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## Unwriting Empire: Decolonizing Khmer Language, Literature, and Cultural Memory

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Accepted version published on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17061523>

**Abstract:** This study examines the enduring effects of French colonialism on Cambodia's literary and linguistic systems, demonstrating how language policy, cultural hierarchies, education, and archival authority influenced the country's intellectual and cultural identity. The research identifies how colonial governance prioritized Eurocentric models and marginalized indigenous traditions through a critical examination of historical sources, literary works, and policy documents. The conversation explores various modes of reclamation and resistance, including the diaspora's cultural activities, postcolonial writers' contributions, the preservation of folk poetry, and the role of educational activism in reclaiming narrative agency. The results highlight the continuous and complex nature of decolonial recovery, which requires both interdisciplinary cooperation and indigenous leadership. The study finds that to ensure the persistence and evolution of Cambodia's cultural heritage in the postcolonial era, sustainable cultural renewal necessitates incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into policy, pedagogy, and cultural output.

**Keywords:** linguistic policy; cultural memory; indigenous knowledge; colonialism; decolonization; Khmer literature

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## Introduction

Cambodia's cultural, educational, and linguistic institutions underwent significant reconfiguration during the time of its integration into the French colonial empire, which lasted from 1863 to 1953. Colonial government aimed to radically restructure Cambodian intellectual life in conformity with European epistemologies and cultural hierarchies, as Edwards (2007b) Shows, rather than just establishing a new administrative structure. Drawing on modernist rationality and Enlightenment principles, French administrators and academics presented their interventions as a civilizing mission. This ideological endeavor established Western literary works and historical narratives as universal standards of modernity. Norindr (1996). This endeavor was implemented through the establishment of literary canons, archival control, and education, frequently dislodging native frameworks for knowledge production.

The rearrangement of language itself was a key mechanism of this cultural change. According to Adams (1997) and Jacobs and Smyth (2013) French philologists and education planners standardized Khmer through orthographic modifications that made it easier to Romanize, facilitated administrative use, and brought it into line with colonial teaching. Although these changes resulted in a more standardized script and grammar, they also reduced the linguistic diversity found in oral genres, regional dialects, and vernacular poetry, hence marginalizing non-standardized forms of Khmer. These actions demonstrated what Anderson (2008) Refers to as colonial states' philological nationalism, in which language codification functions as an instrument for governance and a technique to mold collective identity in ways that support imperial objectives. Similarly, the colonial literary realm underwent a redefinition. Hansen (2004) Notes that pre-colonial Oral storytelling traditions, court poetry, folklore, and Buddhist canonical texts all coexisted and overlapped in Cambodian literature. However, during French administration, the growing literary canon began to exclude or devalue oral traditions and narratives created by the people, while giving preference to elite and Buddhist classical literature. While rural voices were erased or this selective preservation strengthened marginalized, class-based and urban-centered cultural authority. To address these legacies, decolonial theory provides a critical perspective for reevaluating the colonial past and its consequences. According to Mignolo (2011) Epistemic disobedience is the methodological rejection of Western categories as the sole legitimate framework for knowledge production. Similar to this, Smith (2012) Promotes Decolonizing Methodologies, which give indigenous research approaches and epistemologies priority in an effort to recover historical and cultural agency. Scholars can highlight colonial legacies in language policy, literary creation, and collective memory, while also imagining locally practice-based routes to cultural recovery by applying these theories to the Cambodian context. Furthermore, for reassessing the philosophical and moral basis of national growth in the twenty-first century.

Cambodia's positive and noteworthy cultural and educational developments over the last five years reflect a growing commitment to reclaiming and renewing indigenous knowledge systems. By introducing local literature into secondary and

higher education curricula, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS, 2024) has expanded classroom readings beyond the limited canon established during the colonial era. At the same time, organizations like the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center have increased their digitalization efforts, preserving rare Khmer manuscripts and audiovisual documents that were previously at risk of being lost or damaged (UNESCO, 2023, April 20, 2024, November 8). Additionally, the historical marginalization of non-Khmer languages has started to be addressed with the growth of mother-tongue-based multilingual education programs in minority and rural areas, which are aided by partnerships with MoEYS, UNICEF, and other NGOs. A more inclusive national language policy result from this (UNDP, 2024). To eradicate some of the systemic inequities ingrained in Cambodia's educational and cultural systems, these programs represent important first steps. They demonstrate a deeper understanding of the need for community leaders, educators, and politicians to recognize the country's pluralistic linguistic reality and reintegrate indigenous epistemologies into public life.

