

Brokering, Bargaining and Building for the Transformation of Cambodia: A Study on Cambodian French Returnees as Institutional Entrepreneurs

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Abstract: The Cambodian French community remains “in the shadows” as the dynamics of Cambodian French community life and choices on remigration are still little studied or understood. This paper explores the experiences of Cambodian French returnees that try to contribute to the transformation of Cambodia by fulfilling their ambitions to “do good” as institutional entrepreneurs. The multisited research is designed as a comparative multiple case-study. Data is collected, primarily, through conversations with individual informants from the Lyonnese and Parisian Cambodian community, and extensive case studies on selected key informants in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. This article describes the contradictory dynamics of returnee institutional entrepreneurs stuck in the Paradox of Embeddedness, trying to change the societal structures within which they also have to find social legitimacy. Findings propose that solutions to the dynamics of this Paradox should be explored through the threefold activities of returnees’ brokering, bargaining and building upon return to Cambodia.

Keywords: Cambodia, Development, Entrepreneurship, International migration, Southeast Asia, Network formation and analysis

JEL Classification: O10, L26, F22, D85

1. Introduction

At the time of the Khmer Rouge take-over of Cambodia (1975-1979) an estimated 40,000 refugees were legally granted asylum in France, its former coloniser (Duclos and Cogne, 2008). They consisted of a relatively minor first wave of forced migrants arriving and obtaining residency in resettlements

structured in quota, and a large group of voluntary Cambodian “knowledge migrants” now obtaining official refugee resettlement status after already living in France with temporary residency in order to pursue a study or complete an internship under the educational cooperation agreement between the two countries. Arriving before 1979, these first groups of refugees are distinguished as well educated and easily “integrated” due also to the substantial amount of their adolescence and adulthood spent in Cambodia under French influence. In general, the groups of refugees show relative independence in resettlement, language proficiency, the cultural awareness displayed of their new surroundings and their social belonging to the Cambodian middle or upper classes.

After 1979, they were joined, among others, by a larger number of Cambodian exiles fleeing the Vietnamese take-over (Mignot, 1984; Mysliwiec, 1988; Prak, 1992). Some of them stayed in France, others moved on to third resettlement countries that offered better connections or opportunities. In 1989 an estimated 50,000 Cambodians were living in France. Family reunions and related migratory movements allowed this number to grow to about 63,300 by the year 2000 (Simon-Barouh, 1989; Nann, 2007)¹. It is difficult to ignore that, while every year many of them return, the dynamics of Cambodian French remigration are still little studied or understood. At present, as Prak (1992) suggested, the Cambodian French diaspora remains “in the shadows” in its outward presentation. Its members prefer not to attract specific attention to their cultural heritage as well as distinct traditions (Wijers, 2011). This paper explores the experiences of Cambodian French returnees that try to contribute to the transformation of Cambodia by fulfilling their ambitions to “do good” as institutional entrepreneurs. It discusses their perceptions on the initiation and “success” of their institutional entrepreneurial activities in their multiple historic and social contexts as well as with reference to relevant literature. The central question a selected group of representative Cambodian French returnees were asked is how they have planned, initiated, experienced and reflected on their contributions to the transformation of Cambodia through their institutional entrepreneurship. This question is explored while acknowledging the social construction of reality and the social embeddedness of individual agents. The multisited research was designed, therefore, as a comparative multiple case-study. Cases were built with interviews, observations and documentary research on key informants that were selected among the Cambodian French returnees in Phnom Penh through their networks in France.

In this study, the emphasis is on Cambodian French returnees’ own ambitions to “do good”, conceptualised as their “institutional entrepreneurial activities.” These entrepreneurial activities are understood as focused on the creation or improvement of institutions for the common good, thus promoting change in the “fragile” Kingdom of Cambodia (DiMaggio, 1988: 4; Rindova *et*

al., 2009: 478). As the public sector is often where these changes are initiated, cases were selected among Cambodian French returnees working either with the government or with a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in Phnom Penh.

So far, there has been little discussion about the contributions of institutional entrepreneurs in an emergent nation and limited understanding of resources that may help resolve the so called “Paradox of Embeddedness” in working on a country’s transformation. This paradox describes the contradictory dynamics of institutional entrepreneurs who are trying to change the societal structures within which they also have to find social legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Granovetter, 1985; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). In order to contribute to the transformation of Cambodian institutions, thus, returnees require both the trust and esteem awarded by social legitimacy understood as their “embeddedness” in Cambodia as well as access to the transnational social networks tying them to France.

