THE FILM BNGVEL: PRACTICE-BASED MODELLING OF CAMBODIAN MASCULINITY

Owen Tinsley Beck

Bachelor of Media
with First Class Honours, Murdoch University, 2008

This thesis is presented for the degree of
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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Owen Tinsley Beck
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As an undergraduate at Murdoch University in the mid-1990s, I revelled in the puzzles presented by what I perceived to be an esoteric roundabout way Dr Josko Petkovic delivered his pearls of wisdom in my screen production units. It resonated with me. Two weeks short of completing my second production unit, however, with his head in his hands, he said, “Owen, Owen, I feel like I’ve failed with you”. Perhaps he had been telling us straight and I just didn't get it. I abandoned the project I had been working on, and in two weeks of panicked autonomy I wrote, produced, directed, shot and edited a piece which would in many ways define my approach to production thereafter.

Thank you for not giving up on me Josko. Throughout my PhD research, production and thesis writing, you have supported me with a long enough leash to get things done autonomously, while reining me in when necessary. Thank you for your patience when it was me who spoke in roundabout terms and when I got excited about my unexplored hunches. Thank you for your direction, your trust and understanding. I cannot imagine a more rewarding journey or a better advisor and mentor for my PhD.

I would also like to thank the National Academy of Screen and Sound (NASS) Research Centre at Murdoch University as well as the Australian Department of Education and Training for providing the opportunity to pursue research overseas under the Australian Postgraduate Award scholarship.

Many thanks for the support provided by Ascentic Foundation and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, Cambodia. Without your support Bngvel could not have been produced.
This research would also not have been possible without the involvement of the Cambodian community that became my community for over six years. My sincere thanks to all who have participated in the various aspects of the research, but especially my wife, Jasmine, for providing a constant stream of inside knowledge and wisdom from a rarely accessed perspective.

Many thanks for the tireless efforts of the cast and crew of Bngvel, especially Cameron Frost and Coel Healy for your assistance in Cambodia in cinematography and field sound respectively, and Colin Mills and Lor Phaik Sim of Closet Audio Productions in Kuala Lumpur for your musical genius.

Thank you Dr John McMullan and Dr Michael Broderick for your encouragement and for offering shoulders to cry on in desperate moments during the written part of my thesis.

I would also like to thank my parents, Tinsley and Margaret, for modelling honesty, compassion, tolerance, understanding, trust and forgiveness. Thank you for encouraging me to explore life outside of the box.

To my wife, Jasmine, and children, Gracie, Noah, Sunny, Melody and Truly, my deepest thanks for your love, support and patience – especially during times when I was so absent even when present. I love you.
DEDICATION

This is for my dear dad, Tinsley Manning Beck (15-12-1936 to 21-02-2004), an adventurer with an insatiable appetite for understanding. A scholar-turned-goat-farmer who, despite abandoning his own formal education in his thirties after completing a Masters degree on openness as a variable in educational research, continued to assist various others in their scholarly pursuits. Thanks for modelling openness, critical thinking and curiosity, Dad. I hope this would have done you proud.
ABSTRACT

A great deal of western research on post Khmer Rouge Cambodia has been directed at the social devastation that followed the Khmer Rouge reign and on the abuse, exploitation and violence against Cambodian women and children in particular. In this discourse Cambodian men are either ignored or presented as contributing to the problems of women and children. The research in this thesis does away with such a binary perspective and assumes that the problems of Cambodian women and children will be solved only when Cambodian men are incorporated as an element of the solution. Accordingly the thesis re-examines some of the problems encountered by Cambodian women and children by considering these from the perspective of Cambodian men. The thesis does this by modelling an abstract Cambodian family unit using real life accounts from a large group of Cambodian informants and rendering these accounts as a linear narrative for a feature film entitled *Bngvel* (Eng. Turn).

Ethnographic data was collected and recorded over six years in a rural Cambodian context often with real-time feedback from key informants. These accounts and observations were used to construct a script depicting the life of a Cambodian father as he strives to provide for this wife and two children in both rural and urban contexts. All the recordings for the film took place on location in the rural province of Takeo, and in the capital city of Phnom Penh, using ordinary Khmer people as actors and the majority of the production crew. While the scripted account invokes many of the problems investigated by previous research, the accounts that arise from the Cambodian informants presents a picture that is much more complex than the simple victim/perpetrator narratives that characterised the earlier research. The film modelling suggests that solutions to social problems in Cambodia will be found when Cambodian men and women are able to address their problems together.
## Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVO</td>
<td>Apprehended Violence Order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CASC</td>
<td>Cambodian Acid Survivors’ Charity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCHR</td>
<td>Cambodian Centre for Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a Second Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GADC</td>
<td>Gender and Development for Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IWDA</td>
<td>International Women’s Development Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT</td>
<td>Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LICADHO</td>
<td>Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNTAC</td>
<td>United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBS</td>
<td>Special Broadcasting Service</td>
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INTRODUCTION

*The Film Bngvel: Practice-Based Modelling of Cambodian Masculinity* is a practice-based research thesis consisting of a feature film entitled *Bngvel*, along with this written component 1.

*The Film Bngvel: Practice-Based Modelling of Cambodian Masculinity* consists of:

- Part B: This written component.

**Part A – The film *Bngvel***

For the purpose of this thesis, Part A, the film *Bngvel*, is attached as a DVD and Blu-ray Disk with the hard copy of the thesis and is also available online at the following Vimeo address at the following URL: [https://vimeo.com/169674199](https://vimeo.com/169674199).

The principle film credits relevant to this thesis are as follows: Beck, Owen (co-scriptwriter, director, cinematographer, editor).

**Synopsis**

*Bngvel* is the real-life story of *Phally*, a Cambodian man from a poor provincial village who struggles against the odds to be a good husband and father; remaining faithful to his wife and providing for his family to the best of his ability. His card-playing wife, *Phalla*, incessantly casts doubt on his fidelity and chastises him for being unable to provide more. In an attempt to escape, he tries numbing out with alcohol and prostitutes while blaming his wife for his own behaviour; becoming the person his wife thought he was all along, vindicating her accusations and establishing a downward spiral. The consequences of his decisions become too
great, and, identifying his own pain as well as the pain he has caused those he loves, he sets out to make amends, while his wife also turns, having recognised the destructive nature of her own behaviour and the role it has played in the disintegration of her family, her loss of income, her loss of face.

*Phally* straddles the line between documentary and narrative feature film. It was scripted in consultation with several Cambodians, in an attempt to find valid alternatives to the current stereotypical representations of Cambodian men and women as (strong) perpetrators and (weak) victims respectively. The resulting narrative is a collage of people’s real stories assembled in such a way that they relate and interact with each other. While the stereotypical representations of Cambodian masculinity and femininity are not absent from *Phally*, those stereotypes are questioned and challenged by strong female characters and weak male characters – the antitheses of established dominant representations.
Phalla is a strong Khmer woman.

*Bngvel* was shot on location in the rural province of Takeo, and the capital city of Phnom Penh. The actors are all non-professionals; many whom play roles close to their own personal stories, while most minor roles and extras play themselves.
Part B - The Written Component

Much has already been said about the relationship between practice based research and conventional research process. The focus of this thesis is not on the legitimacy of the filmmaking process as research, since there is already extensive literature on the subject and it has largely been accepted by academia for all elements of the filmmaking process. A cursory survey of PhD theses indicates a wide variety of practices including scriptwriting, producing, editing (of found footage), music, performance and IT/CGI just to name a few. In this study, individual elements of the filmmaking process as well as the process as a whole are used as research.

The film Bngvel is the principal and canonical element of this thesis. It was made to be an independent and autonomous text. There is however information relevant to the construction of the film that overflows its content and is not evident within it. To describe these sub-textual and contextual elements of the film is the function of the written component of this thesis, which accompanies the film. Both text and subtext/context are necessary components of the thesis. Of the two, it is the subtext and context that needs elucidation and I will begin the process below.

Under the Hood

Subtextual elements are woven into the textuality of most films, whether through the use of visual or audial motifs, narrative twists or any number of other screen devices. Generally these subtextual elements give rise to a richer intellectual and visceral reading of the filmic text - the most memorable films often being those that reveal a little more of their understory with each viewing, or those which offer increased resonance with subsequent viewings. However, some significant aspects of a film’s subtext can remain obscured without some kind of ‘priming’. What one brings to the text inevitably affects one’s viewing experience, and in the case of research productions like Bngvel some background information will usher in a more engaging experience on a number of levels. In order to address issues associated with implicit content, a major research project on assessing image-based texts
published by the Australian Teaching and Learning Council recommends that the written component of a research project should describe the following elements:

- research and theoretical underpinnings of the production
- implied linkages with other texts
- cultural context and relevance
- symbolic aspects of the production such as musical intentions

These elements are all detailed in the main body of this written text. There are additional elements of the filmic subtext that are not readily accessible to a viewer and cannot readily be described in words. This is because image-based research practice is often based on affect rather than word-based narrativity. Consequently some elements of the research, such as the unavoidable voice of the author in the filmmaking process as well as the importance of and the significance of the researcher/filmmaker’s own life-experience, are not readily evident in an objective and detached writing. To bring out these subtextual elements of the filmic text it is necessary to consider the complexities of communicating through film.

Complexity of Screen Production

Making films is a complex process, and the production of viable films often requires the collaboration of many expert professionals and researchers applying their skills under the guidance of a director, whose responsibility it is to ensure the various parts come together as one. The complexity of screen production is depicted schematically in Petkovic’s gestalt diagram, which illustrates the interconnectedness between the parts and their mutual inter-dependence.
To draw a parallel, musical instruments must be in tune, in time and played by skilled musicians in order for music to be created; so much so that even a slight error in timing or pitch can result in an intolerable noise worse than random clamor. When everything is perfect and the music comes alive it can move the listener to tears and to joy and in a way that the listener may feel to be in oneness with the music. Similarly, Petkovic's schemata illustrates how the production of film requires many skilled participants in symbiosis to bring the filmic text to life and engage us with what can best be described as an abstract, diegetic form of life. The film text has the potential to engage us viscerally and phenomenologically, through a complex crafting of visual and audial codes carefully arranged in time and space to arouse emotional, ethical and cognitive responses. This filmic experience, as opposed to its logical content, might be seen as the central measure of any given film production, and holds its place at the center of the schemata. According to Petkovic,
“It is the filmic experience with all of its trance-like phenomenology and ambiguous logic that is the defining attribute of the screen production” 7.

Just as each musician in an orchestra performs a highly complex symphony under the guidance of a conductor, the craftspeople involved in producing a film perform their craft under the guidance of a director. A director, then, needs a thorough understanding of filmic codes, how they interact with and support each other as well as how they communicate with an audience; instructing camera operators, performers, editors and musicians in such a way that their various craft will produce a harmonious result with the desired audience impact and interaction.

I discovered filmmaking as an undergraduate at Murdoch University in the 1990s when I found it to be an efficient vehicle for communicating important social and personal issues. During my undergraduate and honours years I produced a number of short films including: *An Other Voice From Aceh*, *Justice Executor*, *Terminal Sorrow*, *Blossom* and *Buyers of Benetton*.

With these films I found that I could fulfil most or all of the major production roles. This is best evidenced by my 2005 honours dissertation *An Other Voice From Aceh* 8. For the creative part of my dissertation, I produced a documentary film with the same title, *An Other Voice From Aceh* 9 – a film that features families surviving in the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami. For this film I undertook all the production roles, namely: concept, script, camera, direction, sound, editing and producing.

In my PhD thesis project I used similar production strategies, since these are the least capital intensive, while offering the flexibility to respond to new information and situations as they arise. In the case of *Bngvel*, I again filled all major roles throughout the production process hence the responsibility to ensure the filmic diegesis came ‘alive’ rested entirely with me. As is often the case with research-based practice there is nothing straightforward about this process. The
appropriateness of the filmmaker’s voice needs to be integrated at every level of practice (sound, camera, etcetera), which is both very time consuming and labour intensive.

**Practitioner-Based Scholarship**

While the filmic experience offered by *Bngvel* arose from the crafting of the interconnected production codes depicted in the production mandala (Figure 1) the crafting itself arose from what were mostly my own activities as the principal author and the producer of the film. Accordingly elements of my subjectivity inevitably influenced most aspects of the production, which, in turn, implicates me in so many ways with the center of the production mandala in Figure 1. This was so even before *Bngvel* was conceived. I continually reminded myself of the significance of my personal place in the story as it unfolded, and the responsibility that placed on me as a practice-based researcher. These were the challenges that faced me throughout my candidature. The alternative was untenable. To present the origin of my PhD thesis as if it were independent of my own lived experience, would be inauthentic as it is reminiscent of the compromised subject-object ethnography in which a detached and god-like subject observes the object from afar. We have now accepted that intercultural observations are much more complex and involve a relationship between the researchers and their informants. Furthermore the motive of the researchers is something that is interrogated both at a formal research level and when seeking ethics clearances 10.

**Looking In**

In an effort to validate my contribution to and influence on this research project the research methodology was designed in such a way that my contribution to the text would be made transparent whenever possible either in the film itself or in the autoethnographic writing found in this thesis. The overarching aim of these self-reflective elements of the thesis is to provide a sense of triangulation that supports and strengthens the content of the practice-based research. Some theorists describe
this self-reflective, auto-ethnographic, subjective and often life-long context of practice-based research as practitioner-based research – it is often said that filmmakers only ever make a single film, reworking its content in different circumstances and contexts. Tracing this personal thread within the body of the filmmaker’s work is often the most revealing pointer to the content they present. The research in this thesis began in response to observations of social phenomena that resonated with me at a personal level, prompting further inquiry. Some of these were observations of members of the community I was a part of, and some were associated with media representations which were often rooted in Western scholarly studies, NGO publications and/or social stereotypes and expectations. The previously mentioned image-based assessment study recommended that the written component of research such as this include two additional elements:

- description of the relevant body of work that gave rise to the production
- auto-ethnographic details that are relevant to the reading of the text

Petkovic, who authored the study report, went on to say, “Commentators will often excavate the most minute details of the creator’s background as a way of explaining the meaning of the work” 12. In the case of this thesis, many of those minute details are found in the pages that follow. Hopefully this writing will help contextualise the creative work in this thesis and how the thesis project came about.

**The Written Component Details**

The written component of this thesis can be broken down into six chapters that can be summarised as follows:

*Chapter 1: Autoethnographic Prelude: How Did I Get Here?*

The first chapter describes the backstory, namely my journey to the point of embarking upon my PhD. This chapter explains how it came to be and offers reasons for the choice of topic in the first instance.

*Chapter 2: Contextualising Cambodian Men Prior to April 1975*

The second chapter paints a broad-strokes picture of modern Cambodia, and then
briefly sketches the history of Cambodian society up until the 17th April 1975 when Pol Pot’s *Khmer Rouge* regime assumed control of the nation. It identifies an apparent contempt towards the offerings of outsiders and a resistance to modernising, which resulted in an enduring culture and lifestyle that remained consistent for around a thousand years.

The chapter then discusses the end of a century under the French Protectorate, the crowning of Norodom Sihanouk, newfound progress and prosperity, a sudden embrace of Western arts such as film and music and Cambodia’s refusal to engage in regional conflicts that eventually consumed them.

Throughout, there is a focus on traditional Cambodian family and spousal relationships and how they were impacted by the political and cultural journey described in the chapter.

*Chapter 3: Khmer Rouge and Beyond*

Chapter 3 discusses the reign of the Khmer Rouge and beyond. Despite only lasting a few years, the Khmer Rouge era could be seen as most significant in terms of social change. Amongst other things, very few Cambodians escaped the intense individual and collective trauma associated with having friends and family tortured and murdered, or having had to torture and murder others from one’s community. This chapter describes the assault that the Khmer Rouge inflicted upon Cambodian culture and society as well as some of the unintended consequences of the global effort to help restore the country after Pol Pot was ousted. These unintended consequences could also be viewed as ongoing assaults on Cambodian culture and society. Once again, the chapter considers the impact these assaults may have had on Cambodian families - men, women and children.

Besides identifying the existence of a paucity of knowledge regarding Cambodian men, the limited descriptions of contemporary Cambodian men and masculinity that
are currently available are unveiled in this chapter; Khmer men are described in profoundly negative terms.

*Chapter 4: Research in Preproduction*

Film pre-production research explores the lived experience of modern Cambodian men in an attempt to understand the social impact of being raised in a community where certain unacceptable behaviours appear to have been normalised. This chapter begins by discussing the kind of research that is typical in film productions – the gathering of information for the purpose of informing and developing a script. This gathering of information was formulated and executed in such a way as to elicit answers to the questions that are central to the study. The chapter documents Khmer women’s feelings about and attitudes towards Khmer men, as well as Khmer men’s feelings and attitudes towards themselves and the problematic situations some of them find themselves in. It explores symmetries and asymmetries evident in these feelings and attitudes between Khmer men and women. It compares and contrasts these responses with existing studies including those that deal with sexual exploitation and domestic violence.

*Chapter 5: New Scriptwriting Processes and Producing Bngvel*

Chapter 5 explains how the script refinement and the film production processes both encapsulate and respond to what has been learned so far, while at the same time remaining open for the project to continue to evolve.

The incorporation of real people’s stories and the decision to have real Cambodian people playing themselves in their natural habitat is described in this chapter. These aspects of the production’s evolution resulted in a finished film that resides on the threshold between documentary and fictional narrative film.

*Chapter 6: Ethnographic Reflections*

This chapter discusses ethnographic observations that informed the practice-based research and reinforced its findings, as it documents Cambodian society from the perspective of a foreigner immersed in a poor, rural Khmer family and community.
Towards the end of the chapter, Cambodian audience members’ responses to *Bngvel* are discussed briefly.
The Khmer people are the majority population of Cambodia. There are, however, a number of very small minority groups in remote rural parts of Cambodia. In this thesis, the terms Khmer and Cambodian are used interchangeably, and the word foreigner is used to describe Westerners in Cambodia, since this is what most Cambodians call us. The word girl is often used instead of woman, as is typical in the context in which the research took place. In some cases names have been changed to protect informants and members of the community.


5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 An Other Voice From Aceh, 16 mins, Documentary Film, 2007, Perth, National Academy of Screen and Sound.
12 Ibid., p. 128.
CHAPTER 1

Autoethnographic Prelude: How Did I Get Here?

This chapter is about my journey to the point of embarking upon my PhD, explaining how it came to be and offering reasons for the choice of topic in the first instance.

Entering Cambodia

In 2006 I travelled to Cambodia with a group of high-school students to make a documentary film for a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) that works with vulnerable women and children. The film was about a teenaged girl, called Panha, who lived with her mother and older sister in a tiny wooden shack in a Phnom Penh slum. Panha studied hard at the NGO school, supported by her older sister who worked in a garment factory and her mother who worked a food cart. It was expected that Panha’s mother would soon die from AIDS, which she contracted from her husband who had regularly used prostitutes. It was an eye-opening experience and having been moved with compassion, I offered to return and make more documentaries to help promote the good work the aid organisations were doing. During the next eighteen months, I worked on another three similar productions, and I quickly learned that there were many women and children who were victims of poverty, violence and abuse, and needed protecting from their perpetrators, Cambodian men.
In April 2008, I married Jasmine, a Khmer woman from a poor family in Takeo Province and we settled into a new life in Phnom Penh. During the following years, the reputation of Khmer women as victims of various forms of violence and abuse, and men as their perpetrators, was reinforced in conversations with both foreigners and Cambodians alike, as well as by media images.

When Jasmine and I first married, we lived in a dirt-road suburb in the outskirts of Phnom Penh, across the road from a women’s refuge run by an NGO where Khmer women and girls were hidden and protected from their husbands and fathers. I had no real desire to become part of the expatriate community, but on rare occasion it was nice to meet another foreigner in our neighbourhood. Even out here, though in many ways it felt like the end of the earth, there were reminders of issues I had struggled with in a previous life. On one such occasion Jasmine, immaculately made up and dressed in a frock from the fifties, reminded me of Audrey Hepburn as she locked the gate while I waited in the car. As she approached the car, I heard the familiar accent of an Australian woman tell her how beautiful she looked, so I immediately lowered my window to speak with her, and in my thickest Aussie
accent said, “g’day!” expecting a jovial introduction – given our remoteness from home. She responded with a grunt and a dirty look, and kept walking. On another occasion, my wife spotted someone with a camera hiding behind the gate of the refuge across the road, taking pictures of me. Someone I knew who was remotely connected to the organisation confirmed my thoughts – it seemed the only foreign men expected in these parts were sexual predators or NGO workers – and I was not working for an NGO.

This awareness, as perturbing as it was, became a stepping-stone in my search for a story.

*Teaching English or Building Resorts*

A few months into our new life, our home was broken into and all my filmmaking equipment was stolen, so I shelved ideas to educate and employ Cambodians in production and sent my Curriculum Vitae to a number of reputable English teaching schools. I received an attractive offer, on condition that I complete a specific English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching course, which could be done in neighbouring Thailand. I enrolled in the course, completed the online components, and then flew to Phuket to finish the practical components.

Upon arriving in Phuket, I met and befriended an American in his eighties, Herbert, who was also doing the ESL teaching course. A few days into the course, he asked me if I had any good ideas for projects that might help poor Cambodians, and I described to him a pipe-dream – that my long-term goal was to save enough money to buy land and build an eco-resort where we would accommodate, educate and employ poor and unschooled young Cambodians. This excited Herbert, and he explained that he had more money than he could spend before he dies and was looking for good community projects to help out with, so he would like to contribute the money to get us started – to a maximum of $200,000 USD. As much as I enjoyed classroom teaching, this seemed to be a gift from above, so we discussed some details and agreed to proceed.
With Herbert’s support, my wife and I put our home on the market, and early in 2009 we purchased land in the jungle near a coastal town called Kep and began building an eco-resort. By November of that year, just in time for the tourist season, we were ready to open for business so Herbert flew over from the US to join us. We met him at the airport and as we drove from Phnom Penh to Kep, he explained some difficulties he was having with family and friends back home, because they all thought he was just going to Cambodia for young girls. This prejudice seemed unfair, and he clearly appeared hurt in much the same way as I had been when I encountered the Australian woman in Phnom Penh. He stayed with us for five months, during which time our eco-resort quickly rose to the top position on travel review websites. It was with some sadness that Herbert went back to the US in April 2010, as he said he felt he would be judged unfairly upon his return.

Reflections in Different Pools

By the beginning of 2012, I intended to spend three years researching the common and contrary stories of aging Western men who migrate to places like Cambodia. I knew there was an unvoiced population of men who uproot in search of clear, old-school gender roles and responsibilities, family values reminiscent of their childhood and acceptance of their sexuality. Tentatively titled Go East Old Man, I hoped it would bring about fresh understanding as to what drives some Western men to look elsewhere, and what it is they find once they step outside. Sheridan Prasso describes what many experience upon engaging with the East as a remasculcation that is potent therapy. Mine could be seen as one of these many stories, so it made sense that my research should be at least partly autoethnographic.

By this time we were living in the jungle and despite the fact that our community consisted mostly of Cambodians, I did have reasonable and regular access to other foreigners whose stories would potentially compare or contrast with my own. It
would be interesting at least, to know whether there were significant numbers of others whose journeys reflected my own. As a filmmaker, I imagined an ideal outcome might have been the production of a film that resonates with Westerners, and which illuminates underlying areas of distress for some Western men.

As I assembled ideas and thoughts regarding how this project might move forward, contemplating my own experience of Cambodia and observing foreign men who lived there, I became increasingly aware that there were Khmer men whose experience of life in Cambodia was not very different to pieces of my own lived experience. In fact aspects of their lives in Cambodia might have quite accurately reflected aspects of my life in Australia which I had tried to escape - perhaps there were facets of Cambodian life that Khmer men find debilitating, but they do not have the means to flee.

