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**Recovery of the collective spirit: The role of  
the revival of Buddhism in Cambodia**

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# **Recovery of the Collective Spirit: The Role of the Revival of Buddhism in Cambodia**

## *The Inquiry*

This paper is a preliminary exploration of some of the literature that may help us understand the regeneration of Buddhism taking place in Cambodia following the conflict and destruction of the Khmer Rouge era. Although Ebihara et al. (1994: 13) remark that the importance of Buddhism in pre-revolutionary Cambodia can scarcely be overstated, it has often been awarded a peripheral place in the literature. This paper is therefore an attempt to draw together the threads that are to be found in the literature to try and gain an overview of the role that Buddhism, in combination with animism, has played in rural life in the past in Cambodia. From this I make some tentative suggestions about its contemporary role in enabling the establishment of relationships predicated on trust, mutual dependence and a sense of shared destiny. My inquiry is, however, qualified by the fact that Buddhism is not simply being recreated in its previous mould, but is being “reinvented” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) after a radical break with the past. While there is certainly a struggle in Cambodia to revive moral and cosmological order through Buddhism, there are also powerful forces that contribute to its fragmentation and subordination to the country’s regnant political and economic stakeholders. In their pursuit of legitimacy within the international community, these stakeholders may threaten the survival of what appears to be the core of Khmer identity and culture.

I attempt here to piece together a picture of the ideals that Buddhism has represented for Cambodians in the past and which many hope to recreate, though the obstacles are formidable. It has been argued that these obstacles have less to do with the breakdown in trust and solidarity among people than they do with the unleashing of an unchecked market economy that provides no safety nets for the poor (Krishnamurthy 1999). It should also be noted that Buddhism today plays a central role in Cambodian discourses on “reconciliation” propagated largely by powerful, urban actors and are nourished by western notions of forgiveness, acknowledgement, accountability, repentance, retribution and healing (Borneman 1997). Such

reconciliation, as well as the mission of democratisation, are often posited as prerequisite to reconstruction. The question, however, is whether the introduction of ideals derived from elsewhere – be they about development, ideology or politics – if they overlook the delicate and, particularly in Cambodia, vulnerable matrix of local experiences, understandings and cultural resources, may not contribute to their further fragmentation.

### ***The shaping of Khmer Buddhism***

Throughout the history of pre-modern Cambodia, the cultural fabric of popular Buddhism/ animism has played a central role in political and moral ordering, in shaping Khmer ethnic and national identity and in nourishing fellowship among Cambodian villagers.

A synopsis of the entry of Theravada Buddhism onto the Cambodian scene has been provided by Gyallay-Pap (1996). He describes how the higher ranks of the monkhood (*sangha*) became connected to the royal court. As the role of god-king (*devaraja*) became transformed into that of righteous ruler (*dhammaraja*), political authority was made beholden to Buddhist law and the moral authority of the monks – the *sangha* thereby became the moral moderator of political excesses.

The majority of monks, however, were village based and the ecclesiastical structures were consequently decentralised. These quasi-egalitarian communities of monks operated not only as fields of merit for local people, but also as centres for the redistribution of wealth, as libraries and seats of scholarship. The pagodas provided primary schooling for boys<sup>1</sup>, care for orphan boys and a refuge for the elderly<sup>2</sup>. They were the foci of social and cultural activities and although the *sangha* certainly adapted and reformed over the years, the monks remained strong protectors of local culture and tradition. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Gyallay-Pap notes, the Khmer *sangha* was the major moral and institutional force that resisted first the Vietnamese and later French colonisation. The monks successfully thwarted French endeavours to supplant Buddhist-based education and Khmer as the language of instruction with the French system – something that neighbouring Vietnam was less successful in. From the villagers’ point of view, it may be surmised that the pagoda and the *sangha* represented the only buffer that could provide them with social services, moral order and, by dint of their moral authority, some protection for them and their local worlds from political leaders.

Yang Sam (1990), writing of Battambang Province, describes how people of the 1890s generation recalled wonderful times spent attending village fairs, celebrations in the monasteries and how they had ample time for this in the dry season when they were not required to work their paddy fields. While it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of nostalgic images, there is evidence that Buddhism was widely accessible and deeply integrated with rural life throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the early part of the twentieth century the country was dotted with almost two thousand pagodas (Yang Sam 1990: 165), serving a population of some two and a half million (Mitchell 1982: 44) of whom the majority were Khmer Buddhists - on average one pagoda to every thousand or so inhabitants. By the 1950s, the number of pagodas had increased to almost three thousand, although the population was by now some four and a half million. During this period, Delvert (1961) describes how cremation always took place at the pagoda and it was at the pagoda that the local people gathered for festivities, dances, entertainment and even to listen to the radio. The pagoda, which had provided the small children with rudimentary education, now became home to state run schools. For the rural people, Delvert, concludes, the pagoda was a

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, western explorers noted with astonishment that the adult male population of Cambodia was literate – something that was not accomplished in Europe until the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century – the peak of Europe’s “civilising mission”.

place of retreat, relaxation and reunion, “c’est une vraie maison commune” (*ibid.*: 220). This image of the pagoda as providing the singular centripetal and integrative centre for village settlements is echoed in Ebihara’s (1968) ethnography from roughly the same period.

