Living on the Margins: 
Minorities and Borderlines in Cambodia and Southeast Asia 
Peter J. Hammer

Important insights into Cambodian society can be gained by looking at the lives of those living on the margins. So I have learned by wrestling with the topic “Cambodia at the Margins: Minority Groups and Borders,” while serving as the Visiting Professor for the Fifth Session of the Center for Khmer Studies’ Capacity Building in Cambodian Higher Education Program supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. As the papers in this volume demonstrate, an appreciation of margins, minorities and borderlines teaches a number of object lessons, but it also suggests some enlightening methods of analysis. Margins identify fault lines, demarcating borders where powerful tectonic plates rub against each other, whether these plates represent conflicting social institutions or the forces of transcendent, but ill-defined processes like nation-building, economic development or globalization. Engaging the lives of real people caught on these margins can lead to new understandings of the often invisible forces shaping and reshaping Cambodia and the region.

This is not an easy journey. Notions of “margins,” “minorities” and “borders” are multilayered and enigmatic. But even concepts that appear more concrete upon first impression, such as a physical border or the idea of the nation-state itself seldom withstand closer scrutiny. For example, what is Cambodia? A country? A colored space depicted on a map? A people? An idea? Equally difficult problems arise from asking what it means to be Cambodian. How is it different, if at all, from what it means to be Khmer? The physical borders of Cambodia have shifted over time. In the first chapter of this volume, Ian Baird examines the Lao-Cambodian border, showing how arbitrary such line drawing exercises could be under French colonial administration. He then examines how changing physical boundaries affected the Brao People living on each side of the new border. This is not the only physical border of Cambodia that has shifted. With the redrawing of the line on the map between Cambodia and Vietnam in the Mekong delta, the Khmer of Khmer Kampuchea Krom went from being members of the dominant ethnic group in Cambodia, to being ethnic minorities in Vietnam, demonstrating how facile designations of majority/minority status can be.

Broader lessons can be drawn from these simple examples. Lines, line-drawing, colored shapes on a map take on meaning primarily in a political context. The international community too often takes the building block of the nation-state for granted, but it is important to remember that Cambodia did not exist as a modern
nation-state until 1953. Yet the Kingdom of Cambodia, with its echoes in the
Angkorian Empire, substantially pre-dates the 1648 signing of the Treaty of
Westphalia, which ostensibly marked the beginning of the modern international
age of nations. It is telling, however, nearly four centuries later, that we still
confront the reality of failed states and the perceived need to engage in nation-
building. Post-World War II theories of economic development have introduced the
parallel notion of market-building to accompany the objective of nation-building.
But how does one build an effective system of governance? How does one build an
effective market? What are the effects of nation-building and market-building on
the lives of people living on the margins?

While we might be rightfully skeptical of the notion of market- and state-
building, there is no doubt that markets and states exist and exert powerful
fields of influence. Moreover, something undeniably significant happens at the
boundaries of states and markets. Official documents and passports are needed to
legally cross national borders. With goods, tariffs are charged and customs must be
cleared. Yet legal frames provide, at best, only partial understandings. People and
goods cross borders illegally, as well. Political boundaries seldom correspond
to the boundaries of increasingly global economic markets. Moreover, the
multiple mismatches between political and economic borders invite predictable
opportunities for strategic behavior. Black markets are formed, goods are smuggled
and people migrate for higher wages. Poor people in Vietnam travel to Cambodia
for opportunities, while poor people in Cambodia migrate to Thailand in
search of better jobs. The potential for human agency is a constant in the face of any
externally imposed boundary. But human agency also has a darker side, as
problems of human trafficking and child sex tourism illustrate. These issues
constitute other problems for peoples living on the margins.

