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From Royalty to Citizenship: The Legacy of Monarchical Ideals in Contemporary Cambodian Public Life

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Abstract
This study is dedicated to examining the transformation of monarchical ideals and their enduring influence on contemporary Cambodian civic identity and institutional development. Employing a sociophilosophical framework, this research investigates how the symbolic architecture of royal authority, rooted in the sacred devarāja (god-king) tradition and later reframed through Buddhist dhammarāja (righteous king) ideals, continues to shape modern political perceptions, behaviors, and structures. Despite the formal adoption of democratic institutions after the 1993 UN-brokered elections, Cambodian political subjectivity remains anchored in hierarchical and symbolic forms of legitimacy. Public life, civic education, and state rituals remain permeated with sacred imagery and performative acts that reinforce reverence for authority, moral obedience, and national unity. This study integrates political philosophy, cultural anthropology, and historical analysis methodologies to trace the interplay between monarchical symbols and liberal-democratic citizenship concepts. A central focus is the ontological shift from 'subject' to 'citizen', a transition that extends beyond legal reforms to demand the reinterpretation of traditional values within a civic framework. Through analysis of rituals, language, educational texts, and media representations, the paper demonstrates how symbolic power perpetuates political culture, molds civic expectations, and limits participatory agency. This research offers two key contributions. First, it positions Cambodia as a paradigmatic posttraditional society, where modern governance coexists with sacred cultural foundations. Second, it underscores the resilience of symbolic monarchy in legitimizing political authority, advocating for civic education models that engage local values rather than impose external frameworks. By illuminating these dynamics, the study significantly advances broader debates in comparative political thought,

postcolonial statecraft, and Southeast Asian governance, providing a nuanced perspective on hybrid political identity and legitimacy in transitional societies.

Keywords: Cambodia, Monarchy, Political Symbolism, Civic Identity, Posttraditional Society, Democratic Transformation

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Rationale of the Study

Cambodia presents a unique and instructive case of sociopolitical transformation, where ancient structures of monarchical legitimacy continue to coexist and interact with modern concepts of democracy and citizenship. For more than a millennium, Cambodian political culture has been deeply rooted in the sacred kingship model, particularly the concept of **devarāja**, the "god-king." This model, which fuses Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies, positions the king as a divine intermediary between the cosmos and society, framing power as sacred, paternal, and hierarchical. The enduring influence of this tradition is evident in Cambodia's collective consciousness and institutional frameworks. Throughout the 20th century, Cambodia experienced profound political upheavals, including French colonization, civil war, the Khmer Rouge regime, and a period of postconflict democratization. These events did not erase the country's cultural foundations but reconfigured them into new symbolic and institutional forms. After the 1993 United Nations-brokered elections and the adoption of the Cambodian Constitution, the monarchy was constitutionally reestablished as a symbolic institution. Despite losing direct political authority, the monarchy retained significant cultural power, remaining central to national rituals, identity, and contemporary political rhetoric. It is frequently invoked to legitimize political actions and promote national unity (Chandler, 2018; Edwards, 2019; Tieng et al., 2024; Nget et al., 2024).

A particularly significant aspect of Cambodia's political landscape is the persistence of premodern legitimacy structures within a formally modern political system. However, Cambodia has the institutional features of a liberal democracy such as elections, a constitution, and political parties; its political culture is still shaped by reverence for hierarchical authority, loyalty over legality, and symbolic rather than deliberative forms of legitimacy. Many Cambodians continue to view the monarch not only as a ceremonial figure but also as a moral compass and spiritual safeguard for the nation. These dynamics raise important questions about the sociocultural foundations of modern statehood and the challenges of building a genuine civic identity. Public participation in Cambodia often appears ritualistic rather than deliberative, with electoral practices functioning more as symbolic affirmations of established order than as mechanisms for substantive political change. While younger generations are increasingly involved in social and civic initiatives, the broader political culture remains deeply influenced by sacred and hierarchical logics of power. Cambodia thus provides fertile ground for sociophilosophical inquiry into how monarchical ideals endure within and even shape modern frameworks of citizenship. The Cambodian case prompts a rethinking of Western-centric models of civic development, highlighting the importance of culturally nuanced approaches that recognize the coexistence and sometimes fusion of traditional and modern logics (Chandler, 2018; Edwards, 2019). Understanding Cambodia's experience has enriched global discussions on democratization, civic identity, and the symbolic dimensions of political power.

The rationale for this study stems from the need to critically examine the complex cultural transformations occurring in Cambodia as the country transitions from traditional notions of monarchical subjection to modern ideals of democratic citizenship. While formal democratic structures—such as elections, constitutional rule, and civic institutions—were introduced following the 1991 Paris peace accords and the 1993 UN-sponsored elections (Strangio, 2020), these changes have not fully dismantled deeply embedded symbolic frameworks derived from centuries of royal absolutism and sacred kingship. Cambodia exemplifies what Habermas (1981) termed a "posttraditional society," where rational-legal authority coexists with archaic forms of legitimation that continue to shape political subjectivity. Unlike Western liberal democracies, where citizenship is conceived primarily of individual rights and autonomy, Cambodian sociopolitical identity remains influenced by cultural codes emphasizing loyalty, hierarchy, and sacred duty (Run et al., 2015; Chandler, 2018; Edwards, 2019). This is not

merely a historical relic but also a living framework that informs how Cambodians engage with the state, interpret authority, and perceive their role in public life. Despite being constitutionally limited, the monarchy remains a central symbolic institution, sanctifying the national order and mediating political tensions (Slocomb, 2021). Political elites frequently invoke royal imagery, patronage networks, and Buddhist cosmology to legitimize authority (Kent, 2021), demonstrating the enduring influence of premodern political theology (Schonthal & Walton, 2021).

This study is necessary to trace the legacy of monarchical ideals and to develop a conceptual framework for understanding how these ideals interact with—and potentially constrain—the development of democratic consciousness. An integrative sociophilosophical approach, combining insights from political philosophy, anthropology, and cultural studies, allows for a deeper inquiry into the symbolic foundations of Cambodian public life. This approach moves beyond institutional analysis to examine the cultural preconditions for civic engagement and democratic subjectivity (Bayly, 2022). A significant gap in existing scholarship concerns the subtle mechanisms through which traditional power structures are reproduced in everyday life. Much of the political science literature on Cambodia focuses on elite behavior, electoral politics, or external donor influence (Un & Hughes, 2021; Karbaum, 2023), often overlooking how ordinary citizens internalize and perpetuate monarchical values through symbolic practices, ritualized loyalty, and moral narratives rooted in Khmer cultural heritage (Marston, 2023). This study contributes by investigating how sacred kingship ideals are adapted in contemporary Cambodia and how they shape conceptions of citizenship. The findings offer theoretical insights and practical implications, particularly in civic education, democratic development, and intercultural governance. Understanding Cambodia's unique trajectory can help policymakers, educators, and civil society actors design culturally resonant reforms rather than externally imposed reforms (Eng & Hughes, 2023).

