

Considerations on Asian values & Western democracy For a better Khmer society

by
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1. Introduction

For ten years, since the end of the Cold War, a new situation is becoming more and more acute: the phenomenon of globalization and the strength of liberal capitalism based on material values to the detriment of human ones. The development of multiple poles in the framework of the international relationships could favor more solidarity and a tightening of the bonds between peoples, particularly those excluded from the dominant system. But it seems unstable as the holders of progress and economic power benefit more than ever from real efficient and harmful dominate strength that spreads all over the world. Confronted with such a perspective, humanity must be conscious of the need to change and to base this evolution on the inherent values in each society. Only this can provide an appropriate alternative to imperialist attempts and favor a spread of human values facilitating the fulfillment of fairer, more equal and more fraternal societies.

After having expressed my views about globalization and its foreseeable consequences, I will try to define which values we can rely on in order to, in the third place, consider new alternatives in Cambodia allowing the development of a better society.

2. Globalization and its Social and Economic Consequences

Present unrestrained **globalization** is not a new phenomenon. What is new is its universality and totality. It originates in the spread of commerce which had inspired colonial rule, the industrial revolution and the technological boost. In this process Southern States were prevented from becoming integrated societies and nation-states. Any development was prevented by colonial rule as well as, once independence was obtained, by the confrontation between the West and the East. Since the fall of the Berlin wall, liberal capitalism remains the only reigning model and impedes any really human development.

In the context of globalization, systematic priority to as much profit as possible and the States' decline in regulating the economy lead to increasing inequalities. Foreign groups' activities bloom in the territory of countries with weak economies which have to bear

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constraints coming from external decisions which they can not bring under control. Last but not least, they are induced to refer to values and cultural elements both irresistibly attractive and favoring a loss of their power. Moreover, as these values do not take men into account and do not correspond to the inner nature of the societies in which they are imposed, they are a source of dysfunctions which provoke long-lasting troubles.

The stimulation of globalization on trade is real and favors an unprecedented increase of wealth on a world-wide scale. But this additional wealth is not equitably distributed and results in an incredible increase of inequalities within and between societies. To respond to immediate and maximal profitability needs, the exploitation of soils, forests and seas seems to have become a looting with worrying consequences on the environment.

In the 90's, a so-called "Asian miracle" helped to justify the validity of the liberal theses. Disillusionment was as strong as expectations had been. Some Asian countries indeed benefited from an impressive growth, but it was widely dependent on foreign capital which concentrated much more on speculative activities than on useful investments, i.e. on businesses and services likely to create employment and collective wealth. Thus, the banking crisis, the bankruptcies and the subsequent thousands of people made redundant resulted from an uncontrolled economic growth not regulated by a political power, in the context of globalization.

Priority to economy in comparison with all the other segments of society is also a present-day characteristic. A human being can not only be considered according to its capacity to produce or to consume, nor a society according to its economy. There is a strong lack of ideal in such a practice. Even culture has become a mere merchandise. Which values do then remain in human existence? *Isn't human freedom assimilated to free trade a much too narrow approach to this concept?*

We can not deny the technological evolution and the current world-wide phenomenon and its consequences. They will induce an unavoidable renewal of our societies' ways of living and organization. It is then urgent to develop an ethical reflection about what we want our societies to become. All programs or actions should be centered prioritarily on the human being. *Development can only be conceived as a way to facilitate human development, with the help of men and for them.* Economic growth is only one of the means to achieve real human development which also requires political, social and cultural emancipation as well as spirituality.

To do so, the States should be given the means to favor such equilibrium. A reflection is needed about the ways to rule so that the State is not a "police state", a "welfare state" or in charge of everything, but a guarantor for the accomplishment of *a long-term vision* and anxious to favor internal *equilibrium of society and men's development*.

