

Jacobsen, Trudy (2008), *Lost Goddesses. The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press  
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In recent years the number of studies dealing with women and gender relations in Cambodia has increased. However, despite the importance of understanding women's situation in present-day Cambodia, none of those studies has described the status of Cambodian women from the earliest historical period to the present day. However, Trudy Jacobsen's study *Lost Goddesses*, which was begun in 2000 as her Ph.D. project and which she finished as a postdoctoral fellow at the Monash University Faculty of Arts, does so. The study is novel in the area of Cambodian women's studies as it draws a comprehensive picture of women and power from the third century A.D. to the twenty-first century for the first time. Jacobsen's extensive knowledge of Cambodia and its history allows her to describe in detail, over 326 pages and twelve chapters, the continually changing status and influence of women in Cambodian society and the incidents and factors that contributed to these changes.

In the introduction, Jacobsen manages to briefly introduce the concept of "power" and apply it to the Cambodian context. The author argues that most Cambodians have little idea about gender relations prior to the last two centuries and, thus, are not familiar with the conflicting views of Cambodian women. While the original ruler of Cambodia, according to legend, was an unmarried female warrior, Cambodians today typically perceive of Cambodian women as powerless and inferior. But whether a man or a woman is powerful or powerless also depends on the social class he or she belongs to. According to Jacobsen, differences between social classes determine one's status in society more than differences between the sexes within those classes.

In the second, third and fourth chapters, in which the author firstly introduces the complex patterns of the royal family's life, an analysis of women and power in the pre-classical, classical and middle Cambodian period is presented. Jacobsen argues that in the pre-classical period women enjoyed a high status in society. While elite women belonging to royal families were able to exercise power over others, women at all levels of society were seen as necessary and vital, with important skills, abilities, and ideological significance (37).

Women also had significant status during the classical period. Nevertheless, in the time of Apsaras, a category of female divinity able to change shape at will and move between the celestial and mundane worlds (45), differences between women of the elite and women in the rest of society existed, even though ordinary women still played an important role in

society. The author comprehensively demonstrates that in the middle period, when Theravada Buddhism was introduced, elite women continued to have influence and resonance in society. However, ordinary women also lived a life with rights and legal protection, which was given to them by marriage. In this period divorce was simple and did not degrade women.

The early nineteenth century, described in Chapter 5, was shaped by extremes. Jacobsen introduces two different key stakeholders in Cambodian history: Ang Mei and Ang Duong. While the unmarried Queen Ang Mei ruled Cambodia for over a decade, the strict *Chhap Srei*, a code of conduct for women, was composed by Ang Duong, who later became the ruler of Cambodia. As the author discusses, his reign was associated with a negative perspective towards women and power. If the previously outlined chapters may be abstract and hard to understand for some readers due to the complexity of Cambodian history and the stakeholders the author describes, the subsequent chapters become more illustrative and more accessible to the ordinary reader interested in gender relations in present-day Cambodia.

The late period of the nineteenth century, analysed in Chapter 6, is today believed to reflect “traditional” Cambodia. Jacobsen shows that in this period women were respected rather than constrained. All women, independent of their social background, were attached to the spiritual world. While elite women, for example, participated in the establishment of pagodas, ordinary women had their private spiritual realm.

As Jacobsen highlights in Chapter 7, which deals with the French colonial period established in 1863, colonization negatively affected women’s status in society. The French contributed to the disempowerment of women in Cambodia through their colonial policies by effectively devaluing some areas in which women had enjoyed power and placing control over others (173). It was not simply because the French dismissed evidence that some women in the Cambodian past could have been more important than men that many French activities to support and empower Cambodian women failed and thus contributed to the disadvantaged status of women. As a matter of fact, the author concludes, the status of women declined overall.

Chapter 8 deals with the “liberation” period – the time from the official independence from France in 1953 to the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge in April 1975. The 1950s and 1960s are, as Jacobsen argues, crucial for understanding the relationship of women and power today (182). During these decades the government promised gender equality and, thus, policies were implemented which should have empowered women while giving them the same civil and legal status as men. Nevertheless, women had to remain as traditional as possible (209) and the interests of men were privileged over

those of women's – a situation which still can be observed in twenty-first century Cambodia.

During the Khmer Rouge period described in Chapter 9, women were able to achieve more equality. However, Jacobsen sarcastically notes that gender equality only existed insofar as both men and women from non-rural backgrounds suffered equally from starvation, overwork, disease, deprivation of basic freedoms, torture, and death (218). Although the society of Democratic Kampuchea reinforced the notion that men and women were capable of performing the same tasks, the political arena at the rural grass-roots level was still determined by men's power.

Following Jacobsen, women became only superficially powerful after Vietnamese forces entered Cambodia in December 1978. As demonstrated in Chapter 10, gender equality was promoted and women took up white-collar positions and became lower- and mid-ranking government officials. In many cases, however, women's increased employment was only due to the fact that there were more women than men left alive after the fall of Democratic Kampuchea. After Vietnamese forces left the country and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), consisting of over 20,000 people from all over the world, entered in 2003, a new period began. Many women lost their governmental positions due to personnel cuts in the public sector. In addition, UNTAC forces contributed to an explosion of sex work and by the end of 1992 up to 20,000 women worked as prostitutes.

In present day Cambodia, as Jacobsen summarizes, the culture is shaped by men. Males dominate the public sphere and often define women as the weaker sex. Female identity is bound up with ideas of culture and tradition (278), and only a minority of women participate in the political arena. If women are powerful, they are part of Cambodia's elite. Nevertheless, for Jacobsen Cambodian women have always been powerful, though not necessarily in ways that correspond to Western constructs of power (14).

Trudy Jacobsen's effort to research the relationship of Cambodian women and power from the country's earliest period until today is amazing. The author has not neglected searching for the smallest piece of history which might have contributed to women's situation and the question of whether they have been powerful. Due to the author's close relationship to Cambodia, its history, and its gender relations, the book provides comprehensive insights into Cambodian life and society – in the past as well as in the present. However, with *Lost Goddesses* Jacobsen has written a book which may be predominantly of interest to Cambodian history scholars rather than to gender scholars interested in Cambodian gender and power relations. Due to its focus on history, described and analysed in a very de-

tailed way which goes far beyond background information, *Lost Goddesses* cannot be casually read as an introduction to gender patterns in Cambodia.

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