Findings propose that solutions to the dynamics of the Paradox should be explored through the threefold activities of returnees’ “brokering”, “bargaining” and “building” for the transformation of Cambodia. As intermediaries that hold dual loyalties and dual identities, it’s challenging for refugees to balance their potential in being “brokers” for reform in a (still) traumatised country (Cambodian Center for Human Rights, 2010). Also, this article suggests, in the case of Cambodia, return implies not only finding an opportune position and social legitimacy but also the “bargaining” between (trans) national social networks and institutional structures in order to reconcile with the renewal of Cambodian society as well as the remnants of a violent past (Center for Policy Analysis and Research on Refugee Issues, 1991; Linton, 2004). Finally, the returnees have their own “re-embedding” and the re-establishment of their social legitimacy to take care of in order to effectively help “building” the country from a solid foundation. Informants share in the experience that their contributions need to be based on mutual trust and acceptance.

Until recently, the return of former refugees was not considered a particularly interesting subject of study. The assumption presumably being that, once returned to their place of origin, people are automatically “rerooted” and absorbed into their former homeland’s habitat (Eastmond, 2002: 3). For lack of a consistent body of research on return, this study wants to contribute to academic debates by emphasising the need for an understanding of the consequences of voluntary return as experienced by these, once forced, Cambodian migrants (Chimni, 2009; Kunz, 1981). This is necessary as previous studies barely even acknowledge the desire of former refugees to either return or explicitly avoid return (see for instance: Constant and Massey, 2002). Negative relations to the former homeland are often passed over in silence thus leaving the motivations and actions of an important part of resettled overseas communities unrecognised

(Hughes, 2002). Also, existing accounts in returnee studies often underestimate the challenges inherent in a restoration of life after a prolonged forced absence from a homeland that was ridden with conflict and aggression before exile and is now in a “post-conflict” state (Poethig, 1997). This is not a process to be taken lightly. As a Cambodian returnee explains:

In 1993 I returned to Cambodia with my mother and my sister. The local people did not like us nor did they want us to be there. They often call us “blue plastic bags” [As provided by the UN for their baggage- ed] and Site II [a refugee camp- ed] refugees. They look down on us because we left the country while they stayed here during the war (Rodicio, 2001: 124).

When it comes to the returnees’ activities upon return, current literature on the impact of returnees’ entrepreneurial activities in institutional reform is rarely conclusive in its empirical findings. Some studies bring to light a marked ambivalence on the conditions and constraints regulating the efficiency of the refugees’ contributions (see, for instance: Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2010; Olesen, 2002; Portes *et al.*, 2002). Considering the mixed findings on both the role of entrepreneurial activity in bringing peace and prosperity to states recovering from conflict (see, for instance: Naudé, 2007; Schüttler, 2006) and the limited validity assigned to findings on the effectiveness of returnees’ actions and transnational engagement to bring about institutional reform (see, for instance: Agunias, 2006; Castles, 2007), many questions about the effectiveness of returnees’ ambitions to “do good” and contribute to the transformation of their former home countries still need to be answered.

In the following, the theoretical framework and methods of research are discussed first. Next, the description of the opening up of Cambodia in the nineties as a defining moment in the Cambodian French returnees’ trajectory provides the historical background for the discussion. A summary of refugee and returnee policies in host and home land then allows for insights in the structures and attitudes they have (had) to deal with and is illustrated by excerpts from the case study of Monsieur Kim. These findings are then discussed and analysed. In conclusion, the contributions and implications of this study are brought together.

2. Bringing together “Worlds Apart”

This research aims at bringing forward descriptions, personal “narrativisations” and qualitative assessments organised as case studies built around selected exemplary key informants and contexts (Kohler Riessman, 1993: 1-2, 57-60). The research was designed to compare Cambodian French returnees’ “narrativisations” of their practices in exile and upon return by using qualitative

methods. In contrast to personal narratives such as life stories, a narrativisation focuses on particular “selected” experiences considered pivotal by the narrator in un- or semi-structured interviews (Atkinson, 1998; Kohler Riessman, 1993). The adoption of a multisited research design is relevant as it holds the promise of integrated perspectives in data collection and analysis, the benefits of a people-driven approach and the completeness of acknowledging national institutional structures while following informants’ social networks across borders. Because of this comparative approach to the experiences of selected individual Cambodian French informants in France and Cambodia, the multisitedness resulted in a form of juxtaposition of phenomena that conventionally appear to be “worlds apart” (Marcus, 1995: 100-102).

Even though Paris and its metropolitan area harbour the largest number of Cambodians, its size, the fragmented nature and geographic spread of the active communities, as well as the historic prominence of the better off “royalist” social classes, arguably render it atypical as a research location for this study. Therefore, findings in Lyon were corroborated in interviews with members of the Parisian Cambodian community in order to collect alternative perspectives for comparison of the findings presented in this article.