3. Asian Values and Western World

In this process, it is of paramount importance to find support in the inner values of each civilization. As far as Asia is concerned, it is fashionable to speak of "Asian values". Many people, particularly Westerners, understand it as a mere political concept elaborated to justify an authoritarian way of ruling. Anyway, no one can deny our

societies' own characteristics, genius and distinctiveness. They must be taken into account for Asian societies not to be swallowed by an all-powerful materialism which will inevitably lead to decline, crisis and conflict. *To go safely towards modernity, a society must be firmly rooted in its traditional values.* Not to link these two elements generates dysfunction and often leads to uncontrolled returns to the past as it happened in Cambodia or in Iran. *The attempts to define Asian values are part of our quest of a way of living both modern and coherent with their traditions.*

No doubt they are also a natural response to Western attitude up to now. For centuries, Westerners tried to impose their values as universal to assert their hegemony and economic growth. The main features of the colonization in South America were the massacre of local populations and the looting of their treasures. Later on, great trade companies favored the establishment of trading posts in Africa and Asia. The real spread of colonization occurred in the 19th century when European powers devoted their efforts to military conquest of remote territories and favored the settlement of their nationals. The main feeling then was not anymore the one which had prevailed in the 18th century, the naive ideal of the good savage. Societies of remote territories were then considered as "inferior" and non-civilized. European powers therefore considered they had a mission which was entitling them to rule over colonies, to instruct them in Western culture and, quite often, to convert them. The contempt for local values justified the imposition of a *Western cultural model* which is still considered as superior in most Westerners' minds, as well as in the minds of local elite trained according to Western principles. This is a major cause of today's difficulties in Southern countries. This was perpetuated, once independence was achieved, in the context of the Cold War. Most local rulers only won power through their loyalty to one side or the other, often backing dictators and creating zones of influence such as NATO, SEATO or Warsaw Pact. This phenomenon now goes on in the context of an imperialist economy based on globalization. Thus, whatever the reality it covers, the same kind of hegemony is perpetuated. Now, commercial supremacy tends to become financial and is decisive in the intolerable growth of inequalities and cultural leveling down. The Western world also tries to justify its attitude through the poor pretexts of freedom and human rights. What hopes do poor people have today? To have a handphone or buy a gadget? All this adds more confusion in the Asian world and is a severe brake on all social cohesion.

How can the Asian societies pass from the globalization of material values to **a more human approach?**

I envision a new mankind based on every society's inherent values and in which man is the center of all interests. In Asian societies, each man's dualism is emphasized: strong and weak, rich and poor, masculine and feminine, individual and member of a group, joyful and sad, creative and destructive. *Complementarity, harmony between these various elements* is the cornerstone of Asian values. However, it seems this equilibrium based on human values is neglected. To allow such harmony and more equity, more place must be given to spirituality, the most restraining element to avoid the violence Asian societies have to face every time the equilibrium is broken. The Buddhist middle way, the Confucianism equitability, the "Yin" and the "Yang", the Khmer complementarity between the "Me" and the "Ba" elements must be given due importance in order to counterattack the present perversion of human values.

4. Asia and Social-Democracy

Up to now, mainly two ideologies have been experienced: liberal capitalism and materialist socialism. What new way can we conceive between those two?

Capitalism gives priority to individual freedom at the expense of real human needs and elaborates strategies on widely mystified slogans: liberal economy, human rights, liberal democracy. Its final consequences, however, are a power concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority and a constant worsening of social and economic inequalities. Let us not forget it often justifies harsh repression, harmful embargoes or the support of totalitarian regimes.

Historical materialism galvanizes the system into the "class struggle", is expressed through collectivism and is based on democratic centralism. In the end, it effectively constitutes a totalitarian ruling apparatus which prevents any form of initiative. The heaviness of the system, the proletarian dictatorship through a single party and its human consequences finally lead to the erosion and breakdown of the system.

Neither alternative is favorable to human development. A new one has to be researched. The non-aligned movement was such an attempt. More alternatives exist according to each society's specificities and genius. In this process, many European countries conceived a compromise between the "all State" and the "all private" commonly called "**Social-democracy**".