The village-based monastic system developed over the centuries into one which bound a doctrine of enlightenment with deep engagement in the community. Ancient inscriptions tell us that the pagodas and spirits together have played an integral role in defining as well as protecting the village throughout Cambodia’s history (Ang Choulean 1990), with the pagoda serving as an axis and the spirits demarcating boundaries around the community<sup>3</sup>. It is because of this pivotal social and cultural position that Buddhism has long been an object of acute concern to political leaders in Cambodia. Winning moral legitimacy from the monkhood was an essential means of reaching the hearts of the people – exemplified by Sihanouk’s strategy in the 1960s (Chandler 1991). Indeed, Yang Sam (1990) argues that in the competition between Siam and Vietnam to dominate Cambodia, the cultural clash between the Buddhist Cambodians and the sinicized Vietnamese became the central issue that then implicated subsequent historical events. General Lon Nol, who ruled Cambodia in the early 1970s, also interpreted his battle against the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouge as a “religious war” (Corfield 1994: 101). Ultimately, this perhaps also explains why Buddhism was subjected to unique savagery by the Khmer Rouge in their attempt to establish an entirely new utopian order (Keyes 1994).

Although Cambodia’s history has been one of repeated political disruption and strife over the past two hundred years, the Khmer Rouge era was the only one that broke apart what appears to have been the fundament of Cambodian rural life. It was unique in its attempt to accomplish a complete cultural break the past. The goal of the leaders was to wipe Cambodia clean of its history and of its culture and establish an order that in many senses inverted that of the past; children could be given authority over elders, women over men, the uneducated over the educated. Numerous personal accounts have been published by survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia detailing the appalling ways in which the cadres systematically broke down not only a spiritual tradition but also social bonds such as kinship to enlist the loyalty of,

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<sup>2</sup> Elderly women, in particular, who could join the pagoda as nuns in later life.

<sup>3</sup> This is most explicitly observable even today in the demarcation of the village boundary and propitiation of the guardian spirit, usually located at the northeastern limit, by the whole community in the event of epidemic.

particularly, children to the imposed order, “*Angkar*” (the party). In this endeavour, Buddhism represented the single, greatest threat (Gyallay-Pap 2002: 110).

By 1978, Buddhism had been declared dead and the grounds clear for the building of a new, revolutionary culture by Mme. Yun Yat, the Minister of Culture, Information and Propaganda of the Democratic Kampuchea regime. The destruction of the pagodas and the *sangha* left villagers disoriented, disaggregated and bereft of their prime focus of communal life and shared meaning (Harris, in press). The cultural devastation wreaked by the Khmer Rouge left not only refugees, but even non-exiled Cambodians suffering a radical rupture with their culture and history: in “cultural bereavement” (Eisenbruch 1991). Some Khmer identify this era as having extinguished the world as they knew it (Ebihara et al. 1994: 3).

The Khmer Rouge era had a devastating impact on fundamental institutions such as those of education and kinship, and with the concomitant destruction of Buddhism (as well as the spirit realm) the most important traditional resources for managing suffering and loss were no longer available. Khmer identity, so tightly bound to Buddhism, is shaken by the inadequacy of their culture both in preventing the horror they have experienced and in providing an explanation (Mortland 1994). Moreover, this system of organised physical, emotional, social as well as cultural violation was carried out by Khmer upon Khmer. Neither a national nor an ethnic boundary demarcates an enemy and the distinction between perpetrators and victims also remains notoriously unclear (Ea and Sim 2001). When Khmer culture itself appeared to give rise to the cause of its own dissolution, it is hard to know where to turn to seek repair.

In this collective traumatising, trust and the sense of sharing and belonging were arguably the most significant casualties. The establishment of networks of relations predicated on hope, confidence in others and a sense of common destiny is therefore one of the most pressing problems that Cambodia faces today and may be assumed to be integral to the reconstruction of the country. The way in which Buddhism is now being enthusiastically recast and wielded by various actors in attempts to rekindle both imagined (Anderson 1983) and experienced community is therefore of immediate concern.

### ***Buddhism after the Khmer Rouge***

Today some 90% of the population<sup>4</sup> of Cambodia are Theravada Buddhists. Prior to the Khmer Rouge era of 1975-9, there were an estimated 88,000 Buddhist monks in the country and around three and a half thousand monasteries for a population of just over seven million. In general, some three-quarters of men over the age of seventeen would have spent a period of one or two years in the *sangha* (monkhood) as novices or monks (Keyes 1994: 46). The Buddhist *sangha* was still the predominant transmitter of Khmer language and culture and indeed the first Khmer language newspaper was founded by the Buddhist Institute in 1936.

It is believed that over one third of monks were executed or forced to break their vows by the Khmer Rouge cadres when they came to power, but only a few percent of the original figure are believed to have survived the era - many having died of starvation and disease. Reports suggest that over half of the country's temples were razed and others damaged or desecrated. With this, a tradition of both knowledge and practice that had survived for centuries in Cambodia, playing a vital role in informing and sustaining Khmer culture by resisting or accommodating new influences, was virtually exterminated.

After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese in January 1979, a remarkable recovery began. In 1979, seven monks were selected by the new government and re-ordained. They all had between twenty and sixty years of former service in the *sangha* and their ordination was overseen by Theravadin monks from Vietnam. The youngest of these, Ven. Tep Vong (born in 1930) is now the supreme patriarch of the larger of the two Buddhist orders in Cambodia, but like these other "reinvented" monks, is viewed with suspicion by some for his connection to the Vietnamese and close allegiance to those in power today.