Additionally, regional authors' collectives, grassroots organizations, and independent publishers have recently gained recognition for creating works that blend rural storytelling techniques, multilingual expressiveness, and oral traditions. Scholars argue that such strategies are not only vital for the preservation of cultural heritage, but the cultural hierarchy established during the colonial era continues to affect current Khmer literature and language policy. Oral traditions such as *chbap* (didactic poetry), *yike* (folk theater), and *smot* (Buddhist devotional chanting) are undervalued in formal education, despite their continued practice. Instead of being integrated into continuous literature and linguistic education, they are typically limited to cultural festivals or heritage exhibitions. (Huot, 2025; Khoury, 2020). Furthermore, language planning processes have frequently reinforced colonial-era homogenizing tendencies, despite Khmer being confirmed as the official language since independence. According to Huot et al. (2024) and Scheer (2025) Minority language speakers, including Cham, Kuy, Phnong, and others, confront structural hurdles to full participation in cultural life, and they remain underrepresented in official discourse and educational procedures. This circumstance illustrates a persistent attitude that equates linguistic homogeneity with modernity, while overlooking Cambodia's rich multilingual heritage. Furthermore, the relationship between decolonization and cultural memory remains largely unexplored, particularly in Cambodian politics and academia. Although numerous heritage preservation programs exist, the epistemological frameworks that define what is preserved, how it is viewed, and whose voices are amplified in the process are not being critically examined. If this type of examination is not conducted, preservation runs the risk of perpetuating colonial archive logics that prioritize elite, urban, and textual traditions over rural, oral, and vernacular forms.

In summary, although there has been real progress in the past five years toward cultural regeneration, the underlying ideological frameworks that influence language policy, literary canon development, and cultural memory have not entirely been overturned. For Khmer cultural and linguistic life to thrive on its own terms, addressing these concerns necessitates going beyond preservation and toward transformation, integrating decolonial techniques into both research and policy. In this regard study,

three main objectives are identified as the following points: (1) to examine the historical processes by which colonial rule restructured Khmer language, literature, and cultural hierarchies, (2) to analyze the strategies of resistance employed by Cambodian writers, teachers, and artists to reaffirm and reshape Khmer cultural memory, and (3) to evaluate contemporary decolonial initiatives in education, heritage management, and language revitalization, with attention to their capacity to address both material and epistemological dimensions of cultural recovery.

In addressing the main objectives above, three-fold questions arise: (1) how did French colonial rule alter the Khmer language, literature, and related cultural hierarchies? (2) What forms of resistance and reclamation have emerged in postcolonial Cambodian literary and cultural practice?, and (3) which decolonial methodologies are most effective in supporting Khmer cultural recovery and transformation in the current context? This work contributes to the conversation on cultural policy and scholarly research. It enhances comparative comprehension of how linguistic and literary systems are decolonized in post-imperial contexts by situating Cambodia's contemporary cultural transition within the broader framework of Southeast Asian decolonization studies. By combining memory studies and cultural policy analysis, it also broadens theoretical discussions in decolonial studies and provides a framework for tying epistemological criticism to real-world change. The results will help policymakers develop ways to incorporate indigenous epistemologies into language planning, heritage preservation, and education. The study affirms oral traditions, vernacular literature, and minority languages as essential components of the national story, thereby supporting culturally grounded renewal efforts for communities. By doing this, it satisfies Smith's (2012) Demand that academics actively engage in the regeneration of indigenous cultures in addition to studying them.

