

Buddhism in Cambodia

To Be Khmer Is to Be Buddhist (Thompson)

A small minority of Cambodian nationals today practice religions other than Buddhism. This includes a variety of readily identifiable groups: indigenous ethnic minorities whose religious practices may be somewhat influenced by Buddhism, but who remain animist by and large; the Cham, who traditionally follow the Islamic faith; and some Christians. Compared with its Southeast Asian neighbors, Cambodian society is exceptionally homogeneous in ethnic and cultural terms. This is partly due, no doubt, to the centralized hegemonic power exercised by the Khmer court at the time of the empire, and the relative, if not unproblematic, cultural continuity of Cambodian society since then. There is a very strong and very old idea of Cambodia and Cambodianness.

Buddhism, it may be argued, serves as a (if not *the*) predominant means of conceiving and physically defining Cambodia today as a coherent social cultural and political entity...this indigenous or Buddhist formulation of the Cambodian nation was never simply supplanted with the imposition of geographical borders under pressure of nation-building forces during and in the wake of colonialism. Instead, these premodern understandings of space have at times integrated and at other times resisted modern nation-state mapping, and in vital ways continue to define Cambodia.

Cambodian Adaptations (Ross)

Cambodian Buddhism has no formal administrative ties with other Buddhist bodies, although Theravada monks from other countries, especially Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, may participate in religious ceremonies in order to make up the requisite number of clergy. Cambodian Buddhism is organized nationally in accordance with regulations formulated in 1943 and modified in 1948. During the monarchical period, the king led the Buddhist clergy. Prince Sihanouk continued in this role even after he had abdicated and was governing as head of state. He appointed both the heads of the monastic orders and other high-ranking clergy. After the overthrow of Sihanouk in 1970, the new head of state, Lon Nol, appointed these leaders.

Two monastic orders constituted the clergy in Cambodia. The larger group, to which more than 90 percent of the clergy belonged, was the Mohanikay. The Thommayut order was far smaller. The Thommayut was introduced into the ruling circles of Cambodia from Thailand in 1864; it gained prestige because of its adoption by royalty and by the aristocracy, but its adherents were confined geographically to the Phnom Penh area. Among the few differences between the two orders is stricter observance by the Thommayut bonzes (monks) of the rules governing the clergy. In 1961 the Mohanikay had more than 52,000 ordained monks in some 2,700 wats, whereas the Thommayut order had 1,460 monks in just over 100 wats. In 1967 more than 2,800 Mohanikay wats and 320 Thommayut wats were in existence in Cambodia. After Phnom Penh, the largest number of Thommayut wats were found in Batdambang, Stoeng Treng, Prey Veng, Kampot, and Kampong Thum provinces.

Each order has its own superior and is organized into a hierarchy of eleven levels. The seven lower levels are known collectively as the *thananukram*; the four higher levels together are called the *rajagana*. The Mohanikay order has thirty-five monks in the *rajagana*; the Thommayut has twenty-one. Each monk must serve for at least twenty years to be named to these highest levels.

The cornerstones of Cambodian Buddhism are the Buddhist bonze and the wat. Traditionally, each village has a spiritual center--a wat--where from five to more than seventy bonzes reside. A typical wat in rural Cambodia consists of a walled enclosure containing a sanctuary, several residences for bonzes, a hall, a kitchen, quarters for nuns, and a pond. The number of monks varies according to the size of the local population. The sanctuary, which contains an altar with statues of the Buddha and, in rare cases, a religious relic, is reserved for major ceremonies and usually only for the use of bonzes. Other ceremonies, classes for monks and for laity, and meals take place in the hall. Stupas containing the ashes of extended family members are constructed near the sanctuary. Fruit trees and vegetable gardens tended by local children are also part of the local wat. The main entrance, usually only for ceremonial use, faces east; other entrances are located at other points around the wall. There are no gates.

Steinberg notes the striking ratio of bonzes to the total population of Cambodia. In the late 1950s, an estimated 100,000 bonzes (including about 40,000 novices) served a population of about 5 million. This high proportion undoubtedly was caused in large part by the ease with which one could enter and leave the *sangha*. Becoming a bonze and leaving the *sangha* are matters of individual choice although, in theory, nearly all Cambodian males over sixteen serve terms as bonzes. Most young men do not intend to become fully ordained bonzes (*bhikkhu*), and they remain as monks for less than a year. Even a son's temporary ordination as a bonze brings great

merit to his parents, however, and is considered so important that arrangements are made at a parent's funeral if the son has not undergone the process while the parent was living. There are two classes of bonzes at a wat--the novices (*samani* or *nen*) and the *bhikkhu*. Ordination is held from mid-April to mid-July, during the rainy season.