While physical borders are important, not all borders are physical. Distinctions
in class can establish differences more profound than any wall or fence. It is also
important to realize that every social institution is marked by its own borders and
boundaries. These borders define who is in and who is out; who belongs and who
does not; who is visible in the eyes of society and who is invisible. In traditional
Khmer society, for example, the divorced woman and the unwed mother are both
outside the construct of the traditional family and potentially outside the construct
of feminine virtue. Fear of transgressing the demands of family (and the absence of
alternative social institutions to provide surrogate functions for the support of the
traditional family) leaves many victims of domestic violence alone and isolated. The
borders defining family can leave people trapped outside, as well as in. Family
values, traditional gender roles and notions of sexual identity create their own
borders, rendering many gay men and lesbian women invisible and simply
nonexistent in Cambodian society. Street children may be outside the construct of family, as well as outside the construct of the bureaucratically defined education system, living on the margins of a changing economy. Returnees from refugee camps in the early 1990s, former Khmer Rouge soldiers and recent Cambodian deportees from the United States are outside the construct of the polity and notions of community. The disabled can fall outside the construct of what it means to be healthy, virtuous or respectable, particularly in a value system animated by Buddhist teachings of karma. There are economic borders as well. The landless, migrant workers and people with high debt burdens fall outside the construct of traditional patronage systems and the institutions of property and credit.

The concept of margins may be the most slippery notion of all. Just as borders have many different dimensions, so do margins. Margins can be geographic, political, economic, social or cultural. A margin can be an edge, merging into the notion of a border. But margins are seldom between co-equal parts. Living on the margin is living on the edge, pejoratively being marginal or marginalized. The margin is intrinsically a relational concept. To be at the margin, by definition, is to be removed from the center. The margin and the supposed center stand in opposition. To be at the margin is also to be on the losing end of power. To examine the lives of people living on the margins, therefore, is to focus on the most vulnerable and neglected members of society. To understand the many processes of marginalization, however, requires an understanding of the workings of authority, because it is the working of power and authority that create and define the margins in the first place. This is the perspective of Frederic Bourdier in this volume, who provides a thoughtful discussion of margins. Bourdier suggests the necessity of approaching margins in a dynamic sense as a process, not just as a static state or spacial location. Ian Baird makes a similar point in his discussion of borders, stressing the importance of human agency and the ability of boundaries to create “spaces of resistance.” Where there is action, there is also reaction. These perspectives suggest that power can reside on the side of the marginalized as well, and that margins can be sites of activism and change. Ironically, economists have a not dissimilar view. In economics, all of the action is at the margin. Economists study marginal costs and marginal rates of substitution. Equilibria are defined in terms of the equalization of marginal costs and marginal revenue. Margins are not simply dead ends. But this is not to suggest that margins are innocent or safe places. Without doubt, margins can be rife with danger for their inhabitants, and the dynamic processes defining them can be threatening.

One frame to approach people living on the margins is through theories of social exclusion – understanding marginalization as the systematic exclusion of people from important social institutions or social resources. There are many
important social constructs and institutions in Cambodia: the market, the state (political structures), the Party (CPP), the community or village, the education system, patronage networks, the traditional family, the construct of ethnicity, and the construction of gender roles and notions of sexual identity. We have already noted how social institutions have their own boundaries and margins. Framing problems in terms of social exclusion requires first defining the institution or construct at issue and then identifying its borders (margins). These borderlines are conceptual, not physical locations, and serve as demarcations of differences – who belongs and who does not belong? Who is on the inside and who is on the outside? Who is a member of the majority and who is a member of the minority? Most of these borders are fluid and contestable, calling for an understanding of the social, political, cultural and economic forces that cause these boundaries to shift and be altered over time. The exclusion can have both passive and active dimensions. Passive elements might simply be the withholding or denial of access to the resources that are necessary for survival and advancement. Active elements might reflect more direct forms of exploitation of vulnerable groups through trafficking, prostitution, child labor, eviction, land grabbing or political disenfranchisement.

