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Gendered Motivations, Sociocultural Constraints, and Psychobehavioral Consequences of Transnational Partnerships in Cambodia

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Abstract

Global flows of people, information and capital have created transnational spaces in Cambodia. Within those spaces exists the formation of complex and multilayered interpersonal relationships between people attempting to capitalize on the opportunities created by these flows. The purpose of this article is to describe these transnational relationships, namely between young women employed in the entertainment sectors in Phnom Penh, and their western male partners, while highlighting the racialized and gendered motivations of the global actors, the inevitable sociocultural conflicts/constraints/ misunderstandings that arise within the partnerships, and the resulting challenges and psychobehavioral consequences experienced by the mobile and differentiated individuals involved in these postcolonial relational formations.

Introduction

Since the fall of the Khmer Rouge in the 1990s, global capitalism and tourism have reshaped Cambodia's cultural, sexual and economic landscapes. Complex interpersonal relationships have resulted from both this reshaping, and the intermingling of cultures, capital, desires, histories and imaginations that takes place within the country's transnational spaces. One particularly prolific site for the formation of these postcolonial partnerships is within the western-oriented hostess bar scene in Phnom Penh.¹

This scene is located within the larger entertainment sector in the capital city's overarching nighttime economy. And both the scene, itself, and the individuals that occupy it, are overwhelming stereotyped by outside observers as operating within the commercial sexual marketplace. However, extensive longitudinal ethnographic research has revealed that the relationships between 'professional girlfriends'² and hostess bar workers, and their western³ male partners, are often more nuanced, and less commercialized than the typical sex-for-

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¹A 'hostess bar' is an establishment where paid female employees act as 'hostesses' by sitting and interacting with foreign male customers in order to supplement their USD\$60 per month salaries with tips and 'ladies drinks' (which are drinks purchased for the women by customers whereby the women earn the \$1 surcharge added to the price of the drink). The 'hostess bar scene' is made up of all the bars (totaling between 100-200 in Phnom Penh), and the employees and customers that patronize them.

²'Professional girlfriends' are women who do not typically identify as sex workers, but who engage in materially-motivated transactional relationships with more than one partner via a performance of intimacy in order to improve their socio-economic status and sustain their livelihoods (Hoefinger 2011, 2013). The term 'transactional' refers to the gift-based nature of the relationships, whereby the exchange of sex for gifts is tied to a larger set of non-conjugal obligations (Hunter 2002), and it should not be confused with 'commercial' exchanges, which denote the sex-for-cash exchanges that take place in the sexual marketplace.

cash exchanges that characterize conventional understandings of ‘sex work’ and ‘prostitution’ (Hoefinger 2013).

To date, however, much of the literature that addresses transnational relationships between Southeast Asian women and western men does so from within the framework of ‘trafficking’ (in Cambodia, see L. Brown 2000, E. Brown 2007), ‘sex work’ (in Thailand, see Odzer 1994 and Hamilton 1997; in Philippines, see Law 2000; in Vietnam, see Hoang 2011), ‘mail order brides’ (in Philippines, see Constable 2003), and ‘sex tourism’ (across Southeast Asia, see Hall 1996 and Truong 1990). Therefore, the research presented here is the first of its kind to explore the complexities of exchange, intimacy, political economy and romance between Cambodian women and western men by using the innovative theoretical frameworks of transactional sex the materiality of everyday relationships (Hoefinger 2013, Hunter 2002). Such a framework of analysis provides new understandings of sex, gender, power and political economy that emerge from these multilayered relationships, as well as new challenges.

The objectives of this article are to, thus, describe the contemporary sociocultural and historical contexts of transactional-transnational relationships between ‘bar girls’⁴/ professional girlfriends and their foreign partners by mapping how and where the relationships initially develop, and drawing historical links to ‘temporary marriages’ in precolonial Cambodia. The paper then outlines the racialized and gendered motivations of the Khmer women and western men to engage in the relationships. For Khmer women, these motivations are influenced by global imagination, personal aspirations, global media, as well as the cultural constructs of ‘patronage’ and ‘bridewealth’. For western men, these motivations have been categorized into four typologies which include ‘unattached holiday sex’, ‘hero syndrome’, ‘conventional domestic order’, and ‘true love’.⁵

The goal in this article is to ultimately destigmatize and humanize these partnerships, which often present overlaps rather than dissimilarities with more ‘normative’ and ‘conventional’ relationships (meaning non-commercial/non-transactional/non-remunerative) in terms of their general materiality and the entanglement of pragmatic concerns, emotional desires, personal narratives and political economy. Yet, in order to draw attention to the unique ways that gender, race, culture and power are played out in uneven terrains, the article ends with highlighting some of the psychobehavioral consequences that result from cultural misunderstandings, failed expectations, and miscommunication which, oftentimes, arise within interethnic or transnational relationships. These direct and indirect consequences take the form of depression, alcohol/substance use, intimate partner violence, self-harming and suicide—the last two of which being psychobehavioral public health issues that have received little to no attention in Cambodia.

³Throughout this article, ‘western’ (and its derivatives) are used interchangeably with ‘global north’ to connote socio-economically advantaged persons or places, as well as the hegemonic cultures, values and beliefs embodying those persons or places (Hoefinger 2011, 2013).

⁴‘Bar girl’ is a term the young women employed in bars self-reference with.

⁵These typologies are further outlined in Hoefinger (2013).