### Literature Review

The French colonial administration's approach to language in Cambodia was not a matter of benign linguistic modernization but an intentional and strategic restructuring of the communicative and cultural order. The goal of colonial language policy, as argued by Edwards (2007b) It was to create a literate and disciplined populace that could work within and internalize the logics of French power. French served as the language of administration, higher education, and intellectual prestige, and it was clearly placed at the top of the linguistic hierarchy. Although the majority of people continued to speak Khmer, it was both symbolically and practically inferior to French.

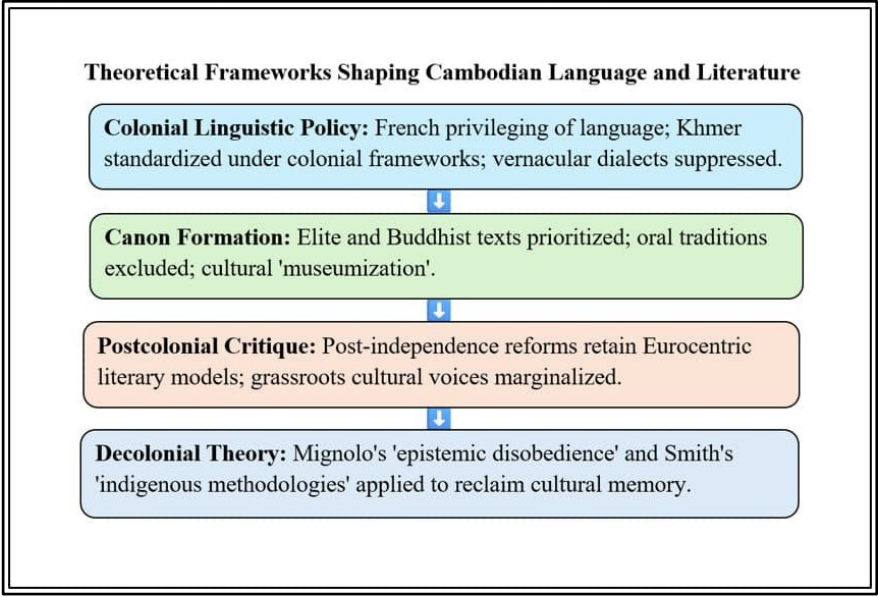
During this period, frameworks that reflected French philological aims were used to standardize the Khmer language. To facilitate colonial education and governmental administration, these reforms aimed to codify the Khmer alphabet in a manner consistent with Romanized transliteration systems, as demonstrated by Adams (1997) and Jacobs and Smyth (2013). Regional dialects, specialized oral registers, and idiomatic variations were marginalized as a result of this standardization process, which was frequently framed as a modernizing endeavor. In this way, standardization was as much about linguistic homogeneity as it was about cultural centralization. According to Vickery (1998), this practice reflected a larger tendency in French Indochina, where

language diversity was viewed as a challenge to be overcome rather than an asset to be developed. In the fields of formal education and state administration, vernacular dialects, whether they were minority languages like Cham, Kuy, and Phnong or rural forms of Khmer, were essentially eradicated. The colonial assumption, as Osborne (2024) observes, was that such diversity would hinder the efficiency of governance and the transmission of “modern” knowledge. As a result, Cambodia mainly inherited a monolingual national orientation upon its independence, a legacy that still influences language policy today. These hierarchical logics also had an impact on the development of the literary canon in Cambodia during colonial control. Printing presses, educational programs, and literary establishments gave preference to forms that complemented the colonial conception of Cambodian history and French aesthetic standards. As examples of “authentic” Khmer culture, Hansen (2004) notes that Buddhist canonical writings and elite court poetry, particularly those related to the royal palace or monastic studies, were preserved, published, and taught. Although this procedure seemed to preserve tradition, it also left out a wide range of oral traditions, popular poetry, and rural storytelling forms that have long supported Cambodian culture. This selective preservation is criticized by Edwards (2007a) as a form of cultural curation that resembles what Anderson (2008) refers to as the museumization of culture. Colonial institutions froze certain forms in time by elevating them to the status of national emblems, thereby making them representations of a timeless, unchanging past. The dynamic, flexible, and community-based oral genres were written off as transient or “less civilized,” and as such, were not deserving of institutional support. As a result, the canon systematically excluded women, rural voices, and ethnic minorities while reflecting the viewpoints of male intellectuals and metropolitan elites. This canon creation has significant ramifications. The marginalization of oral genres under state cultural policy frequently results in their eventual extinction from intergenerational transmission, as demonstrated by Tayanin and Lindell (1994) in neighboring Laos. Cambodia’s exclusion of rural oral traditions from the colonial-era literary canon not only diminished the diversity of recognized cultural forms but also disrupted the mechanisms by which these forms were sustained in everyday life.