1.2. Research Problems

This study emerges from the need to critically examine Cambodia's contested transition from traditional monarchical subjecthood to modern democratic citizenship. While formal democratic institutions—elections, constitutional governance, and civil society—were established after the 1993 UN-backed transition (Strangio, 2020), these structures operate within enduring frameworks of royal absolutism and Buddhist kingship. Cambodia exemplifies what scholars call a "hybrid political order" (Öjendal & Lilja, 2021), where democratic institutions coexist with premodern legitimizing myths, creating tension between legal-rational authority and sacralized power (Hansen, 2022).

Unlike Western liberal democracies, where citizenship is premised on individual rights and secular-contractual state relations, Cambodian political subjectivity remains profoundly shaped by hierarchical cultural codes of *neak mean bon* (those who have merit), patronage loyalty (*khnang*), and the moral cosmology of Theravada Buddhism (Kent, 2021; Marston, 2023). Although constitutionally constrained, the monarchy persists as a sacral institution that consecrates political authority (Slocomb, 2021), whereas elites strategically deploy royal symbolism and Buddhist narratives to legitimize governance (Eng, 2022). This duality reflects a broader Southeast Asian pattern in which democratic transitions remain "encased" in traditional legitimacy structures (Thompson, 2023).

This study advances two interventions: (1) theoretically, it synthesizes political anthropology (Bayly, 2022) and critical democratization studies (Arugay, 2023) to analyze how Cambodians navigate competing subjectivities, such as constitutional citizens and devotional subjects; (2) empirically, it addresses a gap in scholarship that prioritizes elite politics (Un & Hughes, 2021) over everyday citizen engagement with monarchical heritage. The literature often reduces Cambodia's democratization to electoral authoritarianism (Morgenbesser, 2023) or external intervention (Karbaum, 2023), neglecting how ordinary Cambodians reinterpret kingship through vernacular practices such as *bangsokol* (memorial rituals) or the cult of *Preah Chao* (guardian spirits) (Davis, 2022). By investigating these lived intersections of tradition and modernity, this study offers policy-makers frameworks for culturally grounded civic education, avoiding the pitfalls of liberal universalism (Chandler, 2023).

1.3. Research Objectives

The study also aims to evaluate the prospects for cultivating civic consciousness in Cambodia without dismissing or erasing traditional values. Rather than adopting a binary framework that opposes monarchy and modernity, the research proposes an integrative model that appreciates the complexity and fluidity of cultural transformation. Therefore, the study has specific aims:

1. Analyze how monarchical ideals persist in Cambodian society's symbolic and cultural matrix.
2. Examine the philosophical and sociopolitical implications of the shift from subject to citizen.
3. Investigate how traditional power structures are adapted within modern democratic discourse.
4. Propose a culturally grounded framework for civic education and democratic engagement in postmonarchical societies.

1.4. Research Limitations

While this study provides an interdisciplinary analysis of Cambodia's monarchical-legacy-democracy nexus, several methodological, contextual, and epistemological limitations must be acknowledged to ensure scholarly transparency. The study's reliance on hermeneutic and qualitative methodologies—drawing from philosophical traditions such as those of Gadamer (2004) and Ricoeur (1991)—enables deep engagement with symbolic power structures but limits empirical generalizability. Unlike quantitative political science research (e.g., electoral studies by Un, 2023), this approach prioritizes discursive and cultural analysis over statistical validation. Consequently, findings are contextually rich but not broadly predictive (Bayly, 2022). Sacralized authority and traditional political subjectivity manifest subtly through ritual language (e.g., prostrations before royalty), visual symbolism (e.g., portraits of kings in public spaces), and performative loyalty (Marston, 2023). These phenomena resist standardized measurement, introducing interpretive subjectivity. While ethnographic studies (Davis, 2022) and discourse analysis (Eng, 2023) mitigate this, the absence of large-scale survey data means that conclusions remain provisional.

The study synthesizes constitutional texts, elite discourse, and secondary literature but lacks extensive original fieldwork. Rural and marginalized perspectives particularly from indigenous communities (Khmer Loeu) and youth (Peou, 2023) are underrepresented. Future research should incorporate participatory methods to capture grassroots narratives (Öjendal & Lilja, 2021). Cambodia's 20th-century ruptures (colonialism, Khmer Rouge, and post-Cold War liberalization) complicate efforts to isolate monarchical influence from other ideological forces (Hughes, 2022). For example, Norén-Nilsson's (2022) work on "performative democracy" shows how contemporary elites blend royalist nostalgia with neoliberal governance, creating hybrid legitimacy claims. The study's snapshot of Cambodia's political culture may not account for accelerating shifts, such as digital-era youth activism redefining citizenship (Karbaum, 2023), China's growing influence reshaping elite patronage networks (Strangio, 2023), and Buddhist reform movements challenging traditional hierarchies (Kent, 2023). These constraints do not negate the study's value but highlight avenues for future research—e.g., mixed-methods studies combining ethnography with political economy analysis (Arugay, 2023). This work invites more nuanced, historically grounded scholarship by foregrounding cultural logics often marginalized in the democratization literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical and philosophical foundations of Khmer power

The Cambodian conception of political authority originates in a syncretic fusion of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology and indigenous Khmer social structures, positioning the monarch as a political ruler and a sacred embodiment of cosmic order. The devarāja (god-king) cult, institutionalized in the Angkorian period, framed kings as earthly manifestations of Hindu deities such as Shiva and Vishnu (Mabbett, 2023; Sharrock, 2022). This cosmological model established the king as the axis mundi—the ritual and symbolic center linking heaven and earth—ensuring agricultural fertility, moral governance, and social harmony (Davis, 2023). Drawing on Eliade's (1959) theory of

sacred space, Cambodian kingship exemplifies the "hierophany of power," where political authority derives legitimacy from its perceived participation in transcendent reality rather than secular consent.