It appeared during the second half of the 19th century and is originally linked to socialism. Social democracy rapidly differentiated itself from socialism in the Baltic peninsula, and some decades later in Western Europe. Its essential aim consists in constantly improving the level of life in the framework of a liberal society regulated by the State through a more or less long process. It is an answer to a more and more increasing aspiration to have a fairer, more equal and more human society. In Europe, this movement is still trying to find its terms of reference. The young generation, as a reaction against globalization and materialism, is acting in favor of a return to more socialist values. At the time of these ideological interrogations and attempts to get adapted to the modern world, they will no doubt cause some crises, to develop a dialogue with Southern countries is an action innovative and full of hope. This symposium is a unique opportunity to undertake a dialogue between Asia and Europe to conceive a way that would allow both sides to give an answer to globalization and materialism according to their own specific problems. As the two models appear not to be adapted to favor a human development, it wouldn't be wise to go on practicing pure capitalism or to go back to socialist practices. Other solutions have to be conceived, adapted to the modern world and concentrating all their efforts on its *humanization*.

Social-democracy is a middle way more closely linked to realities and to human beings. It has been up to now developed in the Western world. We then have to wonder on which foundations Western societies lie that differ from the ones of Eastern societies. What matters in the West is the present, what one effectively lives during his present life. On the contrary, in Asian societies, priority is given to transcendental evolution. It can be noticed in religion as Asians believe in reincarnation. This leads to different reactions

when confronted with adversity. When Westerners need to express themselves, to *externalize* their feelings, to strongly demand their rights, Asians have a much more *internal* approach. For example, Buddhist meditation allows internal liberation. There are no such needs as in the West to shout demands. Such a characteristic favors non-violence and is embodied in Mahatma Gandhi.

Obsessed by the Western myth, most Asian countries have not yet taken advantage to the numerous resources offered by their civilizations in the quest for solutions adapted to present problems and many do not resist the materialist lure. Japan could have been a good source of inspiration for social-democrats. It is indeed at the same time a country in which leaders are elected and where all the society seems to be unified to ensure minimum equity among its members. This success is associated with a strong, closed regime and a society difficult to integrate into the modern world. No real Asian ways can be clearly noticed when the Western world takes over Asian behavior through the spread of Asian religions and ideologies.

5. For a Cambodian better Society

As far as Cambodia is concerned, several tentatives were made in this sense, but, they remained at the stage of more or less confused speeches without the possibility to structure themselves in a global conception corresponding to Cambodia's real needs. I would like to give some of my own ideas about what the Cambodian problem is. These ideas are expressed personally.

All civilizations have their own permanent features. Whatever the political regime, they always remain present. As its rhythm is punctuated by the dry and the rainy seasons, Khmer civilization established itself on a principle based on the combination of water (feminine element - "Me") and the earth (masculine element - "Ba"). The combination of water and earth then structures the Khmer mentality and beliefs ranging from the cosmological dimension of the royal power to the most common day-to-day habits. The best representation of their complementary aspects lies in the totemic Naga reptile, both male and female, living under ground or in the water, serving as symbol of immortality thanks to the cyclical sloughing of its skin.

Cambodia is basically structured around community life. Its beliefs are based on the Neak Ta, spirits associated to a territory ("Srok"). The passage from the inner community structure to the State form occurred thanks to the appropriation of the Indian model. Cambodia passed from a social organization based on community to another based on a much more wider scale, from the Srok to the empire, from the *Neak Ta* to the *Devaraja* ("God King"). Hinduism helped the political and religious functions to remain over the same class, recreating a kind of cast system. The spread of the Angkorian empire from the 9th century caused a disequilibrium in the structural dualism. The dominant element was becoming too important. Nevertheless, a complementarity was established between the urban political sphere and the agrarian social one. The city took possession of the rural areas, that is the whole empire, but assumed a double role towards them that allowed to reestablish the equilibrium. One of this role was maternal ("Me"): making stocks, protecting, exchanging goods and giving back part of it to rural areas. The other one was paternal ("Ba"): holding power, ruling, supervising, organizing agriculture