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<sup>4</sup> The population of Cambodia was ten and a half million in 1995.

After only two years, over seven hundred pagodas had been restored. While there was and still is a heavy investment from local people of both labour, time and resources, much reconstruction was and continues to be heavily sponsored by overseas Khmer or by the wealthy and powerful in Phnom Penh. The Vietnamese state apparatus tried to maintain tight control of the *sangha* throughout the 1980s, in part by forbidding monks to practise mendicancy and prohibiting men under the age of fifty to ordain. However, Hawk noted in 1981 that in the provinces, “scores of young novitiates can be observed”<sup>5</sup> (1981: 6), suggesting something of the determination and zest of rural Cambodians in relation to Buddhism, though for many it also offered simply a refuge and education and in the absence of knowledgeable, experienced older monks, the establishment of legitimacy for novitiates remains highly problematic.

Some of the village elders, who survived the Khmer Rouge devastation to a greater degree than ordained monks, began spontaneously reconstituting lay pagoda committees, new monks were ordained and temple festivals and Buddhist rituals began to be revived. Some pagodas also began to engage in reconstruction of roads, schools, medical and social services through their lay pagoda committees. Unfortunately, however, many pagodas today still lack a functioning pagoda committee. After the Vietnamese withdrawal in 1989, the new government relaxed restrictions on Buddhism in a bid for legitimacy and the number of monks increased rapidly reaching some 50,000 today (as well as some 4,000 nuns) (Emerson 1997: 48).

The efforts to revive Buddhism also reflect loci of control. Although the new monkhood was spearheaded under Vietnamese inspiration and the rich and powerful patronise temples in the vicinity of Phnom Penh, Martin (1994) points out that poor communities are also trying hard to support their monasteries despite their poverty, and this signals the hope that they place in their religion and monks.

In the 1990s, laymen began utilising villagers’ temple donations to found elementary Pali schools in Phnom Penh which now attract novices, particularly from among the elderly or young orphans. However, the almost total destruction of the clergy and their literature by the Khmer Rouge means reconstruction entails a struggle to establish quality education and to find continuity with past expertise. This new generation of largely adolescent monks is being bred in an ‘expertise vacuum’.

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<sup>5</sup> This is borne out by an interview I conducted together with Judy Ledgerwood with two monks who had both ordained as very young men in the early 1980s.



### *Sacred centres and boundaries*

Western social scientists who have studied Cambodian society since the 1950s have tended to repudiate the idea that community and solidarity are or ever have been features of Cambodian rural life (Prum Thevy 1999) – a view that is called into question by authors such as Krishnamurthy (1999) and Watts (1999).

Contemporary publications, such as those of Thion (1999) and Ovesen et al. (1996) observed that Cambodian villages (*phum*) largely lack formal, social organisational structures with identifiable social groupings and fixed territories. This pattern is not unique to Cambodia. The existence of, “widely ramifying patterns or relationships between individuals and families, sectors of which are only vaguely delineated by formal village demarcation” (Piker 1983 in Kemp 1988: XX) has historically characterised not only Cambodia, but most of Southeast Asia (see Kemp 1988).

Identification with corporate groups and delimited territory do not appear, then, to have been the structuring principles of Khmer community. Ovesen et al. (1996), recognising this, suggest that such structuring principles are likely to be found in the cultural rather than social organisational *per se*. Certainly, it has been noted that although researchers generally stress the low levels of social interaction and corporate solidarity among Cambodian villagers, informants themselves stress the bonds between people (Van de Put 1997: 4/17). What then, is the nature of these bonds?

When asked to define a *phum*, Ovesen et al.’s Cambodian assistants, for instance, responded that “the presence of a temple (*wat*) and of a village chief” are constitutive (1996: 68). These two features recall Delvert’s (1961) distinction between the “*phum paysan*” and the “*phum administratif*”, where the former corresponded to the reality experienced by the people themselves while the latter was an artificial organisation imposed by the French. It is the former that approximates my concern here. A still closer approximation to experienced Khmer “community”, however, may be found in Delvert’s notion of the “*vie paysanne, autre que le vie familiale*”, a variably flexible agglomeration of people of which “*La pagode en est le centre.*” The pagoda may not lie at the geographical heart of a village, but it represented the heart of life - an axis through which relations between people were articulated.

The monastic space of the pagoda, it should be noted, is not the site of Buddhism alone but is, “the most visible and elaborate spatial representation of village culture” (Ang Choulean 1988: 39). It is in this space that the intimate relationship between Buddhism and the animistic system that pre-existed its arrival find expression. Following Ang Choulean’s lead, therefore, I find it useful to bring the realm of the sacred to centre stage - to examine the homogenising, centripetal power of the religious-magical-animistic realm of the pagoda and its attendant features. This may lead us towards the sources that Cambodians look to in their pursuit of moral order, legitimacy, trust and sharing – all of which are crucial in creating the fellowship that is essential to productive collective life. By giving serious attention to this field, it is possible that hitherto largely overlooked forms of solidarity may come to light and the ‘collective spirit’ of Khmer culture may be unearthed.

