

Gangster Style, Foreigner Style: Young People, Consumerism and Intergenerational Tension in a Cambodian Province

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Abstract

A fixation on local gangsters was prominent in young people's discussions about youth issues in the Battambang region of Cambodia. In depth exploration of this issue revealed that gangsters became a metaphor for the tensions between tradition and modernity in young people's lives. The gangster was simultaneously feared and admired by most of the young people in this study, feared because they had disengaged with education and traditional values, but admired because they embraced all that was modern. This paper presents the results of a series of workshops on qualitative research with students at the University of Battambang and forty nine semi-structured interviews that resulted from these workshops.

Keywords: Cambodian youth, modernity, consumerism, identity and gangs

1 Introduction

This paper describes a period of research with university students from the University of Battambang in Cambodia. During our engagement with the students we asked them to think about the question of "what is life like for young people in Cambodia today?" Using this as an overarching theme, we ran extended focus groups with the students and drew out a range of themes to guide the construction of a semi-structured interview. The material presented here is drawn from the discussions with the students and the results of 49 interviews that they conducted with young people in Battambang region. Two themes were prominent in their discourses; gangsters and the rise of a globalised youth culture drawn from other countries, with resultant intergenerational tensions surrounding appropriate behaviours for young people. This paper will explore these concepts from the perspective of the young people and examine how they are connected.

1.1 Background

Cambodia is a country which is emerging from significant trauma following the civil war in the 1970s and Pol Pot's regime from 1975-1979, during which time an estimated 1.4-2.2 million people died from violent conflict, executions and famine (De Walque, 2005). In addition, during and after the conflict, approximately 800,000 Cambodians escaped the country as refugees. Pol Pot's regime focused on the forced movement of people from the cities and towns to work in collective agrarian labour in an effort to eradicate the old society. Educated people and professionals from urban backgrounds were particularly targeted (De Walque, 2005). The country's education system was destroyed and traditions and religions were repressed (Coppens, Page & Thou 2006). The region around Battambang was also one of the most devastated by the Khmer Rouge regime, as the relative fertility of the region meant that higher agricultural targets could be set. Hinton reports that 'tens of thousands' of Cambodians were relocated to the region from other urban centres (2005: 165).

The results on the "front lines" of this economic "battlefield" were often catastrophic, as the regime's high modernist projects collapsed, rice production quotas were not met, and the masses began to fall ill and starve after rice that should have been set aside for consumption was sent to Phnom Penh by timorous cadres (Hinton, 2005: 165)

This very recent history continues to impact upon Cambodian youth in terms of intergenerational trauma, fragmentation of families, destruction of a way of life and the need to re-build and reinterpret cultural norms and traditions. Cambodian youth also struggle to understand and interpret the reasons for the destruction caused by the Khmer Rouge period (Munyas, 2008).

Despite the ever present reminders of the genocide, the memorials constructed out of skulls, the public holiday to celebrate “Victory over genocide day” (7th January), the Pol Pot regime was barely talked about and intergenerational trauma was not directly discussed by the students. Discussions about modernity and consumerism however are always underpinned by tension, given that embracing such aspects of life was tantamount to a death sentence for many of the students’ parents (Chandler, 1991: 243).

1.2 Battambang

Battambang City is the capital of Battambang Province, which is situated in North West Cambodia; the city of Battambang is situated 102 kilometres from the Thai border. The Battambang province is a fertile and relatively affluent region, which is known as the rice bowl of Cambodia.

Although youth culture and fashions are visibly flourishing in Cambodia’s capital Phnom Penh, with shops selling daring fashions such as micro mini-skirts and hot pants, and young people (especially boys) favouring highly styled haircuts, Battambang is inherently more conservative. A girl in a short skirt or a boy with bleached blond hair is still considered to be shocking (by young and older people alike).

The University of Battambang was founded in 2008 and now provides education to several thousand students from the region.