through great hydraulic works. The Angkorian space was then in accordance with the Khmer Srok. When this equilibrium was broken in favor of the dominant element, "Ba", as under the rule of Suryavarman II, the subsequent destabilization led to the sack of Angkor by the Cham people in 1177. An equilibrium was only restored when Jayavarman VII introduced the egalitarian principle of Buddhism. It created a new dynamics allowing to reestablish social bonds. The suffering of the people became the suffering of the Buddha King (*Buddharaja*) and not the contrary. The dominant element had become again "Me", and "Ba" at the same time, in accordance to Khmer traditional complementarity. Later, this complementarity was lost again through the introduction of external elements within Khmer political power: numerous foreigners were advisers to the Khmer kings before the colonial rule which perfected the disequilibrium. For example, although the feminine element is of major importance in Khmer culture, laws imposed by France made official woman inferior. This Me/Ba principle reversal was one of the perturbing factors creating disorders within, and then the burst of the social structure.

After the independence, Khmer rulers didn't manage to reestablish an equilibrium. On the contrary, it was stressed even more and resulted in the events we all know. Conflicts, great economic difficulties, lack of external assistance and the sudden massive arrival of Western influence in Cambodia favored an even more important break of Khmer fundamental balances at the level of the State, at the level of its organic elements (the ones who were managing the society have disappeared) and at the community level (people were displaced, territories modified, families broken apart, break of generation systematically organized). Cambodia has then experienced a disastrous period during which social bonds were severely affected. Social disparities are increasing because of the development of a wild capitalism which strengthens the harmful phenomenon of acculturation as the Khmer people, not yet asserted in their identity, are not ready to welcome the Westerners' cultural elements. In fact, they presently favor the disappearance of human values in Cambodia.

This situation also results from the disconnection between the Cambodian elite, always attracted by the dominant foreign civilization and even more since the time of French colonization, and a popular mass, very conservative and needing a quite long time to evaluate. There are two disconnected societies, one of which, representing a tiny minority and inspired by foreign concepts, holds all the power. This situation reveals a loss of equilibrium and weakens the whole society.

Those phenomena lead to a total confusion affecting the whole kingdom which lacks of references and roots to assimilate the past, skilled working forces to manage the present time and means to go towards modernity, i.e. the future.

An answer could be formulated to address these deep-rooted problems through an appropriate global strategy conceived in accordance with Khmer specific history and favoring a modern management of identity at the same time. A new structure has to be established around Me/Ba dualism principle. The regulating process can be undertaken through the following global actions:

- *An appropriate nationwide education policy that requires a total overhaul of the present system;*
- *A Khmerization of imported cultural, economic and scientific systems;*
- *An economic policy conceived to favor social integration and a rapid revival of community in accordance with Khmer inner principles and the human values of progress, justice and solidarity;*
- *A policy of social integration favoring national and local identities;*
- *Development of an international co-operation to develop the above-mentioned ideal in the respect of national specificities and mutual understanding fostering a spirit of peace.*

To do so, there are some positive features in the Khmer society which can be the base of a social rehabilitation. Social energies are still existing, e. g.:

- *Revitalization of the monastery and various belief systems role;*
- *Reactualization of non-formal education at the community level;*
- *Survival of all the rites related to the passage from one state to another (wedding, burying, etc.) and revival of local substrates;*
- *Strength of the community socio-economical and self-help systems.*

To undertake an over-all program adapted to Cambodia, the social actors able to support it must be clearly identified: acarya, monks, wise men and village teachers as well as new social institutions adapted to present realities. Create a new social actor seems necessary to help a revival and modernization of community life. The following objectives could be made:

- *Revive the community life and create a new moral institution;*
- *Create alternative activities, particularly to young people through technical teaching;*
- *Introduce the concept of democracy at the community level thanks to a community running of this new institution associated to modern management;*
- *Ensure a smooth passage to modernity.*

This program implementation could be a unique intent to achieve a human development which really relies on the support of the people it has to benefit in the first place and could be enriching and instructive for other regions sharing common characteristics with Cambodia.