_Epiphany_

A couple of years earlier, the country's biggest pop star, a man by the name of Sereymun Khemarak, had released a hugely popular song that became something of an anthem for young Cambodian men. I had heard it everywhere from television and radio to personal telephone ringtones, and people often sang it when we were in the local markets or walking down the street. To this day it remains a favourite. Its tune is catchy but the melancholy, passionate delivery was what intrigued me; so one afternoon as it played on the car radio I asked my wife what the song was about. Translated, it is called _Marry a Foreigner_, and it goes something like this:

You lived with me but you never had happiness
I never helped out. Drunk every day...
... No one could possibly live with me
Please, go and marry a foreigner
Your old husband is busy with alcohol, so marry the foreigner
I wish you all the best
Please, take our child to live with him
Your old husband is hung over
You'll be happy with a foreigner
It hit me. The people in the local markets and on the streets were performing a strikingly honest reflection of one of the biggest problems some young Cambodians have to deal with today, for the benefit of my wife and me. Jasmine, like many other Khmer women it seemed, had turned her back to the debilitated Khmer man and her eyes towards Western man, in the hope she would find someone who could provide and protect. It had been a shoe-in for me, but now these revelations didn’t sit well. By this time, I had developed a cynicism for big NGOs and the flash cars some of their employees drive down dirty potholed streets to take photographs of pot-bellied kids who scavenge at urban rubbish dumps – to be displayed on slick brochures and other promotional material. I was familiar with corrupt governments maintaining poverty and denying education in order to hold power and increase ultra-rich people’s coffers. I was conflicted about the big-brand garment and footwear companies exploiting the materially poor. My own integrity was challenged as perhaps I had simply adhered to a pervasive model of exploitation, taking what I could from people in material, relational, social and psychological poverty. I didn’t want it to be like that.

*Hearing What We Listen To*

Khemarak’s song had saturated the airwaves for years, but I had only just stopped to really listen, and hear. I wondered how many other ears were deaf to this message beyond despair, one of resignation. Perhaps I could capture the voices of some Khmer men and present them in a way that would draw the attention of social organisations whose job it is to know this material, in a way that would be compelling enough for people to listen. I decided to shift focus from the stories of foreign men living in Cambodia, turning my attention to the stories of Khmer men living in their own country and culture. I was living in Cambodia, amongst Cambodians, and was the husband of a Khmer woman, so perhaps I was participant-observing, already doing *ethnography* by default. Despite the differences between Khmer men and me, the aspects of their lives that appeared to reflect aspects my own life were ample, and I was convinced that those moments of identification
betrayed something bigger, so autoethnography could still play an important role in this investigation. Finally, as a filmmaker, it was logical that I should use the camera as a tool for gathering information that is difficult to capture in words, then use the screen for presenting research findings that may be difficult to convey by other means. But more than this, the complexity of screen production, as discussed in the introduction to this paper, should be practiced in such a way that it would not only capture and present new knowledge, but that it would become an engaging life-like narrative that itself creates new knowledge by means of its interaction with viewers and its visceral impact.

**Reconnaissance**

As I began to contemplate the plight of Khmer men, my curiosity regarding their representation was fed by an apparent disconnect between a pervasive, stereotypical description of Khmer men and many of the men in my community, so I began searching for publications about Khmer men and masculinity only to find that much of the material arose from within projects that focussed on women and children as victims – where men were described in negative terms, reinforcing existing stereotypes. Despite there being a small number of recently formed ‘good men’ projects that aimed to ‘change’ Cambodian men, I was unable to find information about why Khmer men had these social problems to begin with – it seemed as if they were approached as problems, rather than as people with problems.

Although I am not Cambodian, my experience within the Khmer community gave me access to some of the context in which Cambodian men live, in ways that fly-in-fly-out researchers might not be privy to so it seemed I was reasonably placed to be able to ask fresh questions which might add to the canon of knowledge regarding Khmer men and their masculinity. Considering further the importance of context in understanding social phenomena, I proceeded to broaden my knowledge by reading historical accounts of Cambodian society, culture, politics and war, eventually
concluding that many of the social problems behind the reputation of modern Cambodian men are likely to be rooted in their lived experience, which is entrenched in their context – both historical and contemporary. This exploration of existing work is detailed in the next chapter.
Notes and References – Chapter 1

CHAPTER 2
Contextualising Cambodian Men Prior to April 1975

This chapter paints a broad-strokes picture of modern Cambodia, and then briefly sketches the history of Cambodian society up until the 17th April 1975. The major turmoil and societal changes that began under the rule of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime will be discussed in Chapter 3.

General Information
The Kingdom of Cambodia (known as Kampuchea to Khmer people) is situated in the southern part of the Indochina Peninsula, in South East Asia between Thailand and Vietnam, with Laos to the north and the Gulf of Thailand on its southern coast. It occupies an area of 181,035 square kilometres, approximately three quarters of the size of the Australian state, Victoria. Most of the country consists of highly fertile, low-lying, flat land - ideal for growing rice during the tropical wet-season - with many small mountain ranges jutting up like islands peppered through the plains. The plains are framed by some larger mountain ranges, with the Elephant and Cardamom Mountains in the south and south-west, the Dangrek Mountains and Annamite Range in the north and the eastern highlands of Mondulkiri 1. The Mekong River flows from the north to the south through Cambodia, and meets with the Tonle Sap River in the nation’s capital city of Phnom Penh. At the north end of the Tonle Sap River is the Tonle Sap, or Great Lake, which acts as a huge reservoir during the wet season and supports one of the most productive inland fisheries in the world 2.
Cambodia is renowned for its ancient Hindu-Buddhist temples built by god-kings just outside of modern-day Siem Reap, the most famous being the largest religious monument in the world, Angkor Wat. The Angkor Archaeological Park, which receives large numbers of visitors from around the world annually, is described by UNESCO as having, “impressive monuments, several different ancient urban plans and large water reservoirs... a unique concentration of features testifying to an exceptional civilization.” Cambodia more recently gained notoriety during the 1970s, when the murderous Khmer Rouge regime tortured and killed, or left to die from disease or malnutrition, around a quarter of the population in an attempt to
purge the country of anything that resembled imperialism and to become an agrarian communist society⁵. The highly paranoid regime tried to eliminate every person they imagined could be a threat, including those who might have had political connections, were educated, artists and even those who wore glasses. According to Joel Brinkley, “Eighty percent of Cambodia's teachers were killed and ninety-five percent of the doctors”⁶. A number of genocide museums have been established at sites such as the infamous former high school, Tuol Sleng, and the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek, both in and around Phnom Penh⁷. There are many other mass killing and burial sites scattered around the country⁸.

Several ethnic minorities who predominantly inhabit the north and north-east extremities and other mountainous regions in the south, make up about ten percent of the Cambodian population of about fifteen million, with the other ninety percent of the population being Khmer⁹ - the official language is also Khmer.
Rice is the dietary staple, with *nyum bai* (literally meaning *eat rice* in English) being synonymous with *eat* or *eating*; whether it be a morning, midday or evening meal and even when rice is not actually served. Rice meals are complemented with meat (usually fish) and vegetable dishes, which are flavoured with local herbs, spices and fruits as well as the notoriously pungent *prahok* – fish from the Tonle Sap that have been fermented. Preferred snacks include small sun-cooked clams (most safely eaten when there are no clouds, early in the afternoon), steamed snails, an assortment of fried or barbecued frogs, duck embryos and a range of other fried critters such as crickets, water beetles and tarantulas.

Cambodian society is primarily agricultural and the majority of Khmer people live in the countryside where most crops are still sown and harvested by hand. Rice is traditionally the mainstay of the economy, but Cambodians also farm a number of other crops such as rubber, maize, sweet potato and sugarcane as well as various livestock and fish. The World Bank reports that between 1994 and 2014, Cambodia had the sixth fastest growing economy in the world, seeing tremendous growth in garment manufacturing and tourism as well as a building boom. This economic growth has seen an increase in urbanisation with the estimated number of urban Cambodians now over twenty percent. According to the Cambodian
Ministry for Planning a significant part of the migration from rural to urban centres is rooted in the desire for better education and perceived employment opportunities in the bourgeoning construction, garment and tourism industries 18.

Cambodia’s capital city, Phnom Penh, lies at the junction of the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers. Once known as the ‘Pearl of Asia’ 19, famous for its French architecture and grand boulevards, today’s Phnom Penh has been described as “a city of faded elegance, a curious mixture of grand and ghetto architecture” 20. It is a city of unsettling juxtapositions, where a few are chauffeured in luxury cars by day and sleep in palatial mansions, while others pedal customers around in old cyclos (a kind bicycle rickshaw) by day to earn a dollar, then sleep in their cyclos under a streetlight by night. Such is the wealth of a few in Phnom Penh, that in March 2015, Rolls Royce officially opened a showroom in the city, with prices starting at $650,000 USD. At the opening ceremony, the Minister for Industry and Handicraft, Cham Prasidh, is quoted as saying that “not less than twenty” Rolls Royce vehicles had sold since the previous June 21.

Despite a small minority being very wealthy, poverty, as well as lack of quality education and health services are important issues confronting many Cambodians
today, especially in rural areas. The Asian Development Bank reports that in 2011, over 41% of Cambodians lived on less than $2 USD per day and 72% lived on less than $3 USD per day - 91% of poor households were from rural areas. Since most Cambodian scholars and educators were killed and school buildings destroyed during the Khmer Rouge years re-education programs have been established, but many of them were hampered by ongoing conflict during the 1980s and 1990s as well as low levels of teacher education. Various health problems are rooted in poverty and lack of education with many poor Cambodians using ‘doctors’ who have no qualifications to advise about illnesses that could have been avoided through basic hygiene. For example in late 2014, more than two hundred people, ranging in age from three years to eighty-three years, reportedly tested positive for HIV after receiving injections from one of these unqualified, unlicensed ‘doctors’.

During the last decade, tourism has increased consistently as people from around the world are drawn to the magnificence of the temples of Angkor, the horrors of Khmer Rouge museums, the unique fragrance and flavour of Cambodian cuisine, as well as the Cambodian people who are described as, “extraordinarily warm, friendly and obliging to their visitors”.

Katherine Brickell describes the current state of Cambodian society in the following terms:

After decades of turmoil and international isolation, Cambodia has embarked on a threefold transition: from armed conflict to peace, from political authoritarianism to liberal democracy, and from a socialist economic system to one based on market-driven capitalist growth.
Traditional Society

Ancient History in a Paragraph

The roots of traditional Cambodian society can be traced as far back as the Neolithic period as evidenced by archaeological discoveries at the Laang Spean cave in the north-west of the country 28 and supported by linguists who suggest that Khmer language speakers had words that describe the cultivation of rice as far back as early Neolithic times 29. Fast forward to early in the ninth century, and Cambodian society had evolved and developed into the highly sophisticated Khmer Empire, which ruled over much of modern-day Thailand, Laos and Vietnam and was, as De Koninck 30, highlights “[the] dominant power in mainland South-East Asia [until] the fifteenth [century],” renowned for its “hydraulic works and for an art and architecture that were unequalled in the peninsular and insular Southeast Asia”.

Angkor was at the centre of the Khmer Empire and was, according to Joel Brinkley, the largest city in the world with a population of one million by the turn of the fourteenth century 31. It is believed that the Khmer Empire declined during the fifteenth century, and as it did, ordinary Cambodians “[dismantled] their simple homes, [loaded] them onto oxcarts, and [moved] someplace else in the Khmer kingdom where they could grow rice, pick fruit, and catch fish” 32.

Image 8 - Angkor Wat during a monsoonal downpour
**Complacency or Contentment**

A number of historians have suggested that much of the lifestyle across Cambodia has remained consistent since the Angkorian period and that many Cambodians have not been quick on the up-take of what the so-called ‘modern’ world has to offer. Brinkley\(^{33}\) says that more than three-quarters of Cambodians still live, “more or less as they did 1,000 years ago” and, according to Chandler\(^{35}\), visitors to Cambodia perceived the Khmer people as inert, docile and even lazy. This might be explained by the limited opportunities to accumulate wealth, since, as Serge Thion\(^{36}\) explains, land was owned by the king and everything produced was heavily taxed. It was also likely that any real personal wealth, like gold, precious goods or slaves, would revert to state ownership when the owner died rather than being inherited by one’s family\(^{37}\). According to Brinkley and Coates, Theravada Buddhism, which was introduced towards the end of the Angkorian period, taught Cambodians to reject status and material possessions because “contentment is wealth”, to be happy with the status quo, and to accept whatever comes their way, since they were not responsible for their lot and they had no control over their destiny. Thion concurs; “[compensating] for the absence of any possibility of secure accumulation of wealth or amelioration of status in the present life, Buddhism offered the possibility of both in the future”, but it also justified social inequality and injustice, since it asserted that the rich and powerful must have lived meritorious previous lives and they should not be criticised or resisted, since fate would punish them in a future life if they abused their privileged status. Joel Brinkley adds to these reasons for apparent inertia, the simple fact that Cambodia’s natural environment supports the production of an abundance of food as well as plenty of building materials which are easily and conveniently accessible; there was, therefore, no need to modernise. Muller observes that during the French administration, which will be discussed a little later, the Khmers demonstrated a “lack of enthusiasm... for what the French considered the superiority of Western civilization”\(^{41}\).
Traditional Family Structure and Lifestyle

Appropriate Behaviour and Attitudes
There are sets of rules, or laws; codes of behaviour, arranged in verse, which are supposed to guide and instruct Cambodians in their daily lives. They were memorised and chanted, passed on orally from mother to daughter, from father to son, and from teacher to student. There are different codes for men, women, children, grandparents etcetera and their origins often lie in a combination of popular customs and Buddhist principles. One set of rules for girls and women is called Chhbap Srey and a complementary set of rules for boys and men is called Chhbap Bros. Brickell and Chant suggest that the “women’s codes of conduct... deal predominantly with obeying and respecting spouses, in the rules for men, wives are mentioned directly only once, in relation to men’s responsibility to provide for their families (my italics)”.

Various authors focus on gender inequality found in the differences between Chhbap Srey and Chhbap Bros and rarely consider the overarching values that are taught; qualities such as diligence, humility, respect, and consideration of others. There is also a strong warning to men, in Chhbap Bros, about three madesses: sexual obsession, over-indulgence in alcohol and deep involvement in gambling. If the only mention of wives in Chhbap Bros is in relation to men’s responsibility to provide for their families, as Brickell and Chant have highlighted, it follows that being a good provider might be central to the function of a man within a traditional Cambodian family.

There are many other Cambodian Buddhist stories and proverbs that have also been passed down for centuries, which are designed to impart guidance, wisdom and good living. They are concerned with teaching a virtuous nature, and the practice of prudence and moderation. Some of them teach specifically that women are intelligent, virtuous and precious and that men who disrespect women can expect dire consequences for their actions.

One proverb, which is often quoted by NGOs and scholars alike, says that man “is
like gold and woman is like white cloth. Gold does not lose its shine nor is it broken easily, where as cloth tears and gets dirtied”. Great care has to be taken to ensure the purity of women. This proverb is often used by NGOs to suggest that gender inequality is entrenched in Khmer culture – that men are valued more highly than women (gold vs cotton), and that men can do what they like, while women must remain pure; for example, Dr Kek Galabru, President of LICADHO (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights) interprets the proverb to mean “that women are not equal to men”. In an interview with a thirty-year-old Khmer language teacher from Kampong Spue (a rural province about 50km southwest of Phnom Penh), Sokleng, he agrees that there are different expectations of Khmer men and women, but in his understanding the main thrust of this proverb is that men must respect and honour women and protect them when they are vulnerable. According to Sokleng, in the Cambodian context unwed sex is something of a mortal social sin so irresponsible sexual behaviour on the part of men can potentially destroy the lives of young women.

Sokleng tells another story which he learned during his time as a monk, about a young man who spent two years living with, learning from and working for a potential bride’s father. For a number of reasons the young man’s behaviour does not meet the approval of the bride’s father. Lessons are learned about the value of woman and what is expected of Cambodian men, and the young man moves on to try again elsewhere. A second suitor spends two years living with, learning from and working with the father. He applies himself, is diligent and respectful, and wins the approval of the bride’s father. During this probationary period, the suitor is not allowed the pleasure of the bride-to-be’s company. According to Sokleng, this story teaches Cambodian men that marriage is not a right, but something that demands humility, respect and tremendous commitment.

Sokleng’s commentary might be considered as a typical patriarchal response and consistent with previous studies as well as the position taken by most NGOs. These stories can also fit neatly into patriarchal positions that aim to objectify woman.
Nevertheless, the same stories in the opinion of an ordinary Khmer man, Sokleng, are used to contradict the popular view that Khmer woman is considered subservient to Khmer man, and seem to reflect an elevation of woman in Cambodia that demands respect. Accordingly, Sokleng’s thoughts offer a site for negotiation of stereotypical gender representations.

Traditionally, then, there are different roles, rules and expectations of Cambodian men and women, and it appears that both men and women have been highly valued and respected - especially if they fulfil their respective roles well.

*Marriage And Family*

Heuveline and Poch describe how potential spouses were traditionally ‘researched’ by the parents of both the bride and groom in a way that resonates with Sokleng’s views. They maintain that various factors would be taken into account, including socio-economic status, family background, as well as the personal compatibility of the potential couple, in order to maximize the chances of a successful, harmonious, lasting marriage 53. Once a potential coupling was identified, the groom-to-be would often move in with the bride-to-be’s family and work for the father for a year or two, in order to prove himself worthy of being wed to the daughter. If he was successful, gifts would be presented to the bride’s parents and the wedding would proceed at the expense of the groom and/or his family. The new couple would typically start a nuclear family of their own, but in cases where the bride’s parents were aging, the couple may have lived with her parents in an extended family situation, in order to take care of her mother and father 54. In regards to Cambodian marriages prior to Khmer Rouge, Mony Keo 55 argues that, “Spousal loyalty was strong... Divorce was low. Domestic violence was rare”.

*Domestic Power Relations?*

‘Power’ is a difficult concept to explain in one’s own culture. Ascribing a meaning to the way that people of another culture perceive it is inherently problematic. Trudy Jacobsen – Lost Goddesses. 56
Harold Kerbo suggests that Cambodia’s traditional family is matrilocal, which means the women inherit their parents’ farmland and the husbands move in to help them - working that land. The women are expected to look after their parents in their old age, and the men will often be absent from the home - the husband may be working the family land locally, or perhaps working away in construction or other employment and sending their wife the earnings so she can take care of the family 

Sheridan Prasso, when writing about South-East Asian women, asserts that women have the economic power in the home and wield enormous clout in the marketplace. Furthermore, in Rebecca Surtees paper on violence in Cambodian marriages, she highlights the fact that there is much public prestige attached to being a ‘good wife and mother’, which women are able to exploit in their economic ventures.

When Professor Sarun Sar, of the University of Phnom Penh wrote about the ten roots, or components, of Khmer Mentality, Matriarchy was ‘Number 1’ on his list (this was written before Khmer Rouge, in 1972). According to Sar, the traditional leader or decision maker at all levels of society is, and has always been, a woman. He presents customs, common social beliefs, titles of important positions and a maxim that suggests fathers are less important than mothers, to support his position. In Sar’s observation, “the wife is the chief of the family, while the husband
seeks work outside the home in order to bring money back to her. If the sum is less than expected, his wife may chastise him” 60. He describes the Khmer wife as a “master-wife” 61.

Despite the aforementioned descriptions of what seem to be powerful women, there are conflicting views concerning who holds the power in Khmer families and society, especially in contemporary Cambodia. A recent report on gender norms, masculinity and domestic violence in Cambodia, contradicts Sar’s position, suggesting that Cambodian men are expected to be the head of the household 62. In 2012, during a lengthy discussion I had with a gender studies lecturer at Pannasastra University of Cambodia, it became clear that she had never come across the idea that Cambodian society and families might have been anything but patriarchal. The following year, I attended the premiere screening of a film by Paula Stromberg, which highlights many problems associated with the ‘rescue of sex-workers’ industry 63. During a passionate introduction to the film, Stromberg described Cambodia as a misogynist patriarchal society. In a study on domestic violence against women in Cambodia, Eng et al. assert that Cambodia is a highly patriarchal society 64 yet they say, “Cambodian parents... socialize their children based on traditional gender ideology”. They appear to be implying that traditional Cambodian society is also highly patriarchal, in the context of the report 65.

In 2006, Heuveline and Poch discuss traditional Cambodian marriages in which women are under the authority of their husbands, but can legally divorce unilaterally and relatively easily, while a husband can only divorce if his wife has been unfaithful 66. Only two years later, Heuveline and Demont claim that the Cambodian, “kinship relationships appear to be bilateral” 67, and that divorce laws suggest equality between husbands and wives 68. Heuveline's more recent position is supported by Judy Ledgerwood in her examination of various scholarly discussions about Khmer kinship systems, as she highlights a ‘complementary’ and somewhat flexible division of labour, concluding that, "Khmer kinship is generally bilateral or cognatic, [and that] the Khmer system has unique aspects that defy
definitive keyholing” 69. Regarding the confusion and conflicting opinions about Khmer kinship, she concurs with David Schneider who highlights that the assumptions and presuppositions we foreigners often bring to our research and studies of other cultures, can be problematic 70.

In Petre Santry’s thesis on women and development in Cambodia she suggests that the belief that matriarchy lies at the root of Khmer society is popular among Cambodian people 71. Evidence of a non-patriarchal Cambodia has also been seen in a number of my interviews. In 2012, when I asked who the ‘boss’ of her family was, twenty-eight-year-old Phaneth, from a rice-farming village in Takeo Province, answered “grandmother” without hesitation and explained that her grandfather still goes out to work the fields and grandmother collects money from him, her children and her grandchildren 72. She also described one of her aunties in terms that resonate with Sar’s description of ‘master-wife’; she put so much pressure on her husband to provide more that he turned to crime and was shot dead by police when he tried to escape on a stolen motorcycle in 2007 73. In 2013, Peter, an Australian who had lived in Cambodia for nearly thirty years and is married to a Khmer woman, explained to me that Cambodia was a matriarchal society and that every man there ‘answers’ to a woman. According to Peter, he submits his monthly salary to his wife, as do ‘good’ Khmer husbands 74. In over six years of living amongst Cambodians, I have observed that many men go to work, while the women in their lives run shops and restaurants from home, open stalls at the market, buy, sell and manage rice fields or lend money with high interest in return.

Besides the traditional expectations, family life and kinship systems, there are, of course, other significant factors that have influenced and impacted the human experience of Khmer men such as the colonial experience, the Pol Pot response with all its savagery and the post Pol Pot era.
*The French Years*

The years of the French Protectorate began in the second half of the nineteenth century. Brinkley 75 suggests that it was initially requested by Cambodia in an attempt to gain strength against neighbours, Siam (Thailand) and Vietnam but according to Kamm 76, “France exerted a great pressure on [an] unwilling [King] Norodom”, as if they had inherited some kind of suzerainty over Cambodia through their already-established administration of Vietnam - a protectorate treaty was eventually signed in 1863 77. Kamm goes on to suggest that, through a number of administrative manoeuvres Cambodia was reduced to colony status, triggering a bloody revolt 78. Internal conflict continued through the first decades of French rule, taking until the early twentieth century for real peace to come and, according to François Ponchaud, once this conflict ceased, the “Khmer kingdom lapsed into lethargy… up to the dawn of the Second World War” 79.

The French ruled Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos under one administration, as the Union of Indo-China. According to North 80, the Cambodian elite suffered little under the French, but the rural population was exploited as it had always been by whomever was running the country at any given time.

According to Muller 81 the French saw themselves “as part of a grand Western campaign to bring knowledge, technology, morality and order to degenerate Oriental societies unable in their decadence to realize their own potential” 82. He also describes how Khmer people remained unimpressed by it all 83. In 1916, however, in response to heavy taxes and government charges, the Khmer people surprised the French government presiding over them with somewhere between forty thousand and a hundred thousand peasants demonstrating in a very quickly and highly organized protest. According to Chandler, “The incident undermined French mythology about lazy and individualistic Cambodians, who were impervious to leadership or ideology” 84. What is of particular interest is that these apparently ‘lazy, lethargic, backward people’ who were particularly unimpressed with what the
West thought it was bringing to the party, were capable of taking serious action when they were really pushed.