The data presented here has been taken from a larger longitudinal ethnographic study on the hostess bar scene in Cambodia (see Hoefinger 2013). The main method employed was ‘intimate ethnography’, which refers to the practice of conducting qualitative research by forming deep, interpersonal and long-lasting relationships with participants in the existential, postmodern and feminist veins of the ‘carnal’ sociology/anthropology of Cesara (1982), Newton (1993), Bourgois (1995), Kulick and Wilson (1995), Wacquant (2004), and Irwin (2006). Data was taken from formal ethnographic research and interviews conducted with 86 young Khmer women employed in the entertainment sectors in Phnom Penh, and 102 ‘western’ male tourists or expatriates⁶ living or passing through Cambodia during various fieldsite visits between the period of 2005-2010. The reason the sample of men is slightly larger than women resulted from the sampling methods, which were non-random and purposive, meaning the sample members satisfied certain criteria that were of interest to me (Sifaneck and Neaigus 2001: 528) (such as being young Cambodian women employed in hostess bars, and western men who frequented hostess bars), and whose information was ‘more likely to develop and test emerging analytical ideas’ (Walsh 2006: 2). Specific purposive sampling methods included snowball sampling, and as the majority of the research took place while seated along the ‘customer-side’ of the bar, it was common to be surrounded by men who were eager to initiate conversations, who then not only agreed to participate in the project, but then introduced their friends to the project as well. Ethnographic encounters were recorded in field notes, and interviews were audio recorded and/or hand written. Content analysis (Krippendorff 2004) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) were then used to analyze the field notes and interview data by first coding the data, and then identifying key concepts and themes. All participants provided their informed consent.⁷

Setting the Scene: Contemporary and Historical Context

Phnom Penh is a lively but rather compact capital city, which is often portrayed and experienced as simultaneously wild and chaotic, yet laid back and relaxing—this contradictory experience being the appeal for the plethora of tourists and expatriates who dot the city on a daily basis. And for a nation that prides itself as being sexually and morally ‘conservative’, sex is, quite paradoxically, more than just a backdrop of the landscape, but rather a ‘metanarrative’ of the city, whereby its visibility, consumption, and effects are evidenced in multiple layers of everyday life in the urban centers (Hoefinger 2013). Visible public affection and discussions of sexual activities in daily discourse among friends are becoming evermore commonplace. And at the check-out counter of many convenience stores, it is common to find neatly-rowed boxes of breath mints, condoms, birth control pills and erection-prolonging medications – essentials for a sex-filled night out in Phnom Penh.

⁶This larger sample size of 102 ‘western’ males includes 46 diasporic or overseas Cambodian-American, -Australian, -French men who had spent most or all of their lives living outside of Cambodia in either the US, Australia or France. When compared to ‘white’ westerners, this group tended to have differing experiences with Cambodian women who were specifically seeking out ‘western’ men, because on first sight, then men appeared to be ethnically Khmer, yet their behaviors, attitudes, and comportment were more American, French or Australian due to their extended exposure abroad. Their insights and experiences have been particularly useful in highlighting the complex racialized desirabilities of the female bar workers, who tended to initially reject these men until the women were able to read them as more ‘western’.

⁷Ethics approval was granted by both the Institutional Review Board at City University of New York, Hunter College, and the Department of Media & Communications Research Ethics Committee at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

The hostess bars that are the subject of this article are concentrated in two geographic areas of the city known as the ‘The Riverside’ and ‘The Strip’. The former is the zone which includes several streets that run parallel and perpendicular with the Tonle Sap River, that are home to new and old hostess bars, guesthouses, upscale hotels, restaurants, internet cafes, pubs and expat bars. The latter is a popular tourist street known for its debauchorous nightlife lined with hostess bars, pubs, clubs, and food stalls. The Strip has perhaps one of the most eclectic and colorful mixes of people one will find in Phnom Penh—a place where backpackers, NGO workers, journalists, professional girlfriends, male/female/ transgender sex workers, teachers, sexpats⁸, local gangsters, progenies of high-powered government officials and politicians, deportees, street children, homeless beggars, child rose-sellers and moto-drivers all collide on a nightly basis until the sun rises and the street wakes up to a day of relative conventionality with its small shops and internet cafes. Both the Riverside and the Strip could be described as transnational meeting ground of sorts, what James Farrer refers to as ‘ethnosexual contact zones’ – where individuals ‘seek contact across ethnic boundaries, with one major form of cross-ethnic contact being sexual interaction’ (2011: 748).

Upon entering many hostess bars, a customer will often be greeted with an orchestra of ‘hellos’ by scantily dressed young women wearing heavy make-up and styled hair. The ages of the female employees range from approximately 18-35 (though it’s not uncommon for 16 and 17 year-old girls to work in the bars with fake documentation stating they are 18, the new legal age of consent)⁹. During a night’s shift, the girls will serve drinks, play pool, watch TV, dance with customers and one another, gamble for ‘ladies drinks’ by playing the popular table-top game of *Connect Four*, or simply sit and chat, or awkwardly kiss and stroke—or be kissed and stroked by—one or more of the customers.

Similar to the strategies employed by the ‘taxi-dancers’ in Paul Cressey’s (1932/2005) early study, bar girls utilize certain techniques in order to ‘commercialize most efficiently their personal charm’ and ‘get the dances’ (41-43)—or in this case, the ‘ladies drinks’. These tactics include showing great interest in mundane conversation, communicating through laughter when struggling with language comprehension, demurely flirting through bodily gestures and eye contact, physically caressing the customers, laughing at sexual jokes or innuendos, and making promises of later engagements.

The male receivers of these strategic affections, who range from approximately 18-76 years of age, tend to hail from various regions and walks of life—despite stereotypical images of them as being middle aged, balding, overweight European men. Their countries and regions of origin are typically the US, UK, Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and more recently, evermore Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, Singaporean and Nigerian clientele can be found patronizing the hostess bars. The men range from young backpackers traveling on their parents credit cards during their gap years, to older retired military personnel, and everything in between: English teachers, NGO workers, lawyers, land developers, embassy workers, journalists, advertisers, artists, IT technicians, drug dealers, and internet fraudsters.

⁸‘Sexpat’ is the colloquial term used to describe expatriates who settle in Cambodia for the sole purpose of consuming paid sex.

⁹The legal age of consent in Cambodia changed from 15 to 18 in the 2008 Law on the Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation, which can be found at: http://www.no-trafficking.org/content/Laws_Agreement/cambodia_tip_2008.pdf (accessed August 22, 2013).

Certain scholars have pointed out that in some cases, the men traveling from the global north to the global south for the purpose of consuming paid sex or locating a marriage partner tend to occupy lower socioeconomic classes in their 'home' countries (Constable 2003, Brennan 2004), but this study conversely found great diversity of class and socio-economic status among the male partners.