Members and leaders of community organisations in Lyon were contacted systematically and assisted in the recruitment of other informants (“snowball sampling”: Goodman, 1961). Contacts were asked to refer me to returnee institutional entrepreneurs working in Phnom Penh they considered successful in their position within the overseas Cambodian community and in their contributions to the transformation of Cambodia. In this way, the method of selection also provided insights into the perceptual basis of a returnee’s “success” in the immigrant community (Saunders, 1979).

The research population for case selection was limited to the first generation of Cambodians, born in Cambodia and entering a resettlement country before 1979 in the first wave of exile². This generation holds considerable status in both the host land and homeland. Their activities and social environment in both France and Cambodia were explored. The setting in the governmental and non-governmental organisational (NGO) sector in France and Cambodia, have led this case selection. As the literature review confirms, these two sectors bring forth most of the activities that may bring institutional reform in Cambodia (Ayres, 2000; Edwards, 2007; Guillou, 2001). In the appendix, an overview of the organisations involved is provided in order to illustrate the scope of this study.

In the first three-month period of fieldwork, 20 members of, and stakeholders in, the Cambodian community in Lyon were interviewed once or repetitiously. Also, members’ activities for the Cambodian community were observed and field notes are taken during social events. This group consisted of

women and men ranging in age from 29 to 82 with considerable involvement in the Cambodian community in Lyon. These conversations were complemented by five interviews with members (35 to 67 years of age) of the Parisian Cambodian community. During another three-month period of fieldwork in Phnom Penh 35 informants were interviewed. The group of informants, consisted of ten women and 25 men, the youngest was 31, the oldest 78 years of age. For five key informants, involvement in their organisations was sought as a way to conduct participatory observations. Interviews were supplemented with field notes taken during social events as well as information from personal, professional and documentary sources.

Data analysis involved, first, the broad analysis of interviews to determine main themes and establish the first version of a codebook. Then, the interviews were made subject to more detailed deductive and inductive coding in Atlas.ti, a software tool for qualitative data storage and analysis. Finally, in order to follow patterns that had been discovered in the process, fine coding and axial coding brought forward specific issues and experiences that are presented in this paper.

3. Entrepreneurial development workers or institutional entrepreneurs?

In order to frame the line of argumentation in this article, current debates on entrepreneurship linked to institutional change deserve some attention.

Entrepreneurial activities aimed at institutional reform, inherently, are embedded social actions involving actors that want to make change happen. Authors have recognised a great number of differences in elements that make an actor, individual, organisation or social movement into a successful institutional entrepreneur, as well as the mobilisation of resources evident in the institutional entrepreneur's effectiveness (Li *et al.*, 2006; Shane, 2000). The Paradox of Embeddedness is considered an enigma at the heart of institutional entrepreneurial activity and thus, a key to its exploration (Maguire *et al.*, 2004)

The definition of institutional entrepreneurial activity central to this research encompasses the idea of contributing to the common good as well as acknowledges the actors' embeddedness in societal structures, power and interests. Nevertheless, the individual's evaluation and agency in employing opportunity structures are assumed and merits emphasis. Thus, institutional entrepreneurs are understood as: "organised actors with sufficient resources who see in the creation of new institutions an opportunity to realise their interest" (DiMaggio, 1988: 14). As the illustrative case studies show, they could be Cambodian French returnees who start a non-governmental organisation (NGO) trying to change conventional educational practices or individual agents who try and make change happen from within governmental organisation by organising transformative co-operations and setting new standards. The cases

are distinguished by the actions of “doing good” to fulfill both their own interests as well as their ambitions for their country.

A key question is why returnees, especially, are prone to initiate institutional entrepreneurial activities? From a national perspective, already, returnee populations are human resources for transformation. Certainly, the overriding reason for a government calling for the educated to return from overseas are of an economic nature (Long and Oxfeld, 2004; Tsuda, 2003) as much as the personal motivations to return may be of an economic nature (Tsuda, 2009: 21 & 30). Therefore, it makes sense for previous studies to focus on entrepreneurs’ multiple embeddedness in (trans)national institutional processes as entrepreneurial rather than developmental in nature (Davids and Van Houte, 2008; Kloosterman, 2006; Yeung, 2003). However, former refugees’ return to the homeland has been theorised mostly in parallel to forced return migration and the impact of remittances on emergent nations. Studies on both migration and returnee often neglect the multiple embeddedness of its subjects as well as their employment of this dual positioning. The majority of studies seem to focus on either the home or host country (for exceptions see: Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Mazzucato, 2007) and do not explicitly acknowledge the plural opportunities entrepreneurial returnees’, especially, have to contribute to their home country’s transformation.