2. Cambodia’s Youth

In 2008, youth (defined by the Cambodian census as 14-30 year olds) made up 32% of the population (National Institute of Statistics, 2008). As Munyas (2008) points out this group are the children and grandchildren of both the victims and the perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge regime (pp: 413). Today’s young people live in a world, which is very different to that of their parents and grandparents allowing them much improved access to education. In 2008, 80.19% of the primary aged population (ages 6-12 years) were attending an educational institution. Literacy levels have also significantly increased from 62.80% in 1998 to 78.35% in 2008 with literacy defined as the percentage of adults who can read and write a short simple statement in Khmer or any other language (Index Mundi, 2013). Despite this increase in educational outcomes, Hensengerth (2008) writes that a lack of availability of employment for educated youth in Cambodia impacts their lives in terms of self-worth, confidence, and future hopes that they will ever be able to achieve a better life.

2.1 Youth Identity

Activities youth pursue and products they buy are a way of constructing a certain identity (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Access to a consumer society and the influence of a globalised youth culture are defining transitions for the current generation of Cambodian youth. The youth in modern Cambodia live in an environment where they are constantly bombarded with advertisements from companies that wish to tap into a burgeoning youth middle class purchasing power with these advertisements generally linked to their emerging identities (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; O’Donohoe, 1994). This change is further perpetuated by the rapid accumulation of television channels. In 1990, there was one national TV broadcaster, which was used for broadcasting propaganda (Peou, 2009). In 2013, there are ten television stations including two broadcasting foreign material.¹ Mobile phone use is widespread, and although home computer and Internet access remains low (especially in the rural area), young people access social media through their phones and Internet cafes. Youth living in low socio-economic circumstances are often even more affected by the media presentation of the good life as being linked to wealth and the equation of wealth with power and popularity (Hemmings, 2002). This change has not gone without criticism. At a political level, young people’s embracing of western fads and fashion are seen as destructive to the Khmer Culture. Prime Minister Hung Sen has in the past banned TV performers from wearing revealing clothing, saying: “This is not a Cambodian tradition and we have our own rich traditional culture” (Saoyuth, 2011).

¹ The use of TV of propaganda continues with Apsara TV and Bayon TV being controlled by the Cambodian People’s Party.

2.3 Cambodia's Youth Violence

In Cambodia, literature discussing youth and violence generally is of two veins. One sees children as victims due to the number of caregivers killed during the war resulting in detrimental effects on a child's rearing (UNICEF, 1996). The other theme presented in the literature is that youth are independent players in Cambodian society, who form gangs as "a socio-political set up of patronage relations that does not allow them access to resources and representation as a distinct social group within the polity" (Hensengerth, 2008: 2). In Cambodia not being able to get things through regular channels, youth join gangs, which provide them group status.

Contemporary Asian gangs are loosely structured groups that have an allure for youth who generally come from poorer backgrounds and have difficulties at home or school. Gang membership offers protection, support and friendship with those from similar circumstances (Hughes, 2005). With the advent of the Internet and other social media, gang subculture has spread across borders allowing more intricate communication (Kontos & Brotherton, 2008). No two gangs are alike and while most people relate gangs to deviant behaviour, they should not necessarily be discussed only in terms of crime (see Thrasher, 1927, Hagedorn, 1988). The gangs give its members the opportunity "to be individually and collectively empowered, a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture" (Brotherton & Barrios, 2004: 23). While gang membership does not explain all youth related crimes, it does tend to exacerbate violence and more serious crime (Huff, 1998) with violence, and being physically tough seen as a form of social capital among young gang members (Polk, 1994).

