

History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia.
Edited by John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie. Honolulu: University
of Hawaii Press, 2004. 320 pp.

John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie have assembled a fascinating collection of essays on Cambodian religion, nationalism, and identity. While the volume's title is somewhat ungraceful, the essays taken together constitute a virtual treasure trove of information on Khmer Buddhism in all its many facets. Cambodian religion has been vastly understudied in modern times, even considering the important contributions of Bizot, de Bernon, Forest, and Ang in French. In the last year we have been presented with three new books in the field in English: Ian Harris' work on the history of Cambodian Buddhism, Stephen Asma's account of a personal journey through lived Theravada Buddhism, and this collection by Marston and Guthrie. While the first is a valuable new synthetic contribution and the second a fun ride, as an anthropologist I find the Marston/Guthrie volume exciting in its scope.

The first section of the book focuses on re-reading Khmer religious history, with pieces by Ashley Thompson, Anne Hanson, and Penny Edwards. Thompson's work here and in other venues on the middle period of Khmer history serves to destroy the myth that the period after the fall of Angkor was only a "dark age" with no cultural or religious activity worthy of study. Here she analyses the messianic cult of the Buddha Maitreya by exploring how he appears — by his absence — in middle period iconography. In her conclusion she deftly links the image forward to Norodom Sihanouk as the embodiment of Maitreya in modern times. Anne Hanson explores crucial changes in religious thought in the 19th century, banishing the "Cambodians are unchanged since the times of Angkor" theme that dominates too much of the general writing on Cambodia. She argues that the "self-conscious imagining of a 'Khmer' identity associated with a distinctive language, ethos, culture, and nation, and particularly with a distinctive way of being Buddhist, was a product of the cultural politics of the nineteenth century" (p. 41). Hanson's chapter, and

the next piece by Edwards explore these 19th and early 20th century shifts: French colonial influence, the introduction of the Thommayut sect from Thailand, the beginnings of print media, the establishment of the Buddhist Institute and the rise of the French-educated scholar monks Chuon Nath and Huot Tat and their “new Mohanikay” or “Dhammakay” order. An understanding of these important shifts is crucial for comprehension of what follows historically and sets up the discussion of contemporary ethnographic examples that follow in this book.

The next section focuses on images of the “leper king” and the idea of the king as a body standing metonymically for the geo-body of the kingdom. The first piece by Thompson analyses the issue in theoretical terms, playing on this dual conception of “body” to discuss the idea of king as healer. The second piece by Hang Chan Sophea is an ethnographic description of contemporary practice in relation to several images of the leper king and his parallel female image *Yay Deb* in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh.

The third section of the book is on the ethnography of contemporary Cambodian religion. Guthrie discusses contemporary *Tun Ji* or “nuns,” including descriptions of their lives at one temple in central Phnom Penh, Wat Mangalavan. Guthrie’s argument, that the marginalization of *Tun Ji* and their “ordination” is a recent phenomenon influenced in part by Western ideas about women and religious asceticism, seems to me somewhat strained. The idea of ancient female power that gets lost in modern times is a well-worn trope. While there is inscriptional evidence for educated and pious elite women, it seems to me insufficient to argue that it is only in recent times that the *Tun Ji* were limited to the householder or non-ordained role. Nonetheless, the contribution raises important issues regarding contemporary women’s religious practices.

Didier Bertrand’s contribution on medium possession is important to understanding crucial concepts at the heart of Cambodian Buddhism today. These include *parami* (*baramey*, Sanskrit/Pali for “perfection” or “completeness”), but reappropriated in popular terms to mean “a benevolent form of power” (p. 151), and “*gru parami* (*kru baramey*)

the mediums that Bertrand describes. Bertrand's analysis of the role of medium and the *parami* as linked to the idea of rebuilding Cambodia; that *parami* heroic identities "link political, social, and cosmological orders so that they can address the contemporary situation and expectations of Cambodian society" (p. 166) resonates across several chapters. The medium "listens and speaks; he is an ally;" the medium "researches and proposes explanations for what has happened to their families, and he guarantees a superior position" in contrast to the monks who discuss suffering as an inherent part of life (p. 167). Mediums serve to help manage "uncertainty and vulnerability;" they intervene Bertrand argues, "in the present (without waiting for the kammic retribution of acts)" (p. 167). They are accessible figures to help people who are marginal. The *parami* demands goodness and purity, so the mediums (unlike some contemporary young monks) can be trusted completely.

The chapter by Marston follows nicely on the one from Bertrand, chronicling the movement that sprang up and eventually died away surrounding a *Tapas* (religious ascetic) named Ras Li. Marston's careful analysis of the movement focuses on the ambiguous meanings of religious practice in post-socialist Cambodia and how religious practice was "reinvented in relation to new social circumstances" (p. 187). This ambiguity is heightened, Marston argues, with the involvement of overseas Khmer and the method of transmission through video and audio tapes, and "the vagueness of oral reports" by visitors (p. 187). The symbolism of the building projects organized by *Tapas*, and other similar building projects that Marston has described elsewhere, are linked to millenarian ideas about the coming of a new just and righteous king and the reestablishment of a perfect kingdom on earth. Cambodia as the central location for the establishment of this new reign is, Marston points out, "modern" in the sense that those who would reap the benefits of this movement are conceived in terms of a "nation" — "a Cambodian nation descended from Angkor" (p. 191). Marston casts this in relation to larger global inequities and sees the movement as appealing symbolically to "the subaltern nature of Cambodian nationality" (p. 191).

The final section of the book focuses on the transnational nature of Cambodian religion. The first piece by Kathryn Poethig gives us a nice overview of the *Dhammayatra* movement. These series of peace walks over an eight-year period have been little analysed, and Poethig pulls together all of the available discussions of the walks and their original organizer Maha Ghosananda. She analyses the movement in relation to “socially engaged Buddhism” as a transnational phenomenon, as well as discussing local meanings, including the *Dhammayatra*’s role in “reconstructing a pre-revolutionary Khmer moral order” (p. 208). The final piece by Teri Shaffer Yamada describes a religious ceremony that took place in Long Beach, California, in 1996. This flag raising ceremony honoured the hero Khleang Moeung, who sacrificed himself to raise an army of ghosts to fight off the attacking Thai army in the 16th century. The stated goal of the ceremony was to help bring about resolution of conflicts within the Long Beach Khmer community; but Yamada also points out how these goals are interwoven with the public political aspirations of the organizers and the ceremony’s role in the reconstruction of tradition that is “similar enough” to be seen as “authentic” (p. 220).

The essays are a bit uneven, as is common in most edited books. The introduction by Marston and Guthrie could have analysed further some themes that crosscut the essays: reconceptualizing ideas about power, nationalism in relation to new global influences, and millenarianism in its different forms. But the short introductions by Marston to each section are nicely done, providing necessary context without being overbearing. The book is important for anyone doing research on Khmer religion and society; further it could also be useful for courses on Buddhism or religion courses that aim to address the reestablishment of religion in the face of cultural disaster. I plan to use the book in my “People’s and Cultures of Southeast Asia” class, the early essays for discussion of the colonial period, and the ethnographic pieces to explore the idea of the re-imagination of culture in Cambodia in the post-revolutionary period.

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