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# Media Ruins

## Cambodian Postwar Media Reconstruction and the Geopolitics of Technology

By: Margaret Jack

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## INFRASTRUCTURAL HISTORY: AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA IN THE SANGKUM REASTR NIYUM (1955–1970)

In *Rose of Bokor* (1969), Norodom Sihanouk, then the head of state of Cambodia, plays a Japanese general who, in 1945, took over Bokor Mountain, a Cambodian hill town and French colonial base.<sup>1</sup> The film depicts Cambodian villagers declaring independence shortly after the new occupation. Meanwhile, Sihanouk's character falls in love with Rose, a wealthy Cambodian female farmer, played by Sihanouk's wife Monique Izzi. Sihanouk's character tells Rose that he has "always loved the arts more than the martial arts." Through the film, Sihanouk establishes his version of Cambodia: an idyllic place with glorious natural beauty and the wonders of Angkor but one that always seems to be stuck in the middle of troublesome international politics. In the film, the Japanese ultimately lose the war, the French crush the Cambodian independence movement, and Sihanouk's character commits suicide. Lady Monique's character concludes the film by saying, "What a terrible thing, we are very unlucky."

One of the most puzzling things about *Rose of Bokor* is Sihanouk's very attention to it in late 1969. Why would Sihanouk, head of state of Cambodia, focus on making a historical entertainment film rather than addressing the mounting pressures coming from both inside and outside his country? To answer this question, in this chapter, I analyze the push and pull between Sihanouk's regime and foreign powers, particularly the United States, in building audiovisual media infrastructure in the early postcolonial period, and how these technologies circulated within Cambodia. I show audiovisual media have an air of magic and a power of persuasiveness that have given them a central place in the lives and politics of Cambodian political elites, urban and rural poor, and foreign powers for the last sixty-five years.

My first argument in this chapter is a straightforward historical type. I argue that the investment of the USIS in film and radio between 1955

and 1963 strengthened and supported national audiovisual media infrastructures that then were deployed to undergird Sihanouk's state power. The USIS stationed in Phnom Penh intervened in Cambodian domestic affairs by importing radio and film technologies, training Cambodian Ministry of Information staff about the use and repair of equipment, and disseminating film and radio widely through provinces. The newly independent state at first accepted these audiovisual infrastructures as a part of the goal to improve national media. Struggles for control over film and radio infrastructures, however, were a significant factor in the disintegration of US-Cambodian relations at the end of 1963 (finalized in 1965). In the 1964–1970 period, these media infrastructures became critical elements in Sihanouk's strategy for authoritarian rule. Sihanouk and his staff used audiovisual media equipment as tools for state power. They tightly controlled radio and film technologies as they became increasingly important parts of his ruling strategy.

My second argument concerns the value of an infrastructural methodology and analysis in a history of media, which opens up media history to insights around materiality, work, and relationality.<sup>2</sup> I analyze early postcolonial media with a particular eye to its history of devices: radios, transmitters, boats, screens, and reels, emphasizing that media can be understood not only through content but also through form.<sup>3</sup> Media experiences during this period were largely ephemeral and existed in radio waves and transient mobile cinemas. I perused the archival record for images and descriptions of devices in order to recreate these scenes and give a sense of the material conditions under which independent media creators could produce new content and the ways that average Cambodians gained access to media forms.

When I move to stories of reconstruction in later chapters, the media products that most of the actors restore come from the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period, now often described as a cultural “golden age.” This chapter gives the critical context for this reconstruction and shows that the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period might not have been as rosy as later media producers often make it out to be, who see it through the lens of what happened later, that is, the devastation of the Khmer Rouge. This period, in reality, involved vast amounts of inequality, foreign interference, and authoritarian rule, making it an economic and geopolitical context not wholly dissimilar to Cambodia in 2017. The media creators who made

innovative art during this period did so often by co-opting or working around these conditions in a way that foreshadows contemporary media production.

In this chapter, the components of media infrastructure that I pay closest attention to include media spaces (areas of collective listening and watching), the training of media specialists, the travel of technicians in and out of the country, and the movement of film and radio equipment from foreign countries to Cambodia (and sometimes back) and from urban to rural areas within Cambodia. I often describe in some detail the material qualities of media—specifics of technical models, where technologies came from, how they spread around Cambodia, and how they deteriorated in Cambodia—to show that transnational and national negotiations happened by and with material things as well as with ideas. I also consider the legal regulations for media; for example, in what moments and under what conditions were certain foreign influences or internal dissonance accepted or violently cut off?

Taking this approach, I focus less on the content of media and the give-and-takes between media content and social norms than some histories of media do. An infrastructural media history provides a new set of insights about the role of media in society and politics. It emphasizes the relationality, transferability, and movement of media and the tangible and finite materiality of that circulation. It allows us to see the conditions of possibility for independent artists to appropriate media tools (often first used by imperial or authoritarian powers) in new ways, or for people far from centers of power and wealth to appreciate the products of these tools. Infrastructure contributed to both the common experience and mechanisms for control of media during this period.

I proceed in three sections. In the first section, I move into my historical argumentation and I tell the radio and film history of Cambodia from the end of the colonial period through the breaking of economic ties with the United States in late 1963. In the second section, I describe radio infrastructure in 1963 to 1970, focusing on Sihanouk's attempt to control radio waves in remote and border regions of the country. In the third section, I focus on film infrastructure from 1963 to 1970, outlining the ways that national cinema, foreign technologies and techniques, and independent filmmakers intersected and how Sihanouk manipulated media through film censorship and investment in his own films. I conclude by revealing how the history

of radio and film infrastructures in Cambodia opened up an environment for independent radio and film artists to create innovative content within the bounds of Sihanouk's regime.

