With the generous support of a Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Pre-dissertation Travel Fellowship, I spent the summer conducting preliminary research in Cambodia. I was concerned with questions of whether dominant discourses and policies in public schools effectively exclude Cambodia’s ethnic minorities (particularly indigenous peoples) from membership in the nation-state or serve to incorporate them. I was also interested in the roles that various stakeholders in the education system play. Finally, I wanted to begin investigating how youths’ visions for the future are shaped by schooling. Though ethnic Khmers comprise over 90% of the country’s total population, in the northeastern province of Ratanakiri over half of the population is made of up indigenous minority groups. I conducted my research primarily in Ratanakiri and in the capital city, Phnom Penh.

While public school was out of session over the summer months, I interviewed teachers, students, high school graduates, Ministry of Education officials, and NGO employees. These discussions revealed the degree to which Cambodian citizenship is frequently equated with Khmerness in the context of public schooling. Tellingly, the country is commonly referred to as *srok Khmer*, or “Khmer land,” rather than its official name, *Kampuchea*, which does not carry a specific ethnic connotation. Moreover, students are exposed to only minimal information about ethnic minorities in the national curriculum. Portrayals of indigenous peoples that do exist often frame them as the “living ancestors” of the Khmers, evoking either fear or distaste, a romanticized notion of the exotic “other,” or a sense of pity on the part of non-indigenous teachers and students.

Historically, indigenous youth themselves have had very limited access to formal education, due to distance to schools, costs for supplies, and language barriers. As my interviews with indigenous high school graduates made clear, indigenous youth who are able to attend school often feel uncomfortable in the that environment, leading to high drop-out rates. Since the 1990s, Banlung, the capital of Ratanakiri Province, has tripled in size. Most of the growth has been the result of the migration of ethnic Khmers from the southern regions searching for land and employment opportunities. Recent migrants have little to no prior exposure to indigenous communities, and this lack of knowledge has negative repercussions for indigenous youth in the context of public schools. Indigenous graduates recounted incidences in which their Khmer teachers and fellow students mocked them for being “too stupid to study,” “dirty,” or “backwards.”

Over the past decade, several NGOs have made efforts to mitigate these barriers facing indigenous students though scholarships, housing in Banlung for students coming from remote villages, and other programs. For instance, an international NGO has established a bilingual education program in several elementary schools in Ratanakiri, where indigenous students are given instruction in both their first language and in Khmer in order to help their transition into
Khmer-only classrooms. Another program is aimed at training teachers to be more sensitive to cultural differences. Through my interactions with NGO employees, I learned that organizations working on these issues (generally run by either foreigners and/or indigenous people) disagree over the extent to which the government should be part of efforts to support indigenous students and better incorporate them into public schools. The politics of ethnicity often shape the debate, with some NGOs arguing that Ministry of Education (MoE) officials, who are generally Khmer, do not view indigenous peoples as full citizens nor have the best interests of their communities in mind, and should therefore not be involved.

When the government does become associated with programs aimed at assisting indigenous students, its response has been mixed. In the case of the bilingual education program, NGO employees reported that MoE officials initially resisted its implementation, citing both the extra burden it would place on their staff and the importance of Khmer as the national language. The MoE acquiesced after the NGO repeatedly insisted that increased indigenous student enrollment would help Cambodia come closer to meeting the Millennium Development Goals, and thus increase its standing with international donors. The MoE insisted, however, that indigenous languages only be written using the Khmer script, despite the fact that some languages were already using alternate orthographies (e.g. the Jarai language is written using the Vietnamese alphabet).

For many people I interviewed, the greater incorporation of indigenous youth into the public education system is recognized as a double-edged sword. Indigenous communities in Ratanakiri face high levels of pressure on their traditional livelihoods which are based on swidden agriculture. Large-scale government land concessions for rubber plantations, as well as infrastructure projects like hydroelectric dams, have resulted in many people being evicted from their land. Some indigenous community leaders express hope that public schooling can help provide young people with the language skills, political savvy, and knowledge of legal rights needed to defend their communities. At the same time, however, formal education can serve to devalue indigenous forms of knowledge and undermine traditional social relations that have emphasized egalitarianism. For instance, the director of an NGO working in Ratanakiri, who is indigenous himself, suggested that exposure to structures of hierarchy and Khmer popular culture though schooling has led some young people to question the leadership of their elders and value the accumulation of material wealth above all else. Generational conflicts have arisen as young indigenous people struggle to define their place in the changing landscape of contemporary Cambodia.

My preliminary fieldwork made possible by the Scott Kloek-Jenson Fellowship allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the issues at stake and the players involved in indigenous education in Cambodia. I was also able to establish important connections with organizations that will help facilitate my dissertation research, such as the MoE, several NGOs working with indigenous communities in Ratanakiri, and the Royal University of Phnom Penh. I am excited to further hone my dissertation project as I continue to analyze my field notes from this summer.