During the French administration of Cambodia, Khmer people were provided neither opportunity nor education, and according to Kamm, were condescended and patronised. The French left Cambodia in the mid-1950s and under Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia was at first in relative peace.

Post Colonial Cambodia

Prosperity and Progress

According to Chandler, the first decade of Sihanouk’s reign, from the mid 1950s to mid 1960s, was a relatively prosperous and peaceful time for Cambodia and the young ruler became known as the father of the nation, bringing development and modernisation while celebrating Cambodian culture and the arts. Renowned architect, Vann Molyvann says, “It was not only the work of a man, but it was the work of the whole nation. It was an explosion! A complete opening to Western culture.”

The Arts

Norodom Sihanouk was from a musical family, and he placed a high priority on culture and the arts. His brother, Prince Norodom Sirivudh, recalls, “Our Majesty Norodom Sihanouk ordered all the ministries to form orchestras.” This penchant for the arts is described in Milton Osbourne’s book, Sihanouk: Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness, as he details state dinners with performances of the royal ballet, “traditional Cambodian dances performed to the music of the pinpeat orchestra, a mix of drums, gongs, traditional clarinets and strings” which finished well after midnight. Being an accomplished musician, Sihanouk would then lead a dance band, playing clarinet and saxophone until the morning light.
In John Pirozzi’s documentary film, *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten: Cambodia’s Lost Rock and Roll*, we get a glimpse of Cambodians who, as they embraced modernity, also embraced a fresh celebration of Khmer culture infused with music from abroad. People all over the country started playing music, and would converge on Phnom Penh city on weekends. Amongst the songs about the natural beauty of the Cambodian countryside, the excitement of the modern Cambodian city (Phnom Penh) and romantic love songs, were dramatic, tragic songs about relational break-ups. Houy Meas, sang, “Please stop asking about your father. He’s a womanizer and an embarrassment. This is our karma from our past lives. It’s just something you’ll have to accept,” a sentiment reminiscent of the vast majority of modern Cambodian songs.

*Family and Relational Changes*

According to Vickery, the 1960s saw ‘deterioration’ in the traditional family situation, which increased dramatically in the first half of the 1970s for several reasons. Improvements in education and employment opportunities meant women had more financial freedom and could insist on marrying partners of their own choosing. Women also demanded, and took, social and sexual equality. They refused to register their marriages, as an easy exit strategy. Furthermore, some middle-class urban women repaid their husbands’ infidelities in kind – most still preferred monogamy, but they passed no judgment on those who had more than one man. “Thus traditional morality and the traditional family were changing rapidly and for those who disapproved of the changes they were breaking down.”

*Warring*

Despite great pressure from various outsiders, Cambodia maintained neutrality as the Vietnamese war developed on Cambodia’s eastern border. In Norodom Sihanouk’s words, “In South Vietnam, the US is engaged in a war. For many years now, Cambodia is in the situation of a house miraculously spared in the middle of a village on fire. My feelings about this war are not optimistic.” According to Chandler, political tensions grew within the country throughout the 1960s, and in
March 1970, Lon Nol overthrew Sihanouk’s government and war broke out inside Cambodia. He describes a complex first half of the 1970s, with the warring factions inside Cambodia, as well as conflict with outsiders connected to the war in Vietnam in particular.

In 1973 the United States interpreted the presence of North Vietnamese inside the Cambodian border as Cambodia ‘taking sides’. President Nixon is on record as saying, “North Vietnam has increased its military aggression in Cambodia. The time has come for action” and the United States responded by dropping more bombs on the Cambodian countryside than they dropped in any bombing campaign during World War II: over a hundred thousand tons. John Pilger compares it to five Hiroshimas, the bombing of a neutral country back to the stone-age. The bombings are said to have contributed to the growth in size and influence of what had until then been a small sect, which appealed to poor people in rural areas. Pol Pot is quoted as describing it as consisting of “fewer than 5,000 poorly armed guerrillas uncertain about their strategy, tactic, loyalty and leaders.” In the documentary film, *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia*, John Pilger describes the morning the war ended:

Shortly after dawn, on April 17th, the bombing stopped and there was silence. Then out of the forest came the victors – the Khmer Rouge, whose power had grown out of all proportion to their numbers.

As the war finished, new horrors began.
Notes and References – Chapter 2


6 Ibid.


32 Ibid., p. 22.
36 Thion, *Watching Cambodia: Ten Paths to Enter the Cambodian Tangle*, pp. 97-98.
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39 Thion, *Watching Cambodia: Ten Paths to Enter the Cambodian Tangle*, p. 98.
48 "Chhbap Bros: Codes of Conduct for Khmer Men."
50 Matthew Watson, *Cambodia The Virginity Trade*, 2009, United Kingdom, Zealot Films; Katherine Brickell, ""We don't forget the old rice pot when we get the new one": Discourses on Ideals and Practices of Women in Contemporary Cambodia," *Signs* 36, no. 2 (2011): pp. 437-462.
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54 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
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65 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
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John Pirozzi, *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten: Cambodia’s Lost Rock and Roll*, 2014.


Pirozzi, *Don’t Think I’ve Forgotten: Cambodia’s Lost Rock and Roll*.


Munro, *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia*. 
CHAPTER 3

Khmer Rouge and Beyond

Despite only lasting a few years, the Khmer Rouge era could be seen as most significant in terms of social change. Amongst other things, very few Cambodians escaped the intense individual and collective trauma associated with having friends and family tortured and murdered, or having had to torture and murder others from one’s community in order to survive. This chapter describes the assault that the Khmer Rouge inflicted upon Cambodian culture and society as well as some of the unintended consequences of the global effort to help restore the country after Pol Pot was ousted. These unintended consequences could also be viewed as ongoing assaults on Cambodian culture and society.

The Peasant Revolution

There is much information regarding this time in Cambodia's history, ranging from the harrowing personal memoirs of Loung Ung, author of First They Killed My Father \(^1\), to feature films like The Killing Fields \(^2\), as well as various historians' accounts. Masterminded by French-educated Cambodians, and led by the notorious Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge gained support and momentum in rural Cambodia, recruiting poor, angry farmers (and their children) from shell-shocked provinces, pitting them against Cambodia's elite and educated – and the government of Lon Nol, who was in cahoots with the United States \(^3\). In an act of revolution against those they saw as their oppressors, they evacuated Phnom Penh on 17th April 1975 and so began a most effective social engineering program, which resulted in the deaths of around a quarter of the population \(^4\). Serge Thion describes a Cambodia where:

\[
\text{You had to do what you were told immediately. These youngsters with guns had no patience or humanity. Walk, work or die. You were not supposed to utter a single word of comment. People could disappear because of a single frown. You even had to pretend to be happy. You were frightened all the time. And hungry. You had to hide everything, your past, your knowledge, your feelings, your tastes.} \text{ }^5
\]
Khmer Rouge isolated Cambodia from outside influences, closed businesses and banks, outlawed religion, burned money, confiscated private property and relocated the people from the cities to run rural collectives where the sexes were separated and where, according to Brinkley, “sexual relations or talk of marriage was punished by public execution” 7. Everyone was supposed to be equal, and everyone was to serve the common cause; Angkar (the ‘Organisation’, behind the movement), which, in turn, would protect, house and feed them 8.

This was a new agrarian society with no precedent. They tried to erase a history that hinged on exploiting the poor, effectively return Cambodia to the ‘Year Zero’, since even the earliest civilisations had favoured the wealthy 9. According to Ponchaud, the Khmer Rouge tried to eliminate personal possessions, meaningful relationships and even entrenched cultural Cambodian codes of communication 10. Khmer gestures of courtesy, for example, were done away with as they were seen as imperialist, implying a power relationship, and under Angkar everybody was supposedly equal. Under the new regime, women and men had become equals, in fact, and as Brickell highlights, with the eradication of the traditional Khmer social hierarchy, the Khmer Rouge introduced the most gender-equitable period Cambodia has known since preclassical times 12.

Changes were also made to spoken language, in an attempt to transform human relationships. Ponchaud explains that in the Khmer language, appellatives were used instead of personal pronouns 13. An English equivalent might be to use mother, father, cousin, aunty, uncle, child, or friend rather than use a person’s name. “These appellatives emphasized the ties of blood, the age, social rank, and quality of the person speaking and the person spoken to. They signified respect” 14. Angkar gave the Khmer people ‘new life’, and was a bit like the head of a big family, doing away with relational words like uncle, son, grandmother etc. and replacing them with, all encompassing, “comrade” 15. They were all children of Angkar, with Brother Number 1, Pol Pot, running the show.
According to Brickell, Khmer Rouge “imprisoned or eliminated those who could not transform, chose not to, or who were considered a threat to the revolution” 16.

**Families under Khmer Rouge**

There are conflicting opinions regarding the Khmer Rouge’s policies on the family. It seems most commentators agree with Heuveline and Poch, that, “The Khmer Rouge’s attempt to radically transform Cambodian society included a frontal attack on the family, which it saw as the core institution of social reproduction” 17. Pol Pot demanded absolute obedience and considered family and close relationships as potentially detrimental, obstructions to the commitment he required. Families often disintegrated through the torture and murder of some family members, but living members were also scattered and communication between them cut off 18. Michael Vickery argues that the Khmer Rouge policies were super strict, and that they tried to modify the family (but not destroy it) by breaking down the extended family into nuclear units and making Angkar the parental authority 19. Based on evidence such as the strict regulations banning sexual relations outside marriage and the more favourable living conditions for married women than single women, Vickery concludes that the Khmer Rouge policy was “[obviously]… to encourage the formation and maintenance of at least nuclear family units of husband, wife and children” and that Khmer Rouge actually “maintained, much more strictly than pre-war society, the official morality of ordinary Cambodian culture” 20.

Besides the conflicting thoughts regarding the impact of Khmer Rouge’s approach to existing families, Heuveline and Poch report that Khmer Rouge arranged forced marriages designed to maintain or increase loyalty to Angkar; organizing mass weddings where the new couples would declare their undying support of Angkar.

The disruption of Cambodia’s traditional marriage system by the events of the late 1970s was [very] drastic. Upon seizing power in April 1975, the Khmer Rouges (KF) swiftly attempted to sever all individual ties, other than those linked to the political hierarchy, by sweeping away the fundamental bases of Cambodian society... The KR
organized en masse marriage ceremonies, often without consideration of the families’ preferences and usual matching criteria.  

Vickery casts some doubt on the idea of forced marriages, but agrees that would-be-couples had to seek permission from the authorities, and couples always had to be “of the same political class”  

In 2015, Cambodia’s most watched reality TV program, It’s Not a Dream, reunites desperate family members who were separated by the Khmer Rouge regime decades ago. According to a recent edition of Dateline, on Australia’s SBS television, the program has a huge backlog of cases that will take years to get through, and producer Sokha Youk believes there are still hundreds of thousands of people out there who were “deliberately and systematically separated”  

Post Khmer Rouge

Enter Vietnam

On the 25th of December, 1978, Vietnam launched their final offensive, invading Cambodia and liberating the Khmer people from the rule of Khmer Rouge. It only took them a few weeks to take control of the country, and force Khmer Rouge to the North Eastern border, where they sought (and received) refuge and support from the Thais (who thought Vietnam had conquered Cambodia and intended to gradually take over the whole region). Brinkley describes the response of Cambodians who had been under the control of Khmer Rouge in the following terms:

Millions of Cambodians quietly cheered as their historical enemy swept through the nation. Three years, eight months, and twenty days after they seized power, the Khmer Rouge slipped furtively into the night. For decades to come, Cambodians, with little prompting, would affirm that the Vietnamese saved their lives.

Khmer Rouge, however, was then aided by the United States as well as by other anti-Vietnam governments in the region, who saw the new Cambodian government as a
Vietnamese puppet (therefore an enemy). The Khmer Rouge continued to hold their seat with the United Nations as country representatives for another ten years. According to Kamm, despite the atrocities committed by Khmer Rouge:

The world was fully committed to upholding Democratic Kampuchea's sovereignty, because the release of the Cambodian people from a genocidal regime was the result of a Vietnamese invasion and occupation. America's unforgiving stand against the Vietnamese Communists, whom it had failed to defeat in war, was even stronger than its distaste for the Khmers Rouges. That the deposed Pol Pot regime was the greater evil by far did not matter.

During the year or so after 'invasion' or 'liberation', hundreds of thousands of Cambodian people died from land mines, starvation and disease, as well as continued fighting. Aid was hardly delivered because the various political players created obstacles. Crops didn't produce because they were neglected during the time immediately after Khmer Rouge was defeated. Some Cambodians fled the country as refugees and others settled in camps on the Thai border. Gradually, the new government "[reintroduced] the institutions that Pol Pot had demolished – markets, money, religion, education, the right of association and freedom of movement". People crisscrossed the country desperately trying to find surviving family members, and, hoping to recover something of the lifestyle they had lived prior to the years of devastation, they returned to their traditional farming methods.

Some people never found family members, assuming they had been killed. As previously mentioned, in 2015, Cambodia’s highest rating (and highly emotional) reality TV show, It's Not a Dream, reunites parents with their children as well as siblings who were separated during the Khmer Rouge years.

**The New Family**

One of the significant challenges to the new Khmer family, post Khmer Rouge, was a
gender population imbalance. More men than women had died or been killed, leaving a ratio of about seventy-five men for every hundred women. This meant there were a lot of disadvantaged households where women had no husband to provide financially – as was the traditional role of the man in the family.

Traditionally, it is expected that Khmer women will marry and have children. Heuveline and Poch draw attention to the fact that, given the high female to male ratio during this period, some women would have missed out unless men married more than once. This provided a ‘good market’ for the men, since if they decided to leave their wife there were plenty of opportunities for remarriage. An alternative was for men who could provide well enough to choose a second or third wife, and so flourished a culture of polygamy: something that had not been traditionally widespread. Rebecca Surtees points out that many women preferred to be second or third wives rather than remain unwed.

There were some horrible stories of domestic violence and drunkenness in families where the couple had been forced to marry by Khmer Rouge, but as time demonstrated, these problems were not unique to those families, and, in fact, statistics suggest that those marriages ended up being as (un)stable as traditional arranged marriages and more stable than ‘love marriages’ during the following decades.

**The UNTAC Years (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia)**

Late 1991 through until September 1993 are often referred to as the UNTAC years. *The Paris Accords* had been signed by four conflicting political parties (agreeing to stop fighting and work towards a peaceful future) and UNTAC came to preside over Cambodia as protectorate government. According to Kamm, UNTAC’s mandate was to “restore and maintain peace in Cambodia [and] promote national reconciliation,” but that was too hard so they abandoned their main objectives and made the task of holding “free and fair elections” their new mandate.
Reportedly around 22,000 UNTAC employees arrived in Cambodia, bringing plenty of money and triggering a mini-boom which saw price-hikes well beyond what the general Khmer population could afford. In 1992, a letter was published in the Phnom Penh Post newspaper, complaining that “merchants say they don’t care whether you can afford to buy their things or not, because they can sell them to UNTAC”, and that poor Khmers were eating ‘UNTAC chickens’ - UNTAC’s discarded chicken carcasses. Depending on whom you read, UNTAC employees were paid an extra $130 to $145 per day over and above their already-high salaries, whereas most ordinary Cambodians at the time would have been earning about $20 per month. Keo Vannarin, owner of the Cambodian Equestrian Centre, says he was able to accumulate great wealth working for UNTAC, on a salary that enabled him to buy property every month. People who owned rentable properties raked in large sums of money while others went homeless – the divide between the haves and the have-nots saw a great deal of jealousy amongst Cambodians during this time.

The UNTAC years were also infamous for a prostitution boom and the arrival of HIV/AIDS in Cambodia. Under Khmer Rouge, prostitution was forbidden but during the following decade or so, it resurfaced, peaking during the UN administration. A 1993 report revealed that, with the arrival of UNTAC, estimates jumped from around 6,000 to around 20,000 sex-workers in Phnom Penh, a city of only a million people. Brothel towns such as Tuol Kork and Svay Pak (which became notorious for child-sex) doubled or tripled in numbers to facilitate the high demand. Sandra Whitworth describes an “eruption in prostitution to service UNTAC”, and UNTAC personnel pretending to marry Khmer women, then abandoning them when the mission was over. There were complaints at the time, but Yasushi Akashi, the UN’s special representative to Cambodia, responded by suggesting it was natural for soldiers to chase “young beautiful beings of the opposite sex”. One angry mother of an alleged rape victim was quoted as saying, “they came to Cambodia to help us, but it is not so, they have done nothing right”. A 2001 report suggests that a lucrative, massive sex industry, as well as child sex-
slavery as an industry, began during the UNTAC years. According to Human Rights Task Force on Cambodia, the UNTAC years marked the beginning of Cambodia’s reputation for “easy and inexpensive access to women and child prostitutes as well as a source and a transit point for trafficking women and children into prostitution”.

Brinkley describes the UNTAC years as a time when:

> Brothels worked overtime; UN doctors treated thousands of their men and women for sexually transmitted diseases. Liquor vendors couldn’t keep up with demand; restaurant and bar owners had to replace fixtures and furniture broken in drunken brawls almost every evening. UN vehicles and equipment routinely disappeared in the night, but no one was sure whether the thieves were Cambodian or renegade UN employees.

Despite what might be perceived as the many failures of the UNTAC administration, to its credit, it was able to manage the election process with an unexpected 90% of registered voters actually going to the polls. There was also a new freedom available to the media, human rights organizations flourished and over three hundred thousand refugees who had been in Thailand were peacefully repatriated.

Cambodian Prime Minister, Hun Sen, being asked what legacy UNTAC would leave in Cambodia, answered, “AIDS”. It was the most expensive political program the UN had mounted to that date, costing in the vicinity of three billion dollars.

**After UNTAC**

According to Brinkley, despite having a new, democratically elected government, Cambodia continued in anarchy well into the 1990s with shanty towns crammed into city spaces, beggars, cripples, naked children playing in rubbish, no toilets, gun battles on the streets, uneducated teachers trying to teach subjects they’d never learned themselves, diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, encephalitis and hepatitis.
being common and HIV/AIDS spreading at a frightening pace.\footnote{61}

In 2011 Brinkley noted that extremely high rates of PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder) were found to have persisted for decades in survivors of the Khmer Rouge. He quotes Muny Sothara, a psychiatrist living in Phnom Penh, as describing, “a household provincial survey in Kampong Cham in 2004 that showed PTSD or symptoms of other psychotic disorders in 47 percent of the population”\footnote{62}. Brinkley describes PTSD in the following terms:

\begin{quote}
The illness brings with it major depression, insomnia, and dulled, passive behaviour punctuated with violent outbursts that come when reminded of the trauma. It can impair social and occupational functioning and is particularly virulent among the poor and uneducated.\footnote{63}
\end{quote}

Despite Cambodians passing symptoms of PTSD and related illnesses from one generation to the next it has received very little attention.\footnote{64}

Immediately post UNTAC, the demand for sex-workers dropped and a number of places closed down. By the middle of 1994, however, the number of sex-workers began to steadily increase, and NGOs noticed “the dramatic growth of child prostitution and the rising number of women and children abducted and/or sold for prostitution”\footnote{65}. Jason Barber’s 1995 article in a Phnom Penh newspaper suggests that Cambodia became known as the “New Frontier” for Western paedophiles\footnote{66}. Various reports claim the marketing of virgins as cures (and avoidance) for HIV/AIDS began around this time.\footnote{67}

In the countryside, many families returned to the agricultural lifestyle that had been previously lived since the times of Angkor, though the cities held perceived opportunities for those who were game enough to relocate.

By the end of the decade, the political climate was changing, and with the death of
Pol Pot in 1998, and the arrest of the last Khmer Rouge commander Ta Mok, civil war was really over. After thirty years of conflict, Cambodia was finally at peace.

Foreign Bodies and Commoditisation

*Western Immigrants and the Wild Life*

A state of mayhem attracts a wide variety of people. One can get up to all sorts of mischief, but one can also contribute without too much red tape. Amit Gilboa describes a Cambodia in the late 1990s that’s reminiscent of ‘the wild west’.

For an individual coming from a modern Western society, [Phnom Penh] is a city where the immoral becomes acceptable and the insane becomes normal. Despite having lived in several major cities in America, Asia, and the Middle East, throughout my time in Cambodia, I was confronted with a world more absurd and more unbelievable than I had ever experienced... I discovered an entire street devoted to wooden shack brothels, where the girls are available for $2, and restaurants where marijuana is the favored topping for the pizzas.

He suggests that, “for many expats, part of the joy of Phnom Penh is that not only can they indulge in outrageous behaviour, but they can also finance all of their activities locally”, at least by teaching English if they have no other saleable skills.

One only needs to stroll through one of the entertainment districts in Phnom Penh to see that there clearly remains today, a population of expatriates who are in Cambodia to exploit the available carnal pleasures. There are others who came with NGOs to help, one way or another. Yet others moved there to exploit business opportunities. In a country where most of the educated people were wiped out there are plenty of opportunities available for Westerners with the most humble education, minimal expertise and even very little social prowess.

*Cambodian People as Commodities*

Prostitution in Cambodia has existed for a long time - it was certainly tolerated, if
not accepted, as a means for men to ‘entertain’ themselves. The bourgeoning sex industry in the UNTAC years reinforced the idea of using of women and children as commodities - as acceptable behaviour and a way to make money. It is possible that this inspired the rapid re-growth that began in 1994, when new local markets were developed. The documentary film, *Cambodia the Virginity Trade*, depicts men who believe myths about sex with virgins curing AIDS (and making you look nice, white and young), suggesting that during the HIV/AIDS explosion there were plenty of takers for younger and younger girls, as remains the situation today 71.

Young women and girls, then, could be thought of as ‘easy money’ in Cambodia and parents may exploit the opportunity to sell off their daughters when someone in the family is ill or if they are struggling financially. Emily Jablonski reports parents who, “willingly sell their children’s virginity in exchange for urgently needed cash” 72. Matthew Watson’s film, *The Girls of Phnom Penh*, suggests that a girl’s virginity can be sold for large amounts of money (relatively speaking) and the girls can then be used for ongoing sexual services. They are sometimes tricked and sold off, but often they are manipulated, convinced that they are doing the right thing by their family and so go voluntarily 73. Da-Lin, a seventeen-year-old sex-worker in Phnom Penh says, “my virginity was the only thing of value we had” 74. Sometimes, however, Cambodian girls choose sex-work to finance a consumerist lifestyle, since, according to Theary, a sex-worker in Phnom Penh, some girls can make between $100 and $200 per day, whereas a job in a clothing factory may pay $80 per month 75. Aid workers do not often present this side of the industry, something Stromberg has attempted to confront in her work with the Cambodian sex-workers’ union 76.

Prostitution has become an important focus for many NGO workers and Cambodian men are targeted and often framed in negative terms by those working in the ‘saving of Cambodian prostitutes’ industry. Dr. Lek Galabru, from LICADHO, says it is not uncommon for a Cambodian woman to turn a blind eye to her husband visiting prostitutes, as long as he is still able to provide well for his family 77 – a view Western aid workers generally perceive as problematic. Having a girlfriend,
however, is not tolerable, as the emotional involvement is seen as a serious threat to one’s marriage. What is not often discussed, is that some young Khmer women do not respect relational boundaries, such as marriage, and will, according to Phaneth, openly flirt with a married man in front of his wife.