Wealthy youth from powerful families may join gangs as they know they are unlikely to be prosecuted. "Being politically and economically well off is identical to either having good relations to the police or to being able to prevent them from bringing the case to court" (Hensengerth 2008: 32). Poor youth join gangs for status and protection from a powerful gang leader with a gang structure following tradition Cambodian power structures (Hensengerth, 2008). With a young population and an ever increasing work force, youth make up 25.5% of the country's working population; however, there are not sufficient job opportunities to keep abreast of the burgeoning youth workforce (ILO, 2007). In rural areas, such as Battambang and Siem Reap, with a lack of work opportunities in countryside towns being especially critical for those with no education (4.8 percent youth unemployment) and those with university (3.8 percent) (ILO, 2013), youth look for opportunities through migrant work recruitment agencies. With the Thai border in such close proximity to many Cambodian villages, the lure of the unknown and possible opportunities are most attractive to young people looking for work. Leaving the family unit exposes youth to different values and less monitoring by parents. This idea of gangsters or the development of a more globalised youth identity is seen in part as a result of rural youth migrating to Thailand for work. In Hensengerth's (2008) research *Social and Political Fractures after Wars: Youth Violence in Cambodia and Guatemala*, the police and politicians interviewed in Cambodia frequently mentioned:

Youth come back often addicted to drugs and their behaviour changed for the negative. This includes the formation of gangs with a display of hedonistic Thai lifestyle (dyed hair, display of coolness), robbery to pay for drugs, and violent behaviour at home (Hensengerth, 2008: 28).

In the 2003 study *Paupers and Princelings: Youth Attitudes towards Gangs, Violence, Rape, Drugs and Theft in Cambodia*, interviews with gang members revealed that violence is the one of the main activities for the gang. Results of interviews with non-gang members found that 60% of university students and 68% of high school students were concerned about gangs (Gender & Development for Cambodia, 2003). This fear and concern with gangsters was also evident in our discussions with the students at the University of Battambang.

2.4 Perceptions of Gangsters

The figure of the gangster seems to be both admired and feared by the Cambodian young people in our study, representing both extreme behaviour and identity construction. The gangster style, with its emphasis on particular haircuts and clothing was however, a look that many young men aspired to achieve. It could therefore be argued that when young people told us they were concerned about gangsters, that this concern was a complex construction, which encompassed anxiety about the activities and behaviours of gangsters simultaneously with a desire to be able to consume and project aspects of gangster style.

White (2002:1) has identified various distinctions between youth groups which may include gangs, youth groups, youth movements and wannabes. Using Gordon's (1995 & 2000) classification of street groups, the youth in our research could be better described as a combination of 'youth movements' identified by their characteristic dress and preference for certain free time activities and 'wannabes' who form together for the purpose of unstructured, exciting social activity that is against the grain of main stream society with an outward presentation of gang like characteristics (White, 2002) through music, dress, an outward lack of ambition, and racing their motos.

3. Methods

This paper describes work carried out in the Battambang province of Cambodia with a small group of students (all of whom were under 25) from the University of Battambang who were working towards a degree in Sociology and Rural Development. We had been invited to provide a series of workshops over a four-week period. The aim of the work was to develop and cultivate qualitative research skills among the group thus enabling them to undertake research with young people in their province. Students participated on voluntary basis as they were interested in learning more about research. However, they were all highly committed and attended the daily workshops even though it was not a requirement of their university program.

A key focus of the project was providing the opportunity for the students to articulate their key concerns about their current lives and their perceptions of the future and what life is like for young people in Cambodia. The ideas articulated in initial discussions were used to frame interviews with youth in the villages surrounding the city of Battambang. Using a focus group style format, students discussed which sub-topics they felt were most critical. A central focus and idea that dominated the discussions on was the idea of 'gangs'. After much probing, it became clear that their idea of gangs didn't follow the common understanding of a group associated with organised crime and other criminal delinquent activities, but was more of a description for youth who weren't following what was seen by them as traditional pathways of education or familial expectations. The term gangster had become more of a modern day description for 'bad boys' or members of a particular youth sub-culture.