For the majority of participants, the first point of contact with their current (or previous) partners was in a hostess bar (or other western-oriented nightclub). In some cases, the relationships are initiated under more of a commercial guise, such as sex on the first night in exchange for a cash tip to cover transport home. In other cases, they begin as more transactional—sex, or at least intimacy, in exchange for food, drinks, or gifts of clothes, jewelry or mobile phones. Often the diverse and wide-ranging relations that develop are mutually beneficial (each person receives something of value from the relationship). As historian Trude Jacobsen (2008) points out, these mutually beneficial relationships between local Khmer women and foreign men have been taking place in Cambodia for hundreds of years.

Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Portuguese, Spanish, English, Dutch, Chinese and Japanese merchants, mercenaries and officials traversed through Cambodia and took up local 'temporary wives' during their residencies.¹⁰ Once compensation was agreed upon, the Khmer woman moved into his home, served him by day as a cook and a maid, and sexually engaged with him at night. Due to the transient nature of the men, the arrangements were thus temporary and lasted only as long as the foreigner stayed there, yet they were viewed as legitimate unions. As Jacobsen points out, 'Temporary marriages were conducted in the same manner as a permanent union. Partners were expected to behave with respect and fidelity towards each other. Local rules applied to these marriages, with the relatives of the women concerned prepared to act on their behalf would they be mistreated at the hands of their husbands' (2008: 100).

These 'marriages', which would last for months or years, were viewed for centuries as mutually beneficial alliances: the mercantile, trading and translation skills of the women were useful for the foreigners, while the women benefited from improved status, prestige and wealth associated with their marriage and patronage to Europeans or other ostensibly 'affluent' nationals. These mutually beneficial transnational relationships present interesting parallels with present-day transactional relationships in relation to status and power, and are a useful platform from which to examine the contemporary motivations of professional girlfriends and hostess bar workers to form relationships with foreign men.

Racialized and Gendered Motivations

This study revealed that men's and women's motivations for engaging in partnerships with one another were incredibly varied and influenced by a number of racialized, gendered, economic and cultural factors. The above illustration of temporary marriages is linked to

¹⁰A contemporary example of 'temporary wives' could be the *mia chao* in Thailand. See Cohen (1982) and Murray (2001).

two key foundations in the social structure of Cambodia, which serve as potential cultural motivating factors for the women, and those are the concepts of patronage and bridewealth.

The overall conceptual framework of patronage or the ‘patron-client’ relationship is Buddhist and refers to the ways in which people accumulate merit by redistributing resources and wealth to others further down in the social order (Chandler 1973, 1979; Jacobsen 2008; Hoefinger 2013). Society is, thus, organized around ‘clients’ or followers attaching themselves to ‘patrons’ of higher status. The patrons are influential and distribute resources and protection for their clients in exchange for loyalty and personal assistance, which ultimately enhances the patron’s power (Ledgerwood 1990: 16). The system of exchange is unequal but mutually beneficial. Jacobsen further explains that this network of social relationships is known as *khsae*, or literally ‘cords’, that link people and families via the fulfillment of certain expectations:

‘*Khsae* can be familial, institutional, or political, but are usually cemented through marriage or a long-standing patron-client relationship between a family based in the centre and individuals inheriting the relationship on the periphery. Once *khsae* have been established, there are certain expectations between the contractors. The higher status party will expect their client to pass on a portion of any benefit they receive and support them in their endeavours. In return, the patron is expected to extend their protection to clients, [and] be generous towards them...Clients accept their position within this framework because elite status is perceived as giving that person natural rights over others due to their higher levels of *bunn* [merit], or the power that results from the performance of meritorious acts...This unquestioning acceptance that certain people are entitled to lead and others to follow must be taken into consideration when considering power relations in Cambodia’ (Jacobsen 2008: 7).

Thus, early temporary marriages to Europeans could be viewed as examples of patronage. And as Jacobsen further points out, there is epigraphic evidence dating back to at least the ninth century that reveals that Indian and Chinese diplomats, merchants and kings were offering great gifts to the families of potential Khmer and Cham wives in order to secure marriage alliances and their own right to rule the land (2008: 54). These marriages were historically viewed as ‘political tools of great significance’, which worked to improve the status of the entire family through patronage and *khsae* networks (Jacobsen 2008: 33).

This form of gift-giving to secure marriage could be viewed as an early example of bridewealth, which, in Cambodia, takes the form of the male paying back the ‘price of mother’s milk’ to the potential bride’s family in the form of a monetary (or at least material) gift. This concept (also referred to colloquially in English as paying back the ‘milk money’), combined with the construct of patronage, can potentially be seen as cultural motivators within the current transnational marriage and courtship context. In the hopes of making social and material gains, young Cambodian women attach themselves to foreign men, who generally have economic power over them. The men benefit from gaining not only personal satisfaction (which will be discussed further below in the section on ‘hero syndrome’), but also assistance with language translation and securing land. In exchange for the material benefits and financial security, the female partners are grateful, nurturing and loyal. Because

of her affiliation with this foreign ‘patron’, the women’s social status increases, as she then redistributes the material benefits to lower members of her familial and social hierarchy. This exchange, then, ultimately works to increase her own merit, power, and prestige to the point that she may then become a powerful patron within her own family and networks.

Today, it is still very much culturally expected that a daughter’s marriage will secure material benefits for the entire family. Thus, a Cambodian woman’s desire to meet a partner who will support both her and her family must not be attributed to some form of innate greed on the woman’s part (which is a stereotypical accusation that will be outlined below), but rather to a deeply rooted cultural expectation. And although one must be wary of applying this model of bridewealth and patronage to all cases of foreign–local relationships, there should be some understanding of these cultural concepts in the Southeast Asian context in order to understand what may potentially motivate some young women to engage in relationships with foreign men. Aside from these more tangible material motivations, there are other influences that affect a women’s decision to seek out foreign partners. These include personal aspirations, needs, expectations and desires for sex, romance, love, adventure, ‘modernity’, travel and experiences beyond the village, city, or national borders. After seeing sisters and cousins return to the family community lavished in new clothes and jewelry, many young women are influenced by the ‘opportunity myth’ (Brennan 2004), or the idea that migrating to the cities in search of western partners will result in a fairy-tale type endings, where the women are swept away to a life of happiness in a faraway country.