The returnees’ multiple embeddedness thus may be considered to hold both opportunities and challenges. Embeddedness is understood, not as an act or situation but as the ongoing production of social legitimacy (Granovetter, 1985). Kloosterman emphasises the occurrence of “opportunity structures” in the dynamics of embeddedness. They are seized by a skilled actor with “the levels of financial, human, social and perhaps ethnic capital needed to enter a specific market” (Kloosterman, 2006: 4). These elements enter into relationships that produce a “mixed embeddedness” referring to the opportunities warranted by a time-and-place specific opportunity structure to take social action. Moreover, with Yeung it is agreed that returnees are: “both facilitated and constrained by ongoing processes of institutional relations in both home and host countries” (Yeung, 2002: 30). These transnational institutional relations are perceived of by Yeung as consisting of social and business networks as well political-economic structures and dominant organisational and cultural practices in the home country and host country in which these entrepreneurs are embedded and that shape the outcomes of their activities (Yeung, 2002). In order to understand the Paradox of Embeddedness that puts at risk the effectiveness of institutional entrepreneurial activities, we will have to include the diversity of structures impacting on them. As introduced in the above, this study proposes that the Cambodian returnees’ aim to “do good” need to be understood within opportunity structures and (trans)national institutional forces in both host and

home land as well as by taking account of their individual skills, character and agency. The multiple mixed embeddedness and (trans) national social networks should be acknowledged in order to evaluate what resources may support them in overcoming the ambiguous situation presented by the Paradox of Embeddedness.

4. Returning to Cambodia

4.1 UNTAC: reuniting and redividing Cambodia

In order to understand the context of returnees' narrativisations, the opening up of Cambodia to returnees in the nineties may be considered a key event.

As Mr Kam, a Cambodian French teacher, described his emotions upon his arrival at Pochentong Airport in Phnom Penh: "La choix est fait quand on arrive" (Interview, Phnom Penh, Augustus 2010). For him it was clear that the choice if you will stay or go is "made" upon arrival. He was supposed to come back on a holiday in 1995 but, instead, decided to stay and find a livelihood in Cambodia.

Before the country could open up to the many returnees longing for their home country, however, international intervention was needed. There had been calls on well established, well positioned and wealthy overseas Cambodians to return to Cambodia in 1987 and 1988. As the country was still under a Vietnamese regime, however, these were met with some suspicion and received only limited response (Gottesman, 2004). In 1991, negotiations led to the Paris Peace Accords (also called Comprehensive Political Settlement for Cambodia) and declared Cambodia a post-conflict country. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established to implement the Accords. Now, finally, many returnees did make their way back. As a France national, politician Ms Sophea (of Cambodian descent) explained:

I had nothing in particular to do in France. I wasn't married. I was innocent, had just finished my studies. In Cambodia there was the UNTAC, the Paris Peace Accords had just been signed, things were happening (Interview, Phnom Penh, October 2010).

The returnees arrived in post-conflict Cambodia that UNTAC's mission created. Findings show that those returning to Cambodia in 1991-1993, generally, received a warm welcome and found opportunities for their resettlement. During the implementation of UNTAC strategies aimed at getting Cambodia ready for its first democratic elections the NGO sector exploded and the dual capacities of returnees were in demand. While a detailed discussion of the conception, content and consequences of the Paris Peace Accords is beyond the scope of this

paper, some aspects of the UNTAC achievements merit mentioning (Hughes, 2002; Ear, 2007).

As Mr Mil, a Cambodian French civil servant remembered: “They just called each other, and more and more people came over and got a job through their networks” (Interview, Phnom Penh, September 2010). Reports on transitional Cambodia under the UNTAC and interviews with returnees brought forward that, in many ways, the transitional authority allowed for the traditional patronage system to return (Brown and Zasloff, 1998; Hughes, 2002; McAndrew, 1996). To a certain degree, of course, the return to tradition is a necessary process in post conflict societies in order to provide a suitable and familiar context for new institutions to be embedded and evolve (Gottesman, 2002). Nevertheless, in Cambodia the improvement of state capacity at this time was accompanied by societal empowerment. The government tried to connect itself with people but did so by (re)building vast patronage networks reaching down to community level. Findings show that only those inside the new “democratic” system, are able to use and choose the rules and norms to their own advantage. According to Mr Kam:

For an intellectual there was nothing much else to do but go into government. Most of the NGOs were American or English-based and held little attraction for the Francophone Cambodians. So it’s just common sense that many of the French returnees went into government (Interview, Phnom Penh, September 2010- Translated from French).