Several of the early workshops included learning exactly what qualitative research is and the methods used by qualitative researchers to explore the questions they are interested in understanding. Students decided in order to gain an in depth understanding of issues for youth in Cambodia they wanted to develop a semi -structured interview. There were several days spent on question development. The students initial survey attempts were trialed with each other and modified before reaching a version that they were satisfied asked the right questions.

Using a sample of convenience, 49 interviews were conducted by the students with 24 males and 25 females aged 20-27. Forty-five of these interviews took place in the villages surrounding the city and the remaining four were conducted with young people who lived in the surrounding villages and were currently studying at the University of Battambang. In the beginning, students were more comfortable interviewing in same gender pairs. After they had gone through a couple of interviews they then felt confident enough to interview on their own.

Part of the students' learning was basic analysis of the interviews. Once students had done a number of interviews, they began to notice topics that youth were discussing most frequently. Two key themes were pervasive in the interviews; the first being anxiety about gangsters and intergenerational tensions in the young people's communities and the second a fascination, but also deep concern with what they described as "foreigner culture". These two themes encompassed many aspects of life for young people in contemporary Cambodia, including their engagement with a globalised youth culture, their desires for the trappings of modernity and its consumer products and ensuing intergenerational tension.

4 Findings

4.1 I want to talk About Gangsters!

In initial conversations with the university students about their health and well-being concerns, a young man stood up and said "it is most important that we talk about gangsters- they are the biggest problem in my community". This statement was met with general agreement from the group and the issue of gangsters continued to be raised in every conversation.

This paper, is therefore not derived from work with gangsters themselves as has been the focus of other research in Cambodia (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2011), but instead examines how young people understand the phenomenon of gangsters in their community, their understanding of what motivates young people to become gangsters and why this youth sub-culture features so prominently in their descriptions of their community.

Previous research on subcultures of resistance in Cambodia has examined how the gang becomes the site of both identity formation and resistance among marginalised and maltreated male youth (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2011). Czymoniewicz-Klippel stresses that although the young boys in gangs actively subverted the norms of Cambodian society that they yearn for social inclusion in mainstream society:

The findings here suggest that in essence bad boys agree with and accept the norms and values of hegemonic Cambodian society and yearn for access to the cultural capital that will confer upon them inclusion in mainstream society. For the gang phenomenon to subside, it seems that bad boys must find other more socially acceptable opportunities for expressing their identities in a rapidly changing Cambodia (Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 2011: 16).

During adolescence young people are seeking out and trying to develop their own identities both individually and within a peer group. Distinct sub-cultures may be linked to the consumption of particular items, such as clothing or technology, giving youth both an individual identity and a group identity (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2009).

Almost all the descriptions of gangsters by those young people surveyed emphasized their lack of engagement with education. Although gangsters too, want to embrace aspects of modern society (Moto riding, consuming drugs and alcohol and having a modern appearance) they achieve these through what was perceived as criminal activities or non-traditional means.

Gangsters, there are lots of them and they make the people feel unhappy and they always fight each other. They go moto racing and at night they make some noisy voices for drugs, they always spend money on drugs (Female 22).

Gangsters are important. They do not have work, they are taking drugs and they lack education (Male 22).

In the young people's descriptions, boys become gangsters as a reaction to aspects of their lives that are missing, such as education or employment. One respondent commented that gangster's lives were full of "bad things" and that they used drugs and alcohol to escape from these:

Gangsters are the most important (problem). Education is the cause of these problems because they have no knowledge and then they follow people from other countries or TV. The government should make more schools and some work for them and then make rules for managing the village (Male 24).

There is low education and unemployment for young boys. Lots of gangsters and drugs. Because most of them do not have a job, so they think when they use drugs they will be happy and forget all the bad things in their life (Male 27).