The flow of global media has played an integral part in shaping the women’s ‘global imaginations’ (Appadurai 1996) by allowing them to ‘dream’ of a life beyond what is known or familiar. Indeed, global print media, film, soap operas, and local karaoke and music videos are filled with idealized and racialized images of romantic love. Because of these images, western men—particularly light-skinned or white western men—are imagined to be more liberal, egalitarian, educated, modern, cultured and well-traveled, but also less abusive, jealous and demanding than their Khmer counterparts. Western boyfriends are also thought to be better lovers, fathers, and providers—so much so that some female participants had only ever been sexually intimate with western men, and never with Cambodian men. Other women had been impregnated, abandoned, or abused by Khmer partners, and these experiences, combined with very strict moral and social codes¹¹ that require women to be virgins at marriage, were catalysts for some women to seek out foreign partners who are imagined to be more accepting of non-virgins.

A telling example of the type of racialized desirability that is reinforced by the media is the hugely popular Khmer pop tune: *Go Get a Barang Husband (Tov York Pdey Barang)* by Khemarak Sereymon. The song is about a girl who is treated so poorly by her Khmer boyfriend (who impregnates her and then initiates violence) that she is compelled to seek out

¹¹For more on these social codes for women, known as the *Chpab Srei*, see Ledgerwood (1990), Chandler (1996), Tarr (1996), Derks (2008), Jacobsen (2008), and Brickell (2011). These are the best-known literary sources describing specific ideal behavior for women, which were written by elite men between the 14th and 19th centuries. They stress that regardless of what happens inside the house, only blinding obligation towards one’s husband and family will ensure the good reputation of the whole family. Breaking these social codes—particularly being a non-virgin at marriage—could mean, conversely, ruining not only one’s own reputation, but that of the entire family.

a ‘better’ foreign alternative. The music video is thick with images of the Cambodian couple living out their tumultuous relationship, until finally, feeling guilt and self-pity, the Khmer man encourages her to go get a *barang* [foreign] husband—which she willingly does. The video concludes with the transnational couple happily walking off into the sunset together. Media of this type reinforces and perpetuates popular stereotypes of drunk, lazy, violent, unemployed Khmer men, and their gracious, caring, generous, respectful European counterparts, which, of course, does not always reflect reality, as both groups of men can be caring and violent (Hoefinger 2013).

Oftentimes, partner choice and desirability was based not necessarily on physical appearances or age, but rather a man's ability to provide, to care for, and to be faithful, kind and treat women well (Constable 2003). And because western men are imagined to be better at this from images portrayed in global media, it was not uncommon for young Cambodian women to desire older, more settled western men as opposed to younger backpacker types. As one 23-year-old girlfriend of a 56-year-old Australian man explained: ‘The young *barang* [foreigners] are all butterflies [colloquial term for sexually promiscuous]...I like my old boyfriend because he stay good to me and my family for long time...also he don't want to do sex too much like the young guy.’ And while some women felt they actually could relate to, and have *better* sex with younger men, the older western partners presented more stability and security, which were sometimes more appealing traits to particular women.

Opportunity myth and global imagination combined with global media and communication technology shape not only the women's racialized desires and motivations, but the men's as well. While the following list is by no means exhaustive, the four typologies that are presented emerged as common tropes among western males who were seeking out Cambodian partners. Of course, these motivations were rarely clear-cut, and were often overlapping and affected by a range of factors. The point of this section, however, is to highlight a few of the typological similarities that surfaced most frequently in observations and discussions with western men about what propels them to look for Cambodian girlfriends.

Some of the men—particularly the young backpackers—were pleasure-seekers driven by a desire for guilt-free, non-commercial ‘unattached holiday sex’. It was quite common for these young men to make fleeting promises of love and future commitment, when what they most often desired was just good sex-for-fun while on holiday, or a ‘trophy’ girlfriend in Cambodia as proof of their conquests once they return to their home countries. Their motivations were based on Orientalist constructions of the women as ‘exotic’ and sexually promiscuous (Said 1978), and oftentimes, the young men were unprepared for the emotional commitment that was instead expected by the Khmer women at the other end of these ostensible ‘casual’ encounters. Some of the women were happy to engage in these short-term hedonistic encounters, but others experienced much greater emotional attachment, which led to confusion and misunderstandings, which will be discussed in depth below.

Interestingly but not surprisingly, however, it was quite common for those young men who were originally seeking out ‘unattached holiday sex’ to eventually be affected by ‘hero syndrome’—a latent form of neocolonial globalization whereby ‘privileged’ men from the

global north make it their personal responsibility to ‘rescue’ underprivileged and impoverished girls from the global south (in a sub/conscious effort to control foreign lives and decisions) (Hoefinger 2013). This is linked, again, to the uneasy marriage of Orientalist stereotypes of Cambodian women as ignorant and helpless to (neo)colonial beliefs that westerners are best suited to ‘save’ savage ‘Others’ (Agustín 2007). These messages are, again, often reflected in the media, as Cleo Odzer explain in relation to her research on the male clients of Thai sex workers: “Western storybooks and video games emphasize the hero saving a maiden in distress. Patpong and Thailand presented Western men with the ingredients to play out that scenario’ (1994: 255). In relation to Dominican sex workers and their German partners, Denise Brennan (2004) further points out that these philanthropic acts tend to make the relationships feel less or nonexploitative, and allow some of the men to justify supporting entire families. In Cambodia, however, women often know how to capitalize on this empathy, which leads to some of the men feeling underappreciated and taken advantage of, and results in many of the misunderstandings that will be highlighted below.

Conversations with some of the more mature western men also revealed that, after years of being spurned by ‘dominant’ and ‘liberated’ women back home, they were hoping to find ‘better’ (read as ‘submissive’) partners in Cambodia. These men represent the third typology, which are motivations driven by ‘conventional domestic order.’ These boyfriends were nostalgically longing for patriarchal gendered divisions of labor within the household, and ‘the way things used to be’ before the ‘abhorrent’ women’s liberation movement in the west. Using words like ‘kryptonite’ to describe western ‘feminists’ who longed for equality within relationships, and ‘velvet skinned mermaids’, ‘silky haired vixens’, or ‘genuine feminine women’ to describe Khmer women, the western men pitted the women as polar opposites: western women as threatening and something to be avoided,¹² and Khmer women as simultaneously passive, exotic, and something to be embraced. This has much to do with the men’s own notions of power whereby western women are seen to deplete men’s power in their efforts towards equality, and Khmer women are seen to reinforce it by remaining submissive and subservient. Influenced by both global liberal feminism and local microfeminisms, however, some women express frustration with the subservient positioning of women in Cambodia, and they are not settling for domesticized lives of reproductive labor. Instead, they are asserting their autonomous needs and desires within the relationships, which has lead to some unexpected consequences (outlined below).