**Gender-Specific NGOs**

In response to the numerous challenges facing Cambodia post-war NGOs arrived in Cambodia en masse in 1979. As new problems developed, their numbers increased dramatically during the 1990s and have since continued to rise with estimated numbers of NGOs now working in Cambodia in the thousands. According to Rasmussen, they manage about a quarter of all the aid that’s given to Cambodia each year, and offer services in sectors ranging from public health to education, agriculture to community development. In regards to issues of gender and development, Adam Jones suggests that a “new generation [of women in academia] appears less suspicious of, and more sympathetic to, the study of men and masculinities”, but that this scholarship “seems far ahead of actual development policy and its implementation, which continues to identify “gender issues” almost exclusively with women and femininities”. If Jones is correct, then it could be suggested that a significant number of NGOs working in Cambodia might become more effective if they update the paradigm in which they currently work.

**Protection From Cambodian Men**

There are numerous books, papers, and articles on Cambodian women and a plethora of NGO programs dedicated to the ‘rescuing’ and empowerment of Cambodian women and children by removing them from brothels or violent homes, teaching new skills, offering counsel, educating them and housing them away from abusive men. These programs might be successful in aiding those who have already been hurt, but there appears to be a need for solutions closer to the root causes, since while women and girls are rescued every week from Cambodian brothels, it
seems the sex industry is growing, as is the demand for younger and younger virgins.

One need only look as far as the videos about prostitution and the sale of virgins in Cambodia to see Cambodian men portrayed as predators or violent patriarchs, and the women and children as victims. In these videos, there is rarely a positive representation of Cambodian man. The men in Matthew Watson's Cambodia, The Virginity Trade, for example, have bought young girls’ virginity because they thought it would make them strong, or improve their complexion, and give them eternal youth. The film features other young Cambodian men who are gang rapists, casually explaining what they do and why, at times, they have to get violent, “we may use violence, or hit her and threaten that she has to have sex with everyone or she will be beaten” 84. Given the number of documentaries on the sex trade in Cambodia, with its mostly local clientele, one could be forgiven for thinking all Cambodian men are violent, selfish, moronic rapists.

The Men’s Perspective

There is an awareness that Cambodian men need to change, but there does not appear to have been much attention dedicated to understanding the problems they face and the context in which these men exist in search of reasons for why they have become irresponsible, abusive and violent, straying from the behaviour traditionally prescribed throughout Cambodian history.
According to Litz and Gray, “emotional numbing has become a core defining feature of posttraumatic stress disorder” and in their study on emotional numbing they conclude that, “patients with PTSD require more intense positive stimulation to access the full complement of appetitive or pleasant emotional behaviour” 85. If this is the case, then it seems reasonable to ask whether or not the use of beer and girls might be a convenient and inexpensive way for Khmer men to numb emotionally post-trauma, and in cases where there is not much positive stimulation, whether being labelled a drunk who cheats on his wife might be another reason for wanting to escape their reality 86. Despite the efforts of NGOs and huge sums of money spent on trying to fix the problem, the demand for girls is apparently getting higher in number 87, and lower in age 88, gang rapes are on the rise 89 and there are increases in violence in the Cambodian home 90.

Books, papers, articles and programs dedicated to the understanding and well-being of Cambodian men, and the causes behind behaviour that necessitates protecting the women and children from them, are rare. In 2010, Gender and Development for Cambodia (GADC) with support from Partners for Prevention and the International Center for Research on Women, explored gender norms, masculinity and domestic violence in Cambodia. GADC acknowledges that men and boys are usually not part of violence prevention efforts, and so did this study specifically to explore men and
masculinities in Cambodia. According to their report, the study found that, “The levels of violence against women can be attributed to the pervasive gender inequality in Cambodia, which stems from the rigidly defined gender roles of men and women” 91. However, as discussed earlier, rigidly defined gender roles have existed in Cambodia for a very long time with mutual respect, rather than very high levels of violence against women, being demanded. Perhaps the modern context has something to do with it; with four decades of violence, social upheaval, poverty, health problems and mental illnesses such as PTSD impacting how those rigid gender roles play out. The GADC report goes on to say that, “failure to uphold gender-based expectations of behaviour often leads to violence” 92. It is conceivable that some Cambodians might find security in the traditions that have defined them for millennia, for the time being at least, and that interfering with this might be unhelpful. A different approach to the data might find that encouraging people to reject traditional values at this time is what leads to violence, rather than the traditional values themselves.

There is mention in the same report that some respondents said women play a part in the problem by provoking violence but these claims do not appear to have been investigated despite the study’s mandate to specifically explore men and masculinities in Cambodia. In 2008, the International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA) also published a paper on gender-based violence, in which more than half the participants believed that men’s violent behaviour is often provoked by women 93, and again these claims do not appear to have been investigated.

Regardless of the fact that some of these men might feel that provocation justifies violence (it does not), it could be unwise to brush them off as victim-blaming, since they may well be providing an access point that has the potential to reveal behaviours and counter-behaviours that precede the violence we wish to curtail. Knowing what it is that Khmer men identify as inciting their anger or triggering their rage might be central in equipping us to help some families resolve conflict, dissipate tension and avoid violence altogether.
In one study on domestic violence, Eng et al. assert that, “control has been identified as a central issue in... the dynamics of marital violence”, justifying their measurement of *Husband’s Control* as a predictor variable. It was measured by indicators such as “Husband jealous if talking with other men”, “Husband accuses her of unfaithfulness”, and “Does not permit her to meet her friends” \(^{94}\). The irony it seems, is that Cambodian man is so broadly assumed to be unfaithful, which may well result in jealousy on his wife’s part, but *Wife’s Control* as a predictor was not measured in the study, nor was it asked whether the wife accuses the husband of unfaithfulness, let alone what impact this might have on the relationship. If it is true that *control* is a central issue in the dynamics of spousal violence, then some kind of balance might be deemed appropriate.

I attended the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) conference in Bangkok in 2013, where I was impressed that one of the definitions used when describing gendered violence, was *psychological and emotional abuse*. In discussing the impact of psychological and emotional abuse with others at the conference, I gained the impression that this form of ‘violence’ can be worse than physical violence and have significant long-term effects on the victim. Given the broadly accepted use of this definition of violence, I was surprised to see the only research presented was on men as perpetrators; research on women as perpetrators of psychological and emotional abuse was conspicuous by its absence.

It is understood that physical violence is unacceptable, that some Khmer women need protecting from their husbands, and that perpetrators need to be dealt with appropriately by the law. In an article that considers the focus on women in development and its impact on Cambodian men, however, Robert Jamieson observes problems in practice arising from a disconnect between theory and the real world. He describes the outworking of some programs as being perverse in the way they impact the lives of men, which in turn rebounds on the very women the programs are designed to help \(^{95}\).
This study assumes that physical, psychological and emotional violence are not acceptable, regardless of whom the perpetrator might be. Instead of focusing on the legalities of these situations it seeks a more comprehensive approach where reconciliation may be possible. The thesis film, Bngvel, is a good case in point. In it, provocation arises from both men and women with embedded complexities that will be understood by the audience.

Assuming neither physical violence nor psychological and emotional violence are acceptable, regardless of who the perpetrator might be, there appears to be an opportunity for more comprehensive approaches that might help bring more complete solutions. This study, then, does not focus on the legalities but tries to find out where reconciliation may be possible. In the end, the film, Bngvel, offers indications as to how provocation can arise on both sides without presenting either man or woman as perpetrator or victim but rather demonstrating simple actions, reactions and consequences with imbedded complexities that will be understood by the audience.

**Masculinity Here and There**

It is currently understood by some that men’s loss of their role as good provider may be central to what has been perceived as a masculinity crisis in Western countries with many women out-earning their male partners. Cambodia (as is the case in other South East Asian countries) caters well for Western men who are struggling with some of the dramatic social changes that occurred during the last fifty years, and who feel a sense of emasculation in the West. As mentioned earlier, according to Sheridan Prasso, many of these Western men find, “desirability among Asian women and the “remasculcation” that accompanies it... potent therapy.” If they come to Cambodia and marry, they are expected to earn money to put food on the table and provide a secure future for their family. It is demanded! Western men
who grew up with traditional role-models, can live out their days in the roles they have learned from their fathers, without having to unlearn them. Once again, this is unlikely to help the men of Cambodia, especially those with infrequent, low-paid employment and almost non-existent self-esteem - potentially being perceived as even less able to provide for their families: Less-preferred options. These are the men represented in those Cambodian pop songs that suggest Cambodian women should leave them for greener, foreign, pastures 99.

In Cambodia, it is central to a man’s sense of identity that he provide well for his family 100, but this has become a source of tremendous pressure as Brickell 101 highlights, “the household division of labour is changing with an increased tendency for women to engage in a broader range of tasks, including those traditionally associated with men”. As the garment manufacturing industry in Cambodia has boomed, employing mostly women, and since international organisations tend to offer support and training to many more women than men, it is foreseeable that the ability to fulfil the good-provider role for many Cambodian men may disappear like it has for some men in the West. The potential impact of this should be investigated. The impact may not be identical to that in the West, since many Cambodian women still want and expect their husband to provide well, while they manage the family finances, take care of the children etcetera as Brickell finds, “‘cultural values’ continue to promote the idea of women as ‘naturally ordained’ bearers of housework responsibility” 102. There seems to be potential for deterioration in the social and domestic lives of many Cambodians, as some Khmer men can no longer support a family with the little income that they do earn. “When they have… endured such traumatic stress, are desperately poor, have virtually no resources, and have little chance for education or employment” 103, there will be very little incentive - for anything.
Moving Forward

Chapters 2 and 3 have established that descriptions of Khmer men are mostly limited to unacceptable behaviours that negatively impact Cambodian women. It might be tempting to blame ‘the patriarchy’, as Stromberg does, except that the notion of patriarchy is challenged by others who suggest much of Khmer society is bilateral, and even matriarchal in some cases. Even if one were to rigorously argue a connection between the unacceptable behaviours of Khmer men and patriarchal traditions, the questions regarding how to redeem Khmer men who have gone astray, and how to protect those who have not, remain unanswered – and in many cases, unasked.

Various authors recognise that most of the limited body of work available that describes Khmer men does so in negative terms and that the current paucity of knowledge regarding Khmer men and masculinity is problematic. It is likely that the narrow description available does describe some Cambodian men, but there lies a danger in having only one description broadly available, due to the potential for it to become accepted as the description of Cambodian men; that is, a description of all Cambodian men. As a consequence of this generalisation, Cambodian men (and boys) who do not fit the currently available descriptions may find themselves victims of prejudice from within their community. It also raises concerns regarding what images of Khmer man are available for Khmer boys to model themselves on.

Documentation of Cambodian history tells a story of enduring culture and tradition, which withstood eighty-five years of French rule, only to be disrupted by extreme violence on a broad scale during the Khmer Rouge years in the 1970s. Political, social and domestic havoc continued for decades, as did extreme poverty, poor health and mental illnesses. Many Cambodians over fifty years old have either killed people or witnessed people being killed, lost family and loved ones through murder, disease or malnutrition, been humiliated by the invasion (or liberation, depending on one's perspective) of a traditional enemy, lost all their property, seen girls in
their family or community commoditised en masse for sex by foreigners who came to ‘help’, lost family or friends to HIV etcetera. As a result of ongoing dire poverty and lack of education many Cambodian men have lost their capacity to provide and protect their family. Given this context, it is conceivable that there are significant factors that contribute towards problematic behaviours of some Cambodian men, beyond ‘gender roles’ or ‘patriarchy’.

To invoke the words of Trude Jacobsen, representations of Khmer men as responsible for a, “myriad social issues, including child rape, sex trafficking, domestic violence, corruption and HIV… [are the] sole genre of published work that even mentions masculinity, and then not as a category for analysis, but as an explanation for behaviour” 105. In response to current imbalanced and potentially harmful representations, in the near-absence of any other, the study that follows investigates the views of ordinary Cambodians in regards to Khmer men and searches for a description of a man who does not fit the stereotype. It attempts to not only describe the social phenomena under investigation, but also position it within the context of Cambodian people’s reality 106. Necessarily, it explores the modern environmental, social, relational, and economic context in which Cambodian men live – a process that reveals contemporary issues which some Khmer men find challenging. It then describes that context through a narrative film, which details the kinds of tensions and conflicts that sometimes precede eruptions of unacceptable behaviour. In doing so, it offers a model of Cambodian masculinity in alternative terms to those described by Jacobsen. An antithesis that, it is hoped, will be useful in cooperation with existing theses in synthesising new understandings.
Notes and References – Chapter 3

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6 Brinkley, Cambodia’s Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land; Chandler, A History of Cambodia; Ung, First They Killed My Father.
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8 Ponchaud, Cambodia: Year Zero, pp. 119-121.
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31 Ibid.
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42 Ibid.
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65 "Cambodia: Prostitution and Sex Trafficking. A Growing Threat to the Human Rights of Women and Children in Cambodia.".


67 "Cambodia: Prostitution and Sex Trafficking. A Growing Threat to the Human Rights of Women and Children in Cambodia."; Watson, *Cambodia The Virginity Trade*.


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74 *Cambodia The Virginity Trade*.

75 Theary Theara, interview with Owen Beck, 2012, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Personal interview recorded and archived on video, 19-08-2012.

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90 Eng et al., "Domestic violence against women in Cambodia: husband’s control, frequency of spousal discussion, and domestic violence reported by Cambodian women," pp. 237-246.

91 GADC, *A Preliminary Analysis Report on Deoum Troung Pram Hath in Modern Cambodia: A Qualitative Exploration of Gender Norms, Masculinity and Domestic Violence*.

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"The 'Stubborn Stain' on Development: Gendered Meanings of Housework (Non-)Participation in Cambodia," p. 1353.


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CHAPTER 4
Research in Preproduction

It was established in the previous chapters that there is a significant body of knowledge regarding the historical context, and the turmoil Cambodian people have been subject to during recent decades. A dominant description of Cambodian men is identified; one that has been generalised across much of the population and which frames Khmer men in profoundly negative terms. The unacceptable behaviours of Cambodian men that have been documented could be seen as symptoms of patriarchal systems embedded in Khmer culture, but this would appear simplistic, since it does not take into account the wars, the political turmoil, the social upheaval, the poverty, the pervasive and enduring mental illnesses such as PTSD and the destruction of the traditional family that Cambodia has suffered in its recent history. Besides, there are conflicting views on how Cambodia might be patriarchal and whether or not Khmer homes and families are patriarchal at all. It is conceivable that the unacceptable behaviours of Cambodian men are symptomatic of complex combinations of the aforementioned traumas and turmoils, and that exploring the lived experience of contemporary Cambodian men might bring fresh perspective to problems faced by Cambodian men, women and children.

The current chapter describes film pre-production processes used to learn about Cambodian men and masculinity in a contemporary context, exploring Khmer women’s feelings about and attitudes towards Khmer men, as well as Khmer men’s feelings and attitudes towards themselves and the problematic situations some of them they find themselves in. It also asks whether there are Khmer men who do not conform to the aforementioned descriptions, whether these generalisations have resulted in such men being victims of prejudice and, if so, what form this prejudice takes. In the process of doing the research, another paucity of knowledge is identified but not explored in great depth; one that almost mirrors the paucity of knowledge surrounding Khmer men, advocating an investigation of Khmer women’s
participation in conflict without pre-framing them as only-ever victims – this realm appears to be unrecognised in previous studies on women in dysfunctional or violent domestic situations and thoroughly exploring it might help produce more complete and effective solutions.

The first part of this chapter discusses the kind of research that is typical in film productions – the gathering of information for the purpose of informing and developing a script. This gathering of information was formulated and executed in such a way as to elicit answers to the questions that are central to the study and with the aim of eventually producing a script that captures some of the lesser-known essence of contemporary Cambodian social and family life. Following this, the release of a UN study and the press articles that emerged from that study, are examined in terms of current approaches to gendered violence, which, by default, consistently frame perpetrators as men and victims as women. This approach to issues of gendered violence is challenged when we meet a Cambodian man who was blinded when his wife threw acid over him. His story resonates with data gathered during the scriptwriting sessions, and marks a turning point in the study. This new direction will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Aspects of ethnography and autoethnography strengthen the study but are mentioned only briefly in this and the following chapter - they will be explored and explained more thoroughly in Chapter 6. Screenings and audience feedback that authenticate the study’s findings will also be discussed later.

**Scriptwriting**

**Best Laid Plans**

In order to deal with expected difficulties associated with interacting with participants who are not used to traditional research methodologies or who are too polite to answer questions directly, a practice-based approach was taken, whereby interviews were framed as script-writing workshops in which participants helped
write a story for a feature film by assisting in the development of authentic Cambodian characters as well as various narrative elements such as setting, central conflicts and plot.

Participants ranged in age from twenty to sixty five years, were employed in various fields such as farming, hospitality, tuktuk driving and Khmer language teaching, and some were university students. Most participants had their roots in a rural province but most now lived away from home in order to work or study. None of the participants were wealthy, and some were from poor families in poor villages. They were asked to participate in on-camera script-writing sessions in small groups, pairs and as individuals.

In preparation, a set of questions designed to elicit answers that would both inform the research question, as well as cultivate the script, was formulated as a loose framework for these script-writing sessions. The value of imaginative answers and how participants think they are relevant to real-life Cambodia was emphasised, and it was stressed that there were no incorrect answers. Participants were encouraged to elaborate and illustrate their answers with personal anecdotes in order to maximise the authenticity of the script. It was expected that the issues discussed would invoke the kind of problems and drama that might illuminate the project’s aims. All the participants’ responses were recorded on video with the intention that these recordings would be edited as part of a documentary film. Participants’ combined answers, as well as snippets from personal anecdotes, interactions between participants and non-verbal information such as body language, were to be used to inform the creation of character profiles and a basic plot for a film script. Once the script was completed, a read-through was planned, where audience members would have the opportunity to offer feedback. It was intended that these feedback sessions would also be recorded for use in the documentary film.
Flexible Procedures

As planned as the process was, it was necessary to make adjustments and revisions in response to participants’ backgrounds, personal circumstances, and group dynamics etcetera. This was the very beginning of an experiment, which was steered by participants’ input as it progressed - each step depending on what had come before. During the scriptwriting sessions, some of the participants were keen and capable of helping to fabricate a story, but others seemed completely baffled by the whole idea. Some had never tried to ‘make up’ a story before, so conventions of storytelling were foreign. Not having any knowledge regarding how stories work caused some difficulty coming to terms with concepts like good guys, bad guys, and central conflict etcetera. Some of those who had attended school claimed they had never written or made up stories in class. In response to these unforeseen factors, questions were simplified during some of the sessions in order to learn how participants would describe a ‘good’ man, or a ‘bad’ man etcetera in their Cambodian context.
In all sessions except for one, where the participant ‘froze’ in front of the camera and gave one-word or very short-phrase answers which were prompted by the interpreter, adapting to each participant’s background and experience, as well as the circumstances in which the sessions were held (for example, if they were solo or group sessions) and the participants’ composure, brought about interesting results and most participants appeared comfortable offering their thoughts and elaborating with personal stories and opinions about the Khmer society which they are a part of.

**Good Guys and Bad Guys**

The scriptwriting sessions revealed some common attitudes and thoughts regarding whom the good guys and bad guys should be. The one aspect that was always raised in regards to describing a good guy or a bad guy was *fidelity*. In brief: a good guy does not go out drinking, use prostitutes or have girlfriends and he takes care of his family well. A bad guy, on the other hand, goes out drinking and sleeping with other girls and does not really care about his wife and family.

There was some discrepancy in terms of employment, age and origin, but good guys were most frequently described as poor, middle aged men, who were born and raised in a rural province. An interesting aberration was presented by a group of four university students, who agreed unanimously that a good guy should, “[have] good ability, [be] well educated [and] have a high paid job” – things they all aspired to. Bad guys, on the other hand, were variously employed as policemen, gangsters and drug dealers, were lazy boys from rich families, or poor men who needed to turn to crime in order to survive.

**Standouts**

There were two scriptwriting sessions that stood out; one was with a group of three who worked in the tourism sector, and the other was with the group of four university students living and studying in Phnom Penh. The importance of these
sessions was rooted in *what* they answered, but also in *how* they responded to questions, body language and interactions between group members.

*Bon, Raksmeay and Kiv*

Members of this group 4 were raised in the rural provinces of Kep, Takeo and Kampot. Bon and Kiv completed high school and Raksmeay completed Year 9. Bon is in his early thirties and is married with one child. Raksmeay is in her early twenties and is unmarried. Kiv is in her late twenties and is unmarried. None of them have been to university, and at the time of this session, they all lived in Kep Province and worked in tourism and hospitality.

We started the session with questions directly relating to the script. Bon spoke first, saying he thought the good guy should be a farmer. Raksmeay then offered her thoughts in a snappy tone, that the good guy should be “a man who looks after his family”. Kiv elaborated that he should not just be a farmer, but a really poor one who looks after his family. There was a hint of contempt as Raksmeay then described the bad guy as a man who “doesn’t care about family. He just wants to do what he wants and...” then she went silent. Kiv pitched in that the bad guy should be, “lazy and doesn’t want to do anything”, and the others agreed that “bad guys don’t work”.

When discussing points of conflict between good guys and bad guys, Raksmeay went off topic, suggesting that the problem between them escalates unnecessarily, because, “they don’t understand each other. When they have a small problem, they make it into a big problem”. In elaborating, she suggested that, “the man has a drink but his wife doesn’t want him to drink too much. That’s why they have a small problem, which becomes a big problem because the wife doesn’t want him to drink too much”.

Kiv suggested, “when a bad guy has a lot of money he starts to want more wives or girlfriends and drinks beer and he doesn’t care about his wife or family”. She goes on to say that a lot of men in Cambodia are like this, and that even an entry-level
salary is enough for these problems to begin. Bon agrees that this is a big problem and Kiv suggests, “there are not many good men in Cambodia”. Raksmeay describes a predicament Khmer women find themselves in, that if a man “has a good job, he has money, and if he has money he has another girl, so...” suggesting Khmer women have a limited choice between men who have money but spend it on other girls, or men who don't have money, so cannot afford other girls but also cannot provide well for a family.

It seemed significant that Bon, Raksmeay and Kiv were in agreement, that it is possible for bad men to change and become good men, and vice versa.

This session suggested that, despite Cambodia embracing aspects of the modern West, it is still important to some Cambodians that a man have the desire and ability to provide for his family. Raksmeay described a lose-lose situation that Khmer women find themselves in and a frustration with Khmer men’s lack of ability or desire to fulfil the needs of women and families. Her digression into spousal conflict hinted at a role wives may play in their domestic tension and that conflict starts
small and escalates. This was the first indication that perhaps a better alternative basis for our script would be one that centres on the relationship between a husband and wife, rather than a good man and a bad man. To pursue this so early in the process of gathering information would have been premature, but it was taken into consideration as the research developed.

The University Students

The university students ⁵ were in their early twenties and had moved from a rural province to study in Phnom Penh city. There were two women participating, Sreyleak and Mora, and two men, Veasna and Seyha. Some previous sessions had been a bit stifled as we launched straight into trying to write a script, so we started the session with some casual conversation around the topic in order to get them thinking about issues that might help inform a good script.

The conversation began with a focus on television, which was considered by the students to be useful in helping people relax, but also something we can learn from. Music videos, for example, teach teenagers about love and broken relationships; the kinds of things that, according to Sreyleak, make young people commit suicide. They were in agreement that music videos have oft-repeated themes of boys or girls cheating on their partners, and that there is “no true love” in them. In the words of Mora, the reason this theme is so prevalent is because “many teenagers in Cambodia, boys and girls, [have] a true story about this. That’s why they make up a song to educate some teenagers not to be like them. It’s not good”. The others all agreed that this kind of story is common in Cambodia.

The women described the kind of men they would like to marry as ‘good’ men, who would love them and their family, and earn enough money to provide well. They discussed a music video that features a man who cannot keep his eyes off other girls, and goes from one girl to another. After cheating on several girls and breaking their hearts, he eventually realises that he was happiest before he started cheating, when he was with his original girlfriend, and is remorseful. The girls agreed that a lot of
Khmer men are like this particular character, but unlike Raksmeay, they were determined to find husbands who would be different. At this point, one of the young men, Seyha suggested that, “some men are not like this, but some are”. Mora responded in a cynical tone, “Like you, right?” and laughed. This was a telling moment, as Seyha appeared quite uncomfortable with Mora’s comment.