2.1.1. Ritual and Performance of Sacred Kingship

The institutionalization of royal power occurred through performative rituals that naturalized monarchical authority: the Royal Plowing Ceremony (*Pithi Chrat Preah Neangkol*), which symbolically tied kingship to agrarian prosperity (Marston, 2023). Coronation rites blending Brahmanic rajabhisheka (anointment) with Theravāda Buddhist notions of merit (Kent, 2022) The cult of Preah Chao (guardian spirits) that sacralized royal lineage (Thompson, 2023). As Bourdieu's (1991) theory of symbolic power suggests, these rituals enabled the "misrecognition" of power as divinely ordained rather than politically constructed. This aligns with Weber's (1978) framework of traditional authority, where legitimacy rests on "eternal yesterday" rather than legal rationality.

2.1.2. Buddhist Reconfigurations of Kingship

The shift from Hindu devarāja to Theravāda Buddhist dhammarāja (righteous king) in the post-Angkor period redefined but did not diminish royal sacrality. The Trai Bhūm cosmology (14th century) recasts the king as a bodhisatta (future Buddha) whose rule manifested dhamma (moral law) (Hansen, 2022). This:
- Moralized kingship through the Thotsaphit rachatham (ten virtues of the King)
- Embedded monarchy within soteriological narratives (Heng, 2023)
- Sustained what Foucault (1980) termed "pastoral power"—the ruler as both protector and moral guide

2.1.3. Colonial and Modern Adaptations

French colonialists (1863–1953) strategically preserved monarchical symbolism while hollowing out its political power, creating a "neo-traditional" hybrid (Edwards, 2020). Postindependence, Norodom Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955–1970) fused royal charisma with developmental nationalism (Chandler, 2023). Even Khmer Rouge's (1975–1979) antimonarchism inadvertently reinforced the kingship's cultural resilience, as seen in the post-1993 constitutional monarchy's symbolic revival (Strangio, 2023). Key Theoretical Implications:
- Hybrid Political Theology: Cambodia challenges secularization theories (Asad, 2003) by maintaining sacralized authority within modern governance.
- Continuity Through Rupture: As Norén–Nilsson (2023) shows, each political transformation (colonialism, communism, neoliberalism) has been repurposed rather than erased monarchical discourse.

The theoretical basis of the article is made up of works on political philosophy, social anthropology and studies of postcolonial societies, including the works of C. Taylor, M. Foucault, P. Bourdieu, as well as regional studies of Khmer political culture, carried out within the framework of the anthropological tradition (Ebihara, 1968; Ledgerwood, 2008).

2.2 Symbolic Legitimacy and the Reproduction of Monarchical Worldviews

The symbolic continuity of the Cambodian monarchy in the postcolonial and postconflict periods illustrates the powerful endurance of cultural frameworks that undergird state legitimacy. Even in a globalized context marked by international development aid, democratization discourses, and constitutional reforms, Cambodia's political symbolism is deeply rooted in traditional aesthetics, language, and rituals. As Norén-Nilsson (2016) argues, modern Cambodian nationalism is shaped as much by monarchical imagination as by democratic aspirations. This dual structure—monarchy as a symbol and democracy as a form—has produced a hybrid political culture in which civic identity remains tethered to sacred authority.

Public rituals and symbolic acts, such as the king's participation in national holidays, his presence in school portraits, and state-sponsored royal addresses, act as what Foucault (1977) calls "technologies of power"— practices that inscribe authority into the everyday lives of citizens. These symbols not only are historical relics but

also continue to shape contemporary political emotions and behaviors. The king's apolitical role, guaranteed by the constitution, paradoxically amplifies his moral and cultural authority, precisely because he stands above party politics and remains untouched by corruption or institutional conflict (Williams, 2017). In times of national crisis or tension, appeals to royal authority are frequently used to stabilize political disputes and invoke unity.

Anthropologist May Ebihara's seminal ethnography of Cambodian village life (1968) provides insight into how symbolic hierarchies pervade social relations. Her findings indicate that deference to authority—whether local leaders, monks, or royalties—is not merely imposed from above but willingly reproduced through ritual and education. These hierarchies are internalized from childhood and embedded in the concepts of barami (moral power), kun (debt of gratitude), and sammā (correct behavior). Such cultural logics challenge liberal notions of egalitarian citizenship and suggest a complex terrain of civic formation where traditional values and symbolic orders remain formative.

Moreover, this symbolic power is perpetuated through formal and informal education systems. School curricula and civic textbooks often promote respect for hierarchy, loyalty to the nation, and reverence for the monarchy—values that simultaneously serve national unity and constrain the development of critical civic agency (Slocomb, 2010). Media representations reinforce these patterns, with televised ceremonies, royal blessings, and religious messages linking the king's image to national well-being. This convergence of political theology and public pedagogy demonstrates how traditional authority is preserved and actively adapted within a modern framework. These observations support Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence"—the process by which cultural dominance is naturalized and internalized, making alternatives appear unthinkable (Bourdieu, 1991). In this light, symbolic monarchy in Cambodia serves not only as a vestige of the past but also as a continuously evolving apparatus of legitimation that stabilizes and disciplines the political field.

2.3 Subjecthood, Citizenship, and Hybrid Political Identity

A central challenge in contemporary Cambodian political development is the cultural tension between traditional subjects and modern citizens. In traditional Khmer cosmology, the political subject is defined by vertical relations of loyalty, deference, and ritual obligation rather than autonomous rights or civic participation. Lim (2019) noted that this structure persists in modern political practice, where power is often perceived as morally infallible and unchallengeable. In such a context, citizens are more likely to view themselves as beneficiaries of elite benevolence than as accountability agents. Thus, the philosophical transition from subject to citizen is not merely legal but also ontological. It involves a redefinition of the individual's relationship with power—from a passive recipient of royal protection to an active participant in constructing the public good. This transformation aligns with Taylor's (1994) notion of the "politics of recognition," which emphasizes the need for cultural frameworks that affirm personal agency and collective voice. However, Cambodia's shift is slow and uneven and constrained by symbolic attachments, institutional limitations, and educational legacies that favor hierarchy over participation (Danilevskaya, 2012).