The pagoda, its lay committee and the mutual aid associations it governs, and the guardian spirits together appear to have played and continue to play a key cohesive role in Khmer society. Forest (1991), for instance, identifies Buddhism as the only real socially homogenising factor. The pagoda, “. . . constitutes in fact the only place where villagers are truly collective” (Brown 1999: 8). It “. . . forms the nucleus of religious, social and welfare oriented activities of communities” (Krishnamurthy 1999: 53). Making donations to a particular pagoda and participation in its festivals leads to affiliation between villagers and affinity between groups – several hamlets may support a single pagoda and their shared commitment provokes a kind of solidarity between them (Ang Choulean 1990). In Kampong Thom Province in 1996, for instance, there were 718 identified villages served by 209 pagodas – three to four villages were co-operatively involved in the workings of each pagoda (Aschmoneit et al. 1997a).

Khmer culture, then, may not be characterised so much by weakness and fragmentation but by a surprisingly resilient social fluidity – a fluidity that has long been held together by the unifying and structuring force of Khmer Buddhism. Despite all the trauma and upheavals of war and the lack of tight corporate social structures, many Cambodians today seem still to nurture a strong sense of their common heritage and destiny, “There is a strong sense of being Khmer, and this part of the identity is shown by attending the rituals and festivities of the traditional festivals, be it at home, at the pagoda or at some public space” (Van de Put 1997: 417).

The organisation of these festivals, rituals and even construction and maintenance of the pagoda and its workings are evidence of considerable co-operative effort and pooling of resources, and indeed the pagoda is ideally the hub of a number of local associations. It is maybe not so surprising that the collective spirit that this informal type of reciprocity and co-operation evidences is often invisible at first glance since it expresses the autonomy of the pagoda constituency and is therefore a form of local resistance to interference by administrative officials who may lack local legitimacy. Where it does exist, it may represent a subversive power<sup>6</sup>,

[Since the village authorities are suspicious of them] People are not prepared to talk about them. Unless you stay in the village, you will not see them. However, according to those who do spend time in the villages, they are definitely thriving” (Davenport et al. 1995: 60 in Hughes 2001: 13).

Whether these forms actually operate in a particular village or not, some Cambodian researchers are keen to point out that an ideal of reciprocity is still alive and well (Sedara 2000, 2001)<sup>7</sup>. These observations bring us perhaps a little closer to the way in which Khmer people are now themselves trying to reconstruct a cohesive and ordered world according to ideals and principles that are familiar from the past.

### ***Holding the fractured cosmos together: the sacred centre***

Reconstructed pagodas in Cambodia today differ wildly from one another. Some are actively involved in community services and provide a variety of facilities to their constituency while others are more or less dormant. The credibility of the young monks is, as noted earlier, far from assured and there have been numerous scandals associated with them. The dearth of reliable scholar monks to oversee the *sangha* makes it extremely hard to ensure its religious integrity. Where pagoda committees are lacking, monks themselves may handle money and in so doing break their vows and undermine their legitimacy. Some monks cultivate their links to politicians as a means of securing donations for their pagodas instead of prioritising the will of their constituents (see e.g. Guthrie’s 2002 description of Wat Nirot Rangsey). Pagodas that work together with international NGOs must struggle to avoid the charge of having simply become

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<sup>6</sup> Compare with the case of the monk Khot Khon who upset local officials by running development and education programmes from his pagoda in Prey Veng. Despite his local popularity and a petition signed by 300 villagers, the monk was forced to leave his pagoda and retreat to the forest (report by Bou Saroeun in Phnom Penh Post 4 June 9-2X XXXX).

servants of the international community. Since 1993, when Cambodian monks were awarded the right to vote in the new constitution, their role has become sharply politicised and many pagodas now bear party colours. All these factors threaten the authenticity of the religious vows that committed ascetics must undertake and undermine their ability to provide the valid critique of political behaviour that they once could. Certainly, the process of reinvention is not producing a replica of what once was.

Nevertheless, many restored pagodas have once again become important centres of cultural activity for festivals, death rituals and merit making activities. The annual festival of the dead *pchum ben* and the *kathin* ceremony, when parishioners practise merit-making by donating new robes to the monks, are both very popular. Similarly, the water festival, when the pagodas release their pirogues for racing on the river, is a major annual event. And inside some pagodas there are extraordinary efforts being made to heal the disorders that have so brutally disrupted Khmer culture. Although many Cambodians lament the vacuum that has resulted from the tragic destruction of Khmer Buddhist scholarship and accomplishment, many still look earnestly towards Buddhism as a cherished storehouse of power to recreate order in their splintered, shared world.

Although the soteriological capacity of Buddhist philosophy has been strained by recent historical events in Cambodia, monks continue to play an important therapeutic role both in rural and urban environments (Didier 2002; Eisenbruch XXXX). This persists both at the level of individual distress in healing consultations and at the level of collective ritual. The syncretic complex of magico-religious rites that characterise popular Khmer Buddhism can sometimes be employed for healing problems of a psychosocial nature. Monks, sometimes assisted by nuns, heal by using medicines they have prepared, rituals such as pouring blessed water, advising their clients or reading scriptures to them. The monks share the cosmology of local people: an understanding of the pathogenic implications of neglecting ancestors or breaking codes of conduct, the powers of various kinds of spirits and so on.

The repair of popular Buddhism may therefore imply not only recognition of local cosmology and its transgressions, but it may also contribute to its reconstruction. Similarly, the regeneration of the ritual life of the congregation may recreate a sense of social integration,

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<sup>7</sup> Though it is also noted by Kim and others (e.g. Öjendal, personal communication) that these systems and ideals are

cultural order and continuity, providing a way for people to formulate and relate to their collective stories through a symbolism pregnant with associations to a shared cultural origin and a common destiny.