My sources in this chapter primarily come from the National Museum of Cambodia and the National Archives of Cambodia. At the National Museum, I reviewed the papers of Ingrid Muan, an American art historian who made copies of many USIS documents from the US National Archive and tragically died in 2004. I reviewed all documentation in the National Archives of Cambodia about radio, television, and cinema, their collection of telecom documents (mostly government documents and speeches), and their entire collection of *Réalités cambodgiennes*, a popular French-language weekly magazine that ran during the Sangkum period and was overseen by the Sihanouk government (1965–1970).<sup>4</sup> I also reviewed scholarship from the late 1950s Cambodia, focusing particularly on descriptions of media use. I scanned historical documents with a particular eye to seeking out descriptions and images of media's form (rather than simply media content); for example, I looked for descriptions and mentions of electronic devices, towers, and cables and images of televisions, mobile cinemas, and radios. These often had to be dug for and were often found within news clippings, in memoirs, in advertisements, or in magazines. Sihanouk's films themselves (such as the *Rose of Bokor*) also played a role as primary sources.

The challenges of any historical research in Cambodia are nontrivial; the archival record in (nearly) all of the archives I visited was scattered. During the Khmer Rouge period, many documents were neglected or targeted for destruction. Sometimes I fell upon certain collections by chance or through an unusual search term; I also got tips for key collections from fellow researchers.<sup>5</sup> In addition to archival research, I also found some primary materials online. The Southeast Asia digital library, for example, has visual repositories including May Ebihara's images.

This is a story constructed largely by elite sources (foreign or domestic), but I argue that by taking the infrastructural approach described above, we can still understand the ways that media mattered to many people in Cambodia during this period. Cambodia has many archival gaps due to the destruction of sources by the Khmer Rouge regime and low literacy levels during the Cold War period, limiting the availability of documentation produced about, let alone by, many Cambodians. Undoubtedly, media had a limited audience due to cost prohibitions for products like radios

and batteries; environmental destruction of equipment from heat, dust, and humidity; lack of electricity in large sections of the country; failures of language translation; and the urban location of cinemas.

These conditions also led to specific radio and film cultures in Cambodia. For example, because of Cambodia's economic limitations in the Cold War period, USIS made mobile cinemas; villagers developed the practice of sharing radios; loudspeakers in key public spaces enabled larger numbers to hear broadcasts in provincial towns; and other accommodations were made. As a consequence, audiovisual media reached many Cambodians in the countryside and in provincial towns. Outlining this history below helps us get a sense of how media technologies were received, thought about, and used in innovative ways. It also provides context for why media technologies were seen as so important to control of the country. This history also gives us a deeper sense of the constraints and possibilities for Cambodian radio artists and filmmakers during this period (particularly after 1963), and shows the conditions under which they were able to create new kinds of films and radio content, despite the censorship and control of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period.

## 1 RADIO AND FILM INFRASTRUCTURES UNTIL 1963

Cambodia was part of French Indochina from 1863 to 1953, but audiovisual media were never a focus of French colonizers, who refused to develop its infrastructure until the World War II and early independence period.<sup>6</sup> The first large-scale radio project in Indochina began when the station "Radio Saigon" started in 1939 under the government direction of Governor-General Jean Decoux of Vichy France.<sup>7</sup> In that year, the French government also ruled that all French and Cambodians in Cambodia who wanted to own a radio needed to be registered. These licenses authorized people to have a radio for receiving communications but did not allow them to transmit correspondence.<sup>8</sup> Radio Saigon broadcast in French, which meant it had limited relevance to Khmer-speaking people in Cambodia. As in other sectors of the colonial government, the French invested much more in Vietnamese than Cambodian radio infrastructure, and Radio Saigon covered issues related to Vietnam but rarely Cambodia.<sup>9</sup>

In 1941, during World War II and early Cambodian struggles for independence, King Sisowath Monivong died. Though Monivong's son Sisowath

Monireth was the heir to the throne, the French authorities chose his grandson, nineteen-year-old Norodom Sihanouk, to be Cambodia's next king because they expected him to be easier to work with.<sup>10</sup> Sihanouk was reportedly timid in the role at first. However, during the Japanese occupation in March 1945, Sihanouk briefly declared Cambodia independent, changing its name from Cambodge to Kampuchea and invalidating Franco-Cambodian agreements (as dramatized by the villagers rising up in *Rose of Bokor*). But in October 1945, after the end of the war, Sihanouk reopened negotiations with the French and signed an (albeit weaker) *modus vivendi* to reestablish Cambodia as part of French Indochina in early 1946.

This moment marked the beginning of the phaseout of French rule and the growth of the political role of radio in Indochina. The French realized the potential threat of independent radio voices and developed a newfound interest and investment in radio infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> This French investment, however, came too late and was ultimately unsuccessful. In 1949, Sihanouk negotiated an agreement in which Cambodia received some autonomy for military and foreign affairs, which he called gaining "fifty percent" of Cambodia's independence. On April 13, 1950, Radio Saigon became Radio France-Asia in Saigon, and other radio broadcasting in Indochina became the responsibility of the individual states. In July 1950, the Cambodian government took over "Radio Cambodge" in Phnom Penh from French management.<sup>12</sup>

Along with taking over control of the national radio, Sihanouk also started a national film unit. Sihanouk was reportedly interested in film from an early age when his parents taught him to "love romanticism," including the cinema.<sup>13</sup> He created the Office of Film within the Ministry of Information in 1951, during the transition from French to Cambodian rule. At this time there was already a vibrant cinema culture in urban Cambodia, with thirteen cinemas total in the country (ten of them in Phnom Penh, three in provincial capitals). French investors financed eight of the theaters and Chinese investors financed the other five. Each had a 35-mm projector and ten also had a 16-mm projector imported from outside the country.<sup>14</sup> Their total seating capacity was over 5,000, with a combined annual audience estimated at 1.5 million; the cinemas were reported "to be packed at almost every showing."<sup>15</sup> Programs usually consisted of a feature, a news-reel, and a documentary or a cartoon.<sup>16</sup> Films were all imported, however, and were in foreign languages. Some had Cambodian subtitles, but since

many Cambodians did not know how to read, these were of limited utility. Some films had live translators at the front of the theater as was common in the Southeast Asian region at this time.<sup>17</sup> Despite some difficulties understanding the language of the films, they exposed Cambodians to scenes of life in places like India, the United States, and Hong Kong.