The men in the group were then challenged by Mora, as they discussed the relevance of Chhbab Srey and Chhbab Bros. The following transcript contains interactions that inform what lies at the heart of the study. It is truncated and edited for clarity. It begins with discussion about Chhbab Bros, the rules for men and boys as described in the previous chapter, and its relevance in contemporary Cambodia.

**Mora:** In the past, [Chhbab Bros] was really important, but now? No. Because all the men cannot obey.

**Sreyleak:** If they can follow these laws, I think it’s good, but now it’s different.
**Mora:** If they can obey these rules, all the men will be the best, but [reality] is the opposite to this, they never care about these rules.

**Seyha:** I think it’s good all the time. It advises us to be good men.

**Mora:** Who cares? Only you, right? Only you and a few men care about these rules but others don’t care any more.

**Veasna:** Chhbap Bros is very important for me, a good law to follow.

**Mora:** Can you follow? Can you follow it?

**Veasna:** Yes. I will try.

**Mora:** Really?
The discussion moves on to the three follies men are warned about in Chhbap Bros, drinking, girls and gambling. Seyha considers these warnings important in contemporary Cambodia but Mora contradicts him by asserting that few men consider these things important and that, “they only care about what can make them happy”. 

When discussing Chhbap Srey, the rules for women and girls, both women agreed that it is very good to obey the rules, but that many modern Cambodian girls cannot because they are pursuing education and careers. Mora suggested that, “before, women were not respected because they just took care of the home” and there was general agreement that women are more respected today than in the past, because they can get educated and find work. This seemed to contradict the women’s view that most modern Khmer men are incapable of remaining faithful to modern Khmer women, which could be seen as disrespectful, as well as the belief that it is desirable for modern men to comply with the old rules and expectations, which demand respect for women. These views also seemed to contradict historical accounts that a Khmer woman who managed the home and family finances was highly valued and respected, suggesting that in some quarters there may have been a shift in ideology that has resulted in the perceived value of woman in the home being reduced – something more akin to Western views than traditional Cambodian views. Given that Western countries have been heavily involved in re-educating Cambodia, it seemed possible that these young Cambodian university students were seeing aspects of their own history through a Westernised lens.

In discussing pros and cons of modernity, Mora suggests that there are now good opportunities for women to receive education, work and fulfil high positions of employment, but that men these days waste a lot of money on girls.

Seyha: I want to be a good man, have money and a good job and have a lot of people love me.
Mora: And have a lot of girls.

Veasna: I must study hard to find a good job. Then, I want to be a good man also.

Mora: Boys want to grow up and be good looking and smart and get a good job, but they also want to be able to have a lot of girls.

Seyha and Veasna both say that their fathers and grandfathers taught them to study hard and be good, respectful men.

There was general agreement that a good man in our film should be someone from a poor family who works hard to improve his social and financial situation.

This session highlighted strong impressions of Khmer men that are in line with current stereotypical representations. The descriptions of music videos was consistent with those I had witnessed – I recalled watching thirty minutes of music videos one afternoon and the narrative was identical in each and every one. The first video featured a graphic miscarriage that happened when a very pregnant young Khmer woman learned that her husband was cheating on her. The narrative in the next video was identical, but not as graphic. The rest of the videos featured essentially the same conflict but without the pregnancy.

The university students most-mentioned the issue of ‘girls’ as a problem, which often went hand-in-hand with drinking and the group unanimously agreed that these are common concerns. When the men in the group expressed their desires to be ‘good men’, who work hard and would one day marry a woman to whom they would be loyal, they were openly doubted and mocked by a woman in the group who appeared convinced the stereotypical description applies to almost all Khmer men. Mistrust and gender stereotyping, then, surfaced as a significant factor, and although her mistrust of Khmer men might be rooted in easily observed
inconsistencies between what some of them say and do, her behaviour during our scriptwriting session suggested that prejudicial treatment might also be a problem for some well-intentioned Khmer men.

There was general agreement that the traditional rules for both men and women are beneficial, when they can be followed. Men were strongly criticised for not being capable of following the rules, but women's failure to follow the rules seemed to be justified by the desire for education and paid employment.

**Summary**

- Almost everybody suggested the good guy in our story should be from the countryside, and most said he should be poor.
- A ‘good’ Khmer man was most often defined by his lack of infidelity as well as his desire and ability to provide well for his family.
- A Khmer man is perceived as ‘bad’ when he demonstrates a lack of care for his wife and family by spending time and money out of the home with other girls. These extramarital activities often include drinking.
- All participants perceived Khmer men’s infidelity to be a significant and common problem.
- Some Khmer women appear to believe that very few Khmer men are faithful to their wives. Raksmey demonstrated a sense of hopelessness because of this, and Mora openly doubted and contradicted men who said they wanted to be ‘good’.
- Some men were subject to prejudice and discrimination during the sessions, based on the expectation that they will ‘misbehave’ because they are Khmer men. This raised the likelihood that some Khmer men who want to be loyal, ‘good husbands’, may be subject to unwarranted mistrust and criticism by their wives.
- It was hinted, that a wife’s unnecessary criticism of her husband might sometimes play a role in escalating domestic conflict.
• It was agreed that a bad man could change, and become a good man.

A combination of the most common opinions and most significant moments during the scriptwriting sessions was used to begin forming characters for the script. It seemed that the central character should definitely be a man from a rural province who is loyal to his wife, dedicated to his family, and works hard to earn enough money to care for them well. His antagonist was not so well defined at this stage, except that he should indulge in what might be perceived as sexual excesses and drink too much.

An interesting source of conflict seemed to be reflected in the tension between Veasna and Seyha, the boys in the student group, and Mora. It raises questions about Khmer boys living with a constant reminder, excluding all other possibilities, that they will one day cheat on their wives, and highlights the possibility that some Khmer husbands might live with a wife who relentlessly doubts and criticises them. It did not seem impossible that, in some cases, this might be the stuff some men would identify as triggering feelings of anger and rage, eventually manifesting in either the kinds of confrontation and violence explored by organisations like GADC and IWDA, or unhealthy numbing and retreat. These possibilities were somewhat intriguing, since they could potentially complement existing knowledge about Cambodian domestic and social problems by illuminating areas that had not been previously explored. To pursue this angle would mean a dramatic change in direction, since the most relevant conflict in our narrative would necessarily be between a husband and wife. The research to date had not indicated any likely or possible path to resolution for that kind of conflict, except for the fact that a bad man can change, and become a good man.

**Framed**

Around this time there were a number of significant events and publications that demanded attention since they were pertinent to this research project. What began
as a detour ended up endorsing the pertinence of potential changes in direction that had been suggested during the scriptwriting sessions – that the conflict in our script should be between a husband and wife, rather than a good guy and a bad guy. Much of this section draws attention to the established approaches to understanding ways in which men and women participate in some forms of conflict and violence. Despite the fact that violence is not the direct focus of this study, its relevance lies in the fact that many of the current descriptions of Khmer men are products of studies on violence – domestic and gendered violence in particular.

*It’s a Man’s World*

The fifteenth of October 2012 marked the end of an era. The man who had become known as the last of the god-kings⁶, Father of Cambodia, responsible for taking the country back from the French, embracing modernity while at the same time celebrating culture and the arts, Norodom Sihanouk, passed away and so began months of mourning. At the beginning of February 2013, the population of Phnom Penh swelled with rural Cambodians wanting to pay their last respects at the former king’s cremation, which was to be held by the Royal Palace. The city also swarmed with foreign dignitaries and reporters from around the globe.
One of the reporters present was an Australian, Aela Callan, who was not there to report on the deceased King, but to make a documentary film on the problem of gang-rape in Cambodia, called *It's a Man's World*. Once complete, the film painted a picture of Cambodian men as violent rapists, with much of the presentation being rooted in statistics generated by a *UN Multi-country Study on Men and Masculinities in Asia and the Pacific*. The UN soon published their findings, inspiring such sensational headlines as, “Nearly quarter of men in Asia-Pacific admit to committing rape” and, “Almost A QUARTER of men admit to being rapists across parts of Asia, UN report finds”, as well as news articles describing Cambodia as a society in which twenty percent of men were rapists.

The title of Aela’s film, *It's a Man's World*, appears to imply that ‘men’ would relish the opportunity to be violent gang-rapists with impunity, should such an opportunity arise. Even given the extraordinary figures generated by the study, this generalisation seems unjustified and highly exaggerated. It, along with the other headlines about Cambodian rapists, reinforces the representation of Khmer men as perpetuated by the, “sole genre of published work that even mentions masculinity”, which Jacobsen describes. One thing was for sure; the UN study had been translated to a gloomy representation of Cambodian men in the news. By extension,
the impact of these kinds of publications could be considered in terms of how parents feel about their daughters marrying men who are twenty percent likely to be rapists, and the knock-on effect this might have on Cambodian men.

The full report from the UN study was soon to be launched at the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (SVRI) conference in Bangkok. I anticipated that the research I had begun might serve to bring fresh perspective to the understanding of the context in which gendered violence occurs in Cambodia, not only benefitting Khmer men, but women and children as well. The conference offered an opportunity to learn something about how the ‘gendered violence industry’ works and to consider how my research might complement other work done in this arena.

**Sexual Violence Research Initiative**

*The UN Multi-Country Study*

Around the middle of October 2013, I attended the SVRI conference. There was a sense of excitement as one presenter claimed that we had ninety percent of the big thinkers in the industry under one roof. About two hundred and fifty people attended, a dozen or so of them men. A range of presentations were given, from participant video projects working with young men, to quantitative studies about victims of gendered violence, to the flagship presentation - the UN multi-country study.

The report from the UN study was available at the conference so it was possible to glean some idea of how the figures were obtained. At a glance, it became evident that the language used for gathering data was very different to the language used in newspaper reports. According to the official report, the word ‘rape’ was not used in any survey questions, and in response to the data collected in the first country surveyed, Bangladesh, the researchers added extra questions on sexual partner violence, broadening their definition of ‘rape’. For example, in the women’s survey, a question about partner rape came in two parts; it asked if they had been,
“physically forced to have sexual intercourse when [they] did not want to,” or “had sexual intercourse when [they] did not want to because [they were] afraid of what [their] partner might do” 14. Fearing what a partner might do if one does not have sexual intercourse with him and actually being forced to have sexual intercourse can be quite different things, but they are caught with the same net. While the respondent’s fear should be addressed respectfully and appropriately, the survey offers no way of determining whether her fear is caused by her husband’s violent or abusive behaviour or rooted in something else, such as cultural beliefs, social expectations or previous abusive relationships etcetera. It seems possible, then, that the questions posed might have created at least some false-positive responses. According to the report, all these women were raped - which makes their partners rapists.

The study found “frequent quarrelling, [followed by] having had a large number of sexual partners, [and] having had transactional sex and depression,” to be the factors “most consistently associated with intimate partner violence” 15. At a glance, it seems these factors could well be interconnected so investigating the relationships between depression, frequent use of transactional sex, the number of sexual partners and how often a couple quarrels could be worthwhile, although the study did not explore these connections. The study does, however, link these most-frequent factors with “to larger social norms and patterns of gender inequality and notions of masculinity in society,” and then makes the following recommendations 16:

1. Change social norms related to the acceptability of violence and the subordination of women
2. Promote non-violent masculinities oriented towards equality and respect
3. Address child abuse and promote healthy families and nurturing, violence-free environments for children
4. Work with young boys to address early ages of sexual violence perpetration
5. Promote healthy sexuality for men and address male sexual entitlement
6. **End impunity for men who rape**

7. **Develop interventions that respond to the specific patterns of violence in each context**

All of these recommendations might be important in their own right, but they appear to skirt around the central issues that the study identifies as being, “most consistently associated with intimate partner violence” 17.

**Psychological and Emotional Abuse**

During one of the whole-conference presentations, a list of various forms of gendered violence and their definitions was offered, including *psychological and emotional abuse*. Given that this kind of violence does not require the perpetrator to be able to physically overpower the victim, as might be the case with most physical forms of violence, I anticipated some interesting and exciting new revelations from the statistics to follow – perhaps regarding those who are assumed to be nonviolent; always victims. It seemed possible that an investigation of psychological and emotional abuse might even illuminate the previously unexplored questions regarding what Khmer men consider provocative behaviour. The statistics were presented, revealing that men not only committed physical and sexual violence, but also psychologically and emotionally abused their victims. There were no figures on women as perpetrators and there was no discussion of dynamics that might escalate conflict to the point of erupting in physical violence.

A little perplexed, I discussed the issue of psychological and emotional abuse with several delegates after the presentations and gained the impression that this form of violence can have significant long-term effects. In Murphy and Hoover’s *Psychological Abuse in Violent Domestic Relations*, they claim that psychological aggression usually precedes physical aggression, to the point where it is recognised as a predictor of physical violence, and that it often does have a greater impact than physical abuse 18.
Gendered Violence?

On one hand, it is understandable that, at a conference that was focused on improving our understanding of gendered violence (most often understood as men physically hurting women), discussion might be limited to men only as perpetrators and women only as victims. On the other hand, given that non-physical violence is typically understood to precede physical violence, a thorough and balanced exploration of the dynamics prior to physical violence would seem beneficial in the pursuit of understanding gendered violence in the first instance. In approaching the imbalance, recent findings on intimate partner abuse in same-sex relationships could be illuminating, since they usher in the concepts of male victims (in male same-sex relationships) and female perpetrators (in female same-sex relationships) 19. According to JD Glass, one of the most serious health risks faced by the LGBT community is domestic violence. She refers to a recent study which found, “that the lifetime prevalence of rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner was 43.8 percent for lesbians... and 35 percent for heterosexual women, while it was 26 percent for gay men... and 29 percent for heterosexual men” 20. In a 2013 article that describes an epidemic of same-sex domestic violence, Tre’Andre Valentine discusses difficulties faced by victims of intimate partner violence who do not fit the stereotype. She is quoted as saying, "The idea that a woman can be the one who's abusive throws a wrench in the traditional view, [and the] idea that only men can be batterers makes it a lot harder for men to get access to shelter", making it difficult for gay and lesbian individuals to access support 21. This concern is partly explained by the words of Yejin Lee, who says, “One problem is the way domestic violence has been framed for the past 30 years... [since] the entire movement against domestic abuse started as a battered women’s movement... we are ingrained to think that victims are all are married, straight women” 22.

It follows that if we are ingrained to think all the victims of intimate partner abuse are heterosexual women, we are also ingrained to think all the perpetrators are heterosexual men. The statistics above contradict what appears to have become an
almost-universal presupposition, since, intimate relationships where there is no
man present appear to have over fifty percent more ‘rape, physical violence or
stalking’ than intimate relationships where there is no woman, and twenty five
percent more than heterosexual couples. If these statistics are correct, then a
problematic result of currently popular approaches could be the perpetuation of
impunity for all non-heterosexual-male perpetrators; that is, offenders who are
lesbian women, gay men, or heterosexual women.

Jarrett Davis and Alastair Hilton both work with male victims of sexual abuse in
Cambodia and express frustration with what they perceive as gender-bias in
violence-research. In a 2015 article on sexual abuse of males in Cambodia, Davis is
quoted as saying that it is extremely difficult to get the UN to pay any attention to
males, and that, “for them, vulnerability is about females. And when they describe
research and other initiatives for the protection of ‘women and children’, in practice,
they often mean women and girls”, despite recent studies where more Cambodian
males than females cited being sexually abused before the age of eighteen. In the
same article, Hilton suggests that the media perpetuates the biased narrative, “that
males are ‘perpetrators’ and females are ‘victims’... Photos of vulnerable-looking,
brown-skinned girls sitting in a corner are much better for the media than
[awkward or aggressive looking] boys”. Davis’s research into sexual exploitation
of street children, I Want to be Brave, revealed many young Khmer boys’ first sexual
experiences were, in fact, with adult women.

Just as Jacobsen recognised that we know little about Khmer men as anything other
than perpetrators, in the context of research on violence, little appears to be known
about Khmer women as anything but victims. There is not only a paucity of
knowledge regarding Cambodian men, then, but there is also a paucity of knowledge
regarding Cambodian women – as active agents in any kind of conflict, let alone, as
perpetrators of violence.
Acid Attacks – Women’s Physical Violence?

On the whole, there is relatively little information available concerning female perpetrators of almost any form of violence, but we do know something about one form of physical violence that appears to be more frequently perpetrated by Cambodian women than Cambodian men. Sometimes they commit the act, and other times they organise someone else to do it, but either way, the impact is devastating for the victims of acid attacks. A 2003 LICADHO report describes acid attacks in the following terms:

Acid throwing is usually an act of revenge, motivated by jealousy or hatred, because of a personal relationship problem such as a broken love affair or marriage, unfaithfulness, or rejection. The perpetrator blames the victim for the problem, and wants to inflict as much physical and mental suffering as possible. The acid is usually thrown at the victim’s face. The perpetrator wants to destroy the face and make the victim look like a monster, so nobody will love the victim ever again.

The report goes on to suggest that some women throw acid on their husbands in order to protect themselves from domestic violence, implying that these acid attacks are somehow consequences of men’s violent behaviour and supporting the perpetrator’s view that the victim is to blame. The report also indicates that Cambodian society, “often blames women – rather than men – for family problems.” This claim resonates with the reports by GADC and IWDA, where it was stated that some Khmer men felt provoked into violence, yet once again there does not appear to be any interrogation regarding how wives’ behaviour might sometimes contribute to the escalation of domestic conflict.

A case study described later in the LICADHO report may shed some light on how Cambodian society sees things, and it seems relatively straightforward. Phok Veasna heard rumours that her husband had a relationship with another woman, so she
attacked him with acid. She also, accidentally, splashed acid on their five-year-old son. According to the report, “neighbours said they did not see or hear about the husband having a new wife, and wondered why Veasna acted in a foolish way because of a rumour” 31. It is quite likely the neighbours do not have access to theoretical models that might be used to reframe Veasna as the victim in these circumstances. A 2014 report on acid violence suggests Veasna is not alone; indicating that ‘perceived infidelity’ is most frequently the motive for these attacks 32.

When Khmer women commit these acts of extreme violence, we often look for explanations as to why it happens, as Jane Welsh does when she explains that, “cultural imperatives such as rigid gender roles, along with other processes, combine with personal level imperatives such as a perpetrator’s level of self-esteem… determine the motivations and causes of acid attack violence” 33, or, as we saw earlier, we sometimes default to finding ways to blame the perpetrator’s husband 34. It is difficult not to wonder whether this approach reinforces an existing culture of impunity, which, according to a collaborative study published by The Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR) and the Cambodian Acid Survivors’ Charity (CASC), plays an important part in the ongoing problems of acid attacks in Cambodia. The report offers one explanation for the lack of legal action against perpetrators, which frequently occurs when the victim is the spouse of the perpetrator.

It is more commonplace that the husband is the victim of an acid attack perpetrated by his wife, and because – in Cambodian society – the husband is typically the principle earner in the family, the duty to provide will then fall on the wife. Thus, the perverse situation arises in which the offender is the carer for the dependent victim. In these situations, the victim is unlikely to press charges against [his] spouse, due to the issue of dependency that has resulted from the acid attacks 35.

Statistics vary, but it appears somewhere between half and two thirds of perpetrators of acid attacks in Cambodia are women 36.
Interviewing Bunnarith

I had attended a number of events connected with CASC, where a severely scarred, blind, acid survivor named Bunnarith performed emotionally charged songs about his ordeal. I was curious as to whether he might be interested in being involved with the creation of a soundtrack for some film production work, so organised an interview with him. As a first visit, I hoped to learn about his personal story – what led to him being attacked and how he has managed his new life.

I was picked up in Phnom Penh by Nim, a law student who worked for CASC, and her driver. On our way to Kampong Spue province, where CASC operated a centre for acid attack survivors, Nim explained how the project works and we talked about Bunnarith’s passion for music since he was blinded 37. Eventually, we arrived at a rural property with a number of small houses and various intensive crops cultivated and tended by the acid victims who lived there. As we passed each of the dwellings, we stopped briefly for polite conversation and explained why we were carrying camera equipment, finally arriving at Bunnarith’s house.
Bunnarith briefly describes a childhood in the early 1970s, losing family members during Pol Pot’s reign, school during Vietnam’s occupation, English and Thai language studies in a refugee camp, then gives a little more detail about life during the UNTAC years and beyond. He breaks into a smile when reminiscing about big salaries, big motorcycles, and plenty of beer, dancing and girls. He says he doesn’t often talk about the UNTAC years any more, since it makes him depressed. After UNTAC, he worked as a policeman, and then as a sales person for Coca Cola, where he was quickly promoted to the position of sales manager - involving a lot of travel. He was home for weekends and wanted to go out drinking with his friends but was forbidden by his wife because she was jealous. He insisted on going out, so his wife assumed there was another woman in his life and, driven by her jealousy, she bought acid and threw it on him.

He explains that he did not report her to the police, since his injuries meant he would be unable to work so his wife would have to generate income to provide for their children – something she would not be able to do if she was jailed. While he was dependent on his wife, she was unable to provide well and there was a lot of conflict and violence inside the home, so he decided to try and help provide for the family, seeking training and new employment. He received training, and has now been working for CASC since 2010, counselling other acid survivors, encouraging them and helping them to start new lives.

As a counsellor, Bunnarith says there are two narratives that lead to jealous wives attacking their husbands, or their husbands’ assumed girlfriends, with acid. First, he says men who are very successful want to celebrate with friends, so they go out together drinking, and often find a girl to sleep with. Second, he says sadness and stress due to accusations, constant nagging and violence in the home, drives men to go outside and seek ‘entertainment’.

Throughout the interview, Bunnarith did not refer to the act of having acid thrown on him as an attack, but rather an accident. It was a conversation strangely void of
bitterness or anger, given his situation. According to one of Bunnarith’s colleagues at CASC, the irony in his story is that now his wife has him ‘under control’, she sleeps with one of his work-mates.

The first narrative Bunnarith offered, as a description of events that lead to women becoming inflamed with jealousy is consistent with many existing representations of Khmer men, as well as the opinions of other informants who participated in this study. The second narrative, however, resonated with Raksmey’s comments about the escalation of conflict between husbands and wives, “the man has a drink but his wife doesn’t want him to drink too much. That’s why they have a small problem, which becomes a big problem because the wife doesn’t want him to drink too much” 39. The simple actions, reactions and consequences offered by Bunnarith and Raksmey invoked a more complex, human narrative than the narratives produced by perpetrator/victims models, and so it was deemed appropriate to consider these ideas while developing the script.

On the way back to Phnom Penh, I asked Nim for her thoughts. She explained that her views on Khmer men have changed completely since she started working at CASC. She used to assume the worst about them, but now she feels sorry for them. According to Nim, around half of acid attack victims are men, but most organisations only attend the needs of female victims. She now believes much of the problematic behaviour of Khmer men is in reaction to ongoing treatment by Khmer women, and that attention needs to be turned towards finding ways to resolve conflict if we wish to reduce physical violence or Khmer men’s attempts to escape through outside ‘entertainment’ 40.

*Impaired Observation*

It is conceivable that a connection could exist between perceived infidelity, the most common reason a Cambodian woman throws acid on her husband 41, and frequent quarrelling, which is most consistently associated with intimate partner violence 42. Neither of these things appears to have been explored independently, let alone the
possible connections between the two, and the picture of women who commit acts of violence remains well obscured. Nietzsche might have suggested it is because we have no ear for what we have no access to through experience 43. Others might say it is due to limited parameters that come with the observers' ideological or cultural perspectives 44. However we choose to explain it, the assumptions that only men are capable of violence and only women are victims is clearly unfounded. Bunnarith's 45 description of men attempting to escape ongoing mistrust and accusations of their wives - but in doing so demonstrating some of the very behaviours painted into the stereotypical image of Khmer men as well as intensifying the conflict at home - seemed to resonate with some of what was observed during the earlier scriptwriting sessions. Much of this scenario could well be described as frequent quarrelling; something the UN multi-country study establishes as “most consistently associated with intimate partner violence” 46 and something that inevitably involves both parties.