Buddhist monks do not take perpetual vows to remain monks, although, in fact, some become monks permanently. Traditionally, they became monks early in life. It is possible to become a novice at as young an age as seven, but in practice thirteen is the earliest age for novices. A *bhikkhu* must be at least twenty. The monk's life is regulated by Buddhist law, and life in the wat adheres to a rigid routine. A *bhikkhu* follows 227 rules of monastic discipline as well as the 10 basic precepts. These include the five precepts that all Buddhists should follow. The five precepts for monastic asceticism prohibit eating after noon, participating in any entertainment (singing, dancing, and watching movies or television), using any personal adornments, sleeping on a luxurious bed, and handling money. In addition, a monk also is expected to be celibate. Furthermore, monks supposedly avoid all involvement in political affairs. They are not eligible to vote or to hold any political office, and they may not witness a legal document or give testimony in court. Since the person of a monk is considered sacred, he is considered to be outside the normal civil laws and public duties that affect lay people. Some of these practices have changed in the modern period, however, and in the 1980s Buddhist monks have been active even in the PRK government.

Women are not ordained, but older women, especially widows, can become nuns. They live in the wat and play an important role in the everyday life of the temple. Nuns shave their heads and eyebrows and generally follow the same precepts as monks. They may prepare the altars and do some of the housekeeping chores.

Early History (Khmer-Buddhist Educational Assistance Project, KEAP)

Since the late 13th century, Theravada Buddhism has been a way of life among the Khmer and other lowland peoples of mainland Southeast Asia. To this day, some 85 per cent of the population in Cambodia lives in villages whose symbolic centers remain the wats, or temple-monasteries. The wat was not only the moral-religious center of a village community, but served important educational, cultural, and social functions as well. Until recent times, wats were the main centers of learning with schools and libraries where the Khmer culture and language was preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. They also served as culturally- and environmentally-sensitive foci for people-centered development that included, indeed featured, social safety nets for the poor, destitute, and needy. Until the most recent time of troubles that began with civil war in 1970, it was still common for all men to ordain as monks at least once in their lives, an act most commonly accomplished as rite of passage for young men entering adulthood and society.

Through the 1960s, the Kingdom of Cambodia was known as a peaceful, Buddhist country. It was tolerant of the other faiths -- Muslim, Chinese, and Christian, as well as indigenous peoples -- that constituted approximately 10 per cent of the population. At the Sixth World Council of Theravada Buddhists in Rangoon in 1955-56, the Cambodian Sangha, or monastic community, was singled out for its strong adherence to the Vinaya, or Buddhist discipline. But soon thereafter, it became caught in and the victim of the ideological conflicts...that swept through the region in the sixties and seventies.

Khmer Rouge

In April 1975, after a five-year struggle, Communist Khmer Rouge forces captured Phnom Penh and evacuated all cities and towns. An estimated 3 million Cambodians died from execution, forced hardships, or starvation during the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot from 1975 until 1979. A December 1978 Vietnamese invasion drove the Khmer Rouge into the countryside, began a 10-year Vietnamese occupation, and touched off almost 13 years of civil war (Central Intelligence Agency, CIA).

During the war between 1970 and 1975 more than one-third of the wats were destroyed; many monks and novices were killed, left the order, or became refugees. Still, Buddhism remained a vital basis for Khmer life until the end of the war in 1975. Cambodian Buddhism was not to benefit, however, by the end of the war in April 1975. The new Khmer Rouge government under Pol Pot sought to systematically obliterate Buddhism from Cambodian society (Keyes).

Destruction of Buddhism by the Khmer Rouge (Keyes)

In describing a general shift away from Buddhism in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Vickery cites the early work of anthropologist May Mayko Ebihara and his own observations. He suggests that the Khmer Rouge was

able to instill antireligious feelings in younger males because the latter were losing interest in becoming monks even during their teenage years, the traditional temporary period of service. The monks themselves had abandoned some of their traditional restrictions and had become involved in politics. At intervals during the colonial period, some monks had demonstrated or had rebelled against French rule, and in the 1970s monks joined pro-government demonstrations against the communists. Anticlerical feelings reached their highest point among the Khmer Rouge, who at first attempted to indoctrinate monks and to force them to pass anticlerical ideas on to the laity. Under the Khmer Rouge regime, monks were expelled forcibly from the wats and were compelled to do manual labor. Article 20 of the 1976 Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea permitted freedom of religion but banned all reactionary religions that were "detrimental to the country." The minister of culture stated that Buddhism was incompatible with the revolution and was an instrument of exploitation.