For some of the returnees, joining the government service provided alternative routes to leadership as they could not claim traditional authority through business success or previous importance in home or host country (Bloemraad, 2006). Their dubious motivations and poor performance, however, earned “returnees” a mixed reputation. Dr. Tim, a Cambodian French teacher, clarified these choices. Dr. Tim explained how the decision to return left him in a difficult situation as there was “nothing” to do. He said:

Unless you have agreed to join one of the big political parties it was impossible to find a job that would earn a living. While Dr. Tim felt very welcome and the Hun Sen government stated clearly that the country needed them in its reconstruction, there were no salaries to be expected. According to Dr. Tim, the well-educated returnees speaking multiple languages were clearly at an advantage as they could apply their skills in order to remain neutral. Those with little education and funding were quickly forced into a partisan position and patronage dependency in order to survive (Interview, Phnom Penh, September 2010- Translated from French).

The UNTAC period came to be known as a period of power abuse and corruption. It seems that the type of people returning at this time were, firstly, the ones that had been very successful in overseas host countries. This group could be characterised as the “well- integrated and well educated” wanting to contribute their financial and social capital to the transformation of Cambodia. As Ms Sophea said:

The French were the first wave to arrive, it was easiest for us as we still had so many connections and the local political parties all went to France first to lobby for good candidates for the elections. That’s where many of the leaders had been educated themselves. For an intellectual there was nothing much else to do but go into government (Interview, Phnom Penh, September 2010).

Secondly, another prominent group of returnees had “failed” in their host country and returned to retrieve their old status and network. They are often described as “opportunists” and opposed to change as the restoration of traditional structures allowed them to re-establish their former status.

The attraction of a certain social status as well as job security inspired unqualified returnees to run for official political positions as a means to obtain a livelihood. Informants in France and Cambodia evaluated this situation in similar wording to Mr Mil: “No matter who you are or what you used to do in France, you would find a good position in Cambodian government” (Interview, Phnom Penh, August 2010- Translated from French). The situation contributed to the overseas returnees being labelled the *Anikatchun* (a pejorative term, Khmer meaning “Foreign people”) (Le Gal, 2010). Their return was perceived as being one of self interest. This label and the accompanying stereotypes are experienced as pejorative and painful by many of the returnee informants in this research. They felt, among others, that the diversity of backgrounds and potential in the groups of returnees was not sufficiently acknowledged, their contributions were not valued and they were excluded from reintegration after a first warm welcome.

By 1997 things literally exploded. After clashes in Cambodia the leader of the Cambodian French initiated opposition party went into exile in Paris. To the public’s deception, many of his former party’s members sought and found refuge within traditional parties (Frieson, 1996; Roberts, 2002). Ever since these events the ruling party has consolidated its hold on Cambodian society and, in effect, the country is often still referred to as a “fragile” state and a semi-democracy (Hughes and Un, 2011: 10). According to Mr Kam:

I vividly remember in the early and mid 1990s, that when we went to restaurants, people used to show their social status by displaying guns,

rifles and hand grenades on the tables. Later on, people became more civilised and then they displayed their expensive hand phones. Now, they have become more cautious and do not display their wealth because of the theft (Interview, Phnom Penh, September 2010 – Translation from French).

4.2 Attitudes and socio-economic structures affecting the returnees

In this section, aspects of political and socio-economic structures in Cambodia are explored that may have facilitated and, or, constrained the returnees' activities. This is relevant as both the labelling as "Refugee" and "Returnee" have distinct connotations in the Cambodian context. Some have already been brought forward in the historical description above and others are mentioned here.

Refugees from, and returnees to, Cambodia come in many shapes and forms. The differences between several refugee and returnee groups are relevant in order to get more insights into issues of identity, reconciliation and belonging that are so bound up with the returnee experience. According to the informants of this research, there is a distinct lack of "returnee community" in Phnom Penh. Ms Lim, a Cambodian American of French descent, explained:

There is no returnee community here. I don't feel I belong to a group. Also, the Cambodian French and Cambodian Americans never meet and they could never work together, there are so many contradictions here. Then again, I don't get accepted by my French Cambodian friends either. They don't say they are Khmer, they say they are French when they are here (Interview, Phnom Penh, September 2011).

At issue here is who could actually be considered a returning "refugee." In Cambodia, this term has a multitude of meanings. While the label of "refugee" refers to all that have been awarded the official status of refugee according to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, unofficially, the term 'refugee' is also applied to the many destitute Cambodian-born citizens fleeing to the Thai border camps after the demise of the Khmer Rouge-regime in the eighties (Mignot, 1984). This study concentrates on the official refugees that were allowed both the freedom of resettlement in France, among other countries, and the choice of voluntary return to Cambodia. The unofficial refugees, however, could not escape to third countries as political considerations denied them official refugee status and all accompanying rights. Many of them lived in Thai-Cambodia bordercamps as "displaced citizens" for years.

This group also had no choice in becoming the first group of forced "returnees" in the mid-eighties when the Vietnamese Cambodian government finally started to allow their repatriation. The latter group of forced returnees were left to rebuild their devastated country with little national security and

limited resources. These unofficial refugees that were repatriated by the UN, did not reconcile with their compatriots easily (Rodicio, 2001). They formed a marginalised group long after their repatriation and, as returnees, while dealing with converging issues, are to be distinguished from the official refugees returning from overseas that were selected for this study.