Cambodia officially switched from French to Khmer as the official language of administration and education after gaining independence in 1953. However, many aspects of the educational and literary production systems still had colonial traits. While the nationalist movement aimed to establish Khmer linguistic and cultural identity, Chandler (2018) argues that it did so within frameworks that nonetheless gave preference to standardized language over regional variety and print culture over oral tradition. He contends that this continuity illustrates how colonial epistemologies are deeply ingrained in institutions. Khoury (2020) notes that even today, publishing houses, national literary awards, and curriculum frameworks still favor forms that fit into these historical hierarchies. Grassroots and community-authored narratives are rarely given the same legitimacy as works that conform to standardized Khmer and established literary genres. This marginalization is not unique to Cambodia. According to Rafael’s (2005) research on the Philippines, postcolonial republics frequently uphold the same cultural inequalities that colonial regimes built, although publicly denouncing

colonial control. In Cambodia, the outcome has produced a postcolonial cultural field that is frequently Eurocentric in form but nationalist in rhetoric. Community practice, rather than institutional support, sustains oral forms like *chbap* (didactic poetry), *yike* (folk theater), and *smot* (Buddhist devotional chanting) that are mostly found outside of formal educational frameworks.

The perception that "true literature" is confined to the domain of printed, standardized texts is strengthened by this division, which reflects colonial divisions between high and low culture. Given this, decolonial theory provides a framework for analysis as well as a valuable approach for reconsidering Cambodian literary and linguistic policy. The idea of epistemic disobedience, as proposed by Mignolo (2011)It challenges the assumption that Western frameworks should be the standard lens through which to evaluate knowledge and culture. By rejecting the "coloniality of knowledge," decolonial approaches encourage academics and professionals to focus on Cambodian epistemologies, which are modes of knowing rooted in the historical, linguistic, and cultural experiences of Khmer communities. Smith (2012) Emphasizes research and cultural output that originates from within indigenous worldviews, which complements this. Such methods have influenced community-led heritage initiatives in Cambodia, where local artists, elders, and performers collaborate to digitize historic manuscripts, record oral histories, and develop curricula based on indigenous customs rather than imported models. (Bourgerie, n.d.; Walker, n.d). Scholarship from the region resonates with these concepts. Reclaiming silent histories has refocused national narratives in Thailand toward greater inclusivity of excluded groups, as (Winichakul, 2020) Illustrates. The Philippines' attempts to revive vernacular literatures that were suppressed throughout colonial and postwar administrations are examined by Bautista (2019).



**Figure 1.** Relevant Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Cambodian Language and Literature

These examples demonstrate that an apparent embrace of decolonial ideals could aid Cambodia's ongoing efforts to integrate minority languages and oral traditions into its cultural programs. This literature reveals a distinct pattern: although Cambodia has made significant progress in preserving its legacy and reviving its culture, the epistemological frameworks that underpin these initiatives are frequently still bound by presumptions about language, literature, and cultural hierarchy that date back to the colonial era. In addition to preserving what remains, decolonial theory offers the possibility of radically reshaping cultural authority structures to reflect and uphold the diversity of Cambodian perspectives, as depicted in Figure 1.