Together these systems weave a cosmological fabric that extends beyond doctrinal Theravada Buddhism, percolating through Cambodia's animist traditions. Local Buddhist practice and its various permutations may therefore address not only psychological, physical and social disorders. Perhaps they also represent a local effort to prevent cultural fragmentation and the ultimate demise of Khmer culture.

### *The sacred periphery*

While the pagoda serves as the centre of community, the guardian spirits operate as markers of the periphery. Buddhism has been grafted onto a pre-existing animist background, populated by a range of spirit beings, and the two systems operate symbiotically in the popular milieu (Ang Choulean 1988). Some of the spirits derive from the dangerous jungle areas, outside of ordered village life. Others are the spirits of ancestors who may both protect the community and rice cultivation but may also turn against people – particularly if they are spirits of those who died violent deaths. These are known as the *neak ta* and they generally delimit the community territory and its social networks. No rite may take place without extending an invitation to the spirits and the tribute paid by family networks and the community to the *neak ta* signifies the way in which this community differentiates itself from others but also associates with them within a mystical network.

According to Ang Choulean (1990), the village tutelary spirit or *anak ta*, can be found at the northeastern limit of the habitation area and an analogous *anak ta* can generally also be found at the northeast limit of the pagoda compound, suggesting that the sacred geography of the pagoda may symbolise a microcosm of the world of its constituency. Similarly, collective effort is apparently often mobilised in order to chase away but also to tame and co-opt the powers of maleficent spirits or *bray*, often the spirits of those who have died a violent death or died in childbirth.

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under immanent threat from the cash economy that is now transforming and fragmenting village life.

Many pagodas possess a pirogue or racing boat which is lodged in its compound and used to race in the annual water festival. Ang Choulean claims that this is one of the most important events of the year since the prestige of both the monastery and its parishioners are at stake. The pirogue is inhabited by a *bray*, who operates as a capricious guardian spirit. The potentially maleficent *bray* is indeed tamed within the confines of the pagoda and in her controlled form becomes known as *parami*, a word which designates the ten perfections of Buddhism. Thus, the monks protect their constituency from the violence of restless souls, enabling its members individually or collectively to approach the divine and access its powers for help in their daily concerns.

One of my own informants in Cambodia explained to me that the reason there is so much random violence in Cambodia today is that so many of those who died under the Khmer Rouge have not been cremated in the presence of monks, such as the those whose skulls are on display at the Killing Fields memorial. Their restless spirits are therefore reborn in a violent form. Clearly, not only a localised community, but the welfare of the whole fellowship of Cambodia is threatened by the brutality of a history that has yet to be put to rest by legitimate monks. This says something of how an “imagined community” experiences its collective spirit in ways that may not be immediately observable in social relations.

However, this collective spirit was deeply fractured for many by the Khmer Rouge. The frequent forced movement of people during the Democratic Kampuchea period meant that the links between villagers and their guardian ancestors were severed. Ponchaud even cites a farmer who claimed of the spirits, “Since they didn’t do anything against the Khmer Rouge, I don’t trust them any more” (1989: 168). Moreover, the fact that corrupt politicians successfully patronise pagodas in order access *parami* and thereby secure their political survival makes some Khmer suspicious of the morality of merit-making (see Guthrie 2002: 71). So that the issue of rebuilding trust in Cambodia is clearly not only related to relationships between people but also to the relationships between people and the final truths of their cosmos.

### ***Linking the centre and periphery***

Although Cambodian rural monks have perhaps never been detached from local life, their ability to engage in secular affairs is limited by their ascetic vows. There is, however, an important lay linking mechanism in the pagoda committee. Aschmoneit et al. (1997b) carried out

a unique although limited study in several villages in Kampong Thom Province. Their findings are intriguing.

Aschmoneit's team was able to elicit a list of mutual aid and co-operative organisations of various kinds, sizes, functions and stability over time: 'pots and pans' associations (for organising food preparations for large festivals), cow exchange groups, rice associations, school associations, boat racing groups and more. Among these are the very significant pagoda committees under whose authority several such associations operate.

Others have characterised the pagoda committee as a "primordial element of the village" and "the major axis of mobilisation" among its people (Brown 1999: 14). The existence of these committees indeed challenges prevailing assumptions about lack of social organisation in Khmer rural society (Watts 1999). The committees consist of lay people who are locally elected to constitute an informal administrative unit for the villages or hamlets supporting the particular pagoda. Its members make decisions regarding communal works, management of territory under its jurisdiction and the organisation of festivals and collection of funds. Its decision-making powers, it is claimed, rest upon the achievement of agreement between at least some eighty percent of the villagers, committee members and the chief, using negotiation rather than imposition of their will (Brown 1999). Since its members are under direct influence of the monks, this suggests tacit approval from the monkhood and – assuming the monks have local accreditation and have managed to stay disengaged from politicking - thereby moral rather than political legitimacy.

Although these, like all institutions, suffered greatly from the devastation of the Khmer Rouge period, pagoda committees were the first kind of social institution to spontaneously re-emerge after it. Those that were able to almost immediately began to regain their former role of organising their constituencies through the various associations under their authority, such as rice associations and cash associations. Pagoda committees have apparently existed in Cambodia for more than six centuries and Aschmoneit goes so far as to say that, "There is no organizational structure in Cambodian history which survived so many regimes except perhaps the institution of kingdom" (Aschmoneit 1997b: 14). The committee is responsible for all secular aspects of the pagoda – the place which is the traditional and only gathering place for the villagers.