4.3 The opportunities open to Cambodian French returnees

In this section, based on archival research and related interviews, findings on the Cambodian French and Cambodian American returnees' activities upon return are presented.

Madame Pas explained to me that it made sense for the Cambodian French returnees to enter government in the UNTAC years, as it was very hard to find French-speaking positions with an NGO in those days. The close ties between France and Cambodian elites made it relatively easy to find "patrons" to sponsor a political position and sustain a livelihood. There were very few French NGOs, and the UNTAC required knowledge of the English language that was often not found among the returnees. Moreover, in her experience, the French did not like to hire Cambodians and would rather employ 'real' French citizens (Interview, Phnom Penh, October 2011).

Tentative numbers on the social status and activities upon return of the Cambodian French as compared to, for instance, Cambodian American returnees confirm literature and observations in the conclusion that French returnee members outnumber their American counterparts in the first governments by about 1/3rd (Committee for Free and Fair Elections (COMFREL), 1993 and 1998). However, in recent overviews (2006 and 2009), the Cambodian American returnees working in government have at least equaled their number (COMFREL, 2006 and 2009). In interviews, these tentative numbers on returnees' positions were nuanced by the observation that advisory positions may be awarded by the people in power to "legitimise" their policies. Thus, the positions awarded to returnees did not necessarily allow them to have a voice in decision making (see also: Um 2006).

Findings in interviews propose that, for the Cambodian French returnees to Cambodia, their transnational networks and their positive linkages to Cambodian French communities and organisations have initially provided them with relatively generous leverage for bargaining due to their perceived social status before and in exile. In this way, the old ties with Cambodia bring returnees from France the benefit of their preferential treatment and expedient inclusion in certain local social networks. They have a lot of overseas and local social capital to share. After the consolidation of political power with the Cambodian People's Party, as of 1997, these associations, their attitudes and the language barriers, however, exclude them from reintegration at other levels of society.

4.4 Dual identities, dual loyalties?

While the first returnees, thus, had to handle many hardships with internal relations stabilising, the Cambodian government slowly adjusted its attitudes and started to acknowledge that groups of Cambodian returnees may have a role to play on the long term in in-country processes of (economic) development, peace building and reconstruction (Gottesman, 2004). Since then, the unrelenting engagement of the Cambodian “diaspora” in their home-country and communities of origin has come to produce significant flows of money, human capital, networks of social capital, knowledge and technology, and political support (Ear, 2007; Poethig, 1997). Nevertheless, in recent history, still, all groups of returnees have had to deal with cultural exclusion in the sense of being referred to as not “pure” Khmer (no matter their ethnicity) and subject to the government’s nationalist rhetoric aimed at marginalising social groups.

To illustrate this point to me, Ms Nou recounted an event that happened to her that morning:

People react to the returnees, now, I think.. it never amazes me how people still discriminate against us. Like this morning at lunch time we had a NGO-leader meeting and we were mapping who we needed to meet at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I said: ‘We need to meet Mr. So-and-So’, and then the leader of one of the NGOs said: ‘But he is still an expat, he is a returning Cambodian. He may not be influential, he may not know, he may not be internal in the CPP!’. And I think these people who are still discriminated.. the stereotype is of a person who is not internal in the CPP, not influential. That they do not know enough (Interview, Phnom Penh, October 2011).

Attitudes towards overseas returnees of the first generation, especially, seem to question their loyalty, knowledge and show limited trust when it comes to handing over responsibility and leadership in societal change. For instance, as Prime Minister Hun Sen once remarked on the behaviour of members of the government holding a dual nationality: “Don’t say you are Khmer when it is easy and American when it is difficult” (Hughes, 2002). Since then, moreover, no distinct policies or organisations have been put in place to facilitate transnational connections and returnee contributions. The contributions of the returnees are not explicitly acknowledged and they are often excluded from mainstream politics. However, as Ms Sophea explained:

It’s not about the returnees specifically, it’s really about power and money. In reality it’s about control and not about development. Things have changed now since the beginning, when it was very much about safety. Now if you touch the money or the power then you get into trouble. As long as you don’t touch the power or the money you will be fine (Interview, Phnom Penh, October 2011).

5. Monsieur Kim: Brokering, Building and Bargaining

In order to illustrate these findings and explore the narrativisations and experiences of Cambodian French returnees on a more personal level, the case of Monsieur Kim is presented and analysed in this section. His account has been transcribed in English from the original French interviews as conducted in Phnom Penh in September and October 2010.