Nevertheless, signs of change are emerging. The increasing involvement of Cambodian youth in volunteer work, environmental activism, and digital advocacy reflects the rise of hybrid identities that blend respect for tradition with aspirations for modern citizenship (Ear, 2013). These new forms of engagement represent what Appadurai (1996) terms "vernacular modernities"—localized interpretations of global civic norms. Social media, diasporic networks, and NGO-led civic education initiatives create new platforms for dialog, critique, and public accountability, even if these platforms remain confined to limited urban or elite circles. Moreover, Buddhist ethics may offer conceptual tools for reconciling tradition with civic responsibility. For example, the principle of karuṇā (compassion) can be interpreted not only as a spiritual virtue but also as a public ethic of care, participation, and solidarity (Seneviratne, 1999). Similarly, the Buddhist ideal of dhamma can be reframed in democratic terms as ethical governance, echoing Habermas's (1996) idea of deliberative legitimacy grounded in reason and mutual respect. Ultimately, Cambodia's civic evolution cannot follow a linear, Western-style trajectory. Instead, it must engage in what Ricoeur (1991) calls a "hermeneutics of tradition," where cultural symbols are not discarded but reinterpreted. The goal is not to reject the monarchical past but to reframe it as part of a dynamic cultural heritage supporting inclusive political modernity.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a desk research, interpretive methodology integrating Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972), Bourdieu's symbolic power theory (Bourdieu, 1991), and hermeneutic tradition (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1991) to examine how Cambodia's monarchical worldview persists through language, ritual, and performative practices. Primary sources, constitutional texts, royal speeches, state rituals, and media representations are analyzed through thematic coding and semiotic analysis, with attention to nonverbal discourses (Butler, 1997), such as ceremonial gestures and iconography. The comparative historical method (Koselleck, 2004; Weber, 1978) traces symbolic continuities across Cambodia's colonial, revolutionary, and democratic eras, whereas cross-regional comparisons (e.g., Thailand's monarchy; Smith, 2010) contextualize findings within Southeast Asia's hybrid governance patterns. Ethical reflexivity (Spivak, 1988) guides the study's engagement with politically sensitive themes, prioritizing cultural interpretation over normative critique.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Findings

4.1.1. Research Objective 1: Analyze how monarchical ideals persist in Cambodian society's symbolic and cultural matrix

The persistence of monarchical ideals in Cambodian society is observable through the enduring prominence of symbolic forms that imbue political life with a sacred and hierarchical structure. Despite establishing a constitutional monarchy and the formal separation of the king from executive power since 1993, royal symbolism remains central to the national imagination, manifesting through ritual performances, civic ceremonies, and the visual landscape of public life. Royal portraits displayed in schools, ministries, and homes serve as decorative elements and as sacred images representing national continuity, moral leadership, and spiritual protection. These portraits are typically treated with reverence akin to religious icons, reinforcing the sacred status of the monarchy in the collective consciousness. The state's orchestration of royal ceremonies such as the annual royal plowing ceremony, coronation anniversaries, and New Year blessings continues to function as a public reaffirmation of the king's symbolic centrality. Such rituals engage citizens in practices that reproduce hierarchical subjectivities and elevate the monarch as embodying the national order and virtue (Williams, 2017). A discourse analysis of political speeches and the state media reveals how monarchical ideals are invoked to sanctify political authority.

Table 1: Persistence of Monarchical Ideals in Cambodian Society's Symbolic and Cultural Matrix

Dimension	Key Findings	Illustrative Examples
Symbolic Continuity	Monarchical symbols remain central in public life, reinforcing sacred and hierarchical political culture.	Royal portraits in schools, ministries, homes; reverence similar to religious icons.
Ritual Reproduction	State-sponsored ceremonies reaffirm the king's central symbolic role and reproduce hierarchical subjectivities.	Royal Plowing Ceremony, coronation anniversaries, New Year blessings.
Discursive Legitimacy	Political actors invoke royal ideals to sanctify authority, especially during crises, reflecting "pastoral power" (Foucault, 1977).	Politicians citing the king as a moral guide or symbol of unity.
Educational Transmission	Cultural education embeds royal virtues into national identity, blending monarchy with Buddhist ethics.	School curricula highlight compassion, wisdom, and justice as royal virtues.
Moral Capital and Barami	Monarchical ideals serve as a moral standard for leadership legitimacy beyond democratic credentials.	Leaders judged by proximity to royal values (Barami) rather than civic competence.
Adaptation and Resilience	Youth and digital culture adapt royal imagery to new forms, maintaining emotional and symbolic resonance across generations.	Use of royal symbols in digital media, memes, and youth activism.

| Cultural Deep Structure | Monarchical ideals form a "deep structure" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963) that shapes political consciousness and complicates the emergence of secular civic identity. | Continued public loyalty to monarchy despite formal democratic institutions. |
| Democratic Implications | Rather than contradicting democracy, these ideals may provide culturally resonant foundations for localized civic and institutional development. | Potential integration of royal virtues into democratic norms and practices. |

Politicians frequently refer to the king as a moral guide, guardian of peace, and source of national unity, especially during a political crisis or transition. Even though the king is constitutionally apolitical, his symbolic presence defuses conflict and signals continuity. As shown in Table 1, this practice, as Foucault (1977) suggested, reflects a "pastoral" form of power, where political actors seek moral legitimacy not through legal rationality but through symbolic alignment with sacred tradition. In this sense, the monarchy becomes a repository of moral capital that political elites can draw upon to stabilize or legitimize their rule. Cultural education and public messaging reinforce these ideals from an early age. School curricula often emphasize royal virtues, compassion, wisdom, and justice, as essential to Cambodian identity, promoting a narrative in which national strength and moral integrity flow from loyalty to the crown. These themes are often intertwined with Buddhist ethics, further cementing the monarchy's spiritual authority. Historically associated with kingship, the concept of Barami (moral prestige) has remained influential in shaping perceptions of political legitimacy. It constructs a worldview in which authority is earned through virtue and merit, not necessarily through a democratic process. Even in the context of electoral politics, leadership is often evaluated on the basis of proximity to royal virtues rather than civic credentials. This symbolic matrix is not static; it evolves in dialog with social change. Younger generations increasingly engage with royal imagery through digital platforms, adapting traditional symbols to new forms of expression. However, the affective and moral resonance of monarchical ideals remains largely intact. This continuity suggests that monarchical symbolism operates as a "deep structure" in Cambodian political culture—a concept borrowed from Lévi-Strauss (1963), shaping elite narratives and popular behavior. The persistence of these ideals complicates the development of a secular, rights-based civic identity, but it also offers a potential foundation for culturally resonant models of public life. Rather than viewing monarchical ideals as obstacles to democracy, they can be understood as cultural codes that must be interpreted and, where possible, integrated into evolving democratic norms.