Sihanouk recognized the power of media and used it not just for entertainment but also for persuasion. His negotiation for independence in 1953 was dramatic, and it was the first time that he demonstrated his abilities to use and manipulate media for his own ends. In January 1953, Sihanouk dissolved the National Assembly and declared martial law. He traveled to France, saying he needed to visit the country "for his health." He wrote to the French president, Vincent Auriol, and argued that though *he* was loyal to France, he could not guarantee the loyalty of his citizens. Auriol told him to go home. On the way back to Cambodia, Sihanouk traveled to and gave radio interviews to stations in Canada, the United States, and Japan, criticizing the French. He continued to travel internationally and criticize the French for the rest of the year on international television, radio, and newspapers until they essentially gave into his demands, granting Cambodia full independence in November 1953.<sup>18</sup>

During the period of Sihanouk's fight for and then establishment of independence, the United States became actively involved in Indochinese politics and audiovisual media infrastructure. The USIS began in the early days of the Cold War to work around the world to fight the threat of advancing communism with a cultural war promoting American media and creating local anticommunist propaganda.<sup>19</sup> Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, was an early site for this new war and the USIS started to invest heavily in film, radio, and other propaganda materials to "win hearts and minds" for the anticommunist cause.<sup>20</sup>

Beginning in 1950, the USIS took advantage of the limited media infrastructures and the weak involvement of the French in Indochina as an opportunity for the United States to build its influence and fight the communist influence there through audiovisual channels.<sup>21</sup> Between 1950 and 1955, the USIS started supplying goods to the Cambodian government, including mobile units for disseminating films, a printing plant, a photographic laboratory, a radio transmitter and receivers, tape recorders, and public address systems.<sup>22</sup> Like the French during the colonial era, the Americans at first focused their work in Vietnam, making Saigon their



base. As of November 15, 1950, Radio Cambodge started to rebroadcast the USIS-sponsored Voice of America (VOA) programs in English, French, and Vietnamese—but not Khmer.<sup>23</sup> A 1950 USIS telegram from Saigon to Washington explained that Cambodians were upset at how the VOA sometimes confused the differences between Cambodia and Vietnam.<sup>24</sup>

The political landscape changed in early 1955, when Sihanouk abdicated the throne and reentered the political realm as a private citizen to run for president as the representative of his party “Sangkum Reastr Niyum” or “community of the common people.” His father Norodom Suramit took over the role of king. Sihanouk rigged the September 1955 general election by, among other forms of intimidation, shutting down opposition newspapers. Unsurprisingly, given the questionable legitimacy of the election, Sihanouk’s party officially won in 1955.<sup>25</sup> Between 1955 and 1970, Sihanouk and his party ruled in an authoritarian fashion. His party was based on conservative social values, was pro-nationalist and pro-monarchy, and integrated Theravada Buddhist teachings. Sihanouk’s one-party rule was tightly controlled and dissidents were not tolerated. He encouraged the wealthy to give money to poor people as a way to gain Buddhist merit. Society acted in practice like cronyism; Sihanouk set up state enterprises and then allowed politically aligned elite to manage it, often for their own personal gain. Foreign advisors courted the government with expensive gifts. All civil servants were required to demonstrate their “loyalty” to Sihanouk through rituals of membership to the royal party; these included supervised participation in a few weeks of manual labor each year, and appearances in parades for Sihanouk. There existed an amazing discrepancy of wealth.<sup>26</sup>

In early 1955, just after the establishment of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum government, American radio and film technicians started working out of a Phnom Penh office. In October 1954, the USIS completed an evaluation of Cambodian radio infrastructure, reporting that it was weak and calling for more American intervention. The country had 4,800 receivers for a country of five million (approximately one radio receiver for every 1,000 people). The two transmitters in Cambodia were also in poor condition, the primary one in Phnom Penh needing repairs and the second in Battambang nearly inoperable. The number of goods the United States supplied to the Cambodian Ministry of Information increased dramatically. In 1955–1956 the USIS donated a transmitter, over 1,200 receivers, and “a quantity” of public address systems (speakers for playing radio in market squares and other

places).<sup>27</sup> The American mission tried to distribute radios to public places such as meeting halls, markets, and pagodas.<sup>28</sup> The radios needed electricity, so the United States also supplied 150 generators where no electricity was available.

The USIS also trained Ministry of Information staff starting in 1955–1956. They taught them how to use new radio receivers and transmitters and repair those distributed earlier in the decade.<sup>29</sup> They also sought to help the Cambodian government expand and improve radio programming, for example, by aiding the Education Division of the Ministry of Information to script and produce educational programs to supplement the news and music that they already played.<sup>30</sup>

On August 15, 1955, VOA also started broadcasting in the Khmer language from Phnom Penh. The broadcast, recorded in Washington, DC, consisted of fifteen minutes of Cambodian broadcast news and fifteen minutes of commentary and features in the morning on national radio frequencies.<sup>31</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower and King Norodom Suramit wrote telegrams to each other to celebrate the beginning of VOA in Khmer and what it meant about the relationship between the two countries.<sup>32</sup> Beneath the surface, however, the Cambodian government worried about the VOA as a mechanism of propaganda. They asked for Cambodian embassy oversight of the VOA programming, and the United States offered to coordinate with the Cambodian Ministry of Information about broadcasting to ensure that the broadcast was a “meeting of minds” and a sign of friendship.<sup>33</sup>

The VOA quickly developed a large listening audience, and the USIS designed programs to change the radio status quo, within the bounds of Sihanouk’s neutral state. USIS staff wrote in a memo that Radio Cambodge didn’t “stimulate” listeners and that the radio simply “told” them, without controversial or provocative information. The VOA wanted to change this standard and add more “stimulating” (i.e., political and interactive) content.<sup>34</sup> The USIS based in Phnom Penh promised a coronation photo of the Cambodian royal family to anyone who wrote a letter to the station as a first step at making the station more interactive. They noticed with confusion that letters were not stamped and sent by postal service but instead were personally carried to the station, likely because there was not an actively used postal service in the country at that time.<sup>35</sup> This is one example of how the USIS, including the VOA, tried to construct new media environments without fully understanding how society worked in Cambodia.