5.1 *Brokering*

Monsieur Kim initiated a local NGO aimed at the formation and education of electricians. His goal of institutional reform is to restore the standards of and Cambodian appreciation for vocational training and build the next generations' strength. For reasons of anonymity the exact activities, location and output of this organisation are not described here.

In 1960, Monsieur Kim returned to Cambodia from France, bringing back his French wife, and became a professor at the Faculty of Pedagogy in Phnom Penh. His leadership qualities and passion for technology were quickly noted and he was asked to help establish a new type of university in a rural area, that would combine school with practical formation. You could say that the school was a bigger version of what his NGO is today.

As pressure and conflict mounted in Cambodia in the seventies, Kim was forced to return to Phnom Penh and start working for the government. He expresses that politics were not and are not his passion but seemed to be the only pathway to change and survival. As I observed during a 2010 conference on vocational training, the government officials present applauded him publicly on his former status in Cambodian politics (1970-1975).

Undeniably, Cambodian French returnees of the 1990s such as monsieur Kim, have witnessed the change of the political climate in Cambodia. As he expressed, when he had just arrived he was relatively free to move between his local and international social networks. Fieldwork has brought forward, however, that for many of the Cambodian French returnees to Cambodia, it was hard, or even impossible, to establish and maintain political neutrality in the long term. This suggests a progressive dynamic in their institutional entrepreneurial activities from being, at first, neutral intermediaries, meaning: individuals that can "broker" between parties, to being, as the context and perceptions of social legitimacy change, partisan players that have to "bargain" between distinct social networks in order to work on the reforms they desire. As in the case of Monsieur Kim, former affiliations in Cambodia and Cambodian French immigrant communities enabled him to work. As time went by and political structures consolidated, returnees became more entangled in the Paradox of Embeddedness. In parallel,

however, their opportunities and, or ambitions to overcome it diminished. Even though it is generally accepted in entrepreneurship research that marginalized actors, potentially, are strong ‘change-agents’ (see, for instance: Leblebici *et al.*, 1991; Seo and Creed, 2002: 241; Yeung, 2002), as these cases demonstrate, other factors also come into play. To be effective, in theory, actors positioned as brokers between cultures and nations will have access to more information and resources. Yet, in reality, this access requires them to maintain extensive and diverse networks while safeguarding their multiple embeddedness and the trust by compatriots that is so essential to their social legitimacy. Only when these requirements are met can they try and resolve the Paradox of Embeddedness. The cases in this research bring forward that the Cambodian French returnees’ social legitimacies in both France and Cambodia are hard to balance in the long term. In short: local opportunity structures are shaped by social, economic and political factors outside of the agent’s control and hardly affected by their transnational social networks.

5.2 Bargaining

In 1974, Kim decided to leave Cambodia for France. During our conversation he thinks back on how, through his social network, he had no problem in finding a job as a professor at his former faculty at the University of Montpellier. Kim never applied for refugee status and, he says he had no problems in feeling at home and integrated in French society. In Paris and Montpellier at the time, Kim also re-established contact with his former Cambodian network of friends from college and university. Within this group of friends most had become members of the *Front Uni National du Kampuchéa* (FUNK), a political party closely linked to the Khmer Rouge forces. Kim joined the FUNK. He recalls spending almost every weekend in Paris in meetings and demonstrations and being a very active member, more politically active in his host land than he used to be in his home land. FUNK’s activities were international in nature and for some time Kim was UN ambassador to Democratic Kampuchea with strong relations to the Khmer Rouge leaders. As interviews in Lyon and Phnom Penh bring forward, even in his current work these political activities are still remembered and sometimes held against him by the overseas Cambodians who, nevertheless, say they admire his NGO.

For the Cambodian French returnees, their positive linkages to Cambodian French communities and organisations have initially provided them with a relatively generous “space of movement” for bargaining. In this way, they have benefited preferential treatment and an expedient inclusion in certain local social networks. The Paradox of Embeddedness has been overcome with the support of these social networks as “bargaining chips” allowing for leverage and “bargaining power.”

The association with certain networks, however, has also excluded them from reintegration at other levels of society. Fieldwork findings propose that social networks are both an enabler and a restrictor to institutional entrepreneurial activities. Belonging to distinct social networks in Cambodian and Cambodian French communities, means the exclusion from others. In this way, cultural and social activities at home and away carried important indirect consequences for political incorporation and allowed for actors to try and change institutional structures that were trying to co-opt them. As long as the returnees have bargaining power, they may find opportunities to contribute to transformative change in Cambodia.

As in the cases of monsieur Kim, returnees' effectiveness is affected by their personal history and skills as well as past exposure to other institutional arrangements and networks through their mixed embeddedness in multiple social networks and opportunity structures (Kloosterman, 2006). Thus, the nature of their institutional entrepreneurial activities in Cambodia is burdened with both their histories in Cambodia as well as their life in exile in France, both still influencing their current social position in Cambodia and, sometimes, forcing them into involuntary trade-offs.