Social exclusion was a dominant theme in the CKS Capacity Building Lectures for the Fifth Session. What is striking about Cambodia (and most of the so-called Third World) is how far removed every day Cambodian life and Cambodian institutions are from the hypothesized models of the western state and the western market. Cambodia is a rural, agricultural economy. In these rural communities, there is still only a limited role for markets and most social relations have not been substantially monetized. Here, the family remains the most important social institution. Patronage systems, not decentralized markets or competition, mediate access to most important economic resources. Similarly, traditional patronage systems, not neutral civil service norms or the rule of law, define access to political resources. In this world, personal relations matter. When relations matter, so does ethnicity, religion, family status, reputation and, above all, connections. In the CKS lectures, we examined the role that the ethnic Chinese historically played in the Cambodian economy and the role ethnicity plays today in determining access to economic resources. We explored the role of patronage, particularly how patronage systems historically serve important allocative functions that well-functioning state bureaucracies and markets aspire to displace. Land and land ownership are critical institutions in what is still predominantly a rural, peasant economy. The problem of increasing landlessness and limited forms of credit, therefore, can also be framed and understood in terms of economic and social exclusion. As people lose their land, or land is increasingly unavailable to the next generation, there is greater in-country migration from rural to urban areas. When jobs are unavailable in the
larger Cambodian cities and when wages are higher for comparable work in Thailand, a cascading effect of cross-border migration is triggered by people seeking access to gainful employment. The local, national and international quickly become connected by the inter-linkages of increasingly global markets.

The family always plays an important role in traditional societies, a role that becomes narrower and less important with the development of markets and state institutions. Cambodia has an unusual history. A combination of relatively low levels of population, relatively easy access to individual land ownership and very limited interference at the local level from a distant and anemic state, have all contributed to making the nuclear family the primary building block of Cambodian society. The family serves a broad range of personal, social and economic functions. In the lectures, we examined this traditional role, as well as the lives of those living on the margins of the family, margins that are becoming increasingly difficult in light of the stresses of a changing economy. Notions of marginalization and understanding the family as a complex social institution provide critical insights into contemporary social problems such as domestic violence, street children and the challenges facing gay, lesbian and transgendered persons (concepts themselves that take on important localized meanings in the Cambodian context).

Theories of social exclusion facilitate better understandings of the nature of institutions and the dynamic processes of marginalization. Better understandings, in turn, create new mental maps that can help actors envision more creative paths forward. People living on the margins are not helpless victims. Even the most vulnerable group has the ability to respond to the processes of marginalization in some fashion. One possibility is affirmatively to engage the political process to try and redefine the borders and barriers causing the exclusion. While possible, such action is never easy. Certain obstacles are endemic to political action on the margins. Action assumes a social identity that can engage in political discourse (sufficient visibility). Action assumes some awareness of the larger economic and political forces under way driving the processes of marginalization, such as the workings of global economic markets or the agendas of international aid agencies (awareness). Action also assumes sufficient cooperation within the group to permit effective collective action (cohesion). These elements may be lacking because the victims of marginalization are often isolated and disempowered, lacking any tradition or means of coordination. Some stories in Cambodia, however, are positive. Darren Zook examines how action is taking place amongst certain communities of disabled persons, and how their work can serve as a model for others. But Ed Green illustrates how other vulnerable groups remain invisible, like the men who have sex with men (MSM) in rural Indonesia. Self and group awareness in this setting is more difficult to establish. It is also worth remembering
that civic engagement and political activism are artifacts of the modern democratic state – often modern remedies for modern ills. Engaging the political process and seeking greater access to social resources may not be the answer to all problems of marginalization. Indigenous communities, for example, have historically been defined by their isolation from the polity, not their engagement with it. Autonomy may be a value as well as inclusion. Some groups do not seek greater assimilation, even on terms that preserve their culture. Many barriers stand in the way of the hill tribes using the same tactics as disabled persons, even assuming they want to do so.