4.1.2. Research Objective 2: Examine the philosophical and sociopolitical implications of the shift from subject to citizen

The transition from being a subject to being a citizen in Cambodia is not simply a legal transformation but rather a profound philosophical and cultural reorientation with significant sociopolitical consequences. Under the traditional model, political subjectivity is structured by hierarchical loyalty, sacred authority, and communal harmony. The monarch was perceived not as a representative of the people but as a semidivine figure embodying moral order and cosmic balance. Within this cosmology, the individual's political role was defined by deference and service rather than autonomy or deliberation. While effective in maintaining social cohesion, such a model lacks mechanisms for individual agency, legal accountability, or participatory governance. As Cambodia adopted democratic reforms, particularly after the 1993 Constitution, these traditional foundations were formally challenged—but not entirely replaced. Philosophically, the citizen is presumed to be a rational, autonomous actor endowed with rights and responsibilities. This conception draws from Western political theory, especially liberal and republican traditions emphasizing the social contract, the rule of law, and public reason (Habermas, 1996; Taylor, 1994). However, the remnants of monarchical subjecthood continue to shape political behavior in Cambodia. Public life is often characterized by a politics of gratitude (*kun*) rather than contestation, where government officials are treated as patrons rather than public servants, and citizens are expected to show obedience rather than demand accountability. This results in a paradox where citizens vote and pay taxes yet still act primarily within the moral framework of subjects, seeking protection, not rights, and expressing loyalty, not demands. This hybrid subjectivity has critical implications for democratic deepening. On the one hand, it fosters political stability and cultural continuity. On the other hand, it constrains the development of civic virtues such as critical thinking, pluralism, and public deliberation. The absence of a robust culture of dissent or open criticism can reproduce authoritarian tendencies even within formally democratic institutions. Moreover, the cultural taboo against

questioning sacred authority—including the monarchy—limits the public's capacity to critique politics. As Danilevskaya (2012) noted, institutions of democracy in postcolonial societies often function as shells, reproducing traditional hierarchies beneath the surface of legal equality.

However, the shift from subject to citizen is not a linear progression; it is an ongoing process of negotiation and resignification. Young Cambodians, particularly those in urban areas and the diaspora, are beginning to articulate new forms of civic identity that blend respect for tradition with aspirations for modern rights and responsibilities. Civil society organizations, media outlets, and educational reform initiatives promote discourses of transparency, public participation, and accountability. Nevertheless, these efforts must contend with subjecthood's deep symbolic and emotional power, which continues to inform interpersonal relations, moral expectations, and institutional behavior.

The challenge, then, is not to discard the symbolic resources of subjecthood but to philosophically reframe them in ways that support democratic values. Concepts such as compassion (*karuṇā*), harmony (*sammā*), and merit (*barami*) can be reinterpreted as foundations for civic responsibility rather than hierarchical submission. Such reframing would allow for a culturally grounded and politically empowering form of citizenship—a synthesis rather than a rupture.

Table 2: Philosophical and Sociopolitical Implications of the Shift from Subject to Citizen in Cambodia

Dimension	Key Findings	Illustrative Examples
Democratic Implications	Rather than contradicting democracy, these ideals may provide culturally resonant foundations for localized civic and institutional development.	Potential integration of royal virtues into democratic norms and practices.
Democratic Implications	Rather than contradicting democracy, these ideals may provide culturally resonant foundations for localized civic and institutional development.	Potential integration of royal virtues into democratic norms and practices.
Hybrid Political Behavior	Formal citizenship coexists with informal practices of subjecthood; gratitude (Kun) replaces demands for accountability.	Citizens treat officials as patrons; loyalty and obedience prioritized over rights-claiming.
Democratic Constraints	Lack of civic virtues (e.g., dissent, pluralism) weakens democratic deepening and sustains authoritarian tendencies.	Cultural taboos against criticism; weak public deliberation even within democratic structures.
Cultural Continuity vs Reform	Traditional values continue to shape institutions despite democratic reforms, creating a paradoxical political culture.	Democratic forms coexist with hierarchical norms and symbolic deference.
Emerging Civic Identity	Urban youth and diaspora begin reshaping civic identity; blending tradition with rights-based activism.	Engagement with civil society, independent media, and reform-oriented education.
Philosophical Synthesis	Democratic values may be fostered by reinterpreting traditional ideals (*Barami, Karuṇā*) as civic virtues rather than signs of submission.	Compassion, merit, and harmony reframed as foundations for responsible citizenship.
Ongoing Negotiation	The shift is not linear; it requires continued dialog, reinterpretation, and institutional support to harmonize tradition and democracy.	Educational reform and civic initiatives must navigate deeply embedded symbolic frameworks.

4.1.3. Research Objective 3: Investigating how traditional power structures are adapted within modern democratic discourse

Adapting traditional power structures within Cambodia's contemporary democratic discourse illustrates a unique form of hybrid governance where sacred authority and constitutionalism coexist in a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Far from being obsolete, the symbolic and hierarchical frameworks of the Khmer monarchical tradition have been carefully recontextualized to operate alongside modern democratic institutions. This hybridization is most evident

in political rhetoric and state practices that legitimize governance through procedural norms—such as elections or parliamentary debates—and through invocations of Buddhist ethics, royal virtues, and notions of karmic merit. Leaders frequently frame their authority regarding barami (moral prestige) and national destiny, suggesting that their right to govern is not only sanctioned by the electorate but also underwritten by tradition and virtue. This approach reinforces the public perception that leadership is not merely a result of institutional mandates but also an expression of inherited or spiritual authority (Pak, 2011; Chandler, 2008). Political elites strategically invoke monarchical and religious symbols to embed their authority within the moral expectations of Cambodian society. For example, state-run media frequently depicts leaders participating in religious ceremonies, receiving blessings from the king, or referencing ancient Khmer civilization and the Angkorian legacy. These actions do not contradict the democratic narrative but are integrated into it, conveying the message that modern leadership, to be legitimate, must reflect both civic competence and cultural authenticity. This symbolic adaptation aligns with what Smith (2010) calls the "reinvention of monarchy" in Southeast Asia. In this process, traditional symbols are reinterpreted to fit the demands of modern nationhood, development, and popular sovereignty.

