



**Global Change, Universal Panic: why do women seek refuge
in Buddhism in Cambodia?**

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Introduction

This article uses an anthropological approach to explore how the penetration of global values impacts upon cultural order and influences gender-based violence in war-torn society. It uses Cambodia, where the author conducted fieldwork between 2002-2007, as its case study. Continuing mistrust, corruption and insecurity in Cambodia and the particular vulnerability this means for many women are often explained by reference to the devastation wreaked by the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979), the decades of organized violence and Cambodian traditional gender norms. This article focuses on cultural factors and counters that the peace and development solutions minted by the international community may be as much to blame; they bring with them a tide of global influences that pressurize the local world, generating anxiety about its survival and creating new kinds of moral insecurities and gendered vulnerabilities. Women's pursuit of refuge through recourse to 'traditional' norms and key cultural symbols rather than to international norms of female emancipation should be understood in this light.

While the United Nations produces blueprints for the global elimination of violence against women, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programmes and radical free-market reforms exacerbate rather than alleviating vulnerability for the poor and for women. Some have noted the devastating effects of globalization on the least developed countries (LDCs): perceived relative deprivation, anger over exclusion, links with international criminal economies, widespread violence and religious fundamentalism (Castells 1996), and some go so far as to argue that global stakeholders provoke or prey upon disaster scenarios in weak nations in order to impose their self-serving economic conditions (Klein 2008). Much suggests that in LDCs, straight-jacketing of the public sphere and social spending, erasure of the boundaries between government and business, and unfettered free markets foster not democracy but brutal coercion. So although the global civilizing mission may be delivered clothed as 'liberal peace'¹ and human security, in shattered societies, its neo-liberal agenda simultaneously entrenches inequalities and insecurity (see e.g. Duffield 2001; Springer 2009).

These global interventions alter not only the politico-economic climate but also moral, social and cosmological order. Thus they may provoke panic about the loss of 'culture' and this frequently has devastating implications for women. The international rhetoric about empowering women and raising their awareness about their rights² therefore needs to be scrutinized in light of the way that real international economic pressures are reducing the chances for the most vulnerable women to be able to enjoy or demand fundamental rights to safety. I argue that it is against the background of these global ironies that efforts by some women to achieve moral and cultural rehabilitation in ways that may seem to be anything but empowering should be understood.

Cambodia's recent integration into the global economy

Cambodia provides us with a thought-provoking test case. The country's role in the world economy has changed dramatically in recent decades. Under French colonial rule, the country

¹ Democracy, economic liberalism and integration into the global community.

² See for instance the report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations A65/208, *Intensification of Efforts to Eliminate all Forms of Violence against Women*, 2010.

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3 was a provider of plentiful raw materials but it later became embroiled in the cold war, nose-
4 diving into communist catastrophe under the Khmer Rouge 1975-1979 and Vietnamese
5 occupation, civil war and isolation from the world economy during the 1980s. In the 1980s,
6 urban property was under government control, there was no real estate market and
7 development consisted almost exclusively of state construction and renovation, backed up by
8 Soviet support. There was virtually no market for consumer goods.
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11 In the early 1990s, this situation underwent dramatic change. Soviet support dried up,
12 Vietnam withdrew from the country and the National Assembly began altering the
13 constitution to pave the way for liberalization of the economy. Agriculture was
14 decollectivized in 1989 and land titling for peasants was introduced, though in ways that
15 contribute to increasing landlessness among marginal farmers, particularly female headed
16 households, the elderly or the infirm (Biddulph 2010; Shatkin 1998).
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20 In 1991, agreements were signed in Paris, stipulating political settlement of the Cambodian
21 conflict, and this spurred the design of one of the hitherto largest peacekeeping operations
22 ever undertaken by the United Nations, the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia
23 (UNTAC). From 1992-1993, Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh became host to a wave of
24 foreign personnel, which opened new employment opportunities for locals, generated a
25 market for luxury and leisure amenities, including nightclubs, brothels and imported goods,
26 and accelerated the process of commodification of urban property. This period catapulted
27 Cambodia into the global economy, and into relations of economic dependence in particular
28 with the rapidly industrializing nations of ASEAN. In order to capitalize on the emerging new
29 order, Cambodia's formerly communist leaders began granting vast logging and land
30 concessions to their cohorts; citizens found themselves being forcibly evicted by legally
31 immune speculators and left destitute (see Allen 2009; Le Billon 2007). In the words of
32 Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark (2008) 'Hun Sen and his ruling Cambodian People's
33 Party (CPP) have, in effect, put the country up for sale'. Some forty-five percent of the
34 country's landmass is reported to have been sold off. The complete lack of transparency with
35 which deals are done, and the brutality with which they are enforced mean that a large
36 proportion of the Cambodian population is essentially denied not only prosperity but basic
37 human rights. In the words of the director of the Cambodian human rights NGO Licadho,
38 'Extreme violence, greed and disregard for the most basic human rights – of giving people a
39 place to live – are still with us daily. The methods of the past are being used to dictate our
40 future' (ibid.).
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47 **Global integration – local disintegration**