**Seeing Beyond the Frame**

In her book, *Creating Sanctuary*, psychiatrist Sandra Bloom describes an event that triggered a paradigm shift by challenging her own tendency to lay blame, be judgemental etcetera. During a mixed-gender program for victims of abuse, the male victims were more comfortable speaking about their own perpetration rather than victimisation, causing fear and rage in the women who shared the space. Eventually, once they settled in, the men spoke more easily and in very graphic terms about their experiences as victims of female perpetrators 47. What followed might be described as something of an epiphany:

And to our surprise, opening up the subject of perpetration and its origins in abuse among the men opened up the subject for the women as well. Some of them began, with great shame and guilt, to reveal their own guilty secrets about hurting someone in the past. For us, this muddied our worldview considerably. *We had to contend with our own tendency to be judgmental, to lay blame, to want to punish or seek revenge* (my italics), while at the same time forgiveness was not ours to give. Each individual had to be held accountable for what he or she
had done. The individual history of abuse was the explanation, the reason for the perpetration, but it was not an excuse. ⁴⁸

As mentioned previously, GADC ⁴⁹ and IWDA ⁵⁰ might have missed an opportunity, when Cambodians claimed that Khmer wives sometimes provoked violent behaviour in their husbands. These claims may not sit well, but again, perhaps they should not be automatically discounted nor discarded as ‘victim-blaming’, since in doing so we effectively silence people who could offer fresh perspectives on how things escalate to a point of physical violence. Previous quantitative studies find correlations between violence and historical trauma, childhood abuse, poverty, alcohol consumption etcetera, and as useful as these studies might be, the exploration of the actual processes and behaviours that occur as spousal conflicts escalate from conception to eruption seems imperative. In-depth qualitative studies could potentially reveal common narratives as well as patterns regarding which ‘buttons are pressed’ in order to incite anger or trigger rage, illuminating our understanding of domestic violence in Cambodian households and guiding us towards practical, workable solutions that might help resolve conflict rather than escalate it.

To Clarify
Some of the material in this and the previous chapter questions the effectiveness of current approaches to solving problems where women and children are most often the victims of male violence. The writing in this thesis sought to avoid such gender stereotypes by using a more comprehensive approach to the problem. The thesis film, Bngvel, itself is a good example of such an approach. In it provocation arises from both men and women with imbedded complexities that will be understood by the audience and suggests, in the end, that reconciliation may be possible.
Notes and References – Chapter 4

1 Panh Cheng, interview with Owen Beck, 2013, Takeo Province, Cambodia, Scriptwriting workshop recorded and archived on video, 07-01-2013.
3 Seyha Sous et al., interview with Owen Beck, 2013, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Scriptwriting workshop recorded and archived on video, 04-04-2013.
4 Chhoem, Roeun, and Seb, interview with Beck, 08-03-2013.
5 Sous et al., interview with Beck, 04-04-2013.
7 Aela Callan, *It’s a Man’s World*, 2013, Aljazeera Media Network.
10 Matt Blake, "Almost A QUARTER of men admit to being rapists across parts of Asia, UN report finds,”*Daily Mail Australia*, 10-09-2013.
12 Callan, *It’s a Man’s World*.
13 Jacobsen, "Being Broh: The Good, the Bad and the Successful Man in Cambodia."
14 Fulu et al., *Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the United Nations Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific*.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 "The Forgotten Men: Sexual Abuse of Males in Cambodia".
26 Jacobsen, "Being Broh: The Good, the Bad and the Successful Man in Cambodia."
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29 Ibid.
30 GADC, A Preliminary Analysis Report on Deoum Troung Pram Hath in Modern Cambodia: A Qualitative Exploration of Gender Norms, Masculinity and Domestic Violence; Brereton and Lim, Men's Talk: Men's Attitudes Towards Men, Women, and Violence Against Women in Cambodia.
31 Living in the Shadows: Acid Attacks in Cambodia.
33 Jane Welsh, ""It was like burning in Hell": A comparative exploration of acid attack violence" (M.A., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009), p. 57.
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39 Chhoem, Roeun, and Seb, interview with Beck, 08-03-2013.
42 Fulu et al., Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the United Nations Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific.
44 Schneider, A Critique of the Study of Kinship.
46 Fulu et al., Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the United Nations Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific.
48 Ibid.
50 Brereton and Lim, Men's Talk: Men's Attitudes Towards Men, Women, and Violence Against Women in Cambodia.
In Chapter 4 it was established that ‘good men’ abstain from carnal indulgences such as extramarital sex and excessive alcohol consumption and that they have the will and ability to protect and provide for their family. ‘Bad men’, on the other hand, are the opposite; they indulge in extramarital sex and excessive drinking and they do not provide or protect their family. Agreement that people change, and can be ‘good men’ and ‘bad men’ at different times – or even a bit of both at once - offered some hope that by exploring what it is that stimulates acceptable or unacceptable behaviour some direction towards finding solutions to a number of social problems might be discovered.

It was also established that some men are likely to be treated by their wife as if they are ‘bad men’, even when they are not and that some of them may turn to ‘outside entertainment’ as a means of escaping and emotional numbing - but in doing so they fulfil their wife’s expectations. This can potentially create a cycle where quarrelling, which is consistently associated with intimate partner violence, becomes more frequent and more intense, eventually resulting in either increased efforts to escape and/or physical violence.

There is a tendency to frame men as always perpetrators and women as always victims. Men who claim the women in their lives participate in conflict are overlooked by the very organisations whose mandate it is to help find solutions to those conflicts. In the case of women committing extreme acts of physical violence, these organisations tend to explain the violence in ways that reframe the perpetrators as victims.
The current chapter explains how the final script and the film production process attempts to pay attention to the problems of Khmer men by incorporating some of their claims in the biographies of main characters as well as the film’s narrative. It attempts to tell a story that acknowledges some of the problems Cambodian men face and tries to explain some of their unacceptable behaviour. While not justifying that behaviour, it offers understanding and compassion that facilitates forgiveness and renewed trust, which might be keys to more acceptable behaviour in future – less emotional numbing, less quarrelling and less physical violence.

As the production evolved, real people’s stories were incorporated and real Cambodian people played themselves in their natural habitat. These aspects of the production’s development resulted in a finished film that mounts the threshold between documentary and fictional narrative film.

**Assembling the Puzzle**

Mounting evidence suggested that it would be more illuminating for our film script to centre on conflict between a wife and husband rather than between a ‘good man’ and a ‘bad man’, and that the couple should demonstrate behaviours that have rarely been explored in previous approaches but which the current study suggests might not be uncommon. Enough information had been gathered to build reasonable, general profiles for what Cambodian’s might call a ‘good man’ and a ‘bad man’ - these descriptions were consistent throughout the scriptwriting sessions. It had also been agreed that people change - that bad men can become good men - and Bunnarith’s testimony ¹ suggested that Khmer men are often both ‘good men’ and ‘bad men’. These factors, considered, could be worked into a single, main character, whose internal struggle becomes evident through conflict with his wife. This narrative could direct attention towards quarrelling Cambodian spouses, but from a different perspective - entering the drama prior to any physically violent responses or attempts to escape via carnal excesses, rather than after the situation has
erupted. The story might not completely resolve, but it could be sufficient for the couple to acknowledge their roles in creating or perpetuating conflict, then they could accept responsibility and step on a new path to potential recovery and reconciliation.

So began early drafts of Bnqvek: a tale about a Cambodian man from the countryside, who, like Seyha, wanted be a ‘good man’, remaining faithful to his wife and providing for his family to the best of his ability. His wife would consistently cast doubt on his fidelity and chastise him for being unable to provide more. In an attempt to escape, he would try numbing with alcohol and prostitutes while blaming his wife for his own behaviour; becoming the person his wife thought he was all along, vindicating her accusations and establishing a downward spiral. The consequences of his decisions would become too great, and, identifying his own pain as well as the pain he has caused those he loves he would set out to make amends, while his wife would also turn, having recognised the destructive nature of her own behaviour and the role it has played in the disintegration of her family, her loss of income, her loss of face.

In many ways, the wife’s abuse of her husband could be seen to echo the bigger picture, since her prejudice towards Khmer men would stem from personal views that the study suggests are consistent with the opinions of many Cambodians, as well as some media-makers and those who study social and domestic problems in Cambodia. This being the case, it was anticipated that the main male character might resonate with a significant number of Khmer men, since he would respond to his wife’s ongoing abuse in a way that is congruent with the behaviour of some real Khmer men – the behaviour that reinforces the existing stereotypes. It was as if the task ahead was to now write a common story of contemporary Cambodia, but with a twist; our characters would need to come to the point of owning both their pain, and the pain they have caused their loved, significant others – all without the help of NGOs. It began to seem remotely possible that this story could connect with some Khmer audience members in a way that might facilitate an illumination and
understanding of their own hurt and behaviour, and that our characters might model the beginnings of a journey to recovery that could inspire action within the community.

Adaptation

As mentioned in the beginning of the previous chapter, it was intended that a read-through of the script would be used in gathering further data, which would help confirm or dismiss the authenticity of the narrative and the characters. The script was to be translated and read to participants who would then be surveyed for their thoughts and opinions. The read-throughs were to be recorded on video, and these recordings would be used in a documentary film. Once the characters had been roughly described and as the skeleton of the narrative began to flesh out, it became clear that the planned read-through would not be the most efficient way to gather feedback, nor would it significantly impact the Khmer community in which we were working – as I had begun to envisage.

The production of a feature film based on the script would be a better option. Screening a film, rather than reading through a script, could offer a description of the context in which the narrative takes place in much finer detail and would offer audience members the opportunity to engage at a more meaningful level. It would also save having to navigate lengthy translations between English and Khmer, and avoid other complications associated with reading a film script to an audience consisting of some members who may quickly become restless or bored. Furthermore, the actual production process would offer more opportunities for input from a Khmer production team and actors.

This change of tack had other potential benefits. According to Joel Brinkley, face-saving and protecting personal dignity is so important in Cambodia that compromise is near impossible. He quotes a team of Swedish anthropologists who suggest that, “there is no cultural tradition for reconciling contrary opinions – or even for the acceptance of the existence of contrary opinions”. This makes it very
difficult to confront destructive social situations individuals are met with, since raising the problematic behaviour of another person will inevitably cause someone to lose face and may lead to violence – since there appears to be no other way out of a humiliating situation 4. To make a narrative film would potentially offer the opportunity for a much larger number of Cambodians to engage in a story about people, problems and settings they might be familiar with. Those who identify strongly with the on-screen characters, whether they see themselves as participants in some conflict or as having been affected by the conflict of others, may be able to discuss the on-screen story (which might also be their own story) and potentially find answers to problems they encounter in their real lives. This seemed significant - offering a non-confrontational way of discussing complex destructive situations without causing anybody to lose face, hence avoiding the kind of humiliation and the perceived threat of a violent response.

The decision to make a feature film came with its own complications, since a project this size would be time-consuming and costly and I did not have access to experienced actors or production crew from whom I could call in favours so from this time forward, the availability of resources such as people, places and venues etcetera influenced the writing of the script as well as the planning of production. As long as the script was contained by the use of real settings and real people doing real things there seemed to be a reasonable chance it could be realised with a minimal production crew.

**Realisms**

Joseph Campbell suggests that the real challenge for artists is, “to present [their] material so that it doesn’t put a ring around itself and stand there as separate from you, the observer. And that aha! that you get when you see an artwork that really hits you is ‘I am that’” 5. In the case of Bngvel, it would be imperative that a symbiosis between the visual and audial aesthetic, and the film’s narrative, would maximise the likelihood of this kind of visceral connection with Cambodian
audience members, so they would recognise it as their own, connect with it emotionally; that it would ‘ring true’. At the same time, it was also imperative that a foreign audience be given access to the characters in a way that would bring about empathy and new understanding of the life and struggles of Cambodian people.

Meeting Phally
All of this informed redrafts of the script and influenced the approach to production, which in turn determined what production equipment would be most appropriate to successfully make the film, so in between writing sessions I learned about newly available production tools. A suitable camera was purchased and was tested on reconnaissance trips and on one of those trips, to Takeo Province, I stopped to film a barber cutting hair in a small, dusty, wooden shack beside a dirt road. He was happy for me to film and comfortable in front of the camera, so I asked him if he would like to be in a movie. He said he was too ugly to be in a movie, but after some persuasion (that he was not too ugly), he agreed. This real-life barber became our main character, Phally, a barber from Takeo Province who works in a small, dusty, wooden shack beside a dirt road. When it came time to produce Bngvel, we filmed him in his own barbershop, cutting his real customers’ hair.

![Image 18 - Kim Nget cutting his customer's hair during a reconnaissance trip](image)
Meeting *Phally* triggered the last major change in how the script was developed. Having lived in Cambodia for some years, I had been privy to numerous backstories that could easily match characters in our film script. Drawing on these ethnographic and autoethnographic observations, I decided to adapt some aspects of the script to directly tell portions of real people’s stories. The result could be seen as a collage of different people’s real-life narratives re-enacted in such a way that they interact with each other.

The next step was to fill major roles with people whose own lives were close to the lives of our ‘fictional’ characters. Minor roles like marketeers, shopkeepers, construction workers, barmen, and ‘karaoke girls’, then, would be played by marketeers, shopkeepers, construction workers, barmen and ‘karaoke girls’ in their real places of employment.

*Blurred Lines*

As the script neared completion and the approach to production was being refined, questions began to arise as to whether this was a fictional drama or a re-enactment of sorts – more like a documentary. While still being true to the scriptwriting sessions, as the project evolved it had become closer and closer to real events involving real people in real places. In the end, as much as the story in its entirety
was fabricated, it was fabricated from a collection of actual events, would be played by real people in their natural settings and every effort would be made to ensure the film production was true-to-life. It seemed as if the likelihood that we might produce a film that captures what Dick Hobbs describes as, “the intense meaning of social life from the everyday perspective of group members,” 6 was gradually becoming tangible.

This collapsing of the line between fiction and reality was an unplanned, organic process, but this kind of thing is not new. In 1922, the documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty staged re-enactments in constructed scenes in order to give us an insider’s look at the everyday life of an Inuit from the Canadian Arctic in his film, *Nanook of the North* 7. Today *Nanook* is considered by many to be docudrama and is studied by film students all over the world as they come to terms with the fluidity of what ‘real documentary’ is 8. On the other hand, Lionel Rogosin made narrative films that were scripted, but featured ordinary people in their normal surroundings, choosing their own words and dealing with everyday problems of poverty, discrimination, war and homelessness 9. Inspired by Flaherty and Italian Neorealism, Rogosin’s film, *On the Bowery*, won several international awards for ‘Best Documentary’, despite being a scripted, narrative film covering three days in the life of the main character – but shot over three months and heavily edited 10. Various descriptions included "a masterpiece of urban ethnography", “neo-realist drama", “semi-documentary classic”, and “landmark documentary”, *On the Bowery* followed the scripted story of Ray Salyer, a railway worker who had turned up after a weekend of drinking, and Gorman Hendricks, a regular at the Bowery who claimed he had worked for the Washington Herald 11. Salyer and Hendricks were played by the real-life Salyer and Hendricks, and the film was shot on location where ‘real-life’ continued around the scripted performances and the camera often ventured beyond the actual performance space into that real world. According to Robert O’Har, Rogosin wanted to “reveal the reality of people who were drinking away their lives in an attempt to escape from it” 12. *Bngvel* would also be shot on location where ‘real-life’ would continue around the scripted performances and the camera would
regularly venture beyond the performance space. The aim of *Bngvel* was also to reveal a reality and explain some attempts to escape it.

*Ready For Feedback?*

I was comfortable that the script was nearing completion and the intended approach to production would offer what ethnographers refer to as *thick description* - not only describing the social phenomena being observed, but also positioning it within the context of Cambodian people’s reality \(^{13}\) - while at the same time telling a story that would resonate with many Khmer people, so sent the script through to my supervisor for his feedback. My supervisor highlighted the fact that the script could be criticised for a degree of two-dimensionality of the main female character, *Phalla*, but that it could also be argued that the purpose of the study is to explore the representation of Cambodian men and masculinity and even though much of their context is shared, a thorough exploration of the representation of Khmer women is beyond the scope of this study. It could also be argued that constructive discussion regarding the relationships between Cambodian men and women in more balanced terms might be stimulated by the presentation of an antithesis of the current representations of Khmer men as perpetrators and women as victims.

Throughout the process of refining the script, I consistently sought feedback from expert informants as well as people in the community who had no previous knowledge of the study, to test its authenticity. When I walked through the story with one young Khmer man, Chamroeun \(^{14}\), who was married and expecting his first child, he enthusiastically responded, “This is a real Khmer story!” I explained how pleased I was, since I hoped it would be recognised by Cambodians as an authentic Khmer story, and he asserted, “No! You don’t understand. This is happening to me right now!” He went on to elaborate on a situation, which reflected some of the central drama and main issues raised by the story.
Summary

The completed script offers a number of alternatives to current understandings and representations of both Cambodian men and women. Ways in which it illuminates the research question will now be summarised before the production process is discussed.

- The main male character, *Phally*, works hard to take care of his family, and is loyal to his wife – the antithesis of current stereotypical descriptions of Khmer men.

- *Phally’s wife, Phalla*, spends most of her time playing cards with other women in the village, but consistently accuses *Phally* of sleeping with other girls when money is tight. She is lazy and abusive, rather than a submissive, hardworking victim. Just as *Phally* challenges the stereotypes, *Phalla* could be seen as the antithesis of current stereotypical representations of Cambodian women.

- In order to get away from his wife’s nagging about money and her accusations about girls, *Phally* moves to the city where he can also earn a better salary. *Phalla’s* accusations continue and *Phally* eventually resigns himself to a destiny of drinking and using prostitutes, as accused. He stops communication with *Phalla* and stops sending her money. At this time, his behaviour is congruent with stereotypical representations, but the knowledge of events preceding this behavioural change promotes an atypical audience response - understanding and empathy rather than accusation and judgement. It also gives an answer to those previously unexplored claims of some Cambodian men – that they feel their wives provoke their problematic behaviour.

- *Phalla* sells their daughter, *Nee*, to a brothel to supplement her lack of income and support her lifestyle. *Phalla*’s antithetical behaviour makes her complicit in the cycles of abuse within her family, making it difficult to respond to her as a victim.
• Phally and Nee have an encounter in a brothel. This highlights the logic that men of limited means spending too much of their time and money on sex increase the likelihood that their daughters will be sold into sex-work. Despite the chances these fathers may never see their daughters in the context of their work, these men represent both the supply and the demand of the Cambodian sex industry. This pivotal moment draws attention to the weight of the problems that are sometimes spawned in the cycles of conflict between a Cambodian husband and wife.

• Shaken, Phally desperately wants to make amends, so stops drinking and visiting brothels and works tirelessly to raise the money to buy her back.

• Nee realises that her mother is lying to her so she will work more and send more money (so she can buy unnecessary luxuries), so she stops sending money completely and severs contact with both her parents. This questions the popular view that Cambodian girls are driven to prostitution when a family member cannot afford medicine for some serious health condition. It touches on the problem of denial associated with face-saving and is designed to encourage girls who might be in a similar position to Nee, to question the authenticity of the circumstances they are in.

• Phalla recognises the consequences of her behaviour, and stops playing cards, pawns her jewellery and eventually goes to work in a garment factory. This could suggest that for some Khmer women, employment in a garment factory might be a last resort. Taking care of her relationship with her husband, rather than sabotaging it, increases the likelihood that they will be able to successfully maintain traditional family roles – if that is what they desire.

• By the time Phally has raised the money to buy Nee back, she has already fled the brothel. Phally gets robbed of the money and he goes back to his old life, cutting hair in the village – doing what he is good at and earning enough.
• Upon Phally’s return, Phalla prepares a treat, sweet potato dipped in palm sugar and fried, and has it delivered to Phally. In doing so, she affectively apologises without losing face.

• Phally recognises the significance of the gesture as an apology and Phalla’s desire to reconcile. With excitement, he embraces the opportunity to begin rebuilding their lives together. Their journey has taught them both not only the potential for harmful consequence of mistrust and disrespect, but also that trust and respect beget trust and respect. This contradicts the currently popular approach, of expecting bad behaviour from Cambodian men and treating them accordingly.

Given that the main male and female characters in the script would be described in terms that contradict current understandings and representations of Cambodian men and women, the litmus test would be seen in the production and screening of the film and audience feedback. It would be expected that, if the stereotypical descriptions of Cambodian men (and women) were wholly justifiable, then the film characters and the narrative would not resonate with Cambodian audiences. — Bngvel would ‘ring untrue’. The findings would be authenticated, however, if Bngvel ‘rings true’; if it resonates with Cambodian audience members, that they find the characters familiar or that they personally know people similar to Phally and Phalla.

Producing Bngvel

Approaching Production

My supervisor supported the decision to go ahead with producing Bngvel, so in preparation, during the last weeks of scriptwriting, locations were scouted and my wife, Jasmine, employed an assistant who helped her negotiate arrangements with proprietors of guest houses, bars and brothels, as well as managers of building sites, market stalls and people whose homes were suitable for filming. Jasmine also approached potential actors who she knew had experienced events similar to those in the script and we were soon able to assemble a cast for the main characters –
none with any prior acting experience and many with virtually no formal education. Colin Mills, from Closet Studios in Kuala Lumpur, had previously worked with me on a number of other creative social projects, and generously offered to create the film score, which would provide an opportunity for some of his interns. I was anxious about field sound, since I could direct and shoot simultaneously, but could not swing a microphone boom at the same time, so a recent media graduate from Murdoch University, Coel Healy, was flown to Cambodia to capture and monitor field audio. By the time we were ready to shoot, we were short one western male character, but as things turned out, another media graduate from Murdoch University, Stephen Kelly, happened to book a room at our eco-resort in Jasmine Valley for an extended holiday, so I approached him with the script and he agreed to join us and play the character, James.

*Suitable Equipment*

A number of factors influenced the choice of equipment, including budget and availability, but also the importance of maintaining a low profile so we could shoot in naturally occurring situations without disrupting the people or happenings around us. We were able to buy a Canon C100 cinema camera, which was small enough to go relatively unnoticed, and which also captured a great image at low light – minimising the need for lights. This, along with a kit of Samyang cinema lenses, a Ninja II solid state disk recorder, some small battery powered LED lights, some audio equipment and a second camera capable of recording high quality slow-motion, which crew brought from Perth, fulfilled our equipment requirements.
Production Proper

First Meets First Shoots

Most of our cast and our Khmer production crew were from Takeo Province, so we started at the Daunkeo Guest House, Takeo, on the fourteenth of January 2014 with the first gathering of the full cast and crew to discuss how the production would move forward and how each team member could best fulfil their role. It was explained that the film would be shot out of order, in many locations and that the narrative would inevitably continue to evolve as we progressed. Thyda was going to play Lyla, a massage girl who provides services to Phally (Kim Nget), the main male character, and she was quite anxious about it, so, in order to put some minds at ease I explained that, despite there being intimate scenes in a massage parlour, we would shoot and edit in such a way that it would be acceptable to Khmer viewers and not embarrass the actors. I also assured them there would be very minimal physical contact. Thyda still appeared anxious as some of the other cast and crew made unhelpful comments about how ugly Kim Nget was, how dark his skin was and how awful it would be to have to touch him. The rest of the meeting went well. There was an air of anticipation and excitement, and after some last minute shuffling of roles and the creation of an early-morning ‘to-do list’ for our assistant producer,
Raksmey, we adjourned to meet the next morning for breakfast and prepare for the day over noodle soup.

