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The period covered in this book, 1860-1945, spans the interval between two key events in Cambodian history. The first is the rediscovery of Angkor Wat by French naturalist Henri Mouhot in 1860, three years before Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863. The second is Cambodia’s first post-colonial taste of independence, courtesy of the departing Japanese, in March 1945 (although in October of that year, France would come back and continue to rule Cambodia until 1953).

As indicated in the subtitle of the book, ‘The cultivation of a nation’, Penny Edwards’ main objective is to explore how the idea of jiet (nation) emerged and was popularized in Cambodia. Contrary to conventional analyses of the emergence of modern nationalism in Cambodia, which focus on sociopolitical repression and economic injustice, Edwards adopts a cultural perspective. It is, she argues, from the awareness of one’s culture as distinct from others that the idea of nationalism emerges. She further claims that in Cambodia, ‘nationalists did not produce a national culture’; rather, ‘the elaboration of a national culture by French and Cambodian literati eventually produced nationalists’ (p. 7).

Following this line of argument, Edwards tries throughout her book to answer the question: ‘How, why, and with what effect did people and ideas travel across time and space?’ (p. vii). The people and ideas referred to here are the nationalists and their ideas which, deliberately or not, were shaped by the colonialist project through dissemination of new technology, especially print media. Through this project, which aimed among other things to shield Cambodian social movements – particularly those led by monks – from British influences coming via Siam, colonialism made the language and
religion of Cambodia distinct from those of its neighbours, especially Siam. Cambodians thus came to call them sasana-jiet (the national religion) and piesaa-jiet (the national language).

Another key symbol of the jiet-kmae (Khmer nation) is Angkor Wat. The crystallization of Angkor as a national symbol rather than a religiously sacred site was the result of a colonialist project of museums, exhibitions, excavations, and the rebuilding a national Khmer art style, both in Phnom Penh and in the metropole, France. It was French promotion of Khmer arts and culture that gave rise to Khmer nationalism, with its familiar anthesis of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Consciousness of religion, language, and the great temple as national belongings, and as constituent elements of Khmer nationhood, was further enhanced when increasing numbers of Cambodian literati and leaders began to travel outside Cambodia.

Partly due to incomplete commitment on the part of the French, the project of constructing a Khmer nation was not yet finished at the time of independence. It was continued thereafter by Khmer leaders themselves, who set up their own political agenda for translating the ideal of the jiet (nation) into a real nation-community.

The political use of Angkor Wat by Cambodian leaders involves an element of interpretation. Who built the temple, and who owns it? On these question conflicting views already existed in the colonial period, when the royal family, claiming direct descent from the Angkorean king, claimed Angkor for themselves and equated the national project with the regeneration of the monarchy. Others saw the temple as the property of the Cambodian people and as a symbol of national participation as well as pride, arguing that the common people, not the king, had sacrificed their labour and resources to build it. Other debates within Khmer nationalism concern ethnicity (who are the pure Khmer, the original Khmer?) and, to a certain extent, territory. The nation-building task has always been fraught with controversy, involving as it does the tension between modernity and tradition, between (to use Jurgen Habermas’s terms) system and life-world.

‘Until recently’, Edwards writes, ‘Cambodian nationalism was commonly conceived of as a primordial web of memory linking “pre- and postcolonial Cambodia” via an unbroken chain of pride in the golden age of Angkor’ (p. 5). To a greater or lesser degree, the path forward for the nation was always portrayed as some kind of return to the Angkorean past. This introspective, nostalgic quality of Cambodian nationalism, of course, was not without its dangers. In this connection Edwards quotes Ong Thong Hoeung, Cambodian author of the book *J’ai cru aux Khmers rouges; Retour sur une illusion*: ‘all dictators represent themselves as defenders of national sovereignty, but often when one shelters behind his own sovereignty, his own culture, or his own tradition, an injustice is in the making’ (p. 256).
Actually, there is in principle nothing wrong in rethinking the Angkorean past, or sheltering behind one’s own culture in order to move forwards. The problem remains that of how to translate the idea of jiet (nation) into a real nation-community in the twenty-first century; and whether that task should be carried out only by a political elite, or through the active participation of the Cambodian people.