In 1979, after the Pol Pot government had been forced out of Phnom Penh and the new government of Heng Samrin had assumed power, there were probably fewer than 100 Khmer monks left, the vast majority of whom were living in exile in Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge declared Buddhism to be a "reactionary religion" and denied its adherents even the theoretical rights accorded to other religions in the constitution. In 1978, Yun Yat, minister of culture in the Khmer Rouge regime, told Yugoslav journalists that "Buddhism is dead, and the ground has been cleared for the foundations of a new revolutionary culture." If the religion was dead, that is because the Khmer Rouge had killed it. An estimate made in 1980 showed that five out of every eight monks had been executed during the Pol Pot regime; those monks and novices who were not killed were forced to disrobe, Temple-monasteries were turned into storage centers, prisons, even extermination camps. Images of the Buddha were often decapitated, desecrated in other ways, or buried.

The Khmer Rouge sought, by eliminating the institution that had for so long served as the basic source of Khmer identity, to create a new order that had absolutely no roots in the past. The history of the new Democratic Kampuchean utopia was to be written by the revolution alone.

In the end, the effort to create an agrarian utopia purged of all "undesirable" elements proved to be untenable. Although the Khmer Rouge had come to power in no small part because of its link to the communist revolution in Vietnam, by early 1977 relations between Democratic Kampuchea and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam had become extremely hostile. In late December 1978, after two years of border clashes, the Vietnamese sent a military force into Cambodia, driving the Democratic Kampuchean government out of Phnom Penh.

Post-Khmer Rouge

When the Vietnamese communists drove out the Khmer Rouge in early 1979, the people, working spontaneously through revived lay temple committees, began to reconstruct the country. For villagers, repairing or rebuilding their wats was a first order of priority (KEAP).

Since the late 1980s (the Vietnamese occupation ended in 1989), the number of monks and novices has risen dramatically. The number of men ordaining as monks are: 60,000 pre-war; 2,311 in 1982; 20,000 in 1991; and 55,755 in 2003 (Ledgerwood).

The number of temples is now at pre-war levels, with nearly 4000 nationwide. Quite amazing given the poverty in rural areas, some of the money came from overseas Khmer in the US, France and elsewhere. As a social phenomenon, it is significant that the Buddhist revival in Cambodia has been spearheaded by Cambodia's villagers, the main victims of nearly a generation of ideological conflict and oppression. With meager means and enormous spirit, the common people have been in the forefront of rebuilding their temples, ordaining their sons, and reclaiming their Khmer Buddhist identity and way of life (KEAP).

The Education Problem (KEAP)

The quality and standards of the Cambodian Sangha, however, have remained low given the loss of an entire generation of learned monks. In the 1990s, only some 20 percent of monks, the bulk of who are under 25 years of age, received some formal training, mainly from lay teachers whose qualifications tended to be rudimentary. The first secondary school for monks re-opened in 1993, followed in 1997 by a preparatory class of the re-opened Preah Sihanouk Raj Buddhist University. But very few monk graduates of the high schools (there are now several) and the university choose for a variety of reasons to remain in the Sangha. Most disrobe to move into fields such as computers, accounting, and English as preparation for jobs in lay life. Few have chosen the monastic path of teaching the Dhamma and Vinaya to monk students and laypeople as preparation for leadership roles in the Sangha. The low numbers and quality of education for monks and, as a consequence, the generally poor discipline of the

monks in Cambodia today remain one of the great socio-cultural problems of the country and its recovery as a moral community. The weakness of the Sangha and lack of resources at the Ministry of Religious Affairs have prevented these institutions from introducing meaningful education reform in a country where local masters at the wat and national levels level are simply no longer there.

Role of Buddhism in Cambodian Life (Ross)

Buddhist monks traditionally were called upon to perform a number of functions in Cambodian life. They participated in all formal village festivals, ceremonies, marriages, and funerals. They also might have participated in ceremonies to name infants and in other minor ceremonies or rites of passage. Monks did not lead the ceremonies, however, because that role was given to the *achar*, or master of ceremonies; the monk's major function was to say prayers of blessing. They were often healers and, in traditional Khmer culture, they were the practitioners whose role was closest to that of modern psychiatrists. They might also have been skilled in astrology. The monk traditionally occupied a unique position in the transmission of Khmer culture and values. By his way of life, he provided a living model of the most meritorious behavior a Buddhist could follow. He also provided the laity with many opportunities for gaining merit. For centuries monks were the only literate people residing in rural communities; they acted as teachers to temple servants, to novices, and to newly ordained monks. Until the 1970s, most literate Cambodian males gained literacy solely through the instruction of the *sangha*.