### Methodology

By combining historical documents, postcolonial theory, and textual analysis, this study used a narrative and critical literature review technique to investigate how Khmer language and literature were colonized and the resulting paths of cultural memory. The study was conducted from March to October 2024 and employed a combination of systematic theme categorization of academic sources, close reading of primary materials, and archival retrieval. The empirical core of the analysis was derived from primary sources. Among these were collections of Khmer literary works from the colonial and postwar eras, including those from the Buddhist Institute archives and the National Library of Cambodia, comprising poetry collections, prose narratives, and theatrical scripts. The Center des Archives d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence) and École Française d'Extrême-Orient's digital repositories were used to recover colonial education materials, including curriculum guides, teacher manuals, and language reform policies in French. A systematic review of institutional materials from the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) archives was also conducted to identify continuity and discontinuity in language and literature policy. These materials included policy reports, curriculum frameworks, and language planning documents spanning the period from 1953 to 2023.

Decolonial theory, cultural studies, and memory studies were all incorporated into the analytical approach as interconnected interpretative frameworks. The study examined the epistemological foundations of colonial-era policies and their influence on post-independence literary and linguistic frameworks, drawing on Mignolo's (2011) theory of epistemic disobedience. Identification of knowledge forms neglected by colonial and state institutions was guided by Smith's (2012) indigenous techniques, with special attention paid to oral traditions, vernacular idioms, and narratives created by the community. From a cultural studies perspective, texts and archival records were examined to understand how they constructed cultural hierarchies, defined national identity, and reinforced or contested colonial epistemologies. Memory studies concepts, especially those related to cultural memory, archival power, and canon formation, were employed to assess how narratives of the past were preserved, reframed, or silenced across different periods. Textual analysis was conducted in two stages. First, a contextual reading established the historical and institutional setting of each document or literary work. Second, common themes such as the creation of elite canons, the elimination of oral forms, linguistic uniformity, and strategies for cultural resistance

were discovered using a critical coding procedure. The codes were iteratively compared with the theoretical literature to ensure they aligned with the study's analytical frameworks.

Data from primary and secondary sources were narratively synthesized, considering the diachronic shift from colonial times to the present. This synthesis documented how colonial literary and linguistic policies were institutionalized, how they persisted in different forms after independence, and how decolonial interventions, whether through community activism, education policy, or literature, attempted to restore suppressed cultural forms. By solidly anchoring this synthesis in both documentary evidence and theoretical interpretation, the method ensured that the final analysis was historically grounded, critically informed, and considerate of the diversity of Cambodian cultural views, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Research Methodology

Elements	An overview	References and Examples
Approach	Review of narrative and critical literature that combines textual analysis, postcolonial theory, and historical documents.	Combining theme coding, attentive reading, and archival research.
Primary Sources	MoEYS archives covering the colonial to post-independence periods, original Khmer literary works, and colonial schooling records.	National Library of Cambodia; Buddhist Institute archives; Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer; MoEYS policy reports.
Secondary Sources	Peer-reviewed scholarship and regional comparative studies on Cambodian literature, language policy, and cultural memory.	Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar searches for works by Edwards, Hansen, Jacobs, Chandler, Sam, etc.
Analytical Lenses	Interlinked frameworks of decolonial theory, cultural studies, and memory studies.	Mignolo’s epistemic disobedience; Smith’s indigenous methodologies; cultural hierarchy analysis; canon formation.
Analytical Process	Two-stage textual analysis: contextual reading followed by critical coding of themes.	Themes included linguistic homogenization, exclusion of oral forms, canon formation, and cultural resistance.

Analysis

The communication environment in Cambodia underwent drastic changes due to the French colonial government's linguistic policy. The archives of the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer demonstrate how the Khmer script was meticulously adapted to conform to French phonetic and typographic standards. According to Edwards (2007a) This procedure is both a practical adaptation to printing and an epistemic imposition. As a result of these orthographic modifications, including the elimination of regional orthographic deviations and the adoption of standardized spelling norms, a single, "official" Khmer was granted primacy over its numerous vernacular forms. Among the minority languages that were excluded entirely from formal education were Cham, Kuy, and Phnong. French-language documents from 1911 and 1924 established educational priorities that expressly sought "linguistic unification" for administrative efficiency, demonizing minority languages as obstacles to modernity and confining them to the private domain. (Adams, 1997; Jacobs & Smyth, 2013). In reality, this strategy created a cultural hierarchy in which Khmer remained functionally submissive in local government and minority languages were sidelined within official institutions.