Time to shoot the Stephen Kelly scenes was limited, since he had already booked his flight back to Perth, so we organised for him to be bussed from Kep to the nearby town of Ang Ta Saom, where we picked him up early the next morning and brought him back to Takeo, dined with the team, then migrated to Srey Mom Guest House, where we began the complex process of shooting scenes out of order, with changes in wardrobe, hair, make-up and props being done on the fly. By lunchtime we had shot our first scene, so while the rest of the team took a break I assembled a rough edit. I played the edit for them upon their return, and they were excited to see the confusing, disjointed and repetitive process had paid off, with a coherent scene that made narrative sense.
There were some city scenes to be shot with Stephen, so we moved the team to Phnom Penh and managed to complete production on them, albeit a bit rushed, prior to his departure. Coinciding with the completion of these scenes was the arrival of two crewmembers from Perth. Cameron Frost was a gifted filmmaker I had taught in high-school a decade earlier and who went on to study at Murdoch University. He had established a production company and was emerging as a cinematographer. Cameron volunteered to join us for a few days and to shoot some super-slow-motion scenes on his Sony FS700. Coel Healy had just completed his Bachelor degree at Murdoch University and came highly recommended, with his particular interest in audio. Coel joined the team and took control of field audio.
With the crew now complete, we were able to shoot an average of nearly three minutes of screen time per day.

Contextual Developments

As much as the scriptwriting process had happened with a great deal of input from Khmer people and was based on real stories, it seemed imperative to remain flexible and open to ongoing and continuous input during production, especially in regards to finer points in dialogue. My Assistant Directors translated the script from English to Khmer on the fly, sometimes resulting in time consuming discussion regarding
how best to phrase the dialogue. They both had a reasonable understanding of English, but due to their lack of formal education they sometimes struggled to find Khmer words that communicated the English well. More importantly, some of my English translated directly into things these Cambodian characters would not say, so to some extent the narrative and dialogue was localised and contextualised throughout this process. Furthermore, some dialogue I had written into the script was superfluous. Here, a handful of refining moments are briefly described; some are thanks to input from Khmer cast and crew and others are in response to other influences and opportunities.

- In one scripted scene, a mamasan tells Nee, one of her girls, to “take some water to Room 8 and see if you can get him to have two girls”. One of the Assistant Directors explained to me that this dialogue was overkill, and that Cambodians would understand that the girl was being told to offer herself as a second girl, if she was simply instructed to “take some water to Room 8”. These kinds of tweaks were made throughout the production process.

- When Nee arrives upstairs and enters Room 8, she kicks off her shoes and turns to see her own father, Phally, on the bed. The scripted version of what followed was highly dramatic and there was an obvious risk of very awkward acting. We tried a number of approaches but nothing was working, so finally, Nee and Phally just look at each other for several seconds in a tense standoff, then Nee walks out and closes the door behind her. In the end, this scene is more powerful in its understatement than it would have been if we had persisted with the scripted version. Once again, it adheres to the cultural expectation that people contain their emotions.

- In the script, Phally buys perfume for his wife, Phalla, but does not give it to her. Instead, he uses it to make himself smell good when he visits prostitutes in Phnom Penh. At the end of the film, when the couple reconcile, he pulls a ragged perfume box from his pocket, presents it to Phalla and says, “I bought
you some perfume”. She is pleased to accept it, despite its ragged appearance. The perfume is intended to represent Phally’s sexuality, and when it came time to film the first ‘perfume shots’ we sent one of our production assistants to buy some perfume from a local shop. They returned with a perfume called ‘For You’, perfectly fitting, given its symbolic referencing in the context of the film.

One morning at four o’clock, I rose to shoot some tuktuk and cyclo drivers waking up and starting their day – on any given night there are hundreds of them scattered around the city, sleeping street-side in their open vehicles and refreshing themselves in the morning by ‘bathing’ with a little water they keep in a plastic bottle. As I checked and prepared equipment, I heard the sound of guitar music echoing in the street below. I peered out the window to find a lone musician sitting under a single amber streetlight plucking on his guitar. An eerily appropriate moment which was beautiful, lonely, and which somehow illuminated the scenes I was about to shoot. I approached the musician and he was happy for me to film him as he played. We later organised for some of the men he regularly jams with to play some tunes together for the film. These snippets of real Khmer men, being themselves, were used as segues which punctuated parts of the film and presented aspects of Khmer masculinity rarely seen in existing publications – positive community and creativity rather than violence and abuse.

During production it became necessary to recast Lyla, the massage girl being played by Thyda. As much as there was to be very little physical contact between her and Kim, just a squeeze of the shoulders, she appeared to have succumbed to the ridicule that she had been subjected to by other members on the team which centered on Thyda’s character sleeping with this ugly, dark-skinned man. Kim took it in good humour, and we reshoot the scenes with Raksme replacing Thyda.
It is not uncommon for entire scenes to be ‘deleted’ from a film when it is realized that they do not add significantly to the narrative. In the case of \textit{Bngvel}, there were a number of scenes that seemed superfluous once we were in production and the narrative started to take shape in rough assembly edits. My supervisor had alerted me, that a scene featuring James, the foreigner, might give the Western male too much screen time, and once we were in production it became clear that he was right. The final scene was dropped in preference for much more appropriate closing sequence that would signal important decisions that the protagonist and his wife, \textit{Phally} and \textit{Phalla}, had made and that they intended to support each other for the next part of their journey. Another scene was dropped not because it was superfluous, but because it became clear that it would have been unethical to continue. We had scripted some scenes featuring young Khmer prostitutes who line the rural roadside in the outskirts of Takeo town and work out of run down shacks. We had permission from the mamasan and the girls were quite excited to feature in the film, but when we arrived to shoot the scene we realised the girls were simply too young – they said they were eighteen and twenty years old but they looked more like fourteen and sixteen. We shot the scenes regardless, and they were happy to be paid, but the scenes were promptly dropped in post-production. Fortunately this omission did not impact the narrative significantly.
Coel Healy had come to Cambodia to work with us on a feature film. He did not know that the script was based on real lives and actual events and I did not discuss the idea that it was, in many ways, a documentary. During the filming process he was often taken by his own cultural immersion and ideological challenges that this narrative and context presented. Towards the end of his time with us he commented a number of times about how he felt like he was helping make a documentary rather than a fictional piece, since much of the action and the locations were real. This seemed no more apparent than when we shot a scene where Phally, riding his motorcycle-taxi with a customer on the back, takes a detour through a strip in the outskirts of Phnom Penh where both sides of the road are illuminated by the neon lights of dozens of karaoke bars, massage parlours and brothels with dozens of girls in their teens and early twenties wearing skimpily clothes lined up in the entrances. We were being taxied in a tuktuk with the roof removed, filming Phally and his customer, and as they rode through the strip young men with light batons (the kind often used for directing traffic) tried to stop our actors and force them to enter their premises.
This, of course, was not arranged or staged, they were simply doing what they do every night, and this was a documentary moment. Some time later, Coel wrote to me about the making of Bngvel:

I think the whole process was more along the lines of a documentary than a fictional piece. The fluid nature of the production was also very 'doco', I think it was an appropriate way to tell the community's story, it seemed less like a top down, parachute filmmaker process and more of a consultative approach which enabled yourself and the actors to communicate some of the issues despite educational, language and financial barriers.  

The relevance of the narrative was also affirmed by Raksmey. Raksmey had been one of our scriptwriting participants. She was one of our Assistant Directors and now, having replaced Thyda, she doubled up playing the part of Lyla, a young woman who had been sold into prostitution at a young age after losing her mother to HIV and not knowing her father. Having been part of her community for six years, I was aware of a number of ways in which the story was close to Raksmey’s own story. Five years earlier, Raksmey’s mother spent much of her time playing cards and had accumulated a significant debt that she was unable to repay. Her father was spending most of his income on alcohol and other women. Her mother was considering an offer from a woman in Kuala Lumpur, who wanted to buy her fourteen-year-old daughter, Raksmey, for six thousand dollars. Someone intervened
at the time, paying the debt and later providing alternative employment for Raksmey. Much is not spoken about in a face-saving society, so Raksmey is obliged to act as if she is oblivious to her mother’s gambling and father’s neglect of the family. She is also obliged to act as if she is not aware of the fact that she was on the brink of being sold into a life of prostitution in Malaysia.

Raksmey also has a cousin, who, as a child, did not know her father and lost her mother to HIV. Still prepubescent, she was then sold to a rich Khmer man from Phnom Penh who kept her in a hotel room and used her for sex for two months before letting her go. Demands were made on her to continue providing money to her family in Takeo, so she then worked in a brothel with a hotel shop-front. There, she endured daily abuse and witnessed other girls as young as eight years old being sold to rich and powerful Khmer men. Raksmey knows that her cousin did not know her dad and that she lost her mother to HIV. She also knows that she had provided money for the whole extended family for years. The rest of the story has never been spoken about until now, through the shooting of a scene where our ‘fictional’ character, Lyla, describes how she ended up working in a Phnom Penh brothel. Cameron, our second camera operator, shared with me that after we had shot this particular scene, Raksmey went to the room we used for wardrobe and bawled. He approached her to see if there was anything we could do to help, and she replied, “no, I just want all the Khmer mothers and fathers to watch this film”.

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The main female character, *Phalla*, was played by Phana, who is very poor, undereducated and has some burn-scarring on her body. I had been present a few years earlier when, in a jocular manner, Phana told her cute two-year-old daughter that when she reached puberty she should earn money for her mother through sex-work, but that she should also study hard and get a university degree so she would be able to provide for her long-term. Phana gets to walk through some of this scenario, when her character in *Bngvel* sells her daughter to work in a massage parlour. There were two telling moments during production, which drew attention to the relevance of the story of *Bngvel*:

- One afternoon, Phana’s onscreen daughter, *Nee*, descended the stairs of a run-down rural house wearing a bright yellow dress with hair, face and nails made up ready to film – someone who might fetch a fair fee in the Cambodian sex industry. When Phana saw her, she turned to me and laughed, saying, “Owen, I want one!” which I understood as being a reference to the financial opportunities which attractive daughters provide their parents.

- Phana was very easy to direct, since she played her part so convincingly, except during the shooting of one very short scene. Phana’s husband was on
set during all her filming except this particular scene, and it made it impossible for her to focus on the task at hand – since she was convinced he would be drinking and having sex somewhere. The scene had to be heavily edited, but fortunately the essential narrative elements were salvaged.

Phana might have betrayed the level of connection with her ‘fictional’ character when she shared with my wife that she found it very difficult to do the scenes where Phalla, having decided to turn her life around, throws her cards into a fire, pawns her jewelry and gives money back to a loan-shark.
It’s a Wrap

Exactly one exhausting month since our first production meeting, we completed shooting so after a celebratory meal and many thanks, we bid our cast and crew farewell and began editing in earnest.

Post Production

Since most scenes were roughly edited in the breaks between filming, the next months entailed fine-tuning those scenes, editing some sequences to music in order to get timing right, allowing plenty of pauses to give time for the intended audience to think about key issues that were raised at certain moments in the film. At different stages we screened the film for various audiences and received feedback. They laughed in the right moments and there were groans of approval that seemed to suggest there was at least some degree of resonance with audience members. It was particularly encouraging to hear one man say, “I wish my wife was here”.

Once the edit was reasonably coherent and English subtitles done, I uploaded it and sent a link to my supervisor as well as to Colin Mills, who was preparing a team of musicians in Kuala Lumpur. Bngvel met with my supervisor’s approval and he offered helpful feedback in terms of subsequent edits. A few shots needed replacing, so we organised some reshoots, after which I began the next edit, started to work on a colour grade and began collaborating more closely with the music team.

The Music

The music in Bngvel was designed to complement the narrative and the thesis in a number of ways. In basic terms, it begins raw, dirty and primitive in the countryside, where Phally rides a bicycle and cuts hair with hand clippers in his dirt-floored barbershop. In the city, with its neon lights and modern motorcycles, the music is modern and electronic. In the final chapter, back in the province, the music is still electronic but simpler, and as the reconciling couple ride off into the distance
on an old bicycle, a Cambodian punk-rock tune delivers us a taste of determination and rebellion - rejection of the current dominant attitudes and views.

Cambodian Popular music was used to drive the narrative and reinforce the central issues that the film raises. Besides the music performed by the aforementioned men on the street, there were a number of Karaoke scenes, where the Khemarak song, *Marry a Foreigner*[^17], was performed either as part of the background setting or the action of our main performers.

To support a scene where Phally first visits a brothel, we decided to use music to question the ominous threatening sounds that usually accompany scenes of prostitution in Cambodia, by writing music that would empathise with Phally’s nervousness, excitement, exhilaration and release from the ongoing abuse he has been subject to. We called the piece Gospel Porn; a fusion of hallelujah-style choral vocals and 1970s porn-funk, which is designed to underline the internal conflicts that we all have to struggle with and which Cambodian man is not immune to. It asks the audience to not only empathise with someone they may not be comfortable empathising with, but also to vicariously partake in and enjoy, his forbidden pleasure.

By June 2014 the cut was almost complete so Colin flew to Phnom Penh for two weeks of all-day audio editing and musical integration. We worked in constant collaboration with his team in Malaysia, who were making last minute changes to the actual music and uploading the files for us. Colin and I also recorded some samples, which we sent back to the studio so they could be integrated into some of the musical compositions.

[^17]: Footnote reference
Summary

- Despite being a scripted film, as production progressed it became increasingly synonymous with documentary.
- The film was shot entirely on location, with a small production team and minimal equipment maintaining a low profile and ensuring the ordinary, everyday activities were not disrupted.
- Some actors played themselves, in their own, real context, and others played characters close to their real stories.
- Flexibility to ongoing input from Khmer cast and crew influenced the evolution of the production in process.
- Problems were seen as opportunities to increase the authenticity of the story as well as enhance the connection between the screen and audience.
- Super slow motion and big close ups were used to humanise Cambodian men and to affect a kind of intimacy between the Khmer men on screen and the audience.
• Music was used to drive the narrative, reinforce the statements that the film makes, and challenge audience members regarding their views of Cambodian men.

Section Wrap Up

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss ways in which new information was elicited and knowledge created through the practice of filmmaking-as-research. Almost all participants believed that most Cambodian men cheat on their wives and that this is a significant social problem. In some instances, women thought this problem was so common that they préjudge and discriminate against Khmer men, expecting them to cheat if they have the opportunity and means to do so; one woman openly doubted and mocked Khmer men who said they want to be ‘good men’. This perception of Khmer men may impact some Khmer women as signalled by a participant who felt Khmer women who wish to marry a Khmer man have a limited choice between poverty and infidelity. There was some indication that a number of Khmer men feel that their problematic behaviour is a response to ongoing conflict that is rooted in mistrust and accusations of their wives.

All of these findings were embedded into a narrative film, which features Khmer characters that model the antithesis of current dominant representations of Khmer men and women. These findings and the film were then authenticated through the responses of Cambodian audiences, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

This research was planned with the expectation that it would evolve over time in response to both the data collected and the ongoing increase in understanding of the context in which we were working. Eliciting, creating and authenticating new knowledge motivated the project, from scriptwriting, through production all the way to screenings and post-screening responses.
Despite this being deliberate, intentional research, there has been occasional mention or allusion to ethnographic and autoethnographic information which helped explain some of my decisions and to bring greater meaning to the data. The next chapter will discuss in detail the ethnographic and autoethnographic aspects of the study and how they informed the research.
Notes and References – Chapter 5

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
7 Robert J. Flaherty, Nanook of the North, 1922.
12 O’Har, "About the Film".
13 Fetterman, Ethnography: Step by Step, p. 17.
14 Chamroeun Kit, interview with Owen Beck, 2013, Kep Province, Cambodia, Personal interview, 16-11-2013.
15 Coel Healy, Email to Author, 23-09-2015 2015.
16 Malis Pahn, interview with Owen Beck, 2013, Cambodia, Personal interview recorded on video and in field notes, 12-01-2013.
17 Khemarak, Marry a Foreigner.
CHAPTER 6
Ethnographic Reflections

Chapters 4 and 5 detail a practice-based exploration in which a combination of processes unique to filmmaking was intentionally exploited in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of contemporary issues experienced by Cambodian men. The findings were supported by six years of ethnographic observation and intimate engagement with informants, which provided both broad-strokes explanations as well as fine details that were incorporated in the script development and film production. This chapter presents some of the real-life stories behind the characters and the narrative of Bngvel; stories which resonate with the findings described in the previous chapters.

Pictures and occasional Internal Monologues are peppered throughout this chapter in order to help convey the context of Cambodian life as well as remind the reader of my subjective place in the study. On reflection, these observations often prompted questions that might be somewhat peripheral to the central thesis, but which helped drive the research. These devices are intended to enhance the Western reader’s mindfulness of an ‘otherness’, which, by its very existence, is a reminder that Western representations of Cambodia and the Khmer people are often partial and political and that Western solutions to Cambodian problems may often be irrelevant or even detrimental.

Sophea

As Informant
The ethnographic aspects of this study involved participant-observation, as well as ongoing engagement with a number of informants. These informants ranged from employees at Jasmine Valley Eco-Resort, to tuktuk drivers we regularly used, to Khmer language teachers and people who worked in local markets. Some were
relatives, some were neighbours and others I met through some other social network. My key informant, however, was Sophea, a woman who was close to my wife, Jasmine, and with whom we frequently spent time. In many ways I came to know much of Cambodian society through the lens of her experience and ways in which she shared that experience with me, so it seems appropriate to tell some of her story. The following sketch could well have been assembled from conversations with her during a period of approximately six years, but was consolidated during a two-hour interview recorded whilst driving from Phnom Penh to Kep with my wife and me 1.

As a Khmer Girl

Family Arrangements

Sophea’s real name is Malis. She is from Takeo Province. Like many Cambodians of her generation, her birthdate is not certain. Her mother died when she was young and her father abandoned her mother before she was old enough to know him, so she was written into the family book of her grandparents with a nominal birth date of 30th June 1986. Officially, then, Malis is the daughter of her grandparents, and her uncles and aunts are registered as her siblings.

Malis has one older (real) sister, who is scarred on her face and body from burns she received when they were children - a kerosene lamp tipped over near where they were sleeping.

Childhood

As a small child, she lived under a palm-leaf roof, with no walls. She describes not understanding why she had such a big, round stomach, since she ate so little and the rest of her body was very skinny. She recalls being chased out of dirt-roadside shack-restaurants when she tried to scavenge leftovers, and being told, “you’re going to die soon anyway, so there’s no point in giving you food”.

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Later, she recalls the pleasure of farm life. The sweet taste of water in the rice paddies. The joy of catching crabs and snakes in holes around the paddies, and ‘fish everywhere!’ when the annual floods came. She brims with excitement about catching fish in your kitchen and putting them straight into the frying pan – quite the reframe on having one’s house flooded.

To save her the heartbreak of having been abandoned, people in her family and community told her that her father had died. Then, unexpectedly, he returned to the village with a new wife and with children. When she heard that her father was back, Malis ran to him and threw her arms around him, but he struck her to the ground and told her, “You are not my daughter”.

She speaks highly of her beautiful, plump, white skinned mother, and is deeply proud of her mother’s commitment and loyalty to her father – somehow, she was convinced he would one day return to her so declined several offers of marriage, choosing to provide for her daughters by her own means.

She seems conflicted when she speaks of her mother’s employment in a low-end restaurant in Takeo town. She knows its reputation. She knows her mother was prostituting herself there, in order to provide for her and her sister.

She speaks of nursing her mother as she died from AIDS. People were scared of the disease, so her mother was neglected. As a child, she found her mother covered in ants and lying in her own faeces. Tearfully, she would clean her, tend her, love her.

She tells of her mother’s family distributing her humble inheritance amongst themselves, then pressuring her to go and work in the city. There is a sense of abandonment and betrayal in her voice.
Growing Up

She speaks of being taken in by a young prostitute called Lily, at a time when she was broke and homeless in Phnom Penh city. She recalls her job in a restaurant and the pressure to sleep with patrons. Eventually, her virginity was sold for two thousand US dollars, to a wealthy Khmer man who kept her in a guesthouse for two months. She speaks of being embarrassed about not having breasts or pubic hair yet. He came and fed her daily, and had sex with her.

As a Young Khmer Woman

The money raised from the sale of Malis’ body had been shared between the woman who organised the sale, and Malis’ grandparents. When her ‘owner’ had no further use for her she was released, but pressure to provide for extended family remained, so she went to work with Lily in a brothel with a hotel shop-front. Here, she became Sophea. She was popular, useful, and came to afford nice clothes, a mobile phone, and her own motorcycle. She provided well for extended family members who bought themselves property and built houses, and she became highly esteemed in both the provincial village and Phnom Penh.

Money

In Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia, Heidi Hoefinger writes about the concept of ‘milk money’, which she describes as “relating to the contemporary practice of gift-giving and paying back the ‘price of the mother’s milk’ to the family of potential brides in order to secure marriage” \(^\text{2}\). The study found that many Khmer men complain about being unable to marry because they do not have enough to pay the ‘milk money’ \(^\text{3}\). Sophea’s definition of ‘milk money’ was broader than Hoefinger’s, as she describes mothers and grandmothers using the concept to manipulate their children and grandchildren into giving them money. She recalls great pressure from her grandmother to provide money through the sale of her body, because she owed her grandmother ‘milk money’ – even though it was Sophea’s mother who provided for her as a small child.
Commoditised From All Directions

Despite her new popularity, Sophea cried herself to sleep each night. She yearned for her mother and felt a deep loneliness. She hurt when her extended family fabricated stories of desperate need in order to get her to work more and send them more money – for example, frequent urgent requests for large sums of money to buy medication would inevitably result in the purchase of jewellery, a new television, a motorcycle or perhaps a rice field. She was a commodity and her usefulness lay in her ability to provide over and above what was necessary.

At work, Sophea saw men cheating on their wives every day. She heard them speaking on the phone, telling their wives that they had to work late, they’d stopped for a coffee with a friend, been pulled over by the police, or some other excuse. Sophea says she felt ‘sick inside’ for the wives of these men, both Khmer and foreigner.

She kept up appearances and her social life grew, as did her exposure to the Cambodian elite and foreign dignitaries and aid-workers; including some who came to collect virgins as young as eight years old, from their mother or aunty who presented them at the brothel. She speaks of deeply disturbing abuses that were not uncommon to her and her work colleagues. Stuff we do not need to go into.

Sophea’s Perspective

Sophea lost her mother and was abandoned, rejected, beaten, raped, commoditised. But she appeared to harbour little bitterness. She wanted to marry and have children, but was convinced it would be preferable to marry an older foreigner than a young Khmer man. In Hoefinger’s study, she found that not only did Khmer men complain about feeling inadequate in terms of providing ‘milk money’, but Khmer women also complained about having to support their unemployed boyfriends. Sophea wanted to avoid this kind of scenario, and thought an older foreigner would
be less likely to spend the family money on beer and girls, hence increasing the chances of her children being given a better start to life than she was.

It could be suggested that seeing Cambodia through the lens of someone who appears to have had such an extraordinary life is risky, but I would argue that Sophea’s story is not unusual in the Cambodian context, and her input is highly valuable since she has seen much of the behaviour that has shaped common opinions about Khmer men, from the other side of the brothel door.

**Summary**

- Relationship with informants facilitates insider perspectives via ongoing conversation.
- Sophea was subject to immense trauma and abuse throughout her childhood and as a young woman, at the hands of both men and women. Men usually did the abusing, but women usually facilitated it.
- Her obligation to provide for family tied her to abusive situations.
- Despite the fact that in many ways men in Sophea’s life could be accurately described in stereotypical terms – cheats, violent rapists etcetera - she did not appear to think of Khmer men as any worse than Khmer women.
- She believed Khmer men were not ideal suitors for marriage, since they would spend their money on beer and girls. A view reflected in much of Cambodia’s contemporary popular media, such as pop songs and music videos.