Social exclusion and access to social resources are not the only frames through which to approach “Cambodia at the margins: Minority groups and borders.” As the International Conference held on March 14-15, 2007 in Siem Reap and the papers in this volume suggest, there are many creative and effective ways to approach this topic. A more complete collection of conference papers and PowerPoint presentations can be found by following links at the main CKS website (www.khmerstudies.org). The smaller number of papers selected for publication in this volume take approaches and address themes that are complementary to but in many ways quite different from those addressed in the CKS Lectures. The papers here are organized around three dominant themes: 1) Borderlines and Border Crossings; 2) Development and Indigenous Peoples: Targeting the Marginalized; and 3) Constructing Self and Others: Understandings Beyond Borders. These themes will be briefly outlined here, with slightly longer expositions at the beginning of each section.

The challenges facing indigenous communities constitute a central focus of this volume. The hill tribes in Cambodia account for only 1% of the total Cambodian population, but have always constituted the majority of those living in the remote northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri. The reader will be introduced to important aspects of the language, culture and beliefs of these peoples in the essays themselves. Suffice it to say here that these vernacular communities provide an enlightening foil not only to the ethnic Khmer that comprise the dominant ethnicity in Cambodia, but also to the external forces of western modernity that are reworking Cambodia and are now making their way into most remote reaches of the globe. But the lives of other people living on the margin are also examined in this volume. In addition to indigenous peoples in Cambodia and Southeast Asia, the reader is exposed to Muslim minorities living in Colonial Burma, the Cham of Cambodia, the struggles of people living with disabilities in Cambodia and the lives of men who have sex with men (MSM) in rural Indonesia. The following outlines the structure and themes of the volume:
Part One: Borderlines and Border Crossings

This section plays with the idea and meaning of borders and boundaries. Each paper involves indigenous communities, but each examines a radically different notion of borders and a very different example of a border crossing. Ian G. Baird, *Spaces of Resistance: The Ethnic Brao People and the International Border Between Laos and Cambodia*, is concerned with physical boundaries between nation states. He details the artificial way that the border between Cambodia and Laos was drawn and the impact that this external imposition has had on the Brao people, who lived in the area long before there were modern nation states and national borders. Robert Winzeler’s paper, *Religious Conversion on the Ethnic Margins of Southeast Asia*, deals with the religious beliefs and religious conversions of some indigenous peoples. Rather than physical spaces, the border here is between different belief systems. Crossing the border comes not in the form of passing from Cambodia to Laos, but in the form of changing sets of beliefs and ideas. These borders are every bit as contentious as those guarded by nation states. Brigitte Nikles, *Women, Pregnancy and Health: Traditional Midwives among the Bunong in Mondulkiri, Cambodia*, provides the third perspective on borderlines and border crossing. At one level, the paper provides insights into the Bunong People’s understanding of the universal human crossing represented in the act of giving birth. At another level, the paper, like Winzeler’s, is about battle lines between competing belief systems – modern understandings of health and medicine under the umbrella of an expanding public health system, and traditional understandings of the sources of health and community well-being. Each paper gives the reader a deepening understanding of the lives and beliefs of members of these indigenous communities, while creatively challenging our understandings of borders and boundaries.

Part Two: Development and Indigenous Communities: Targeting the Marginalized

The crusade for “economic development” is the defining ethos of the modern age. This section provides a comprehensive assessment of the problems that development is raising for indigenous communities. Jeremy Ironside, *Development – In Whose Name? Cambodia’s Economic Development and its Indigenous Communities – From Self-Reliance to Uncertainty*, gives the reader an overview of Cambodia’s recent strategies for economic development and the negative impacts these efforts are having on indigenous communities. As the title suggests, he argues that traditional practices have historically afforded these communities a substantial amount of self-reliance. After all, these groups have survived for centuries on their own. While the stated aims of economic development are to increase security (food, income and social), the effect of disrupting traditional practices is often to increase
the uncertainty and insecurity facing these people. Margherita Maffii, *Changes in Gender Roles and Women's Status among Indigenous Communities in Cambodia's Northeast*, continues the theme of assessing economic development but focuses on the lives of women and changing gender roles. Relying on first person narratives, Maffii provides real insight into these women's lives and challenges, giving voice to those living on the margins. Peter J. Hammer, *Development as Tragedy: The Asian Development Bank and Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia*, frames the issue of economic development as a conflict between competing worldviews. The paper dissects two Asian Development Bank reports about indigenous peoples to reveal what Hammer argues are the mistaken beliefs driving the tragedy of modern economic development. Frédéric Bourdier, *When the Margins Turn Toward an Object of Desire: Segregation and Inclusion of Indigenous Peoples in Northeast Cambodia*, concludes the section with a thoughtful meditation on the impact of development on the belief systems of indigenous communities. He highlights the dangerous and subtle ways that external interventions can undermine traditional belief systems, but cautions against the naiveté of simply embracing isolation and segregation as appropriate responses.

