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Deathpower: Buddhism’s Ritual Imagination in Cambodia. By Erik W. Davis. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. xi+320 pp.

Deathpower: Buddhism’s Ritual Imagination in Cambodia is an authoritative, far-reaching synthesis of theory, existing literature and fieldwork. In the best scholarly tradition, Davis never loses sight of the concrete realities of ritual practice, recorded thoughtfully and systematically, even while he examines a range of philosophical approaches to ritual and conceptual systems that ritual exemplifies. The book will doubtless be required reading for students of Cambodia, of Theravada Buddhism and of the anthropology of death for some time to come.

Davis describes the core practices of Cambodian funeral ritual itself and goes on to discuss other Buddhist practices associated with death: the setting of temple boundary stones, the iconic making of monks’ robes from shroud remnants, the annual Bhjūṃ Piṅḍa festival (to honour the dead and feed hungry ghosts), and witchcraft. In his analysis, these practices relate to a common imaginary rooted in Cambodia’s long historical tradition as an agricultural society.

I initially resisted what seemed the overly dramatic terminology of “deathpower”, which builds on a concept of “biopower” developed by Foucault.

[W]e may imagine that death somehow multiplies life. The ability to master this paradoxically productive power, to manage that which death produces, and to put all the parts back into their proper places is at the heart of what I call deathpower. (p. 2)

However, in the end the book convinced me of its usefulness as an analytical tool.

I was less comfortable with the concept of “ritual imaginations”, for which the author draws on Cornelius Castoriadis’s theory of social imaginaries to argue that such imaginaries underlie ritual practice. Davis indicates that he is not developing this approach as fully as he would like for reasons of space; it will no doubt figure in future work. For now I remain sceptical that, however important his own work generalizing about ritual may be, this work should claim to represent a particularly Khmer imaginary. That is to say, however much I admire the elegance of the logically consistent scheme, I bridle at the presumption of calling the author’s own synthesis the imaginary of the Khmer themselves.

The book functions at a high enough level that the questions that it raises will no doubt cause me to re-examine my own assumptions as I observe Cambodian practice. Nevertheless, not all elements of the Khmer imaginary that Davis proposes immediately rang true to me. Underlying his overall presentation is a dichotomy between the world of the forest and the world of agriculture, in which the forest is associated with death and spirits. Davis would say that this is a dialogical relationship as much as a dichotomy. My reaction is that such a dichotomy surely exists at some level, but I would ask if it at the present time is so key and basic to conceptualization as the book suggests. Despite some historical evidence and the logical consistency of the idea in the system that Davis develops, I have not found it salient in my own fieldwork.

Davis makes a conscious decision to use the single English word “spirit” for the range of entities which in Khmer cannot be generalized in a single word. His theorization likewise depends on seeing them all, ultimately, as manifestations of the dead. This way of generalizing has never been evident to me, and in teaching I have sometimes contrasted Khmer phenomena with those found in Vietnam, which make more explicit reference to ancestors.

The book often reminded me of French ethnographic work on Cambodia and, like that work, it has the virtues of careful description and consistent modelling, even if it finally goes in different directions from that work. Nevertheless, anthropologists of a certain era, like

me, were trained to be sceptical of ethnographies, like those by the French scholars of the colonial era, in which cultural description is overly static — outside of time and uncontested. Davis is aware of these issues. He even states that he originally aimed at seeing how funeral practices changed following the Pol Pot period, but he did not find such change. He speculates that the reaction to social upheaval may have even been to entrench traditional practices more deeply. What he describes is thus not an active process of change. He likewise demonstrates an awareness of variability in ritual practices, such as the distinction important to Bizot and other scholars between modernizing “reformed” practices and types of practices that modernizers reject. However, the overall focus of Davis’s book is not on how practices are contested. Rather, we see in large part a unified system. We are thus left wondering whether another scholar might have produced something different and less neatly unified.

Each chapter ends with a more subjective section describing anecdotally the author’s interactions during fieldwork. These sections introduce a literary element into the book and underline the ways in which Davis experienced the here and now of Cambodian death practices. For some readers these will be the book’s best parts. However, I was uncomfortable with them and often strained to see how they related to the chapters in which Davis included them.

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The Political Economy of Schooling in Cambodia: Issues of Quality and Equity. Edited by Yuto Kitamura, D. Brent Edwards Jr., Chhinh Sitha, and James H. Williams. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xii+245 pp.

I can still see Cambodia and its educational and social issues so vividly after having gone through every page of *The Political Economy*