By 1956, the USIS program also started helping to develop Cambodian film production and dissemination programs. In April 1956, the USIS made the first local film in Cambodia, in Khmer.<sup>36</sup> By November of that year, the USIS film section completed seventeen newsreels and seven documentaries with Khmer and English soundtracks. They also gave thirty-five 16-mm projectors to the Cambodian government for their own information purposes.<sup>37</sup>

The USIS built an infrastructure of film mobility and expanded the dissemination of cinema to remote locations. They planned elaborate public showings and moved films, projectors, and screens around by what they called "cinecars" actively in 1956 and 1957.<sup>38</sup> Evaluations reported that 150,000 people every month watched USIS films via mobile units by the beginning of 1957. The USIS was particularly proud of the diverse rural audiences they were able to attract.<sup>39</sup> In fact, one USIS officer claimed that interest increased proportionally with the lack of social and economic development in an area.<sup>40</sup> The USIS trained Cambodian staff to run the cinecar, repair equipment, and act as cameramen, editors, and sound technicians.<sup>41</sup>

By late 1956, the USIS reached more rural populations by distributing films by boat, reaching populations that were inaccessible by road, particularly during the rainy season, and that lived on the Sangker River (which connects the Cardamom Mountains to Tonle Sap lake). During the rainy season of 1956, they offered seventeen film showings to villages along the banks of the river, reaching a total of 8,500 people. In fifteen of the seventeen trips, it was the first time that the townspeople had ever seen movies. The boat traveled every week from Monday to Saturday and was (according to American reports) enormously successful, improving the population's goodwill toward the USIS. The report states, "The USIS boat received an excellent reception at every village. At most villages, the local chief would be waiting the arrival of the boat with many eager hands willing to assist in unloading equipment."<sup>42</sup> The cinecars and boats expanded the media geography extensively. Building a new mobile film infrastructure this period allowed the USIS and the Cambodian government to control messages sent to rural Cambodians who were largely cut off from other global influences. These films became an important mechanism for spreading the anticommunist message.

In 1956, the USIS also built cultural centers in Battambang, Siem Reap, and five other provincial capitals where radio could be broadcast and films

could be screened. These centers were “constructed by joint effort” between the Cambodian government and the USIS.<sup>43</sup> The centers played the VOA and other radio programs every day and arranged for public film screenings regularly. The cultural centers provided workspaces for audiovisual creation and repair to radios and other audiovisual equipment that had been previously distributed. The centers also arranged showings of USIS films in “outlying localities.”<sup>44</sup> In November and December 1956, there were hundreds to thousands of attendees per show.<sup>45</sup> In a similar model, the USIS aided the Cambodian government with their own “information halls” for distributing the news around the country. They supplied them all with radios and film projectors in order to improve communication channels between the Cambodian government and people in the provinces.<sup>46</sup>

The most popular USIS films during this time were *Boy Scout Jamboree*, a color film, and *Defense against Invasion*, an animated public health film.<sup>47</sup> Other films focused on American lifestyles and included such titles as *Life in America* and *Buddhist Art in America*.<sup>48</sup> The USIS reported that films depicting athletic events, youth activities, and animation were most popular, especially those in color. Surprisingly, the USIS found that the film *Cambodian Coronation* was unpopular, which they attributed to peasants remote from the city being largely uninterested in Phnom Penh politics.<sup>49</sup>

Though these films promoted American values and lifestyles, they were rarely explicitly political. USIS films needed to remain politically subtle for the USIS to stay in Sihanouk’s favor. Even in this time of general alliance between the United States and Cambodia, Sihanouk was still skeptical about US intentions. On September 22, 1957, Sihanouk reiterated to the USIS that “propaganda was not allowed” and reminded the unit that their material could not be overtly political. The USIS filmmakers agreed that they would focus not on politics but instead on a wide range of films about public health, American culture, and Cambodian culture. For the time being, this justification was accepted.<sup>50</sup> The compromises that the American team made for Sihanouk’s demands served to make the primary outcome of these projects the support and strengthening of Cambodian national audiovisual infrastructure, rather than promoting anticommunist propaganda.

At this time, USIS activities were interpreted in a number of ways by Cambodian audiences. According to Steinberg, a social scientist studying

Cambodia in 1957, many rural Cambodians appreciated the majority of USIS media. USIS self-evaluations reported that remote villages found the USIS shows exciting because these were often the first films villagers had seen. The USIS was also the first organization to create original Khmer-language film and broadened the scope of Khmer-language radio broadcasting. They therefore reached a far larger audience directly with media, without the filter of a foreign language, subtitles, or the occasional live translator. Steinberg also noted some criticisms of the USIS activities. He said that when military messages were shown along cultural products side they could be seen as “warmongering.”<sup>51</sup> Some Cambodians also worried that the United States was “simply trying to take the place recently occupied by the French.”<sup>52</sup>

By 1958, the national radio station—Radiodiffusion National Khmère, or Radio Cambodge—had matured under the guidance of USIS trainings and donations. It broadcasted programs in Khmer, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, English, and French, including sports, the national lottery, stories of agriculture, weather, dance, music, and “muscular awakening.” In 1957, 7,000 receivers were registered.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the strong investment and interest in the radio from both domestic and international powers, a question remains about how many people were accessing and listening to radio, particularly in rural Cambodia in the late 1950s. May Ebihara spent a year from 1959 to 1960 in Svay, a small rural town in Kandal Province. Based on her ethnographic experience there, she wrote a remarkably detailed picture of village life in Cambodia.<sup>54</sup> She brought a radio with her and wrote, “My house became a place to visit for company or curiosity, to listen to the radio, and to receive simple medications.”<sup>55</sup> She gave an overview of how news was generally received in her village:

News of national and international politics does reach the village in several ways, although Svay residents have relatively little access to most media and are often uninterested in political affairs. There are only two radios in the entire village (both located in the other hamlets), although I brought one into West Svay and there are others at the local temples and in Kompong Kantuot. The Khmer Broadcasting System (Radio Diffusion Khmère), operated by the government offers music, drama, news, and speeches on its one station. As a source of news the radio is of limited utility to villagers because the news broadcasts are either in French or in the formal Khmer speech used by educated people that is barely intelligible to most peasants. Whenever Sihanouk is on the radio, he arouses great interest and attention (and it is a credit to



**Figure 1.1**

A crowd listening to May Ebihara's radio in Svay, 1959. Source: Southeast Asian Digital Collection, Northern Illinois University

Sihanouk's cleverness that, in such speeches to the populace, he always uses "colloquial" language in at least part of his talk so that ordinary people can understand him). Otherwise, however, West Svay villagers are much more interested in listening to music and especially dramas (which always drew great crowds around the radio).

As Ebihara pointed out, even with Khmer-language media materials, formal language could exclude many peasants from understanding and engaging with radio and film. Language issues were not the only barrier to receiving radio news. Steinberg explained that "inadequacy of electric power seriously restricts the use of receiving sets away from the large towns."<sup>56</sup> However, Steinberg continued, "Given the still small number of radio sets actually available . . . every owner of a radio set keeps his whole neighborhood informed of the latest news. . . . In certain small towns where the mayor owns a set, a public address system may be connected with it, so that people by collecting in the market square may listen to news and entertainment." He explained that public address systems were sometimes also set up in pagodas.<sup>57</sup> Some villagers could not get away from the public

address of radio even if they wanted to. Steinberg wrote, “Loud speakers are considered the most effective means of persuading groups of people in villages or cities. There appear to be no taboos affecting the location of mobile units in Cambodian villages, and operators are understood to get the full cooperation of local officials.”<sup>58</sup>

The growth and circulation of radio and film infrastructure—developed in part by the United States—continued as the country became a more mature independent nation in the late 1950s. Media relations began to change, however, as Cambodian-US diplomacy deteriorated after the so-called Dap Chhuon affair, which, I argue, was centrally about radio. In February 1959, Dap Chhuon, a right-wing warlord who exercised a large military influence over Siem Reap province, executed a plot to overthrow Sihanouk and install a Western-friendly government. He had formerly been an anti-French Issarak rebel and had amassed weapons and an army of about 3,000 men. He also had the backing of 1,200 Khmer Serei, a South Vietnamese-based anticommunist rebel group with fighters in Thailand. The government learned of the plot and took over Chhuon’s villa, where they found gold, radio equipment, and two Southern Vietnamese technicians. Chhuon was executed a few days after he was found.<sup>59</sup> The Khmer Serei continued to operate from South Vietnam and the Thai border areas. Sihanouk was rightfully suspicious that the Americans were in collaboration with the Southern Vietnamese supporting the Khmer Serei. A US State Department official and former soldier named Victor Matsui provided the radio equipment found in Dap Chhuon’s house in 1959.<sup>60</sup> Though the United States has never officially admitted to assisting the coup and argues that the radio was provided “only to keep tabs on Chhuon’s scheming,” subsequent evidence strongly indicates that the United States worked with the Khmer Serei to overthrow Sihanouk in this plot and that Sihanouk’s anger was therefore justified. In 1967, Sihanouk made a film called *Shadow over Angkor* about the Dap Chhuon affair in which he plays the commander who captures Dap Chhuon.

As Cambodian-US relations were deteriorating, Sihanouk turned to China for more support. The United States collated a “Chinese affairs summary” on a monthly basis that concluded that communists had “radio, motion pictures, publications [in Cambodia] . . . but less than the US.”<sup>61</sup> Chinese media were particularly geared toward people of Chinese and Vietnamese ethnicity who lived in Cambodia.<sup>62</sup> Smaller communist states also

were involved in Cambodian media; for example, Hungary started a radio broadcast in Cambodia in November 1957.<sup>63</sup>

The most significant investment in Cambodian media infrastructure from a communist state was the Chinese donation of a major radio transmitter for Radio Cambodge built in Stung Meanchey, in the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Relations between Cambodia and China warmed in the mid-1950s, when Sihanouk first met Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference in April 1955. There leaders of newly independent former colonies in Asia and Africa gathered to discuss how to support decolonization. Between 1957 and 1962, the Chinese financed and technically supervised the building of the state of Cambodia's new radio transmitter and an accompanying studio facility. In 1957, two Chinese engineers came to Cambodia to assess the project. In July 1958, Beijing and Phnom Penh established official diplomatic relations, and by November 1958, Sihanouk laid the first foundation stone in the new transmitter building.<sup>64</sup> The first test of the transmitter occurred on April 14, 1959. On January 12, 1960, the Chinese hosted a ceremony to hand over the first installment of work.<sup>65</sup> In this ceremony, the Chinese ambassador explained that the "The Royal Khmer National Radio Broadcasting Station has begun transmitting its waves around the world, a station symbolizing friendship and collaboration between China and Cambodia."<sup>66</sup> The transmitter provided 20 kW on medium wave and another 15 kW on shortwave, which represented a major improvement from the weaker, earlier transmitter donated by the US (10 kW medium wave).<sup>67</sup> This greater strength of transmission led to greater coverage of the radio waves across the country. Between 1960 and 1962, the Chinese engineers upgraded the emitter to a 50-kW signal and built an auditorium. Chen Shu Liang, the Chinese ambassador to Cambodia, congratulated Cambodia on its recent modernization and development: "In just a few years, modern factories, roads and institutions of popular charity are emerging in every corner of the Kingdom. The Emission Station is like a flower in a blooming garden, a flower offered by the Prime Minister Chou En Lai to Prince Norodom Sihanouk, in mark of the Chinese people's friendship."<sup>68</sup>