Other descriptions appear to place the gangsters in a more heroic role, with some people emphasising the communal nature of this activity and others suggesting that gangsters played a role in protecting the village and traditional society:

They stop, when they are free they gather together. They have something in common, they are a small group in the community together. They wear the same hairstyle and they wear earrings. Also they are using drugs and sometimes even drinking beer. They are like a group of friends, but sometimes they force people to start taking drugs. They like walking at night. It is difficult for them to be advised by the community. Gangsters do not care about advice from parents. They smoke cigarettes and defy their parents (Male 22).

Gangsters protect their villages: they will react if there are any problems. Gangsters protect culture and festivals. They come to festivals and ceremonies so they can connect with their groups. But sometimes conflict happens (Male 23).

4.2 Intergenerational Tension

The tensions within the family were a common source of conversation throughout the interviews. Similar to youth in many places, a generation gap was considered a source of conflict. Older people (parents & grandparents) were described as being resistant to modernity.

Older people are not modern, different to young people. They don't understand (Male 24).

Young people described themselves and being "up to date" and modern and considered that these values were at odds with the emphasis placed on the respect of culture and history as espoused by their parents.

Young people don't respect older people, culture and history because now the village is modern (Male 23).

Wearing modern clothes, embracing foreigners' culture and aspiring to emulate the appearance of other people are acts of rebellion against traditional society as represented by the young people's parents and grandparents. In many ways the more extreme behaviour and appearance of the gangster becomes a metaphor for this resistance in young people's discourses:

A modern gangster likes everything new – technology, clothes, moto, cigarettes, and hairstyle. He has no future goals, just to play with his gang (Male, 22)

For this group of highly educated young people, however, the choices made by gangsters, particularly their disengagement with the education system are not acceptable. Prominent in young people's discourses is the fear of not being able to continue with their education, due to parental unwillingness or inability to pay for it. Becoming a gangster because there are no other options in terms of education or employment is a continuing source of anxiety.

4.3 The Construction of a Globalized Youth Culture

Cambodian society places a strong emphasis on young people's respectful relationships with their elders, particularly their parents, as Hinton 2005 explains:

As recipients of the protection and overall benevolence (kun) of their parents, children incur a great moral debt "to repay their good deeds" (sangun). Children are therefore expected to respect (korop) and obey (stap) their parents without hesitation (Hinton, 2005:113)

These familial structures of respect and deference were turned upside down by the Khmer Rouge, who sought to overturn the old hierarchies by giving power to young people, as Chandler writes:

Fierce in the condemnation of the 'old ways', contemptuous of traditional customs and ardently opposed to religion and parental authority, freed from family obligations, they displayed a loyalty to the Organisation that was often absolute (Chandler, 1991: 243).

The typical gangster who does not "take advice from his parents" was positioned by the young people in this study as being socially aberrant. But to some extent the young people in this study were also active in questioning the motives of the parental generation, and often suggested that parental decisions were neither modern, nor based on the results of a good education. During Pol Pot's regime, the existing structures of education were abolished and although propaganda suggests there was some education for children, this appeared to be limited to such things as learning revolutionary songs (Chandler, 1991 256).

Access to education, effectively has created a gulf between the students and their parent's generation:

Some young people, they think that they have more knowledge than the older people. When the young people have more knowledge they do not support older people's ideas (Male 22).

Young people in society some of them don't respect their parents because they think they don't know anything or understand modern life. They follow other culture such as what they see on TV (Female 21).

Many of the young people interviewed considered that their parents' lack of knowledge caused them to undervalue education, especially for girls, leaving women behind and not treated as deserving of the same opportunities as boys. This had profound effects on the lives of the young people concerned:

Older people think that girls should not study. They think that when the girl has more education that the boys will not want to marry her. They also think that if the girl can write then she will be able to find a boyfriend and write letters to him and have love. They think that girls should do housework, and they cannot go outside and they cannot go and work in a factory (Female 23).

Some young people in the community lack the opportunity to continue to study. Parents don't allow them. Some want to study, they are clever in class, but they are not allowed. We talk to our friends, they are very upset if they cannot study and feel a little bit of jealousy, but they have to accept the situation (Male 23).