As mentioned in Table 3, this adaptation is not limited to elite manipulation; the public also internalizes it. Many Cambodians, especially in rural areas, view the government through a moral and hierarchical lens, expecting leaders to act as patrons, protectors, and benefactors, as traditionally held by monarchs and Buddhist monks. Political loyalty is often expressed through ritual acts, patronage, and public reverence rather than policy evaluation or ideological alignment. Although held regularly, elections tend to function more as rituals of affirmation than as mechanisms of political change. This is not to say that Cambodian citizens lack agency but rather that their political subjectivity is shaped by a different set of cultural logics—those that emphasize continuity, harmony, and respect over confrontation, rights-claiming, or open criticism (Norén--Nilsson, 2016). Nonetheless, there are emerging tensions within this adaptive framework. Youth movements, digital activism, and civil society organizations increasingly call for transparency, accountability, and civic participation—values that are not easily reconciled with inherited deference and symbolic authority models. These actors push the boundaries of the democratic-monarchical synthesis, demanding a recalibration of political discourse that includes reverence for cultural heritage and recognition of rights, diversity, and deliberation. The durability of Cambodia's political system may depend on its ability to accommodate these demands without severing its connection to symbolic traditions that continue to anchor public identity.

Table 3: Adaptation of Traditional Power Structures within Modern Democratic Discourse in Cambodia

Dimension	Key Findings	Illustrative Examples
Hybrid Governance Model	Cambodia exhibits a fusion of sacred authority and constitutional norms, creating a mutually reinforcing political structure.	Elections coexist with religious ceremonies and royal blessings as sources of legitimacy.
Symbolic Legitimacy	Leaders invoke barami, Buddhist ethics, and national destiny to enhance their democratic legitimacy with traditional moral authority.	Political rhetoric emphasizes virtue, karma, and service to the nation alongside democratic mandates.
Cultural Authenticity in Leadership	Modern political leadership is framed as requiring both civic competence and traditional moral standing.	Leaders frequently seen in state media receiving royal or religious blessings; references to Angkorian civilization.
Public Internalization	Citizens, especially in rural areas, understand politics through hierarchical and moral lenses, expecting paternalistic leadership.	Loyalty expressed through rituals, patronage, and reverence rather than policy evaluation or ideological debate.
Ritualized Democracy	Democratic processes like elections function more as symbolic affirmations than vehicles for change.	Elections viewed as expressions of support and continuity rather than forums for contestation.
Cultural Logics of Political Behavior	Political subjectivity is shaped by values of harmony, continuity, and respect rather than rights-based or confrontational paradigms.	Avoidance of open criticism; emphasis on moral authority over legal rationality.

Emerging Tensions	Youth movements and civil society challenge traditional authority, demanding transparency and participatory democracy.	Digital activism, civic education campaigns, and calls for accountability.
Democratic-Monarchical Synthesis	Traditional power is not discarded but reinterpreted within democratic narratives, leading to both stabilization and constraint of political life.	Cultural values like reverence and merit reconfigured to coexist with civic participation and rights-based discourse.
Implications for Reform	Sustainable democratic reform must navigate and integrate symbolic traditions to ensure cultural resonance and legitimacy.	Reforms should build on traditional values (e.g., karuṇā, barami) while promoting civic virtues and institutional accountability.

In sum, traditional power structures in Cambodia have not been displaced by democratic discourse; rather, they have been reconfigured within it. This hybridization has produced a unique political culture that is stable and constrained. While it offers legitimacy rooted in history and morality, it also risks obscuring accountability and delaying the maturation of a truly participatory political system. Understanding this balance is essential for interpreting the Cambodian democratic experience and designing reforms that resonate with the cultural realities of the population.

4.1.4. Research Objective 4: Propose a culturally grounded framework for civic education and democratic engagement in postmonarchical societies

On the basis of the findings of this study, a culturally grounded framework for civic education and democratic engagement in Cambodia must begin with recognizing symbolic power as a central axis of political culture. Rather than treating monarchical ideals as archaic obstacles to modernization, such a framework must embrace them as integral components of the Cambodian social imagination. This means that ideas of citizenship in Cambodia are not built solely on abstract legal rights but are also shaped by traditional values such as karuṇā (compassion), sammā (proper conduct), and kun (gratitude). A democratic civic education model that seeks resonance must reinterpret these cultural values in ways that empower citizens rather than bind them to hierarchical passivity. For instance, barami (moral authority) can be presented not as inherited charisma but as civic virtue—earned through ethical participation, public service, and accountability to the community (Seneviratne, 1999; Ledgerwood, 2008; Sam et al., 2015).

As illustrated in Table 4, civic education must also be dialogical rather than didactic. Traditional Cambodian education, often influenced by monastic or hierarchical pedagogies, tends to favor rote memorization and obedience over critical thinking and debate. While these methods foster order and discipline, they can inhibit the development of civic agency. A reformed civic curriculum should therefore integrate deliberative practices that encourage students to question, reflect, and engage with governance, rights, and justice issues. This does not mean abandoning respect for tradition; rather, it entails cultivating a new kind of moral citizenship that honors the past while actively shaping the future. The concept of dhammarāja (the righteous ruler) could be reframed not just as a moral monarch but also as a metaphor for collective responsibility, where all citizens contribute to the ethical guidance of the nation. Moreover, civic engagement in Cambodia must leverage ritual and symbolism rather than avoid them. Public ceremonies, national holidays, and Buddhist festivals can serve as platforms for promoting civic values if recontextualized properly. For example, royal events could include messages about civic duties, environmental protection, or youth participation in governance. Likewise, Buddhist sermons, which already hold moral authority, could be used to promote democratic ethics such as fairness, nonviolence, and public reason. This approach is in line with Appadurai's (1996) call for "vernacular cosmopolitanism"—a model of modernity that arises from within cultural traditions rather than being imposed from outside.