5.3 Building

Now, Kim says, he would call himself a nationalist, but in a good way. He says his biggest motivation is to free Cambodia from foreign influences and contribute to its economic survival by educating and training the young for a competitive job market within the ASEAN. Kim expresses that he perceives the Cambodian population as uneducated and "weak." Too weak to survive. From the outset Kim has called upon members of his transnational social network, old and new, many of whom are within the Cambodian French community, to support his cause financially as well as with their expertise as trainers or advisors. Also, he has engaged French (inter) national organisations to give him financial support as well as to provide him with overseas internships and on-the-job training opportunities. Although this gives Kim a generous reserve of resources to mobilize, it also requires him to invest a lot of time in travel, maintaining his networks and in the logistics and planning of bringing all (inter) national resources together. Both his personal and financial investments in the transformation of Cambodia are considerable.

Overall, when analysing the case studies and findings presented, a mixed picture of these Cambodian French returnees' contributions to Cambodia emerges. It seems hard for them to find common cultural ground with their compatriots as well as other returnees while maintaining a balance in their dual loyalties. Both on an individual and on a social level there seems to be much "disembeddedness" and "cultural exclusion" resulting from the governmental

rhetoric on being a “pure Khmer” and a nationalist citizenship policy. A majority of the informants expressed that this leads to frustration and a relative sense of “failure” in their institutional entrepreneurial ventures.

There is a certain animosity between social groups in the new social ordering of Cambodia that seems to cause this specific group of returnees from France to not feel “Khmer among the Khmer” and is, thus, enforcing their sense of disconnection. Aware of the transformation in their home country, some refugees believe that they are the sole repository of their traditional culture leading to a defensive “nationalism” as in the case of monsieur Kim (Gold 1992: 18; Tsuda 2003: 363). As monsieur Kim’s case brings forward particularly, his experiences show a nationalist desire to nurture the “true” culture of Cambodia. This has also been observed by Edwards (2009) in her work on the French influence on the perception of Cambodian culture in her work *Cambodge*. History seems to motivate Cambodian French returnees to claim their special capacity to “educate” Cambodians and “cleanse” the country of destructive foreign influences. According to Hughes this position is natural as:

Such views, echoing the trope of Vietnamization in the 1980s, permit returnees to acquire responsibility for rebuilding the Cambodian nation and teaching those who have lost their culture (Hughes in Yeoh & Willis, 2004: 211).

Feeling the threat of exclusion, these privileged returnees isolate themselves in order to retain autonomy. This self-exclusion, however, makes them less effective in their activities and diminished the embeddedness so needed to bring about institutional transformations. In this way, the awareness of a cultural identity, a dual experience and knowledge works against the overcoming the Paradox of Embeddedness. The focus of their activities is solely on change and transformation, but their lack of social legitimacy makes it hard for them to be heard, acknowledged and accepted.

6. In conclusion: resolving the Paradox of Embeddedness

This paper has explored the dynamics of Cambodian French returnees’ institutional entrepreneurial activities in order to contribute to the transformation of Cambodia. Findings suggest that both their brokering and bargaining for the transformation of Cambodia will support institutional entrepreneurial activities and help overcome the Paradox of Embeddedness. Yet, these activities seem temporary and singular events as they appear in a limited timeframe and do not seem to outlive the opportunity structures that allow them to exist. The unique initial positioning of these returnees who are in contact with different networks and can build on a life in two countries seems to threaten the long term survival of their activities and organisations.

When it comes to “building” their institutional entrepreneurial activities do not lead to the significant contributions to the transformation of Cambodia they intend to make. Moreover, a lack of candidates they approve of for succession and a general dependence of their activities on these first generation of returnees’ distinct histories, personalities and social networks restricts the survival of their contributions on the long term. For them, it is not easy to find solid foundations in their old home country.

Future research is needed to explore the validity of these conclusions on the long term. It is of interest to describe the sustainability of these dynamics as more and more returnees of the first generation disappear and the second generation of Cambodian French returnees enter the country. Pathways for further investigations include, also, the question of Cambodian French community in Cambodia. Remarkably, while all key informants expressed to have fallen victim to cultural exclusion upon return, this has not driven them to solidarity with their Cambodian French peers and the retreat into their own social networks.

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Notes:

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¹ As the French government does not allow for ethnic statistics, all these numbers are based on independent research by different authors.

² For information on the return of the second generation see: Mariani, L. (2013, forthcoming) *Identités narrativisations et identifications sensible. Reconstruction et mise en perspective de quelques itineraries de migrants franco-cambodgiens de seconde generation à Phnom Penh*. REMI

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