

Descent in old Cambodia: Deconstructing a matrilineal hypothesis

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Abstract. The available evidence relating to the question to the nature of descent and its concomitants in Cambodian history is examined. It is argued that the theory frequently put forward, especially by non-anthropologists, that early Cambodian society was matrilineally organized, generally contradicts or is otherwise inconsistent with this evidence. Although definitive indications are hard to come by, there is no particular reason to think that Cambodian society was differently organized in such respects than it is today, namely as a society which recognizes descent primarily as cognatic or bilateral. The problems are traced partly to the late development of any adequate theory of cognatic descent in anthropology and partly to the more general problem of the transfer of ideas between different disciplines.

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Cross-disciplinary research is in principle to be encouraged, since it can enrich knowledge of a particular topic by allowing it to be seen from a variety of perspectives. There are also dangers, however, since individual scholars tend to develop expertise in just one discipline, and there is always the risk of error in plunging unguided into another.

This is exactly what appears to have been the result of a number of speculations concerning the nature of descent and its concomitants in Cambodia¹ in historical times, which a number of historians, linguists and orientalist have claimed were matrilineal. Most of this article will be taken up with a detailed refutation of their arguments. The fault seems to lie, at least in part, in an insufficient understanding of the nature of descent and of the evidence appropriate to it – subjects traditionally the domain of a separate discipline, anthropology. I hope to show, therefore, how cross-disciplinary research may have limitations – how it may, indeed, distort rather than improve our knowledge of a particular topic.

The matrilineal hypothesis has certainly begun to be questioned in recent years. Wolters, for instance, sees traditional Cambodian society as 'a society which probably

¹ 'Cambodia' has been preferred to 'Kampuchea' in this article, since it remains better established, especially in historical writings, and during 1989 again became the official name of the country. I take no account of any changes which may have occurred as a result of the upheavals in the country over the last two decades, and my use of the present tense must be regarded as referring to the period just prior to the fall of the monarchy in 1970 at the latest.