

## BOOK REVIEWS

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***Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land.* By Joel Brinkley. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2011. Hardcover: 416pp.**

This is a heartbreaking book to review because so much of it is excellent reportage (for example, the Preface and Chapters 2 to 16) while other parts of it lapse into an ugly Orientalist mould (e.g. the Introduction, Chapter 1, Chapter 17 and the Epilogue). The author, Joel Brinkley, is a journalist who won the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting on Cambodia in 1979 for the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in Kentucky. It often reads breezily like a very long magazine article, pockmarked with factual blunders (many errors — such as a reference to a non-existent national oil company on page 347 or implying China invaded Vietnam in 1989 on page 62 — have already been uncovered by other reviewers: Douglas Gillison for *Time*, 11 April 2011; Elizabeth Becker for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 April 2011; Sebastian Strangio for *Asia Times*, 13 May 2011; Geoffrey Cain for *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 May 2011; and Eng Kok-Thay for *The Truth*, June 2011). Reading *Cambodia's Curse*, one cannot help but feel that Brinkley's curmudgeonly style and dry commentary (often at the expense of his subject, the Cambodian people, though not always — he actually uses the word “Chinaman” on page 19 to describe Zhou Dagan a Chinese chronicler who visited in the thirteenth century) come across as arrogant and detached.

His dependent variable is the failure of Cambodia to develop and democratize, and while he marshals several perfectly valid independent variables like impunity, domestic violence, deforestation, narcotics, corruption, elections, hunger, education, health, etc. he ultimately settles rather bafflingly on one that is least convincing: Cambodians are just cursed by a millennium of history and culture, and the Killing Fields of 1975 to 1979 only made it worse. Needless

to say, this argument has won him few friends among Cambodia scholars and Cambodians because what he has essentially done is to insult everyone he has ever come in contact with while writing this book.

On the positive side, Brinkley provides some quality reporting and condenses historical and political events into a readable format for most audiences, which reflects his strength as a journalist. All the while, he manages to capture the political tension of many events, such as the United Nations-organized election in 1993 and power struggles among Hun Sen, Prince Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy. Brinkley also delves into aid dependence and the donor culture of Cambodia. He highlights the recurring process of donors coming together, making empty threats, and then pledging more money than Cambodia requested, a problem of credibility that has been highlighted for several years now. A new approach is needed for genuine reform to occur, for example increasing domestic revenues (primarily tax collection) to increase accountability and national ownership. Bribe taxes (unofficial revenues), if converted to official revenues, could make up much of this difference. But solutions are not part of Brinkley's dominant narrative, which is the hopelessness of Cambodia and its people.

Although one of his inherent strengths is the ability to write engaging prose, fact-checking is not one of them. Aside from making sweeping generalizations about Cambodians' alleged laziness and lack of ambition throughout the book, and occasionally obsessing over human cannibalism, several of his facts are just plain wrong (in the span of 47 continuous pages alone, I could find at least four errors): in 2005–06, more than two human rights activists were jailed (p. 267) unless he was referring only to Cambodian Center for Human Rights Director Kem Sokha and his deputy, there was also independent radio owner Mom Sonando, NGO head Yeng Virak (whom Brinkley interviewed), and labour union leader Rong Chhun; the site of the 1997 grenade attack against Sam Rainsy has not since been renamed "Hun Sen Park" (p. 268), Hun Sen Park is next door; the *Phnom Penh Post* was a fortnightly newspaper under Michael Hayes' ownership, not a weekly paper (p. 302); Pol Pot did not die a free man (p. 314), he was under house arrest.

A book riddled with errors unfortunately detracts from its seriousness and further erodes Brinkley's credibility as someone who, after three decades, has returned to Cambodia for two summers and now claims to know all things Cambodia. The judgmental attitude present throughout the book compares unfavourably to

his reporting in 1979, which won him the Pulitzer. As a former American diplomat to Cambodia confided to me, "It is difficult to understand why Brinkley feels so confident that he has found the 'curse' which condemns Cambodia to complete failure ... It was as if he were doing an autopsy on an entire nation." The patient is not yet dead, but Brinkley the pathologist says, "The lineage of larceny is clear. Far more than almost any other state, modern Cambodia is a product of customs and practices set in stone a millennium ago." (p. 15). Overall, the book treats Cambodia like a basket case and writes off the entire population.

The allegations begin early with gems such as "Vietnamese embrace change. Cambodians tend to resist it." (p. 11); "Wasn't that the Cambodian way?" (p. 122); "Cambodians most of all wanted peace and quiet, qualities of life they had not seen since the late 1960s. They wanted to be left alone." (p. 142); "If accused, a Cambodian generally will not respond to the accusations. Instead, he will attack the accuser." (p. 320); "Cambodians are incapable of that" (p. 351) which he repeats twice on the same page; ending with this gold medal winner: "Now, once again, most expect nothing more than they have. They carry no ambitions. They hold no dreams. All they want is to be left alone." (p. 353) Adding insult to injury, he claims that today's Cambodia is worse than Darfur, Myanmar, North Korea and Haiti (pp. 351–52).

Writing a book requires more tact than that demonstrated in Brinkley's work. This is not to say that modern Cambodia is perfect or even normal. As a diplomat friend of mine once said, "Cambodia is slowly becoming a 'normal' country." Yes, Cambodia is slowly becoming a "normal" country with all the attendant problems of the developing world such as lack of domestic revenues leading to a lack of accountability and national ownership. Tying foreign aid to increased domestic revenues would appear to be one solution to this problem.

As the saying goes "Don't judge a book by its cover." For Brinkley's book, the adage should be amended to "Don't judge a book by its title, Introduction, first and last chapters, and Epilogue." Forgive his many errors in between by stonecutting and you might actually see a diamond in the rough.

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SOPHAL EAR is an Assistant Professor in the Department of National Security Affairs at the US Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. The views expressed above are his alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the US Navy or the Department of Defense.