In the region in which Aschmoneit conducted his study, a single pagoda committee was related to several villages and included representatives from each of these. The picture sketched from the data is impressive. Generally, these were some five to ten or more mature men<sup>8</sup> whom the villagers had entrusted with the power to handle the pagoda funds honestly, administering them to the monks, the pagoda and the people. Thus the committee linked not only the pagoda to the people but also linked several villages together. Aschmoneit describes the three types of lay people usually present at the pagoda: the *achar vat* or wise man of the pagoda, the *achar phum* or village representatives and other respected community members. The *achar vat*, who is elected by the monks and community elders, acts as a the mediator between the monks and the local people and in some areas this person is forbidden to sit on the pagoda committee and similarly, not all committee members are necessarily *achars*, though they are respected community members, sometimes including women, who are awarded the power to make important executive decisions that affect the welfare of its inhabitants. In Kampong Thom, these people could be responsible for handling very considerable quantities of money, which is all the more remarkable given the general impoverishment of the communities in which Aschmoneit conducted his work.

The *achars* are often men who have previously spent time as monks and they are therefore usually versed in the chanting of sutras and in the organisation of festivals and rites. Some may even double as healers or fortune-tellers thus presumably putting their local knowledge and legitimacy to use to help maintain the smooth running of community life. It may be surmised that their intermediate position between the renunciatory world of the monks proper and the secular life of the villages may enable them to “engage Buddhism” without sullyng it by contaminating its ascetic principles.

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<sup>8</sup> Women may also become members of the pagoda committee, though they cannot become *achars*.



Although the ingredients described above suggest a potential in this social and cultural realm for re-building relationships predicated on trust and mutual dependence, this is not unproblematic. To trust is always to take a risk and the integrity of *achars* is not unquestionable. Many of those who committed atrocities during the Khmer Rouge era had themselves been monks and *achars* earlier in life – the political complexity of the 1960s and 70s in Cambodia meant that some of these joined the communist cause and were, indeed, particularly successful in recruiting peasants precisely because of their local legitimacy<sup>9</sup> (Harris, in press). Meas (1995: 21) also notes how this fundamental institution of trust also suffered during the Democratic Kampuchea period,

All except one of the ‘pious laymen’, the achar as they are called, were killed at the pagoda. The one who was spared was in league with the Khmer Rouge . . . When even an achar could be a killer, the people did not know who to trust.

Nevertheless, since 1979 and the end of the Khmer Rouge reign of terror, villages in many areas of the country do seem to have poured their resources, labour and hopes into the reconstruction of pagodas and pagoda committees. Both ideals and forms of popular participation, relationships of mutual dependence and moral order appear to be created and articulated in this cultural space - “la vie paysanne” – which formerly lay suspended between the renunciatory world of the monks and the limits of the realm protected by the spirits.

### ***Buddhism under threat***

While it may be tempting to see in Khmer Buddhism a straightforward source of culturally appropriate community healing and regeneration, this cannot be assumed. Not only are the Buddhist texts capable of multiple levels of interpretation (Tambiah 1976: 402), but both Buddhist doctrine and practice become culturally potent only in the hands of historically situated cultural actors.

In Cambodia, the legitimacy of the new monks remains unclear. The involvement of the *sangha* in political developments of the last decades has made some question its moral authenticity. Not all pagodas are actively engaged in rebuilding community life and some monks are even known to be corrupt or abusive.

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<sup>9</sup> Though, for precisely the same reason, senior monks in particular were summarily executed by the Khmer Rouge in order to stem the influence they had over the people.

The co-optation of Buddhism by organisations promoting community development and peace-making also entails particular problems. The *sangha* and pagoda have been identified as one of the most potent community development institutions in Cambodia. The pagoda's traditional role at the heart of village life, providing social services, counselling and healing together have encouraged some to see Cambodian village Buddhism as "socially engaged" and offering a variety of opportunities for creating an effective development model (Emerson 1997: 46). However, the engagement of monks and nuns by secular organisations and, conversely, appropriation of secular ideas by the *sangha* and nuns, may threaten their vows and thereby compromise their careers as ascetic religious persons and their claims to religious legitimacy. Financial support from secular organisations and, in particular, from political leaders may also play a significant role in shaping the choices of the clergy, silencing the critical voice that has for centuries provided a moral check on the excesses of abusive leaders.

The greatest threat to rural Khmer culture may not, then, be the devastation wreaked by the trauma of the past. Khmers show admirable strength in putting the past behind them and rebuilding what they can. A more pernicious threat may in fact be that of development and the ". . . rampant liberalization and unrestrained greed" (Ovesen et al. 1996: 83) that is coming hand in hand with the development and democratisation mission. Villagers' ability to maximise their security – in which the pagoda plays such an indispensable role both in the material and spiritual sense – is clearly at risk.

### *Occupying sacred space*

During my recent field trip to Cambodia I was invited to attend the consecration ceremony of a newly constructed building at a pagoda in a village not far from Phnom Penh. My companion, whom I call Vanna, was an elegant Khmer woman in her sixties who had been raised in Phnom Penh and attended French medium school. She wanted to attend the afternoon session of the ceremony and to donate two 50kg sacks of rice, and she explained that there would be many people and goings on most of the night.