Most of the major Cambodian annual festivals are connected with Buddhist observances. The *chol chnam* (New Year Festival) takes place in mid-April; it was one of the few festivals allowed under the Khmer Rouge regime. The *phchun ben*, celebrated in September or in October, is a memorial day for deceased ancestors and for close friends. *Meak bochea*, in January or February, commemorates the last sermon of the Buddha. *Vissakh bochea*, in April or in May, is the triple anniversary of the birth, death, and enlightenment of the Buddha. The *chol vossa* takes place in June or in July; it marks the beginning of a penitential season during which the monks must remain within the temple compounds. The *kathen* marks the end of this season; celebrated in September, it features offerings, especially of robes, to the monks. The *kathen* was still celebrated in the PRK in the late 1980s.

Cambodian Buddhism exists side-by-side with, and to some extent intermingles with, pre-Buddhist animism and Brahman practices. Most Cambodians, whether or not they profess to be Buddhists (or Muslims), believe in a rich supernatural world. When ill, or at other times of crisis, or to seek supernatural help, Cambodians may enlist the aid of a practitioner who is believed to be able to propitiate or obtain help from various spirits. Local spirits are believed to inhabit a variety of objects, and shrines to them may be found in houses, in Buddhist temples, along roads, and in forests.

Several types of supernatural entities are believed to exist; they make themselves known by means of inexplicable sounds or happenings. Among these phenomena are *khmoc* (ghosts), *pret* and *besach* (particularly nasty demons, the spirits of people who have died violent, untimely, or unnatural deaths), *arak* (evil spirits, usually female), *neak ta* (tutelary spirits residing in inanimate objects), *mneang phteah* (guardians of the house), *meba* (ancestral spirits), and *mrenh kongveal* (elf-like guardians of animals). All spirits must be shown proper respect, and, with the exception of the *mneang phteah* and *mrenh kongveal*, they can cause trouble ranging from mischief to serious life-threatening illnesses. An important way for living people to show respect for the spirits of the dead is to provide food for the spirits. If this food is not provided, the spirit can cause trouble for the offending person. For example, if a child does not provide food for the spirit of its dead mother, that spirit can cause misfortunes to happen to the child.

Aid in dealing with the spirit world may be obtained from a *kru* (shaman or spirit practitioner), an *achar* (ritualist), *thmup* (witch, sorcerer or sorceress), or a *rup arak* (medium, usually male). The *kru* is a kind of sorcerer who prepares charms and amulets to protect the wearer from harm. He can cure illnesses, find lost objects, and prepare magic potions. Traditionally, Cambodians have held strong beliefs about protective charms. Amulets are worn routinely by soldiers to ward off bullets, for example. The *kru* are believed to have the power to prepare an amulet and to establish a supernatural link between it and the owner. A *kru* may acquire considerable local prestige and power. Many *kru* are former Buddhist monks.

Another kind of magical practitioner is the *achar*, a specialist in ritual. He may function as a kind of master of ceremonies at a wat and as a specialist in conducting spirit worship rituals connected with life-cycle ceremonies. *Rup arak* are mediums who can be possessed by supernatural beings and communicate with the spirit world. The *thmup* are sorcerers who cause illnesses.

Fortunetellers and astrologers--*haor teay*--are important in Cambodian life. They are consulted about important decisions such as marriages, building a new house, or going on a long journey. They are believed to be able to foretell future events and to determine lucky or unlucky days for various activities.

Villagers are sensitive to the power and to the needs of the spirit world. According to observations by an American missionary in the early 1970s, villagers consulted the local guardian spirit to find out what the coming year would bring, a new province chief held a ceremony to ask the protection of the spirits over the province, and soldiers obtained magic cloths and amulets from mediums and shamans to protect them from the bullets of the enemy. Before embarking on a mission against enemy forces, a province chief might burn incense and call on a spirit for aid in defeating the enemy. Examples of Brahman influences were various rituals concerned with the well-being of the nation carried out by the ruler and the *baku* (a Brahman priestly group attached to the royal court). These rituals were reportedly stopped after Sihanouk's ouster in 1970.

Future

In Cambodia, there is a lack of older educated monks. Those ordained before the war or in the 1980s are elderly and dying. Abbots today are often young with limited experience. Many men who ordain as monks today do so as a means of social mobility, as a way to gain an education (Ledgerwood).

Well-trained monks as well as nuns are needed to minister to the people's psychic, cultural, and social needs in ways that the western humanitarian agencies and the state are unable to do...Drawing on historical precedent, Buddhism in Cambodia can again play a crucial role at both the village community and societal levels in promoting a meaningful peace, healing, and reconciliation process; in guiding a people-centered development that is culturally and environmentally sensitive and based on social equity; and in contributing to the wider moral, intellectual, and political regeneration of the country. In spite or because of materialistic globalization/ development pressures, it can, with help and encouragement from Buddhists worldwide and sympathetic friends, again play a leading role in shaping a better future for all Cambodians (KEAP).

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