This dichotomy between "traditional" and "modern" served as the basis for the cultural colonization of Cambodia. Buddhist canonical literature, royal court poetry, and Pali knowledge were valued and kept as representations of an immutable Khmer legacy in a process that Hansen (2004) Likens to cultural museumization. In contrast, French literature, art, and philosophy were presented as representations of progress and rational modernity. Both the cultural forms that were preserved and how they were seen were impacted by this hierarchy. To conform to French anthropological narratives, Khmer ceremonies were often reframed as static artifacts, stripping them of their dynamic community obligations and responsibilities. Colonial shows and publications that deliberately blended these "timeless" Khmer relics with narratives of France's civilizing mission served to perpetuate the notion that the only path to accurate modernity was incorporation into French cultural forms. (Edwards, 2007a).

Colonial education played a significant role in shaping the public's perception of these institutions. Khmer language instruction was limited to teaching basic literacy and moral principles derived from a few selected Buddhist texts. At the same time, the curriculum heavily emphasized French history, literature, and science, as indicated in textbooks and teacher guides from the 1930s. The underlying educational message, according to Vickery (1998) It was that intellectual sophistication belonged to the French realm, while Khmer culture belonged to the realm of moral tradition and regional custom. In the colonial educational system, Western logic, linear thinking, and secular historiography replaced indigenous epistemologies, which were based on cyclical time, intertextual oral narratives, and spiritual cosmology, as the primary teaching modalities. This not only caused cognitive dissonance but also separated Khmer pupils from the intellectual heritage embedded in local performative, literary, and ceremonial traditions.

Control over the preservation of archives further cemented colonial authority over cultural memory. According to Derrida's (1996) theory of archival authority, those in charge of the archive also have control over the parameters and subject matter of

historical narrative. Before documenting, categorizing, and interpreting manuscripts, inscriptions, and oral histories, Cambodian colonial archivists and ethnographers evaluated their significance. The archival record of this era reveals a selective preservation strategy designed to support colonial administrative and scholarly objectives. Oral histories, traditional music, and rural theater scripts, particularly those that were critical of authority, were not included in the official collection, even though documents bolstering the notion that France was the guardian of Khmer civilization were painstakingly maintained. This disparity excluded subaltern voices from the official historical record, resulting in a distorted cultural memory that persisted throughout the postcolonial era. According to Chandler (2018), these colonial archives continue to form the foundation of most of what is considered "authoritative" Cambodian history, perpetuating the silences and omissions deeply embedded within them. The long-term result is a layered form of cultural displacement in which both language and memory bear the imprint of colonial selectivity, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Colonial Impact and Cultural Displacement in Cambodia

Dimension	Description
Language Policy	The Khmer script was adapted for French phonetic and printing needs, while minority languages were excluded from education. Standardization was imposed under a colonial framework.
Cultural Hierarchies	Khmer culture is presented as static; French literature and philosophy are praised as symbols of modernity; Buddhist scriptures are kept as a "traditional" legacy.
Education and Curriculum	Indigenous epistemologies were sidelined, Khmer education was restricted to moral instruction and basic literacy, and the French curriculum placed a strong emphasis on Western logic, secular history, and science.
The Authority of Archives	Due to colonial control over archival selections, records that supported French narratives were preserved, while the voices of oral and subaltern individuals were excluded from official archives.

Discussion

Vernacular traditions continued to be an essential instrument of resistance despite the colonial state's efforts to standardize language and suppress non-elite speech. Best illustrated are the writings of Krom Ngoy (1865-1936), dubbed the "poet of the people." In his public performances at pagodas, village gatherings, and rural marketplaces, Krom Ngoy combined his poetry with local wisdom, moral teaching, and social criticism. His poetry, which was delivered in easily understood colloquial Khmer, emphasized the importance of everyday speech as a medium for cultural transmission and questioned the colonial school system's dominance over the elite literary canon (Huot, 2025; Khoury, 2020). Even when his works were transcribed and published under colonial supervision, the idiomatic texture, rhythm, and orality of his writings

continued to provide a counter-discourse to the organized, Francophone-influenced literary language.