Sihanouk was at this time maintaining Cambodia's neutrality, but both the Chinese and the Americans were beginning to push him harder to take a position on Cold War politics. His earlier warmth to American USIS initiatives began to cool. In 1961, US Embassy staff reported that Sihanouk was increasingly hesitant about American cultural centers. He remarked



that if there is an American-Cambodian cultural center, “there might also be a Soviet/Chinese cultural center.”<sup>69</sup> But between 1961 and 1963, US aid still accounted for over 14 percent of Cambodian governmental revenues, including 30 percent of the military budget.<sup>70</sup> Relations finally took a nose-dive in August 1963, when a new Khmer Serei radio program again enraged Sihanouk.<sup>71</sup> This radio station broadcast from Southern Vietnam and could be heard in southern regions of Cambodia. An US news article from 1964 explains,

The prince made it plain at that time that he regarded the broadcasts as an indirect American attack upon him. As the broadcasts continued, despite his protests, the Prince’s public displeasure with the US grew. Finally, on November 5, 1963, Prince Sihanouk issued an ultimatum: all US aid activities in Cambodia were to be stopped unless the Khmer Serei radio was silenced. Though December 31 was the deadline he set, the Prince’s patience in the face of the clandestine radio attacks gave out in December and he ordered the American military and economic aid missions to pack up and leave.<sup>72</sup>

Relations continued to deteriorate until April 1965 when Sihanouk severed diplomatic relations. The embassy was closed on May 3, 1965.<sup>73</sup>

There was some concern among the USIS staff even during its peak activity that all the equipment that the United States was bringing into the country could be used for ends that were not intended. One report noted that “it has been informally argued that mobile units may fall into hands of communists, or otherwise used counter to the US objective of assisting Cambodia to build a . . . US assisted audiovisual program in Cambodia— itself a project to help the government strengthen (and in some cases, create) vital links of communication between itself and its people.”<sup>74</sup> The program continued despite these concerns. Media infrastructures did in fact enable Sihanouk’s authoritarian rule, as the United States feared, and as explicated in the next section. However, independent Cambodian artists and technologists were also able to appropriate these audiovisual infrastructures creatively to make innovative forms of content within the constraints of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum state.

## 2 SANGKUM REASTR NIYUM RADIO INFRASTRUCTURE

Sihanouk believed strongly that foreign radio waves must be defended against and the strength of the Phnom Penh signal protected. Cambodia,

a small country with more powerful neighbors, was vulnerable to stronger radio transmissions. Sihanouk became obsessed with the strength of the national radio station's transmission, radio waves coming from across the Southern Vietnamese and Thai borders, and ways to strengthen and promote the Cambodian radio in rural and border regions. Alarmed authors wrote articles about radio infrastructure that regularly appeared in the Sihanouk-sponsored publication *Réalités*, suggesting that the government cared deeply about both developing national radio infrastructure and controlling foreign broadcasts in Cambodia.

In early January 1967, *Réalités* reported with concern that the "Voice of Free Asia" was broadcasting in rural parts of Cambodia. The article explained the United States built a 1,000-kW transmitter (compared to the 20-kW transmitter that the Chinese built at Stung Mencheay) in Thailand to broadcast the Voice of Free Asia in Chinese, Malay, Indonesian, Khmer, and Lao for eight hours a day.<sup>75</sup> The article continued,

Let's face it. It is certain, given the exceptional power of this transmitter, that it will be heard perfectly in Cambodia. The Khmer people are curious by nature and, while they are suspicious of what comes from Thailand and the USA, they will not fail to listen to a station so easily audible that speaks to them in Khmer. If the Americans do not make the irreparable mistake of entrusting the Cambodian emission to the Khmers Serei for their propaganda of hatred, if they give this emission a relatively "objective" look, it will be heard on the border and at the seashore. [In these places] Radio Phnom Penh is difficult (and sometimes impossible) to hear if only a modest medium-wave transistor is available.<sup>76</sup>

To address these concerns, a royal engineer visited all the regions to measure the power of the Radio Cambodge broadcast.

Later in January 1967, *Réalités* reported that the Ministry of Information was able to start using a new transmitter, which ran on a new frequency in addition to the current frequency.<sup>77</sup> The Ministry would use it to play Radio Cambodge over the same frequency as the international broadcasts, hoping that the quality of sound for the national radio would be better than the international radio. A few weeks later, a *Réalités* author wrote, "A solution is necessary for the urgent problem of the international radio transmissions." He suggested that the government needed to build new relay transmitters either alone or in cooperation with a "friendly country" to distribute the radio more broadly. A relay tower would receive a signal from the Phnom

Penh transmitter, amplify it, and then retransmit it to the nearby region. The article's author suggests that Cambodia should build relays in Bokor, Battambang, Svay Rieng, and Kratie to cover the whole of the country. If the Phnom Penh radio station were stronger and more audible, then the border populations would be less likely to listen to foreign broadcasts and would listen to ones coming from the national radio.<sup>78</sup> Later in February 1967 *Réalités* reported that because of a new relay tower in Bokor, Radio Cambodge was heard better in Bokor, Kep, and Sihanoukville.<sup>79</sup>

In November 1967, *Réalités* reported that Cambodia should also make an emergency radio in Kirirom for military action. The author reported that "the concentration of all of the radio waves poses a serious problem: an incident or a sabotage would not allow the country to listen to the instructions of the government. It will be therefore useful to create a station from one to five kW shortwave in a place easy to protect [Kirirom]." The author proposed to use the "numerous talents" of the army to run the radio technically and also perform live music. The author explained that in "normal time," the station could be used for fun and pleasure and would be complementary to Radio Cambodge. It could also connect urban dwellers who went to Bokor for weekends to Phnom Penh news.<sup>80</sup>

Though Sihanouk cared deeply about the political role of radio, radio was primarily, as hinted at in this article, listened to for entertainment and pleasure. During this period, radio theater also became an important art form and many Cambodians fondly listened to the radio collectively, particularly to *lkhoan niyeay* (spoken theater) or *lkhoan ayai* (comedy theater), played on the national radio frequencies. Traditional musicians and voice actors together would sit in the Phnom Penh radio station studio to create and record new music and dramas, which mixed story lines with musical interludes.<sup>81</sup> Some of the dramas are still popular today. Though the radio was used for news and propaganda, the same machine, the same frequency, and the same infrastructure offered a variety of content, including the music and stories popular in communities of rural and urban Cambodia, from children to the elderly.