Aspects of Sophea’s biography were reflected in the practice based research described in previous chapters, and as the script developed, her story was written into two characters in Bngvel – Nee and Lyla. Lyla is played by Raksmey, Sophea’s cousin, who has been bound by a face-saving culture to not acknowledge the suffering and exploitation within her own family.
Srey Nek

In 2007 I met Srey Nek as a skinny eleven-year-old girl who could well have been described as the kicking-dog of the family. She was considered crazy after having been bitten by a dog and so was consistently verbally abused, given the ‘lowest’ chores to do and was otherwise excluded from family affairs. Her posture was hunched and she almost never spoke.

Srey Nek's parents were very poor and she had several siblings. In 2008, extended family members who had observed how she had been treated approached her parents, offering to take care of her. Her parents couldn't believe anyone would want to look after their crazy daughter, and happily agreed. Srey Nek's ‘new parents’ believed the way she was being treated was having a dramatic impact on her well-being and they were worried that if she was treated like she was crazy, she may well have ended up crazy, but that if she was treated well, she would be well. They approached her as a person of value, clothed and fed her well, and gave her the respect, love and attention she had missed out on as well as opportunities for education and positive social development.

Many changes happen between the ages of eleven and seventeen, but it seemed quite possible the transformation of Srey Nek, from inadequate, anxious and withdrawn, to a funny, talented, confident and respected member of the extended family and community was connected with changes in how she was perceived and subsequently treated. Having witnessed what appeared to be a profound and positive impact of this ‘experiment’, it was difficult to escape the idea that something similar could happen for Cambodian boys who are currently being raised in an environment where jealousy, mistrust, accusations and conflict are the norm, and where it is expected that they will one day drink excessively and cheat on their wife.
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE - A confronting couple of weeks at a time when I was still trying to work out where I fit in - without much detail.

- An orphanage for disabled kids around the corner burned down.
- The neighbour tried to sell us her baby for $500 USD to pay for her husband’s cancer treatment.
- Two girls who had been ‘leased’ to a Karaoke bar in Kampong Cham Province came to stay with us when their five-month contract was complete.
- Two other girls, neighbours from Jasmine’s village, came to stay with us after being laid off at the garment factory (it was during the Global Financial Crisis). Their dad called several times a day in tears begging us to find them work that did not involve them selling their bodies. We tried. They moved out after finding work at a brothel.
- Jasmine’s Aunty was diagnosed HIV positive, and decided to start work at a brothel so she could afford medication.
- Jasmine’s friend, Lily, sold her teenaged sister for $1,000 USD and split the money with her mum. Lily spent her share in a week of partying. I don’t know what her mum did with her share.
- Jimmy, our little wedding present puppy, was stolen and presumed eaten.
Srey Nek’s family had more problems and less money than others in the community. There were seven siblings and while her mother played cards much of the day, her father spent most of his time elsewhere in the company of other women. This meant there was not enough income to support the family, so Srey Nek’s mother borrowed from local lenders who charged ten percent per month interest. It did not take long before a few hundred dollars borrowed became a few thousand dollars owed and eventually the debt was deemed insurmountable. At this time, a woman from Kuala Lumpur who trafficked girls for prostitution approached Srey Nek’s mother and offered to buy Srey Nek’s fourteen-year-old sister, Raksmey, for six thousand American dollars. Fortunately, someone in the community offered to cover their mothers’ debt, and Raksmey eventually came to work for us in Jasmine Valley.

These events drew attention to the fact that the children with mothers and fathers of limited means, who spend excessive time and money with cards and girls respectively, are particularly vulnerable. Furthermore, the man who spends his time and money with girls outside the home is often the father of the girl who gets sold in order to maintain the rest of the family. These men, then, represent both the demand and the supply of an industry that so many organisations are busily trying to ‘fix’ one way or another. It could be suggested that the successes of these organisations will remain limited until attention is turned to the understanding and support of Cambodian men.

Summary

- Srey Nek’s story offers the possibility that altering how someone is perceived and treated might bring about radical positive change. This sometimes requires fresh attitudes and approaches that challenge dominant ideas.
- Her story might also shed some light on questions about expectations that Khmer boys will one day drink excessively and cheat on their wife, and the
possibility that reframing Cambodian men and masculinity may play a part in bringing about positive change.

• Srey Nek’s and Raksney’s family situation presented the possibility that women playing cards and men out with beer and girls might somehow be complementary problems.

• In some ways, Khmer men represent the supply and demand of the sex trade, so understanding them is likely to be helpful when approaching associated problems.

In a number of ways these stories became part of Bngvel. The main character, Phally, is expected to be unfaithful to his wife, and treated as if he is unfaithful. He wants to be different, and works hard to provide for his family, but eventually surrenders and becomes the man he is expected to be. For a period of time at least, Phally, spends time and money with beer and girls while his wife, Phalla, plays cards. When Phalla runs out of money, she sells her daughter for a one-off payment and expects regular payments to ensue. To highlight the point that some Khmer men represent the demand and supply of the sex trade, Phally comes face to face with his daughter, Nee, in a brothel.

Jasmine Valley
The eco-resort which my wife and I began building early in 2009 provided the opportunity for over five years of ongoing intimate engagement. A number of observations that were pertinent to the research were made during our time in Jasmine Valley. They centre mostly on the relationships between men and women, husbands and wives.

Where The Money Goes
During the building phase, we employed dozens of Khmer men. They ranged in age from around fifteen to sixty years. They all lived onsite, and we provided very basic accommodation (a blue tarpaulin over a timber frame, and bamboo stretcher-beds)
as well as providing utensils and ingredients for their meals and employing a cook. Pay-day was the first of every month, and a taxi was always organised to take their salaries back to their wives or mothers in their home-province.

Once we opened for business, we employed young people with little education, and almost all were from very poor rural families. Our staff lived onsite, and we had live-in English teachers to provide lessons as well as consistent interaction for all staff members. Once again, they all sent their money back to their mother, or in some cases an older sister. It was clearly observable, that some felt great pressure to provide for their family, and we would regularly help out either by gifting or advancing their pay if we knew of situations that called for it.

Employing more than fifty people over a period of around five years, I did not once hear of anybody keeping their pay for themselves, or sending it to a man, such as a father, brother or uncle - it was always a woman; usually a mother or wife.
INTERNAL MONOLOGUE - I quizzed Bon about what he does with his money. He said that he gives it to his mother, who invests it in rice fields and various other small business ventures. If he ever needs it, he is entitled to ask for his money to be returned, plus a little. She will have profited from it in the meantime. He expects to get married one day, and his mother will pay for his wedding out of the money Bon has given to her.

Dit and Mom
Dit came from a particularly poor family. Mao, his younger brother, had worked for us a while and came to us in tears one afternoon to tell us he was quitting work to join his brother, who was working in Phnom Penh. As it turned out, their mother had borrowed from Dit’s boss, but Dit did not earn enough to repay the debt. This put Dit in a bond-slave type relationship with his employer and life became very
difficult for him. Mao was going to go and earn half his current salary, to help Dit pay off the debt. We provided a solution to the problem, paying their mother’s debt in full, and employing Dit on double his current salary.

How much a man can afford to spend on his wedding, including ‘milk money’ is seen as a reflection of how well he will provide for his bride long-term, and the amount he has available for this is often a deciding factor in whether or not he can even get a bride. Dit and Srey Mom, who also worked in Jasmine Valley, developed feelings for each other and wanted to get married. Dit did not have money to pay for a wedding, since he sent all his pay to his mother who did not seem to be able to make ends meet, so Jasmine offered to pay for the wedding if the families would approve of their marriage.

Image 33 - Dit and Mom’s wedding April 2012
Who Plays Cards

Chhbp Bros, the rules for men, warns men to avoid indulging in three follies - women, alcohol and gambling. These three behaviours often tend to be 'lumped in' together and linked to issues such as domestic violence, but Synoda Sokhan’s 2015 research, *Life Outside the Home: Interrogating Men’s Understanding of Their Roles in Cambodia*, suggests that men’s alcohol use and extramarital relationships are important issues, but gambling may not be, since most the study’s participants had no interest in gambling at all.

Since we employed several people from our own village in Takeo, we would frequently see the mothers of our staff during our visits and they were often playing cards. According to my wife, most of them play cards most of the time, and this is where much of our staff income gets spent – including the earnings of Dit and Mao.

I observed many card games in Cambodia and almost exclusively, men played during festive seasons such as Khmer New Year, around the middle of April. I did see men play at other times, but it was an exception rather than a rule – it seemed occasional rather than habitual. It is possible that men gamble in settings I have not frequented, but, from what I have witnessed in our provincial village and
community, it appears as if the majority of habitual gamblers who spend extended periods of time playing cards and who borrow money in order to maintain their habit, are women.

**Working and Playing**

Jasmine’s Uncle Borun established his reputation as a builder when he managed construction in Jasmine Valley. He appeared quiet and reserved, worked hard and earned very good money. Once he returned to Takeo, he continued to get decent employment and on his days off he built large extensions on his family home. During a number of our visits to Takeo there was obvious friction between him and his wife Darop. Darop regularly complained that he did not earn enough money and suggested it was because he was having sex with someone other than her. On the other hand, Borun felt she was neglecting her responsibilities by play cards through the day and into the evening.

*Image 35 - Borun’s wife, Darop, playing cards with her friends*

**Bon**

Bon was our first employee in Jasmine Valley. When we purchased the property he moved in as ‘security’ and was also responsible for planting and maintaining various crops and fruit trees. He stayed on during the building process, and then headed up
our team of groundsmen. Bon had been rejected by almost every female member of the Jasmine Valley staff, when one morning he unexpectedly announced to his colleagues that he was soon going to get married. A few months later, Bon married a beautiful, round-faced, white skinned woman, moved in with her mother and started a family.

Bon and his wife soon had a baby, and the women who had turned him down came to see him as the perfect Khmer husband; working hard, earning good money, and doing his manual chores around the home - providing and protecting his wife and child. His wife, then, had achieved what every one of our female staff aspired to, receiving her husband’s ample salary each month, investing it wisely and taking good care of her man. Theirs was a symbiotic relationship worthy of envy. There was murmuring amongst Jasmine Valley staff that many of them had blown their opportunity to live the dream.

**INTERNAL MONOLOGUE** – We drove from Phnom Penh to Kep around five o’clock in the morning and saw a stream ‘cattle trucks’ full of
women, with a few men interspersed. There were literally hundreds of these trucks taxiing women to work in the garment factories. Jasmine reckons many of them will have unemployed husbands or boyfriends who they support. In a country with a limited job-market, it was hard not to wonder whether getting women into the workforce en-masse was empowering or disempowering for both men and women in the Cambodian context - especially for those who wish to pursue the traditional lifestyle and family function that Bon and his wife had successfully achieved.

Image 37 - truckloads of women off to work in garment factories

Summary

- If our staff behaviour is any indication, a vast majority of Cambodians in some communities at least, still fulfil the cultural expectation that they will give their money to their mother or wife. If the behaviour of mothers of our staff is any indication, the spending of that money in countercultural ways, such as playing cards rather than investing it for the benefit of the family, is not uncommon.
• For some Khmer women, time spent playing cards is time spent neglecting their traditional responsibilities. This sometimes causes friction between spouses.

• Some card-playing Khmer women deflect financial responsibility by accusing their husbands of spending family money on other girls.

• As indicated by the story of Dit and Mom, in order to marry a Khmer woman, a man must demonstrate an ability and willingness to provide adequately.

• The Bon story suggests that many young Khmer women still aspire to traditional roles in the home, though in the current social climate this might be beyond the reach of most.

It would be risky to generalise the observations made during our time at Jasmine Valley across the whole Khmer population, but it could be suggested that some of the findings might be common to some of the poor rural communities at least, since these are the communities our staff came from. Issues relating to the submission of income to mothers and wives, women’s gambling habits and the conflict that is rooted in accusations of marital infidelity and men’s financial inadequacy are all woven into the Bngvel film script.

**Testing the Liminal Narrative**

I am the primary scriptwriter of Bngvel, however the script was constructed by a structured engagement with Khmer contributors and participants as is detailed in this thesis. When the film was completed I wanted to get some informal feedback to ascertain if Bngvel was a Khmer story or if my own “foreign” preoccupations colored the final narrative. The immediate feedback from a collection of ordinary Cambodians who did not know the story was most encouraging.

The feedback comments included observations such as: “you made a film about my life,” “This is the story of 80% of the people who live in the village,” “I want all the Khmer mothers and fathers to watch this film,” and, “everybody should watch it, it’s so Khmer,” Around eighty-five to ninety percent of survey participants say they
know Khmer women and men like Phalla and Phally, the main characters in the film and around one quarter to one fifth say they know more than ten people like the main characters in the film. This feedback seems significant, given the film’s antithetical presentation of both Khmer men and women, and suggests that Bngvel resonates in ways important to the viewers.
Notes and References – Chapter 6

1 Pahn, interview with Beck, 12-01-2013.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 "Chhbap Bros: Codes of Conduct for Khmer Men."
6 Synoda Sokhan, "Life Outside of The Home: Interrogating Men's Understanding of Their Roles in Cambodia" (Victoria University of Wellington, 2015), pp. 60-61.
CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to learn whether or not there are Cambodian men who do not fit the descriptions offered by what Jacobsen calls the sole genre of work on Cambodian men, where they are framed as being responsible for problems such as child rape, sex trafficking, domestic violence, corruption and HIV etcetera \(^1\), as well as how these established portrayals have impacted the lived experience of Cambodian people - men in particular. In order to try and convey the findings of the research in context and over time, they were presented through the film, \textit{Bngvel}. \textit{Bngvel} attempts to engage its audience viscerally and phenomenologically, through the intentional arrangement of visual and audial codes in time and space in the hope that it might arouse emotional, ethical and cognitive responses - understanding, that some of these responses may be at odds with established approaches to Cambodian men and masculinity.

In the process of scriptwriting, it became clear that the dominant determining factor in deciding whether a man is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ was whether or not he cared well for his family – in particular, whether or not he was faithful to his wife. The study found – in a qualitative sense - that there is a tendency for some Cambodians to be convinced that almost all Khmer men do fit the descriptions offered by previous research, and that Cambodian men are expected to be unfaithful to their wives or girlfriends - men who claimed to be different were openly doubted and mocked. If spousal loyalty and commitment is central to the definition of ‘good Khmer men’ and ‘bad Khmer men’ and Cambodian men are expected to be unfaithful to their wives, it follows that Cambodian men may often be considered ‘bad men’ who cannot be trusted. There were also indications that sometimes men might try to be ‘good men’ but eventually succumb to the kind of behaviour that is expected of them. Previous research established that problematic behaviour of Khmer men makes trouble for Khmer women and children, so a quest to understand the problem behaviour of Khmer men would seem imperative if lasting positive social change in Cambodia is
to be achieved. It is anticipated that in seeking to understand Khmer men’s behaviour, scholars and NGOs already working in the interest of Cambodian women and children might further explore how Khmer boys and men are affected by the common assumption that they are ‘bad’ and the expectation that they will behave ‘badly’.

From the outset, this study assumed that the many problems associated with previously offered descriptions of Cambodian masculinity were complex, and that a binary perpetrator-victim approach to problems between Cambodian men and women would be inadequate at best. By exploring the context in which these problems occur, it found that men and women both play roles in escalating conflict, and that sometimes quarreling is caused by mistrust, jealousy and accusations that are rooted in the expectation that Cambodian men are infidels by nature. This stands in contrast to previous studies where binary approaches catered for a limited range of outcomes by assuming the position that men were never-victims and women were never-perpetrators - consequently obscuring some of the behaviours of both Khmer men and Khmer women that are pertinent to the understanding of the problems behind the unacceptable behaviours of Cambodian men such as physical violence or spousal unfaithfulness.

It was not within the scope of this project to thoroughly explore the potential impact that the reputation of Cambodian men and masculinity might have on Cambodian boys. The project did, however, model a more complex Cambodian man who might be described as a ‘good man’ – one who provides for and protects his family - but whose wife treats him as if he is a ‘bad man’ who spends his money on other girls instead of providing for her and their children. He eventually responds to this treatment by doing exactly what it is he has been accused of but when he becomes aware that his behaviour is hurting himself and those around him, he takes responsibility and makes a positive decision to change – becoming a ‘good man’ once again. This model attempts to offer one explanation for problematic behaviour of otherwise ‘good’ Khmer men and, without excusing that behaviour, it asks for
compassion, understanding and hope rather than shaming. It also models a Cambodian man attempting to take control of his destiny rather than yielding to the expectations of those around him or to fate. It is hoped that this modelling will offer Khmer boys and young men an alternate pathway. It is also hoped that scholars and media-makers might explore the many Cambodian stories that offer encouragement rather than condemnation to Khmer men and boys.

*Bngvel* touches on some behaviour of Khmer women that does not appear to have been previously explored but which impacts some Khmer men. The main female character has a gambling habit that partly explains her frustration with her husband’s inability to provide more money. Accusing him of sleeping around is a convenient distraction that helps her avoid taking responsibility for her own time-wasting and the financial consequences of playing cards. Just as her husband does, she also comes to realise how her behaviour has hurt herself and those she loves, takes responsibility and makes positive decisions to change - taking some control of her destiny. Her character is not explored in great depth, nevertheless, it is hoped that her story will prompt new enquiries into areas of some Cambodian women’s lives that have previously been difficult to access due to traditional approaches to research, and which may illuminate some contexts in which relational problems occur.

*Bngvel* finishes at the beginning of the couple’s journey to recovery with a simple act of mutual trust and reliance. In doing so, having highlighted some of the ways Cambodian men and women create and perpetuate their problems, it offers the beginning of a path forward that includes both Cambodian men and women as integral in addressing their social and domestic challenges.

At the time of writing a Khmer language (without English subtitles) version of the film has received over 13,800 views. Audience responses suggest the characters and narrative modeled in *Bngvel* are recognisably Cambodian.
Bngvel received the prize for Best Direction Long Form and Best Cinematography Long Form, as well as a nomination for Best Long Form Drama at the West Australian Screen Awards (2016). It also received an Award of Merit at the World Film Awards (2015) in Jakarta and was selected for screenings at the Zanzibar International Film Festival (2014) and the Cambodia International Film Festival (2014). Bngvel also screened at the 2015 Sexual Violence Research Initiative conference in Cape Town, South Africa.

Inadequate Men

Since migrating from Cambodia back to Perth, in Western Australia, in the middle of 2014, startling rates of spousal beatings and killings in Australia has made domestic violence a major issue in mainstream media, in politics and in various forms of online discussions.

In the introduction to Hitting Home with Sarah Ferguson 3, a two-part documentary series that screened over two nights in November 2015 on an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television channel, Ferguson claims to investigate how these problems start and why they escalate. Rather than investigating how things start and why they escalate, the films’ focus was on the tribulations of women as victims of domestic violence, and on the punishments and programs designed to fix the perpetrators; men. Dialogues that ensued through a number of media forms searched for ways of fixing the problem by making men more accountable and women more supported. Issues such as mandatory reporting, reinforcement of Apprehended Violence Orders (AVOs), funding gaps, women’s refuges, men’s behaviour-change programs and anger management programs were all discussed. These issues are probably important, given the current situation, but questions regarding how we came to have such broad-scale relational dysfunction were conspicuous by their absence. The discussion seemed once again limited by a binary approach to the problem, as was demonstrated by the head of Domestic Violence
New South Wales, Moo Baulch on ABC's panel program, *Q&A*, when she said that men pretend to be victims and that they play the system. It was difficult not to wonder whether Australia's approach to the complex problems of domestic violence reflect the inadequate binary approaches previously taken in Cambodia. These approaches in Australia have not been very successful in curbing what is now being described as an epidemic of domestic violence. While there are programs designed to help men manage their anger better, nobody seems to be asking why they are angry in the first instance.

The oft-paraphrased Henry Mencken might have suggested the problems of domestic violence are highly complex, and some of the answers on offer are clear, simple and wrong. However, a few nights after *Hitting Home* was screened Ferguson appeared on *The Drum*, where she introduced a concept that was absent from the documentary films as well as the *Q&A* dialogue that ensued. She stated that the core problem in domestic violence is men's sense of inadequacy. Years before, Khemarak's song which had saturated the airwaves and which triggered my interest in the lived experience of Cambodian men in the first instance was one that voiced, in no uncertain terms, a deep sense of inadequacy experienced by Cambodian men. Just as the established approaches in Cambodia have not successfully stemmed the unacceptable behaviours of Khmer men, domestic violence in Australia is reportedly on the increase. Perhaps the efforts to reduce domestic violence in Australia would benefit from a less-binary approach and, by exploring the narratives of Australian men and women in context and over time, we might be able to uncover processes that lead to eruptions of problematic behaviour of otherwise 'good' Australian men and, without excusing that behaviour, offer compassion, understanding and hope.
Notes and References - Conclusions

1 Jacobsen, "Being Broh: The Good, the Bad and the Successful Man in Cambodia."
3 Ivan O'Mahoney, Episode 1 and Episode 2, 2015, Australia.
6 The Drum, 29-11-2015, Australia, Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
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Appendix 1: Creative Practice Research Methodology Bibliography

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Appendix 2: Bngvel Film Credits

### ភ្លៅ

bngvel
(turn)

*Produced and Directed by*
Owen Beck

*Assistant Directors*
Jasmine Beck
Raksmey Roeun

*Assistant Producer*
Jasmine Beck

**Cast**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kim Nget</td>
<td>Phally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phana Cheng</td>
<td>Phalla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somaly Roeun</td>
<td>Nee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raksmey Roeun</td>
<td>Lyla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen Kelly</td>
<td>James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sokhorn Kim</td>
<td>Perfume seller</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jeav Ouk</td>
<td>Rice wine barman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phorn Cheng</td>
<td>Phally’s father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nan Sor</td>
<td>Haircut woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ham Hun</td>
<td>Phalla’s friend 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sopheap Nget</td>
<td>Phalla’s friend 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chreoun</td>
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<td>Chanthorn Khim</td>
<td>Phally’s friend 1</td>
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<td>Resa Kai</td>
<td>Phally’s friend 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chantha Khim</td>
<td>Phally’s friend 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seyha Sous</td>
<td>Tee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tee Roeun</td>
<td>Postie</td>
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<td>Heng Sok</td>
<td>Shoe seller</td>
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<td>San Dok</td>
<td>Barber customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rath</td>
<td>Barber customer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pheatra Kun</td>
<td>Barber kid customer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eoum Da</td>
<td>Monk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vibol Thav</td>
<td>Moto owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Title</td>
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<td>-----------------------</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>David Collins</td>
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<td>Jasmine Beck</td>
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<td>Sokmaly Ngim</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sara Kim</td>
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<td>Dina Cheng</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dara Bou</td>
<td>Security man</td>
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<td>Peah Cheoun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pheyrom Yy</td>
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</table>
Makara Beun  Moto customer
Shhorina Chok  Moto customer
Sreypich Heng  Moto customer's kid
Sinath Mouen  Tuktuk sleeper
Renh Boh  Moto sleeper
Pheun Tha  Cyclo sleeper

Shot and Edited by
Owen Beck

Slow Motion Photography
Cameron Frost

Location Sound
Coel Healy

Boom Swinger
Tee Roeun

Music
Closet Audio Productions

Musicians
Marcus Leong
Sachie Amira
Lor Phaik Sim
Wong Wei-Ming
Colin Mills

Street Musicians
Pouv Heng
Vanna Seng
Dara Kaem

Recording Production and Sound Engineering
Colin Mills
Lor Phaik Sim
Khual Tawng

Credits Music
TV Aut La’or (instrumental)
by Leng Ski PUnks
Production Assistants
Seyha Sous
Tee Roeun

Venue and Talent Scout
Kosal Thorn

Venues
Kim Nget's Barbershop
Garage Bar
Sovann Naree Beer Garden
Pkay Preuk Karaoke
Mom Hak Guest House


Script Foreigner Feedback
Sven Sorensen
Hugh Kesson
Stephen Watts
Gracie Beck
Stephen Kelly

Special Thanks
Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, Cambodia
Ascentic Foundation

Filmed on location in Phnom Penh city and Takeo Province, Cambodia.

a film by
Owen Beck

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