On the way, Vanna was quiet. She responded to my questions with direct and concise answers. She seemed a reserved woman who did not waste words. We drove past several ostentatious pagodas on the way. Most were painted in gold and red and stood out sharply against the skyline and simplicity of the brown village houses around them. I asked Vanna why she had

chosen to start attending the particular pagoda we were going to and she explained that it was because of the head monk who she felt was one of the few authentic monks around. The pagodas we drove past, she lamented, were not truly Khmer. They had been renovated following the Thai model because after the Khmer Rouge era there were not enough people who knew what the true Khmer traditions were. When we arrived at our destination, the pagoda appeared simple. It was painted in subtler colours and was smaller than the others I had seen. The monks' accommodation was a simple wooden building and Vanna told me that the monks here had deliberately chosen this simplicity.

To our surprise, the pagoda was virtually empty and it turned out that the head monk had travelled to Phnom Penh for the day. A handful of young monks gathered to see if they could help us. Vanna explained quietly and simply to me that the ceremony had been postponed and when I asked why, she simply shrugged. The story did not emerge until we were in the car on the way back to the city. In the meantime I had a chance to ask the monks about their pagoda and discovered that several of them were not from the local village but had come from other parts of Cambodia specifically to this pagoda because they knew the head monk was good. When I asked what they meant by this, they explained that he knew the *dhamma* and Pali, but that he was also a very accomplished healer who had acquired his healing powers through a vision. The young monks did not know so much more about the history of the pagoda except that there had been Pali tuition there under the former head monk, before the Khmer Rouge. Now, the pagoda offers a refuge for orphaned boys, clothing for the poor children of the village, free coffins for cremations and it houses some fifteen elderly nuns in simple, wooden huts in the compound.

We looked around the new building<sup>10</sup> and it was brightly decorated on all walls with paintings depicting scenes from the Buddha's life. Each bore the name or names of the families that had contributed the funds to pay for it. According to Vanna and the monks, the funds all came from local people – although Vanna was clearly also supporting this pagoda. Local to the pagoda clearly does not correspond with territorial locality.

We left the pagoda and visited one of Vanna's distant relatives in the village, a sparkling single woman in her forties who lived in a simple wooden house on stilts just off a dusty dirt track by the river. Vanna and her relative sat in deep discussion for an hour or so

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<sup>10</sup> The building was a *sala* – the hall in which the monks take their meals and lay people may attend for ceremonies.

before we got back on the road for the return trip to Phnom Penh. It was in the car that Vanna told me what had happened to the ceremony. It is a telling story.

The pagoda's constituency had invested a great deal of effort and funding into their pagoda and they were proud of it. There was another pagoda at the other end of the village area which was more elaborately decorated but neither Vanna nor her relative in the village would have anything to do with it because, she explained "It is CPP". In other words, it has been co-opted by the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

The head monk of Vanna's pagoda is apparently a quiet, unassuming but sensitive and gifted man who seems to command great respect from his monks and lay supporters. He is firmly against involving Buddhism in politics. However, Vanna explained, "There is trouble. The village chief told the pagoda committee that they must invite Prime Minister Hun Sen to attend the consecration ceremony for the new building that the people have constructed." The head monk and the committee were against this but they did not want problems, so they sent off an invitation. It never reached Hun Sen but landed on the desk of a low ranking politician who agreed to come. This, however, did not satisfy the village chief, who then told them to postpone the ceremony.

Vanna related all this calmly, though with evident despondency. She had chosen to support this pagoda after a cousin of hers in Phnom Penh had identified it and understood the head monk's qualities and his autonomy. Now, this seemed to be under threat. Vanna explained that we had come in the afternoon in order to avoid the politicians, who she knew were supposed to have been there in the morning. "They bring gifts to give to the villagers<sup>11</sup> and their assistants take note of who attends and who does not" she told me.

Vanna's long conversation with her relative in the village had apparently been all about this. Her relative was incensed. The local people had done all the work and contributed all the funds, and now the government wanted to jump in. At this point, I interjected with the simple comment, "So, the government is hijacking the people's production?" Vanna suddenly lost her reserve and became animated. "Yes," she responded. "You have chosen exactly the right word. They are hijacking the people's efforts!"

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<sup>11</sup> These are apparently usually monosodium glutamate and the characteristic Khmer headwear or scarf.

The conversation became lively and Vanna talked almost uninterrupted the rest of the way back to the city. She explained how she had worked as an election observer and how the poor people are afraid and vulnerable and their votes can therefore be purchased or won by intimidation. When people come to the pagoda and receive gifts they may feel morally bound to show loyalty to the donor<sup>12</sup> and they fear the consequences of breaking such a contract or not entering it in the first place.

I asked how things used to be in the 1960s and Vanna responded that Cambodian villagers have never known justice, but in the 1960s they had peace and were left alone to get on with their lives. They had enough to eat, there were schools and healthcare. Now, the politicians are constantly trying to take over pagodas and, through them, the people. Vanna is well-versed in certain western social science theory and she used it to explain that the patron-client system is now only operative within the elite circle. The politicians – whom she described as former guerilla soldiers - are obliged to one another, while the rural people are a mass that has become a potential threat to their privilege. It must be controlled, co-opted and coerced but not protected.