### 3 SANGKUM REASTR NIYUM FILM INFRASTRUCTURES

By the 1960s, the National Office of Film expanded to include a new group to produce newsreels and educational films. The group incentivized local

film production by giving half of the 40 percent tax on tickets back to Cambodian film producers.<sup>82</sup> Sihanouk deeply cared about film, perhaps a trait he learned from his mother, Her Majesty Queen Kossamak, who, throughout Sihanouk's rule, hosted film nights at her residence with Cambodian and foreign films.<sup>83</sup>

Som Sam Al's biography illustrates the ways that independent Cambodian cinema, national cinema, former USIS influence, and other foreign training were closely tied to each other during this period. Som Sam Al was a key figure in building a national audiovisual media program throughout the Sihanouk era. He traveled to France from 1949 to 1955 where he studied in a technical school for industrial design and mechanics as well as a school of photography and cinematography and interned for a French television station and the cinematographic service of the French army.<sup>84</sup> He then returned to work for the Ministry of Information and FARK (the Cambodian royal army), where he was trained by USIS technicians in 1955–1956. In the late 1950s he made some short movies about the indigenous hill people's "Khmerization" for FARK, full of claims about the benefits of integration into mainstream Cambodian society. He participated in a USIS-sponsored study trip to Japan, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. In 1957, he left the Ministry of Information to make his own films with the help of a team compiled of Cambodians who had also been trained by FARK and the USIS.

In 1960, Som Sam Al made the first full-length Cambodian color feature, titled *Phka Rik Phka Ruy* (Blooming Flower, Withering Flower), adapted from the novel by Ieng Say.<sup>85</sup> He made other commercial films (*Sobennavong* and *The Road of Happiness*) and collaborated with the French director Marcel Camus in the movie *Bird of Paradise* (1962). Som Sam Al worked in the national film studio, stocked with international film equipment. They had, for example, both a 35-mm Arriflex camera and a 16-mm Paillard, both imported from France. They also had a projection room, projectors, a studio for filming, and many props needed for making "Khmer-style" films, such as ancient costumes and materials for making Angkor Wat scenes.<sup>86</sup>

Som Sam Al also directly supported Sihanouk to make his own films. Between 1966 until his overthrow in 1970, when civil unrest was at a peak, Sihanouk became passionate about making films. During these four years, Sihanouk devoted much of his energy to the production of films, which he scripted, directed, wrote the musical scores for, and starred in. Som Sam

Al managed all of Sihanouk's films and claimed that Sihanouk was a real "cinéaste" even if he was an amateur.<sup>87</sup> With Som Sam Al's help, Sihanouk made his first feature-length film in 1966 (*Apsara*); then he made (produced, directed, wrote, and often starred in) six other films before being deposed in 1970. These include *The Enchanted Forest* (1966–1967), *Shadow over Angkor* (1967), *The Little Prince* (1967), *The Joy of Life* (1968), *Twilight* (1969), and the *Rose of Bokor* (1969/1979). Sihanouk also hosted film festivals during this period. The first was held in 1968, when Sihanouk's *The Little Prince* won the top prize (the Golden Apsara award). The second was in 1969, when Sihanouk's *Twilight* won the top prize. Sihanouk brought to the cinema screen stories of contented Cambodian peasants and a prosperous elite. Sihanouk's films often oscillated between Angkorian cultural references and the romanticization of Phnom Penh modernism by highlighting buildings and monuments created by architect Van Molyvann, music written and performed by Sinn Sissamouth, and modern Khmer fashion.<sup>88</sup>

The Sangkum Reastr Niyum and Lon Nol periods are now often referred to as Cambodia's "golden age of cinema," referring to the nearly 400 movies that were produced in Cambodia in Khmer by Cambodian directors and starring Cambodian actors between 1960 and 1975. These films were shown in movie theaters constructed in Phnom Penh and provincial capitals (Kampot, Battambang, Kratie, and Kampong Cham).<sup>89</sup> Mobile cinema also continued, both sponsored by the government and through private companies.<sup>90</sup> Movie-going was a highly popular activity and "during the festival days or on public holidays, it was almost impossible to get a ticket for a film screening, if you did not buy one in advance."<sup>91</sup> People in the theaters were reportedly deeply involved in the movies they watched. "People shouted and laughed when they watched scary or funny movies. . . . At other times they would talk back to the people on the screen. If an actor and actress played a mean or evil character, they often would get upset with them."<sup>92</sup> Candy, popcorn, dry lotus, watermelon, pumpkin seed, sugar cane, ice cream, and bread were favorite snacks of the cinema audience. In order to attract the attention of the audience, cinema owners put up huge, hand-painted posters in front of the cinema.<sup>93</sup> The soundtracks written for the films were another draw to the cinema.<sup>94</sup>