As previously stated, the men’s motivations for engaging with Cambodian partners were complicated and intertwined, and often they were also longing for enduring ‘real’ love, intimacy and someone to happily spend the rest of their lives with. These men tended to seek out genuinely egalitarian partnerships based on mutual romantic attraction and shared labor and decision-making in the household. They were aware of the inherent power asymmetries and worked hard to try to even the playing field. The professed vulnerability and sensitivity of some of the western men helped to problematize binaries of oppressor/oppressed (Constable 2003), and contest the reductionist stereotypes and typical hegemonic discourses

¹²For more on men’s negative feelings towards western feminism, see Faludi (1999), Robinson (1996, 2001), Constable (2003) and McRobbie (2009).

around neocolonialist masculinity that were so clearly evidenced above in the typologies of ‘unattached holiday sex’, ‘hero syndrome’ and ‘conventional domestic order’.

Quite often, power was a fluid and shifting force within the relationships, which was animated by different parties in different situations (Foucault 1980, Ong 1995). As Constable points out, ‘It is unwarranted to assume that either the man or the woman has a monopoly on power; nor should it be assumed that either has a monopoly on pleasure’ (2003: 221)—or love. And while desirabilities based on race, gender, economics or culture were apparent in most conversations on partner choice, it is important to note that these conditions ‘did not necessarily preclude feelings of love’ (Constable 2003: 133). ‘Love’ was most definitely a dominant theme resonating from both genders when questioned about motivations and reasons for taking part in the transnational partnerships. However, it was precisely different constructions and understandings of love that was at the heart of many interpersonal conflicts in the relationships. Though the desires of men and women may often be complementary, the constraints of history, culture, politics, economics, race and class inevitably produce gendered and sociocultural conflict and misunderstandings that must be continuously negotiated and grappled with throughout the relationships.

Sociocultural Constraints, Conflicts and Misunderstandings

In the globalized ethnosexual contact zones of urban Southeast Asia, a common challenge arises when intersecting and contradictory meanings of love, desire and pragmatic concerns collide, and the culturally entangled participants are subsequently left struggling with confusion, expectations, and misinterpretations. This money-love conundrum has been well documented in Southeast Asia by Annette Hamilton (1997), Lisa Law (2000) and Alison Murray (2001), who each highlight, in different ways, how many sex and entertainment workers in the region tend to both view their relationships with clients/customers in terms of emotionality and love, and that these notions of love are attached to material needs and economic pragmatism.

It is also important to note here that love, itself, is a socially and culturally constructed concept, where its meanings range from sexual, passionate and/or romantic, to caring, respectful and appreciative (Hoefinger 2013). As highlighted above, there are deeply-rooted cultural expectations in Cambodia surrounding marriage and material benefit for the entire family in the form of bridewealth. This expectation is closely linked to understandings of love as expressed through gift-giving, and often, sex and love *without* material rewards is considered demeaning to many Khmer women as it is culturally expected that the man will fulfill the ‘provider role’ (Jewkes et al 2011). Emotional attachment is commonly engendered through material dependence, whereby pragmatic concerns and ideas of ‘love’ are overlapping and even inseparable.

Yet this linkage between money and care completely throws into chaos the man’s cognitive map and perceptions of ‘pure love’, which should, in his mind, always be uncommodified and detached from material expectations, since, in western ideology, love tends to generally be viewed as noncommercial (Hamilton 1997). In outlining ‘how and why love, romance, and marriage are linked—despite a strong American cultural reluctance to burst the fairy tale

bubble and see it this way—to money, class, and power’ (Constable 2003: 118), Constable explains that US men’s aversion to linking love with political economy is connected to a basic western conceptualization of the public-private divide, whereby the ‘private’ family is viewed to be ‘symbolic refuge’ from the market relations of capitalism (2003: 116). Viviana Zelizer goes further and has termed this conceptualization the ‘separate spheres and hostile worlds’ model, which argues that there are ‘distinct arenas for economic activity and intimate relations with inevitable contamination and disorder resulting when the two spheres come into contact with each other’ (2005: 21). She further explains:

For each meaningfully distinct category of social relations, people erect a boundary, mark the boundary by means of names and practices, establish a set of distinctive understandings and practices that operate within that boundary, designate certain sorts of economic transactions as appropriate for the relation, bar other transactions as inappropriate, and adopt certain media for reckoning and facilitating economic transactions within the relation. All these efforts belong to relational work...Hostile worlds ideas and practices emerge from the effort to mark and defend boundaries between categories of relations that contain some common elements, could be confused, and would threaten existing relations of trust if confused. (Zelizer 2005: 36)

Despite the fact that families, marriages nor any personal relationships are immune from influences of the state or the economy (Constable 2003), and that across a wide range of intimate relations (be they familial, professional or sexual), ‘money cohabitates regularly with intimacy, and even sustains it’ (Zelizer 2005: 28), and that the commodification and commercialization in and of itself does not destroy intimacy (Hochschild 2003), this ‘hostile worlds’ perspective continues to dominate the views of those western men in Cambodia, who feel confused and threatened by this intermingling of pragmatics and emotion. A woman’s demands of jewelry, money, and gifts suggest to the western man that she is not sincere in her displays of affection, and sentiments of mistrust and uncertainty were repeatedly voiced during interviews with western men. They often framed the women in such pejorative and stereotypical terms as ‘greedy whores’, ‘thieves’, ‘liars’, and ‘hoodrats’ (British slang for conniving, deceitful people), who were ‘dishonest’, ‘lazy’ and ‘money-hungry’. They associated these traits as ‘innate faults’ of the women, who simply ‘know no better’, which resulted in men’s sentiments of ‘ulterior motives’ and ‘never being able to trust’ the women, due to constant feelings of being ‘underappreciated’, ‘used’, and ‘taken advantage of’.

