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Khmers: A Mix of Magic,

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PARIS—The paucity of hard facts about the xenophobic Khmer Rouge makes an educated guess about the future of Cambodia hazardous, but the key to what motivates the nation's new rulers may lie more in Cambodian history than Marxist theory.

An example: The abandonment of the capital is nothing new for the Khmers. A vast tract of Southeast Asia from Burma to the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam, where the Khmer Empire once was supreme, is dotted with the ruins of cities the Cambodians abandoned. Some were overrun by invading armies but, in many instances, the Khmers just walked away.

Angkor, the vast complex of palaces and temples in northern Cambodia that was the hub of the Khmer Empire at the height of its majesty, was abandoned in the early 15th Century. So, too, was Oudong, about 25 miles north of Phnom Penh, where Cambodian kings held court when the French established their protectorate during the 19th Century.

Khmer chronicles are filled with tales of magical happenings, of dreams and of portents, and it is a next-to-impossible task to determine where history ends and legend begins. Magic plays an important role in Cambodian life to this very day.

While Cambodia's head of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, has written of his own skepticism, he maintained Brahmin priests in the royal

palace in Phnom Penh to conduct Hindu rites connected with the royal family's role as god-kings of the Khmers even though he, like virtually every other Cambodian, is a Buddhist.

The Kboun was a secret text on magical warfare to which former President Lon Nol referred repeatedly in his speeches. History—or legend—records that it flew away inside the hollow statue of a cow and the loss led to the decision to abandon Angkor—although the real reasons were more prosaic.

The chronicles make clear that the ancient courts were steeped in greed and treachery. Lon Nol's entourage likewise became the symbol of systematized corruption and self-seeking intrigue. In addition, the consumer society that it fed—and which fed upon it—had next to no impact on the lives of ordinary Khmers.

Most of the beneficiaries were outsiders, notably Phnom Penh's Chinese merchants and Westerners as well as the city's small intellectual elite of Khmers whose light-colored skins often betrayed their part-Chinese ancestry.

The "dark ones", as Lon Nol liked to call pure-blooded Khmers, were the strangers in their own house. Indeed, before the anti-Vietnamese pogroms of 1970 and the vast influx of refugees that more than tripled the capital's population, Khmers in Phnom Penh were outnumbered by the Vietnamese and Chinese communities.

These factors may explain the wanton destruction carried out by the peasant Khmer Rouge soldiers, many of whom had only the vaguest notions of what a city was like.

But it does not account for their stone-faced automatism in carrying out the orders of puritanical leaders who seem determined to mold the country according to their own standards of military asceticism.

The answer may lie in the acute awareness of Khieu Samphan and other Khmer Rouge intellectuals that the Khmers have been declining steadily in power in Southeast Asia for more than 500 years. The ideal Khmer way of life, according to a popular contemporary Cambodian saying, is to "listen to the wind, watch the rice grow and make love."

This happy-go-lucky attitude is obviously counter to the driving force that impelled Khmer emperors to exhaust their people to add to Angkor's monumental grandeur. Some modern historians hold that the fundamental cause of Angkor's fall was neglect of the sophisticated system of irrigation canals that had made it possible to grow a second crop of rice during the dry season—a crop that was essential to feed the city's vast population.

Most of Cambodia still harvests only one rice crop today, principally because the peasants do not feel it is worth the added investment or labor to produce a dry season crop. Prince Sihanouk recounts how farmers

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a few years ago accepted gifts of American-developed "miracle" rice which the experts claimed would double their yields — and then planted only half their normal acreage.

The unquestioning, single-minded Khmer Rouge soldiers, many of them teenagers still in the throes of puberty, are evidently the prototypes of the new Khmer that Khieu Samphan seems determined to create. That new Khmer might reverse centuries of slow but unremitting decadence that has reduced Cambodia to a small nation of perhaps 7 million hemmed in by their more numerous Vietnamese and Thai neighbors, latecomers who stripped the Khmers of their lands.

The blind obedience demanded by the Khmer Rouge leadership is not a new phenomenon. Absolutism has been the historic rule in Cambodia. Those who marvel today at the wonders of Angkor often forget that the artists who created these sublime masterpieces were little better than slaves of the Khmer god-kings.

Neither is there anything new in the Khmer Rouge stress on the peagantry. Cambodia has few natural resources beyond its rich farmlands and fisheries and the people have a mystical attachment to their land, lighting joss sticks to propitiate spirits that live in trees or rivers. One of the god-king's most important functions was to plough a symbolic furrow at the beginning of each growing sea-

son to insure a bounteous harvest in the rice paddies.

Xenophobia likewise has deep historic roots and Cambodians feel in their hearts that provinces in Thailand and South Vietnam, where substantial Khmer minorities still live, are theirs by right.

Cambodia's relations with its neighbors have always been tinged with deep suspicion that they coveted Khmer lands. Thailand seized the rice-bowl province of Battambang during World War II, and there have been constant complaints from Pnom Penh that the Vietnamese were encroaching in Southern Cambodia, surreptitiously shifting frontier markers a few hundred yards at a time.

This suspicion has given the Khmers an egocentric view of the world similar to the Chinese belief that they are the heirs of the "Middle Kingdom" and that all other peoples are barbarians.

What is new is the means employed by the Khmer Rouge to fashion their new Cambodian man. Instead of Vedic chants or Buddhist prayers, all reports indicate that Khieu Samphan and his helpers are using agitprop techniques developed by the Chinese Communists and perfected by North Vietnamese and Vietcong propaganda teams to "purify" the people of the cities.

But still the mysticism remains. "Man is born from a grain of rice," explained one Khmer Rouge soldier, when asked why the people of Phnom Penh were being sent into the countryside.