In one of the questions framing their interviews the young people asked the interviewees to describe how they thought their current life was different to that of their parents. Only two people talked (very briefly) about the hardships and trauma that their parents faced:

I have never met a difficult life, like they (my parents) did, I am happy every day. I have money (Male 22).

The difference now is peace and there is a lot of technology. Life is very modern and it is easy to do work (Male 23).

The remainder of the interviews focused on two key themes: access to education and access to technology and consumer goods.

The good thing about modern life is that it is easy to get every kind of information through technology. You can have communication around the world. You can study widely and have a comfortable living (Male 23).

We have computers, motor cycles, clothes like jeans (Female 20).

In most responses, consumer goods and access to technology were positioned as both highly desirable but also potentially dangerous and problematic. Respondents talked about their frustrations in obtaining access to the consumer goods that they wanted, as well as problems using and maintaining the technology with limited knowledge:

Computer, phone and TV and good things, but computers make life difficult because they are not easy (Male 21).

Technology makes life difficult, because we must pay for all these modern things (Female 22).

Access to the television and the Internet was also considered to be something which was changing people's tradition and culture. Access to the worldwide web has opened up the world beyond their immediate borders with many of the youth in the interviews wanting to embrace everything modern:

Nowadays foreigner culture flows into this country, so young people always follow this culture (Female 23).

Girls always want to look beautiful and always wear makeup, if they don't the boys don't think they look sexy because they look old fashioned. They get style from other countries, from USA, Korea. It is pretty, but I am worried about our culture. In 100 years maybe our culture will be lost (Female 23).

Young people's physical appearances were also presented in the media as being something that could and should be altered to achieve modernity and beauty. During Our workshops about young people discussions included the extreme lengths that some people would go to change their appearance, particularly lightening their skin through the use of creams or by peeling off layers of skin. The local media was full of stories of young women who had died as a result of using a particular skin whitening cream (allegedly imported from Vietnam). Local magazines (who use models with Western features) carry advertisements for such skin whitening remedies, which claim that their use will not only change your appearance, but also your life chances:

Imagine what life would be like for you if you could get that beautiful even-coloured white skin you seek and attract more handsome partners, get married faster, become an international model, find jobs easier, attract customer easier and earn the highest salaries because you so much look presentable (The Cambodian Herald, 2012).

They also carry advertisements for tools to lift and reduce the width of one's nose (the "nose up"). One of the researcher's western nose was frequently admired by young women, who said they would like surgery to obtain the same effect; however this was beyond the reach of all except media celebrities:

If I were rich, I would go and get my nose straightened, but I can only afford to get my hair coloured (Female 25).

5. Conclusion

Gangsters are prominent in young people's discourses about the problems in contemporary Cambodian society as seen by rural youth living in the countryside of Battambang. Their definition, however of gangsters is different from the more common notion of gangsters whose primary activity for being together is crime. The gangsters that were identified as a big problem by youth in the Battambang region were more of a youth movement or unique street group (White 2002) that were identified by their dress and open rebellion against traditional societal expectations.

Young people's discourses are, however, much more about the gangster as a metaphor for modernity which is achieved through diligent attention to identity construction and embracing of foreigner style and should be seen as part of a youth movement which challenges traditional roles and acceptable standards of behaviour and appearance. Gangsters are not alone in doing this; new identities are being forged through young people's embracing of emerging fashions and efforts to alter their physical appearances. Gangsters, however, are regarded in being more extreme in their pursuit of modernity because they have effectively severed their ties with the traditional structures of Cambodian life, notably the authority of the family.

The idea of the gangster appears to encapsulate many of the ambitions and tensions of young people in this province of Cambodia as they negotiate a myriad of modern global influences on their lives, including access to education, access to global issues / trends via technology, ability to purchase consumer goods, issues of style and identity and intergenerational tensions about the roles and values that are the traditionally expected of a Cambodian young person growing up in Battambang.

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