**Part Three: Constructing Self and Others: Understandings Beyond Borders**

The last section returns to the notion of borders and margins, but this time from a perspective of identity – the construction of self and others. It also looks at questions of social inclusion and exclusion in the context of modern nation-building and civic engagement. Stefan Ehrentraut, *Minorities, the State, and the International Community in Cambodia: Towards Liberal Multiculturalism?*, is a bridge paper. It connects indigenous peoples as minorities in Cambodia with Cambodia's other ethnic communities. It also connects the discussion of targeting indigenous peoples for development with the broader issues of nation-building and the role of international law in affording protection for the rights of indigenous peoples. The next two papers examine how religion can act as a marker for minority status and potential marginalization. Stephen L. Keck, *The Making of an Invisible Minority: Muslims in Colonial Burma*, takes an historical look at how Muslims were treated in Colonial Burma. The paper underscores the theme that “invisibility” and lack of social recognition within the governing polity are important aspects of being marginalized. To act, a group must first be visible. Allen Stoddard, *The Cham Muslims of Cambodia: Defining Islam Today and the Validity of the Discourse of Syncretism*, examines questions of religious identity, religious belief and how belief systems change and evolve over time. The Cham simultaneously struggle with issues of self-definition as a minority group within the borders of Cambodia, as
well as with defining their understanding of Islam within the international Islamic community. Zook and Green examine the lives of other groups living on the margins – people with disabilities and men who have sex with men (MSM). Darren C. Zook, *Disability, Democracy, and the Politics of Civic Engagement in Cambodia*, details how people on the margins can engage social processes in a manner that can redefine the location and meaning of the boundaries that define them. Using narratives similar to Maffii’s approach to indigenous women, Ed Green, *The Important Forgotten – Men Living in Rural Indonesia Who Have Sex With Men: The Implications for HIV Education*, provides important insights into the MSM community. The paper explores how these men navigate the borders created by understandings of family, religion and sexual identity in rural Indonesia.

All the papers in this collection were written as stand-alone responses to the Conference topic, “Minority Groups and Borders: Cambodia and Southeast Asia at the Margins.” They can be read alone or in different combinations according to the reader’s interests and inclinations. Collectively and serially, however, the papers provide a sustained meditation on the themes of margins, minorities and borderlines. This volume also illustrates how an appreciation of the lives of those living on the margin can sometimes hold the key to understanding the profound yet often invisible forces shaping our world. Creative destruction may be the mediating force of economic markets, but it leaves new margins and new problems in its wake.

This volume provides other insights as well. This volume is a window into the Conference, which itself is a window to the Capacity Building in Cambodian Higher Education Program, which is a window into the broader work of the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS). CKS’s mission is to promote research, teaching and public service in the social sciences, arts and humanities as they relate to Cambodia. This volume and the work of the Capacity Building in Higher Education Program would not be possible without the generous support of the Rockefeller Foundation. It would also not be possible without the hard work and leadership of Chean Men, Director of the Capacity Building Program, and Philippe Peycam, director of CKS. Speaking on behalf of the other contributors to this project, we are grateful for their efforts and support.