In the decades following independence, a new generation of Cambodian writers challenged the cultural concepts and literary traditions that had been influenced by colonialism. In the 1960s and 1970s, authors like Soth Polin merged existentialist philosophy with nationalist themes to explore concerns of identity, authority, and alienation. (Chandler, 2018; Kiernan et al., 2023). Even though Western intellectual currents influenced Soth Polin's books, they contextualized these philosophical questions within Cambodian social realities, creating a hybrid literary style that was difficult to categorize as either colonial or nationalist in nature. (Mekong Review, 2015, November 11). This literary hybridity challenged the enduring Eurocentrism of post-independence cultural institutions by expanding the themes of Cambodian writing to include moral complexity and psychological introspection. The Cambodian diaspora has played a significant role in helping people regain their cultural identity and historical memory, particularly through groups founded after the Khmer Rouge regime. In addition to attempting to reestablish connections with their homeland, exiled and second-generation Cambodian writers often address the tragic changes brought about by war, genocide, and forced migration. Writers such as Sothy Eng and Sophal Ear create what Hirsch (2012) calls "post-memory" fiction by fusing memory fragments, bilingual stories, and oral experiences. In this genre, survivors' descendants reconstruct and transmit memories of events they did not personally experience. These pieces combat the erasure caused by colonial archival silences and the destruction of cultural institutions during the Khmer Rouge era by establishing new international venues for Khmer cultural expression.

Contemporary initiatives to restore Cambodian cultural memory are increasingly combining educational reform with community-based preservation efforts. Organizations such as the Bophana Center in Phnom Penh provide the public with access to and integration of endangered recordings, video archives, and oral histories into local curriculum. Indigenous research, teaching, and methodology practices are exemplified by these projects, which return control of cultural knowledge to its creators. (Smith, 2012). Decolonial curriculum modifications, developed in collaboration with NGOs and community educators, aim to reintegrate oral traditions, local histories, and critical media literacy into school curricula. By challenging the dominant colonial order that places a premium on Western epistemologies, these reforms promote what Mignolo (2011) calls "epistemic delinking," which allows Cambodian students to engage with their cultural history as a dynamic, ever-evolving source of intellectual agency. The different forms of reclamation and resistance, ranging from rural oral poetry to diasporic literary experimentation and institutional action, demonstrate that Cambodian cultural regeneration is neither a total rejection of external influences nor a yearning for a pre-colonial past. Instead, these projects demonstrate a dynamic balancing act between historical legacies and contemporary concepts. Collectively, they disprove the colonial myth of cultural reliance, validate the resilience of native knowledge systems, and lay the groundwork for a pluralistic and critically engaged Cambodian culture in the future.

## Conclusion

The literature and language of Cambodia were significantly and permanently impacted by French colonization. The adoption of standardized language forms, the preference for certain cultural expressions over others, and the restructuring of educational and archival systems changed how Khmer identity and knowledge were recorded, valued, and transmitted. These actions disrupted the natural continuity of indigenous activities by altering what was considered acceptable culture and reducing the diversity of voices preserved in the country's memory. In the decades since, Khmer intellectuals, artists, educators, and community leaders have engaged in various forms of resistance and reclamation. Through the revival of oral traditions, the creation of postcolonial literature, the preservation of diasporic memory, and the development of culturally grounded educational programs, they have sought to dismantle inherited hierarchies and revive the vibrancy of Cambodian cultural life. These initiatives demonstrate that reclamation is not a one-time occurrence but rather an ongoing process that lasts for centuries and changes to reflect shifting historical conditions.

For a long-term decolonial recovery, transdisciplinary and indigenous-led projects will be required. Coordinated efforts in cultural development, educational policy, and heritage preservation must be built upon the languages, artistic representations, and knowledge systems that are deeply embedded in Cambodian communities. By centring local agency and fostering cross-sector collaboration, Cambodia can cultivate a cultural future that honours its heritage while remaining dynamic and adaptive to contemporary realities.

**Author Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to this work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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