One way transnational couples are attempting to circumvent this issue is the adoption of the newly imported model of dating colloquially referred to as ‘going Dutch’. This, which is particularly favorable to the male partners, refers to the couples splitting (or paying for their own) costs of drinks, food and taxis—a strategy which tends to make the relationships feel more egalitarian—he doesn’t feel like he’s being used or like he’s paying for sex, and she feels an ostensible sense of financial independence which boosts her self esteem. The irony, however, is that the female partner can usually only engage in these types of practices if she has secured funds to pay her own way from another sponsor or boyfriend. As one 28-year-

old Cambodian bar worker complained: ‘He want me to pay for food and taxi same like him, but he get angry when I get money from other [German male] friend.’

Varied socially and culturally constructed meanings of ‘honesty’ mutually affected the transnational partnerships, as well. While ‘honesty’ was something both the Cambodian women and foreign male partners placed high value on in relationships, the Cambodian concept of ‘saving face’ complicated understandings of the term. ‘Saving face’ refers to the process of maintaining one’s pride and reputation through whatever means—even if that includes a girl telling little ‘white lies’ about continuing to work in the bars after saying she would stop, or casually seeing other partners on the side after promising loyalty to one boyfriend. The rationalization behind what appears to be ‘dishonesty’ on the women’s parts is usually not malice or greed, however, but a sense of wanting to protect themselves and look after their future security. And while the women might interpret such actions as taking control over their lives by creatively using the resources around them to improve their livelihoods, the western men use these examples as fuel to feed the stereotypes, and justify the rationale that all Cambodian women are materialistic liars (Hoefinger 2013).

Not surprisingly, however, a great deal of infidelity and ‘cheating’ took place on the part of the men as well, despite their harsh racialized accusations against the women. In some cases, this was related to a sense of entitlement that was associated with ‘hero syndrome’, as a young British man explained: ‘I been supporting [his girlfriend] and her family for years...the money shuts them up. So once in a while it’s ok if I dabble a little’—referring to having sexual relations outside their supposedly monogamous relationship. In other cases, this male infidelity was linked to more global constructions of patriarchal masculinity and justified in terms of ‘insatiability’ and a ‘biological need’ to have frequent sexual intercourse with multiple partners.

Nevertheless, this fraught terrain of mutual deceit, rationalizations, lying and ‘saving face’ sowed the seeds of mutual uncertainty, insecurity and mistrust, which had to continually be negotiated alongside other more basic sociocultural constraints. (Mis)communication resulting from deficits in the language skills of both parties was a common cause of friction in many relationships. Difficulties with ‘intimate speech’ (Hamilton 1997) or more complex interpersonal dialogue was a sight of constant frustration for some couples. Other practical impediments that affect transnational partnerships in distinctive ways were associated with more bureaucratic tasks such as sorting out travel paperwork, marriage certificates, visas, and passports—all great stressors in some cases. The current marriage ban in Cambodia is an example of one such major stressor for couples intent on connubiality. Despite not passing through parliament and being a breach of both local and international marriage laws, in March 2011, the foreign ministry implemented a ‘legally binding’ marriage directive that prohibits any foreign man over the age of 50, or any foreign man of any age earning less than \$2,550 per month, from marrying (in Cambodia) a Cambodian woman of any age.¹³

¹³For a longer discussion on the sexist, ageist, and discriminatory effects of the current marriage ban, see Hoefinger (2013). For more information on the ban itself, see http://www.economist.com/blogs/ban-yan/2011/04/legislating_morality_cambodia and <http://www.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Asia/Story/A1Story20110316-268488.html> (both accessed 17 July 2012).

Such intrusive governmental obstructions to fulfilling matrimonial goals are the catalysts of great tension and strain for some transnational couples.

Regularly branded in public opinion as ‘inappropriate’ or ‘inauthentic’, Cambo-western couples must continuously grapple with social stigma, another major stressor for some. Because the borders between marriage, courtship, transactional sex and prostitution can be quite ambiguous, outside observers tend to homogenize most interethnic, intercultural (and intergenerational) relationships in Cambodia as always commodified—particularly if they are initiated in a bar. The couples find themselves having to constantly defend their relationships to their friends and families as different from prostitution or a commercial sexual exchange (even when the relationships may clearly be more transactional than others). By marking their relationships as ‘boyfriend’ and ‘girlfriend’, local women and foreign men deliberately distinguish the relevant boundaries of the partnerships so as to define them in both a nonstigmatizing and non-consequential way. Monetary exchanges are distinctly marked as ‘gifts’ or ‘help’ as opposed to ‘payments’ or ‘tips’, the former indicating ‘friendship’ and the latter ‘commercial exchange’ (Zelizer 2005). Despite that this type of boundary marking and rationalizing takes place in all other relationships as well, those involved in Cambo-western partnerships are, often times, inclined to be more defensive because they are the first to be accused of engaging in exploitative, uneven, commercial relationships simply because he is western and ‘rich’ and she is Cambodian and ‘poor’. It can be argued that the stereotypes and stigma surrounding transnational coupledness are classist and racist, since the negotiations that take place within them around pragmatic concerns and intimacy are quite universal (Hoefinger 2013).

Yet, these stereotypes and stigma, coupled with cultural (mis)understandings around economics, emotions, sexual value systems, and varying subjective constructions of ‘love’ and ‘honesty’, combined with everyday obstacles related to language barriers, bureaucracy and state interference can sometimes result in combusive and inter-related consequences for the mobile and differentiated individuals involved in these postcolonial relational formations. These various psychobehavioral consequences are outlined in detail in the following section.

Psychobehavioral Consequences

Desires for marriage with a foreign partner and the imagined worlds they represent are based on a myriad of constructed notions of desirability, attractiveness, material comfort, romance and love. These ideas conjure up a ‘felicitous brew’ and a ‘heady mix’ (Ong 1999) of imagined and idealized images of romantic love like that which exists in films, soap operas, and karaoke videos. Yet, the practical realities of negotiating desires and ‘dating’ someone—particularly from a culture other than one’s own—can prove to be challenging, as evidenced above. When expectations for enduring relationships aren’t met, and feelings are misunderstood between Cambodian women and their western boyfriends, psychobehavioral consequences sometimes ensue, which take the form of depression, alcohol/substance use, intimate partner violence, self-harming and suicide. In the context of these transnational partnerships, these particular issues sometimes overlap, and have symbiotic relationships to one another.