### *Conclusions*

In this paper I have taken the observed lack of social structure in Cambodian rural life as an invitation to use “culture” as my entry into a search for the structuring force has held a fluid Khmer society together and given people their strong sense of being Khmer throughout the country’s traumatic history. I have proposed that Khmer Buddhists are connected to one another in a variety of ways through an intricate and flexible web of relationships articulated through the sacred.

Khmer Buddhism has played a crucial role in Cambodian culture for centuries both in the royal court and widely throughout the country. Not only has the pagoda provided a variety of social services, healing and moral order for communities, but the *sangha* has been a formidable power that has held Khmer identity and culture intact despite repeated waves of aggression from foreign invaders. It has been very much engaged in the welfare of the people but has exercised its authority by transcending rather than advocating politics.

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<sup>12</sup> Robin Biddulph (personal communication) describes exactly this process taking place clandestinely in connection

The integrity of Khmer Buddhism was deeply rent by the Khmer Rouge and the revolutionary attempt to break with all vestiges of past culture and begin anew. Knowledge and experience were lost in the vast numbers of monks, books and pagodas that were destroyed. However, remarkable energy has been poured into the reconstruction of Khmer Buddhism despite the enormity of the social devastation left in the wake of decades of conflict. This testifies to the resilience and self-reliance of Khmer villagers in particular.

Sadly, this brief exploration of some of the literature dealing with Buddhism in Cambodia leads me to see the reinvention of Khmer Buddhism as the creation of a new battleground. The battle that is now being fought appears to be between Khmer culture - an historical entity that has bound Khmers together and offered them hope of continuing autonomy and an intact world – and the global culture of consumption and its attendant ideology of development and democratisation. The horrific decimation of Buddhism in Cambodia that took place in the latter half of the 1970s, has left the sacred, integrative moral centre of “la vie paysanne” – perhaps even an ideal “vie Khmer” - desperately vulnerable to the disintegrative power of what might be called “la vie globale”, in which the Phnom Penh elite acts as client.

Extraordinary efforts to revive Buddhism are being made at all levels of Cambodian society today, but perhaps most impressively by impoverished villagers, many of whom are survivors of unspeakable horrors. This is taking place in villages despite sometimes brutal attempts by politicians to control, hi-jack or even destroy the new forms of emerging Buddhist legitimacy. And as monks become possible voters and pagodas take on party colours, the divisive effects of party politics may be cracking the cement that has unified the Khmer cosmos for so long. As part of the democratising mission, the political centre is spreading its tentacles into the heart of Khmer culture and attempting to occupy its most sacred space.

While politicians still patronise temples in order to gather divine power and moral legitimacy, as they have done historically, this is all now framed in a new form of politicisation and against a background of a seriously morally and intellectually weakened *sangha*. Aspects of the democratisation process may represent a pressing threat to the unity of the Khmer cosmos and the autonomy of rural peasants. Buddhist codes forbid monks from playing partisan roles and in Thailand, for instance, ordination means foregoing the right to vote. In Cambodia, however,

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with elections he has observed.

monks are losing their potential to provide a critique of power holders since the *sangha*, which has yet to restock its accounts in morality and scholarship, is easily purchased by the powerful and then becomes deeply enmeshed in the struggle for power. And every religious statement may now have a political edge. When the supreme patriarch Ven. Tep Vong argues that monks should not use their vote, this is understood by Cambodians not as a statement about religious ethics but as a political statement of his support for the CPP.

The battle to sustain the Khmer world is not only being fought with words, symbols, gifts and votes. It is also a battle of blood, bullets and bodies. Just before I arrived in Cambodia this year, the forty-seven year old Ven. Sam Bunthoeun, president of the Buddhist Meditation Centre of Oudong and budding Buddhist scholar, was gunned down at a pagoda in Phnom Penh. He died two days later. Not surprisingly, Cambodians are cautious about publicising political interpretations of this but rumours circulate that this monk was in favour of monks using their vote (which would in effect mean a significant symbol of strength for the opposition) (see Falby 2003). Whether this is so or not, it is clear that he was a person capable of influencing and attracting the loyalty of a large following. His impressive centre at Oudong is attended by growing numbers of Khmers from all over Cambodia. In a country lacking a functioning judiciary, it is unlikely that the murderer will be apprehended and their motives disclosed, so rumours will presumably continue to fuel fear and strengthen the battle, making those who promote integrity and scholarship within Buddhism more acutely aware of the risks this entails<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, Ven. Sam Bunthoeun's centre at Oudong, like Vanna's pagoda, represent the strength that Khmers are still capable of mustering to try and sustain their central values.

For some of the Westerners working with NGOs whom I interviewed, the villagers' desire to support their pagodas represented an obstacle to development. One interviewee commented upon her frustration when she discovered that villagers were utilising the credit facility set up by the NGO to borrow money for donating to the pagoda rather than for investment in their own material welfare. I suggest, however, that we take the villagers' knowledge and will seriously and try to understand what it is that they value so highly and by which they set such store, but which does not necessarily correspond with the values promoted by the international

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<sup>13</sup> In interview, a minister from the Ministry of Religion and Cults explained the resistance that is met from poorly educated teachers at the Buddhist University when well educated monks are proposed as teachers. Two well educated monks also explained to me that it was not safe to practise true Buddhism in Cambodia.

community. If not, perhaps the ideology of development will simply come to mean envelopment and, ultimately, the demise not only of a cultural form that is uniquely suited to the people concerned but of yet another valuable critique of the global culture of consumption.

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