Table 4: Culturally Grounded Framework for Civic Education and Democratic Engagement in Cambodia

Dimension	Key Findings	Illustrative Examples
Recognition of Symbolic Power	Monarchical ideals are central to Cambodian political imagination and must be reinterpreted, not rejected.	Values like Karuṇā, Sammā, and Kun reframed to support active citizenship rather than passive obedience.
Redefining Traditional Values	Traditional concepts (e.g., Barami) can be reinterpreted as civic virtues based on ethical behavior and service.	Barami taught as earned moral authority through public accountability and participation.
Dialogical Pedagogy	Move from didactic to deliberative learning to foster civic agency, critical thinking, and engagement.	Classroom debates, role plays, community dialogs on governance, rights, and justice issues.
Cultural Reframing of Citizenship	Promote a concept of citizenship that honors tradition while empowering democratic participation.	Dhammarāja reimagined as collective ethical responsibility of all citizens.
Symbolic Platforms for Engagement	Rituals and public ceremonies should be harnessed to convey civic values and responsibilities.	Integrate messages of civic duty and democratic ethics into royal ceremonies and Buddhist sermons.
Vernacular Cosmopolitanism	Aligns with culturally rooted models of modernity that emerge from within local traditions.	Use of festivals and local media to disseminate messages of fairness, nonviolence, and environmental care (Appadurai, 1996).
Inclusivity and Youth Engagement	Target youth and rural communities through participatory, locally grounded educational approaches.	Support hybrid civic-religious activism, include oral histories, local problem-solving, and social media engagement.
Civic Evolution, Not Imposition	Civic identity should evolve from the Khmer worldview, integrating democratic values with cultural norms.	Citizenship taught as moral development rooted in Khmer history, spirituality, and communal responsibility.
Organic Democratization	Reform must resonate with Cambodia's symbolic and moral structures to ensure long-term democratic sustainability.	Education reforms bridge tradition with modern participatory norms, supporting culturally legitimate democratization.

Finally, a culturally grounded civic education framework should be inclusive, particularly for youth and rural populations. Many young Cambodians are already participating in hybrid forms of engagement—blending social media activism with religious festivals or organizing volunteer events that are both civic and spiritual. Civic education should nurture these practices, not suppress them. It should also include local history, oral traditions, and community-based problem solving to anchor democratic values in lived experience. In this way, citizenship can emerge not as an import but as a moral and social evolution of the Khmer worldview. By recognizing the symbolic dimensions of power and grounding reform in Cambodia's cultural matrix, this framework allows for a more organic democratization process—one that does not displace tradition but reinterprets it in the service of civic responsibility and participatory governance.

4.2. Discussion

The practical significance of this study lies in its potential to illuminate how formal democratic institutions in Cambodia coexist with enduring structures of traditional political thought. It identifies mechanisms of cultural continuity within the political sphere and offers insight into how these can inform more culturally grounded civic education and reform models. The symbolic matrix of Cambodian politics, rooted in centuries-old sacred notions of power, continues to shape public expectations, elite behavior, and modes of participation in ways that challenge simplistic models of democratization. Authority in traditional Khmer culture has long been founded on a worldview in which political and sacred spheres are inseparable. The ruler's legitimacy is derived not from contracts or laws but from transcendental principles—cosmological, mythological, and religious. The king functions as a spiritual intermediary between the cosmos and society, embodying charisma in the Weberian sense

and moral prestige known as barami. This worldview was influenced by the Hindu-Buddhist synthesis adopted during the early formation of Khmer state. Central to this was the concept of devarāja, the "god-king," in which rulers were seen as earthly manifestations of divine forces such as Shiva or Vishnu (Fukushima, 2019). Therefore, allegiance to the king was not simply political loyalty but a religious obligation. This sacred model aligns with what Mircea Eliade, E. Cassirer, and Karl Jaspers described as the archetype of cosmic order in political life. Historically, Khmer's political structures prioritized harmony and hierarchy preservation over mobilization or modernization. Rituals play a central role in legitimizing power—from coronation to agrarian ceremonies such as the royal plowing ceremony—ensuring continuity and involving the public in reenacting the sacred order (Chandler, 1996). In this context, power resembled a familial structure: the monarch was the father of the nation, and the subjects were moral dependents.

Theravāda Buddhism further reinforced this sacred-political synthesis. The ideal of the dhammarāja emphasized the ruler's duty to protect the sasana and promote social harmony. The state required symbolic approval from the sangha, and kingship became a political and spiritual vocation. Khmer epics, myths, and oral traditions further amplified the supernatural aura of the monarch, fostering political infantilism in which citizens sought protection rather than participation. Cambodian history confirms this pattern. Norodom Sihanouk's return as a unifying figure after 1993 illustrates the resilience of sacred kingship. Although disconnected from modern politics, he retained legitimacy through symbolic status. This underscores Levi-Strauss's notion of power as a deep cultural structure, not merely institutional (Chandler, 2008). The citizen-subject in Cambodia has thus historically operated not through legal agency but through ritual and loyalty. Even under Cambodia's constitutional monarchy, sacred archetypes remain powerful. The 1993 Constitution ostensibly instituted modern representative governance but retained a sacralized perception of the monarch, who remains an apolitical figure yet a moral and symbolic stabilizer (Pak, 2020). Habermas might note that Cambodia exemplifies a "posttraditional society with archaic relapses," where democratic norms coexist with premodern legitimation mechanisms. Despite democratic procedures, electoral participation often functions as a ritual affirmation of order rather than a critical expression of civic will.

The persistence of patronage networks, where loyalty and charisma override legality, reflects deep-seated Khmer political culture. The monarchy is invoked not only in ceremonial contexts but also to morally anchor political decisions. Political actors appeal to royal authority to sanctify their actions, and the populace interprets power in familial and spiritual terms. Slobozhan (2018) highlights how modern Cambodian statehood evolves through symbolic monarchy, which remains central to public imagination but devoid of executive power. This symbolic continuity does not hinder political transformation but rather channels it through culturally resonant pathways. The monarchy's symbolic capital has been reconfigured—from direct rule to moral guardianship and from executive authority to symbolic legitimacy. Rituals, public addresses, and Buddhist-infused language reinforce the monarchy's integrative role. Gadamer and Ricoeur noted that tradition is not static; it evolves through reinterpretation. Cambodia's monarchy embodies such a living heritage.

The gradual shift from the subject to the citizen is fraught with contradictions. While democratic frameworks are in place, civic identity remains shaped by hierarchical norms. The subject is still seen as dependent on moral authority rather than empowered by legal agency, which poses philosophical and pedagogical challenges. As Chhandara (2016) noted, many Cambodians view authority as external and unquestionable. Danilevskaya (2012) argues that institutional democracy, without subjective maturity, risks reproducing archaic subordination. However, hybrid identities are emerging. Youth activism, volunteerism, and grassroots movements reflect the formation of a civic consciousness that blends traditional values with democratic aspirations. Education and media play pivotal roles in this transition, although authoritarian pedagogies often constrain critical engagement. Nonetheless, young Cambodians increasingly articulate political responsibility and solidarity, challenging traditional expectations. Symbolic monarchy remains a double-edged force. It stabilizes identity but constrains dissent. Visual culture—such as ubiquitous royal portraits—inspires and disciplines. Osborne (2004) describes the king as speaking not for the state but for history. The monarchy's practical purity enhances its stabilizing function but can also obscure accountability.