Take, for example, the case of alcohol/substance use. As stated above, the vast majority of the Cambo-western relationships in this study were initiated in a hostess bar, and nearly every single male and female informant participated in some degree of alcohol and/or substance use (namely marijuana or methamphetamines). Studies have shown that up to 84% of women employed in karaoke bars have drunk alcohol every night and 83% have reported ever using drugs (PSI 2006), while up to 91% of beer promotion women¹⁴ admitted to drinking during their shifts in beer gardens (CARE 2005). Similarly, nearly all the female hostess bar workers in this project self-reported that they drank alcohol almost every time they worked—a behavior directly linked to the concept of ‘ladies drinks’, which provides a strong financial incentive to consume alcohol, as they are essentially paid to drink by earning a dollar for every beverage that is purchased for them by a customer. It’s not compulsory to choose alcoholic beverages, but they usually do, with some women reporting the consumption of ten or more ‘ladies drinks’ per night.

There is also a ‘glamorization’ of alcohol in Cambodia, whereby it is culturally considered a ‘potent symbol of power, prestige and status’ (Tarr 1996: 203). Thus, the ability to purchase large quantities of it is considered prestigious, and consuming it to the point of ‘extreme drunkenness’ is deemed quite normal (PSI/FHI 2007). No statistical data exists for the consumption of alcohol among hostess bar workers or patrons, but empirical observations revealed that both the men and women in this study engaged in daily drinking patterns that often resulted in extreme intoxication with toxic results.

Many times, the cultural misunderstandings, miscommunication and mistrust between the couples escalated when under the influence of alcohol, which led to cases of intimate partner violence. Katherine Brickell (2008) found, in her study on the gendered experiences of violence in the Khmer household, that many men and women perceived violence to be related to alcohol consumption in Cambodia. Due to strictly prescribed gender roles that require women to remain submissive and subservient to men (as outlined in the *Cbpab Srei* and embedded in public discourse and national rhetoric), women are typically the victims of this physical and sexual violence (Yount and Carrera 2006), which takes the form of beatings, rape (including gang rape), forced commercial sexual exploitation, father-daughter incest, and police brutality, to name a few (Hoefinger 2013). Ethnographic evidence from this study revealed, however, that the intimate partner violence within many transnational relationships is often mutual, and instigated by both parties—particularly when alcohol is involved. This finding is significant because this mutual abuse within transnational partnerships has not been documented in the literature on gender-based violence. The rationale behind the reciprocation of violence from the women’s perspectives is linked to notions of western liberal feminism.

¹⁴‘Beer promotion women’ are women who work in the ‘beer garden’ sector of the entertainment industry in Cambodia. They are employed by both local and western beer distributors (such as Heineken, Carlsberg, Tiger, Asahi and Anchor) to wear the company’s branded uniforms and push their particular brand of beer to customers in exchange for monthly salaries or commission, only. ‘Beer gardens’ are often large combined indoor/outdoor venues that provide beer, food and entertainment to mostly Cambodian or other Asian customers—as opposed to white westerners, who instead frequent the hostess bar sector (racialized differences in clientele are what make beer gardens and karaoke bars, which tend to attract locals, distinct from western-oriented hostess bars). For more on ‘beer promotion women’ or the beer garden sector, see CARE (2005), Lubek (2005), or visit www.beergirls.org (accessed August 22, 2013).

After being the subject of much physical and sexual abuse meted out by the Khmer man she was forced to marry at a young age, one 24-year-old Cambodian female used feminist notions of ‘strength’ to justify the violence she ultimately carried out on both him (which took the form of threatening to kill him with a knife and throwing acid in his face), and future western partners: ‘Men are afraid of me ... I am strong like western girls ... I will fight back’ (Hoefinger 2013). Another 26-year-old female explained that when she witnesses her Canadian boyfriend talking to another girl in the bar, she regularly ‘boxes’ (punches) him if she’s been drinking—a common occurrence empirically observed throughout this research. She, too, frames herself as being ‘a strong girl’ who is ‘fighting back’ (against what she interprets as infidelity or disloyalty in this case, though he might interpret his conversations as casual social discourse).

These attitudes highlight that the concept of liberal feminism and refusal to surrender to abuse is regarded as a western quality that Cambodian women are adopting into their own discourses of empowerment. Rather than quietly accepting the violence perpetrated against them—as they are directed to do by the *Chpab Srei* and gendered social codes—young women are appropriating behaviors that they deem ‘western’, and associate with strength and resistance, and they are literally throwing the first punches. Thus, it was common to also hear narratives of abuse from the foreign men, who voiced regular occurrences of being punched, kicked, spat on, bitten, slapped, stalked, and robbed by their (usually inebriated) Khmer girlfriends. Again, the causes of these fights were often money, jealousy, mistrust, miscommunication and failed expectations, and the fuel was alcohol (and in a minority of cases, methamphetamine—which is the ‘predominant drug of abuse’ in Cambodia, outside of alcohol [Thomson 2010: 18]).

So while the theme of alcohol as being linked to intimate partner violence was prevalent in the narratives of participants, so too was the trope of alcohol (and other substances) as being used to deal with depression and ‘heartache’. When the relationships ultimately fail due to the myriad of sociocultural conflicts and constraints described above (including recurring intimate partner violence linked to alcohol use), many Khmer women and western men framed alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism. A 27-year-old British male explained that, since his bad break-up with his Khmer girlfriend, he spends every night in the bars, ‘drinking his sorrows away.’ A 22 year-old female bar worker admitted that she drinks to ‘have fun’, but also because she ‘gets depressed’ when continuously abandoned by her backpacker boyfriends, so she soothes the constant feelings of rejection, abandonment and betrayal with the liquid elixir. Another 26-year-old girl explained how she essentially puts her ‘heart on the line’ every time with new partners, and when ‘it doesn’t work out’, she sinks into deep depressions which lead her to drink to the point of blacking out. When questioned further about why she drank excessively, she claimed that it made her ‘happy’; she enjoyed the temporary euphoria caused by drinking, but complained of feeling like she was ‘stuck’ in a cycle that involved drinking to appease her heartache and emotional suffering, but then emotionally suffering from the depressive aftereffects of drinking.