Though this was a time of exciting creative output, independent filmmakers needed to tap into the national and foreign audiovisual media infrastructures that were crafted under Sihanouk's government. Independent

filmmakers often had connections to the government, foreign filmmakers, or the USIS, who would provide their equipment or technical training. Sun Bun Ly, for example, who formed the first independent commercial movie production company, Neak Poan Productions, in the 1950s, was first trained under the USIS.<sup>95</sup> The most popular and critically acclaimed Cambodian feature films of the 1960s era came out of Ly Bun Yim's and Yvon Hem's private studios. Both of these filmmakers had transnational influences. Ly Bun Yim attributed the beginning of his career to Americans who handed out free cameras associated with the "Life of America" photo competition.<sup>96</sup> Yvon Hem attributes his start in filmmaking to the 1962 filming of Marcel Camus's *Bird of Paradise*.<sup>97</sup>

The independent Cambodian films made during this period were generally socially conservative and in line with the values of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum regime. They often told stories based on traditional folktales. They regularly portrayed conservative gender roles with a certain set of subservient tropes reserved for female characters.<sup>98</sup> Often films were violent; those with the best special effects were often most popular. These could include scenes of wonders and miracles: flying horses, man-made earthquakes, and thunder, giants, and witches.<sup>99</sup> These were generally not outwardly political films of resistance as was the case in other parts of the Third World during the Cold War (and which are now called "Third Cinema").<sup>100</sup> Neither, however, did they offer overtly political propaganda for the cause of the national government.<sup>101</sup> Muan and Daravuth claim that the Cambodian films tended to attract less educated laborers who were drawn into supernatural stories and folktales, whereas students and white-collar workers tended to prefer international films.<sup>102</sup>

After the 1963 economic break with the United States, Phnom Penh theaters still played foreign films, but these films were limited to the Communist Bloc. In April 1966, Cambodia hosted a Soviet film festival;<sup>103</sup> in October 1966, a group of Chinese filmmakers came to Phnom Penh to make sports documentaries;<sup>104</sup> in November 1966, a team of Czechoslovak cineastes came to Cambodia;<sup>105</sup> and that same month the government hosted both a Romanian film gala and a Russian film festival.<sup>106</sup>

Film equipment and processing continued to move back and forth between Cambodia and other countries throughout this period. Producers began developing color film in Phnom Penh only in the mid-1960s despite poor quality due to a lack of temperature control. Yim, however, still had

his films produced in France in the 1960s and in Hong Kong in the 1970s.<sup>107</sup> In the late 1960s, Roem Sophon (another Ministry of Information and USIS-trained filmmaker who had been working at the Ministry of Information with Sihanouk since the early 1950s) brought back a machine from France that allowed soundtracks to be recorded separately then attached to a film. Yim described this as a key moment in the Cambodian film industry, giving film a consistent soundtrack, rather than fickle live narrations.<sup>108</sup>

The independent filmmakers were working within a context of a highly controlling government where foreign media influences were increasingly suspicious. By the mid- to late 1960s, censorship law controlled the projection of foreign media. For instance, in May 1966, a censorship law prohibited the playing of foreign radio in public places including “restaurants, shops, hotel halls, etc.” If anybody chose to listen or watch these at home they had to “ensure that they could not be heard from outside.” The article continues, “As can be seen, individual liberty is respected but foreign propaganda (which manifests itself everywhere) is not entitled to be here.”<sup>109</sup> In October 1967, a law decreed that foreign films could be projected only with authorization of the Minister of Education, the Minister of Information, and the Undersecretary of State to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. To justify this new law, a *Réalités* article complained that “the ideological invasion, as we see, is becoming more and more difficult.”<sup>110</sup>

In this chapter I have shown how the USIS’s investment in film and radio between 1955 and 1963 in Cambodia strengthened and helped develop national audiovisual media infrastructures that then supported Sihanouk’s authoritarian regime. Struggles for control over these infrastructures, however, were a major reason for the disintegration of US-Cambodian relations at the end of 1963. The American support of Khmer Serei radio infrastructure beginning from the Dap Chhuon affair triggered Sihanouk to break ties with the United States. After this souring of relations, Sihanouk invested heavily in developing and tightly controlling national media infrastructures, which contributed to his authoritarian rule.

I argue that the government and foreign powers tried to control audiovisual media largely through infrastructure, rather than exclusively through content. Media histories sometimes neglect to address the formative influence and crucial shaping power of infrastructure. Many factors disconnected the media messages, regardless of who controlled them, and the Cambodian audience: language differences, lack of electricity, geographical

separation, poor transportation networks to cinemas, and the difficulty broadcasting radio waves to remote parts of the country. The USIS and the national government attempted to build infrastructure to bridge these divides. Infrastructural control over media was both material and ephemeral and included the importation of new techniques, tools, and towers; the facilitation of travel of people and goods; and the attempt to strengthen and interrupt radio waves across space. The USIS bridged gaps by bringing movies to remote villages by boat and car, building cultural centers in provincial capitals, and distributing radios and projectors widely. In the field of radio, Sihanouk sought to limit the waves coming across the border and strengthen national radio transmitters to make the voice of Radio Cambodia stronger than other voices. This control also took legal form; from 1964 to 1970, Sihanouk sought to limit foreign influence in national media production particularly from the Americans through new censorship laws that banned unlicensed projection of foreign films in public spaces.

Media infrastructure also led to a certain kind of media experience common to most Cambodians. This media experience was shared in public places, through the development of a public cultural center system (run by both Americans and later the national government), mobile screenings, and loudspeaker systems for radio. These infrastructures were imposing and hard to escape. Yet this public orientation toward media became a way for Cambodians to gain back control over media experiences; they often shared their personally owned technologies with their communities and families as a grassroots development of infrastructure.

This media history also gives us a deeper sense of the conditions under which Cambodian artists were able to create new kinds of films and radio programs during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period. Radio artists developed a culture of *lkhoan niyeay*, the recording of stories and music in the radio studio, which villagers would listen to collectively in public places. Independent filmmakers created the “golden age of cinema” after establishing connections to national media infrastructures and foreign filmmakers and technologies. As we will see in later chapters, these conditions foreshadow the ways that contemporary media creators, too, need to appropriate technologies and skills from foreign and authoritarian modes in order to create new content.





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