In this context, a culturally grounded model of civic development is essential. Concepts such as karuṇā (compassion) and dharma can be ethical bridges between sacred tradition and democratic values. The path toward full citizenship in Cambodia lies not in rejecting symbolic power but in reinterpreting it through moral agency and participatory responsibility. Lim (2019) noted that respect for monarchy must be coupled with institutional feedback to ensure meaningful accountability. The Cambodian case demonstrates that democratic development in postmonarchical societies must involve cultural narratives and symbolic foundations. Citizenship cannot be imposed as a purely legal status but must be cultivated through ethical reinterpretation of tradition. As a living cultural symbol, the monarchy can play a vital mediating role—not by ruling but rather by guiding the nation's transition from sacred loyalty to civic responsibility.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

This study explored the enduring influence of monarchical ideals on contemporary Cambodian political culture and civic identity. Employing a sociophilosophical and interpretive approach, the research demonstrates how sacred symbols, traditional hierarchies, and ritual practices continue to shape the relationship between the state and its citizens, even after formal democratic structures were adopted in 1993. The findings reveal that Cambodian political life remains deeply embedded in a symbolic framework rooted in sacred kingship. This framework has not been replaced but rather reinterpreted within modern democratic discourse. The persistence of these symbolic structures underscores the complexity of Cambodia's political transformation. The shift from subject to citizen is neither linear nor complete; instead, it is a hybrid and negotiated process. Democratic ideals have not supplanted monarchical norms but coexist with them, often being shaped by traditional concepts such as *Barami* (moral prestige), *Kun* (gratitude), and *karuṇā* (compassion). These cultural logics continue to inform perceptions of legitimacy and political obligation. Although the king's role is constitutionally apolitical, he remains a central figure in the public imagination as a spiritual guide and moral compass, reinforcing a view of political authority as paternalistic, protective, and sacred.

This hybridity challenges the liberal-democratic model, which assumes a rational, rights-bearing citizen. In Cambodia, citizenship is grounded in legal rights and emotional, moral, and symbolic dimensions inherited from centuries of sacralized kingship and Buddhist cosmology. Political participation often takes ritualistic forms rather than deliberative forms, with expressions of loyalty, hierarchy, and reverence for authority frequently overshadowing demands for transparency, equality, and civic rights. Electoral practices, public rituals, and state symbolism collectively reinforce a political subjectivity aligned more with sacred order than with legal-contractual norms. However, the study also identifies emerging spaces of transformation. Cambodian youth, civil society groups, and educational reforms are beginning to reinterpret traditional values within democratic frameworks. This nascent civic consciousness blends respect for cultural heritage with aspirations for greater agency, accountability, and participation. Social media, grassroots activism, and civic education programs are gradually reshaping Cambodian citizenship, offering alternative narratives of engagement that are both culturally grounded and forward-looking. Critically, the study challenges universalist assumptions about democratization. This highlights that in posttraditional societies such as Cambodia, political reform cannot succeed through institutional changes alone—it must also engage with the symbolic and cultural foundations of legitimacy. Monarchical ideals are not mere historical relics but active forces shaping contemporary governance and public life. Thus, efforts to deepen democratic culture must involve hermeneutic engagement with tradition, with the goal not to reject it but rather to reinterpret it. In conclusion, Cambodia exemplifies a posttraditional polity where sacred and secular, subject and citizen, intersect in dynamic and complex ways. The legacy of kingship provides a moral and symbolic infrastructure that continues to influence political identity and behavior. While this legacy presents challenges for democratization, it also offers opportunities. A culturally resonant civic education that reframes traditional values as sources of civic virtue rather than subordination is essential for fostering a more participatory and inclusive political culture. Cambodia's experience holds broader lessons for postmonarchical societies navigating the tensions between heritage and modernity, tradition and transformation, authority and accountability.

5.2. Recommendations

Building on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed, with a focus on (1) civic education reform grounded in cultural tradition and (2) further research to expand empirical and participatory engagement with Cambodia's hybrid political subjectivity.

5.2.1. Civic Education Reform Rooted in Cultural Continuity

Effective civic education in Cambodia must integrate, rather than negate, the symbolic and moral codes that define public life. Instead of importing abstract democratic values disconnected from local contexts, educational strategies should draw on Khmer cultural idioms—such as *barami*, *karuṇā*, and *sammā*—and reinterpret them as civic virtues compatible with democratic engagement. For example:
- *Barami* could be reframed as the moral integrity expected of citizens and public servants.
- *Karuṇā* could serve as the foundation for social justice and solidarity.
- *Dhamma* could underpin ethical governance and accountability.

To achieve this goal, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport, in collaboration with Buddhist institutions and civil society organizations, should develop an integrative civic education curriculum that bridges democratic values and Khmer cultural heritage. School textbooks should prioritize active learning—debates, community projects, and participatory rituals—over passive moral instruction to foster critical thinking and civic agency. National holidays, royal ceremonies, and Buddhist festivals could be leveraged as platforms to emphasize the interplay between tradition, ethics, and democratic responsibility. Teacher training must also evolve. Dialogical pedagogies, encouraging respectful questioning and inclusive participation, should replace hierarchical teaching methods stifling open discussion. A culturally sensitive approach would empower educators to nurture civic awareness while honoring the values of harmony and social cohesion that are central to Khmer society. Ultimately, the future of Cambodian democracy hinges on institutional reforms and reimagines how power, duty, and citizenship are symbolically and practically enacted.

5.2.2. Recommendations for Further Research

This study highlights the need for more empirically grounded and participatory research, particularly that incorporating the voices of youth, rural populations, and marginalized communities (e.g., Khmer Loeu). While this research employed interpretive methods to explore cultural continuities, future studies should complement these findings with ethnographic fieldwork, oral history projects, and community-based participatory research (CBPR) to examine how symbolic power is experienced, contested, and transformed at the grassroots level. Additional areas for inquiry include the following:
- The role of digital technologies and social media in reconfiguring traditional narratives of authority. How are young Cambodians blending ancestral reverence with calls for transparency and reform in online spaces?
- The adaptation of religious institutions and rituals to modern pressures for accountability.
- Comparative studies with other postmonarchical societies in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore) are needed to identify regional patterns of symbolic adaptation and hybrid governance.

By foregrounding cultural and symbolic dimensions, researchers and policymakers can move beyond binary models of tradition versus modernity, advancing a more nuanced and historically grounded understanding of civic transformation.

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