The cycle outlined here, which she linked to bad breakups and failed relationships with western boyfriends, resulted in another psychobehavioral consequence which has received little attention from health organizations, academics or the media in Cambodia, which is that

of self-harming in the form of self-cutting, pharmaceutical drug overdoses and other self-abusive behaviors. The majority of these self-harming behaviors were evidenced in the female participants. However, there was also evidence of these behaviors in the western men as well.

In some cases, the methods of self-harm due to a broken heart included ‘taking too much medicine’, or oral ingestion of substances such as paracetamol (aspirin), Valium (and other sedatives which are easily purchased over the counter), birth control pills, and rat poison. When observing the bare arms of some hostess bar workers, it was also not uncommon to see evidence of scarring from self-cutting with razor blades or broken glass. This self-cutting is distinct from the self-cutting that is linked to drug use, which is typically done to relieve the pressures of drug withdrawal from methamphetamines and heroin. Some participants explained that the physical pain of cutting reduces the emotional pain of the heartache. One bar worker explained how her long-term partner (a former US embassy worker) had regularly cut his arms and thighs when depressed over their arguments, while she admitted to also cutting her wrists and trying to hang herself after he had been unfaithful with another woman.

The same informant who complained above about being stuck in a cycle of depression of alcohol use, also shared her experiences of attempted hanging, as well as attempted drowning in the sea when she was having difficulties with the European father of her child. Other self-abusive behaviors that emerged in the women's narratives were throwing one-self down sets of staircases, attempted jumps off balconies, and violent head-banging on the floor and walls—all said to be the result of infidelity and/or break-ups.

Many of these ‘heartbreak’ self-harming incidents tend to result in hospital visits but not usually in death, although some suicides do occur—another area that has received little attention in Cambodia. Throughout the fieldwork, two cases of suicide were encountered. The first was a young mother of five, who fatally overdosed on pharmaceuticals after her husband admitted to having a second wife and family in Vietnam. Her surviving sister claimed that the suicide was due to a broken-hearted, but also to having ‘lost face’, which implies the social suffering her sister experienced from the humiliation and embarrassment over being abandoned.

The second case involved a young European man who also committed suicide by lethal overdosing. Both he and his Khmer wife were HIV positive, and according to his sister, he had suffered years of physical and mental abuse by the partner—though it is unknown how much of the abuse and infidelity were reciprocal. The sister maintains that although several combined factors led to the suicide (including their HIV status, financial hardship, domestic abuse, infidelity and ‘loss of face’ in his own home country), the ultimate cause of friction had to do with deeply rooted sociocultural differences, misunderstandings and power struggles that were simply unresolvable.¹⁵ This section highlights, again, the complexity and daily challenges that affect both actors in these complex, multilayered transnational

¹⁵Apparently, two other western male acquaintances of his in Cambodia had also ended their lives due to strained relationships. For a longer discussion on the socio-cultural and historical links to self-harming and suicide in Cambodia, see (Hoefinger 2013).

partnerships, and that the trauma and violence that sometimes results is not always one-sided. Yet despite these problems, there are scant couples counseling services, mental health/substance use services, or traditional/alternative healing venues available for any population in Cambodia (VOA 2010; McLaughlin and Wickeri 2012), which results in the proliferation, rather the treatment, of depression, substance use, self-harm, intimate partner violence, and trauma.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed that contemporary transnational relationships between Cambodian hostess bar workers and their foreign male partners are often conjointly beneficial, yet fraught and power-laden, as couples wrestle with intersections of class, race, age, economics and personal desires, as well as persistent stereotypes that classify their relationships as inappropriate, inauthentic or only-ever commercial. Resembling, in some cases, the precolonial temporary marriages and/or patron-client relationships between local Khmer women and foreign men, both parties are interlocked in an complex web of sex, intimacy, money, emotions, obligations and expectations.

The men and women's individual motivations to partake in the intimate affairs that unfold in the ethnosexual contact zones of the hostess bars are both racialized and gendered. Influenced by global imagination and personal aspirations, many Cambodian bar workers strive to reap the potential material benefits of being associated with western men who are more economically powerful than them, so that they may then become patrons themselves, and bestow those benefits upon their extended familial and social networks. Simultaneously, however, the women are also driven by desires for idealized forms of romance and love like those that they are exposed to through local and global media.

The motivations of many foreign men, on the other hand, are heavy with Orientalist and neocolonial tropes in which Khmer women are constructed as submissive yet sexualized; hyper-feminine yet victimized. Because of this, Jacobsen has argued that the continued sexual conquest of local Cambodian women by western men could be viewed as a 'metaphor for the violent acquisitions of early colonialism' (2008: 150). Yet, there are also men who actively seek out more egalitarian relations, and in doing so, disrupt the assumed unidirectional flow of power that is often associated with interethnic couplehood. In many cases, idealizations of 'love' dominate men and women's framing of their partnerships, despite the fact that both genders may construct and understand the concepts of 'love' and 'honesty' differently. These differentiated meanings and (mis)understandings, alongside other cultural constraints cause interminable tension, that in some cases, ultimately leads to various detrimental psychobehavioral consequences.

While my intention has been to illustrate the humanity and textured experiences of both bar workers and their western boyfriends (Constable 2003), this article is not meant to romanticize or idealize their multidimensional relationships, because although the actors are active agents, they are continuously limited by gendered, racialized and cultural encumbrances. My objective has thus been to draw particular attention to these specific challenges and consequences, which have so far been overlooked in research and discourse

on intimate interethnic relationships, gender-based violence and mental health in Cambodia. As the country propels into the 21st century, and increasing numbers of foreign men and Cambodian women continue to converge in the entertainment sectors, such a detailed description of the gendered motivations, sociocultural constraints, and psychobehavioral consequences of transnational partnerships could help to facilitate the development of both local and international interventions or programming that focus on cultural orientation for couples, relationship counseling, and mental health services so that depression, self-harming, abuse, and suicide can be prevented or mitigated. These public health issues are simply too significant to remain unnoticed.

Biography

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