

Prolung Khmer (ព្រលឹងខ្មែរ) in Sociohistorical Perspective

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Abstract

In this article we selectively review Cambodia's history through the lens of *Prolung Khmer* (ព្រលឹងខ្មែរ, meaning “Khmer Spirit” or “Khmer Soul”), a complex, multivalent ideological discourse that links symbols and social practices, such as Angkor, Buddhism, Khmer language (written and spoken), and classical dance, in an essentialized Khmer identity. When Cambodians began arriving in the United States in 1975, they immediately and self-consciously deployed Prolung Khmer as a means for asserting a unique cultural identity within the larger society. Through diachronic and ethnographic analyses of *Prolung Khmer*, we gain a holistic understanding of how it serves as an ideological metaphor for Khmer culture.

Keywords: Prolung Khmer, Khmer Identity, Cambodia

Synopsis

To ignore the Khmer customary social life is to ignore and misunderstand the Khmer people. To be unappreciative of the Khmers' longing to preserve what has been held dear for many centuries is to be insensitive to the wellspring of the Khmer heart. The modern may be necessary and national, but for many Khmer people, the old is necessary and sacred.

Venerable Reverend Chhean Kong (Kong, 1989, p. 22)

This article presents a diachronic study of *Prolung Khmer* (ព្រលឹងខ្មែរ, meaning “Khmer Soul” or “Khmer Spirit”), a highly salient ideological discourse drawing on certain symbols and practices from Cambodia's 2000-year history. Ideological discourses are an individual's rationalization or justification of social structures and behaviors which can serve as mediating links to represent to themselves and to others their understanding of what it means to be a member of a group (Silverstein, 1979; Woolard, 1998) – in this case what it means to be Khmer. *Prolung Khmer* links stories, events, and people, with ways of seeing and being in the world. It uses symbols from Cambodia's cultural heritage, including Angkor Wat, Buddhism, language (written and spoken), dance and music, and familial and ritual practices, and is prominent in the national/political discourse representing Khmer uniqueness to Cambodians and the world. As in any culture, not everyone is equally aware of or dedicated to, all aspects of *Prolung Khmer*.

However, most Cambodians participate in its key symbols, embracing some portion, however small.

The impetus for this historical review is ethnographic. In the thirty years that we have been researching Cambodians in the diaspora, we have been struck by the prevalence and consistency in the presentation and performance of this group of key symbols. We have also noticed the assemblage of symbols forms a meaningful pattern of thought and action. Much like the concept of “culture” as used in anthropology, Cambodians use *Prolung Khmer* to invoke practically every aspect of what anthropologists would recognize as Khmer cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors (but from an emic rather than etic perspective). *Prolung Khmer* includes aspects of history and legend; ritual and religious practices; social, economic, and political relations; written and spoken forms of language and its social variations; food, forms of dress, music, dance, and architecture. Through its use *Prolung Khmer* delineates, historicizes, and naturalizes what it means to be Khmer. Among its other attributes, *Prolung Khmer* also reflects Khmer time orientation making use of interdiscursive and non-linguistic symbols and practices that invoke the past in the present. Because these practices are based on a “unifying, underlying set of ideological assumptions” they create indexical relationships between symbols and customs, that produce “felt continuities” across time and space (Agha, 2005, p. 2). Through this means, specific historic and legendary events, people, and objects are made real in the lived present and may be called upon for protection, guidance, expertise, authority, and power. Cambodians in the diaspora have used all of the aforementioned to establish new communities and rebuild lives in alien surroundings. They have drawn on *Prolung Khmer* (both consciously and unconsciously) to demonstrate their uniqueness and value as a people, to themselves and the larger society.

Based on the history presented in this article and ethnographic research among Cambodians in the diaspora, we argue that *Prolung Khmer* is a cultural metaphor reminding Khmer of the ideal way of being in the world. It also provides the means for regaining that ideal if lost through hierarchical and patterned arrangements which are always present and always available through established social practices and ritual actions. *Prolung Khmer* reminds Khmer of who they are and points to the many ways Khmer have to regain order.

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