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49 In 1994, the UNDP minted the novel concept of Human Security, according to which
50 individual freedom from want and freedom from fear are the prerequisites for global stability.
51 However, this peculiarly vague prerogative provides little clarity and tends to shift the focus
52 of security scholars simply from brutish, discredited states to 'the individual', while glossing
53 over the crucial factor of the relationship between the two. It has been noted that the concept
54 of human security is 'dangerously amoral when it comes to what really matters in life. The
55 key problem then is not who is most able to tackle insecurities, but who is representative of,
56 and accountable to, the people' (Durodié 2010: 387).
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60 As long as poor nations with fragile institutions continue to be drawn into the global market,
their authoritarian regimes seem likely to trumpet the idea of 'freedom from want' and embed

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it the form of ‘development as freedom’, while perpetuating fear and regimenting the poor in order to enforce neoliberal reform and ensure stability (Nishikawa 2009). Many profit from this, but the great numbers of people who fall foul of the system find that there are no safety nets for them.

The relationship between the international and the local spheres that is established through globalization and development efforts is reflected in female labour migration and working conditions for these women. As Mohanty (1997) notes, the global division of labour frames women as a cheap, flexible labour force in which domesticity and sexuality figure strongly. This began to be borne out in Cambodia in the early 1990s, when women began leaving the moral universe of rural life and flocking to find new employment opportunities in Phnom Penh. These consist largely of the textile factories, entertainment and the sex industry. In her study of migrant Khmer women, Annuska Derks (2005) concludes that ‘migrant women are often seen as “loose” or “broken”, having left the watchful eyes of their family and the protection of the village boundary ... They point to the importance of *kun*, the obligations children have to repay their “debts of merit” [thus framing their work in the city] as means to both fulfill and forsake financial and moral obligations’ (p. 254). Clearly, the dawning of today’s global age in developing countries like Cambodia puts women in a position of acute moral ambiguity.

Universal Panic

In Cambodia, recent changes have whipped up alarm about the state of the universe in its entirety. The world is envisaged to be unravelling from the top downwards. Researchers frequently mention how the dealings of the top-ranking in Cambodia are insulated from popular scrutiny and demands and how the emergence of trust, democratic control and accountability are jeopardized (Hughes 2007; Springer 2009). Ironically, even government ministers I have interviewed, who are benefitting materially from the situation, claim that the universe is in moral disarray; opulence is no guarantee of security. Like the less fortunate, they too lament the decay of the fabric of their society and ascribe responsibility for it to morally disengaged leadership by people who are driven by business interests and international networks. Edwards (2008: 214) has noted that some Cambodians even evince nostalgia for aspects of life under the Khmer Rouge, of whom a few living key figures now face trial for crimes against humanity.

The wealthy, the high-ranking and the powerful are known in Cambodia as *neak meun umnaich*, or literally, people with raw power³. When threatened, a Cambodian who has connections with powerful patrons (Khmer *khsae*, lit. string) will usually try to appeal to such people for backing (Khmer, *khnang*, lit. back) rather than to the legal system or an abstract notion of rule of law. The international market of goods and ideas provides the nouveau-riche patrons with steady sources of more raw, amoral power, which is seen by many as costing them their moral legitimacy, particularly in terms of Buddhist ideals. The more that the powerful become unmoored from local values, the weaker becomes clients’ ability to exert moral pressure over patrons (Hughes 2006). In a dangerous, unpredictable world, the vulnerable continue to seek protection from those who can exercise raw methods of control, and this raises the stakes for all concerned, further corroding trust and fomenting fear (Hinton 2005: 115-116).

³ In karmic terms, *umnaich* is considered to be the reward for having accumulated merit from past deeds. However, a person who exercises such power without moral constraint reduces their own karmic stocks.

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Lack of representation, democratic control and accountability mean that individual survival in today's Cambodia often means engaging in morally questionable activities. Cambodia lacks a culture of trust; its 'agencies of accountability' – such as the courts and police – cannot be relied upon to ensure that breaches of trust are condemned and made costly to the offender (see Sztompka 1999). Instead, the judiciary and police have extremely low integrity ratings (-77% and -55% respectively); their staff are poorly paid and are widely known to be cashing in on the climate of consumerism, demanding instead under-the-table fees for services⁴ (Nissen 2008).

A general climate of menace and fear is also kept simmering by high rates of extra-judicial homicide and brutal crime that are not readily explained by the decades of organized violence (Broadhurst 2002); instead, the indebtedness and competition over depleting resources that mark the new ethos interplay with a permissive attitude towards violence, underpaid and ill-trained police and the lack of legitimacy of judicial process, all of which generate a market for crime as well as for violent solutions to insecurity. For the individual therefore, breaching trust and engaging in legally dubious pursuits quite simply often *do* pay in terms of survival, even though they may be costly for the moral integrity of the individual and community.

Cambodia does not lack the capacity to draft and implement laws. The Constitution prohibits discrimination against women and a new Penal Code, which will come into effect in late 2010, sets the legal age of consent at 15. Similarly, a monogamy law, which criminalizes adultery, was drafted and passed within a few months in 2006 (Henke & Chhim 2006). However, legal process is carried out by individuals who are entangled in webs of power. Judges and prosecutors facing intervention by a high-ranking official tend to give in out of loyalty or fear and court officials and staff at the Ministry of Justice have revealed that most appointments and promotions involve bribery and connections; this encourages officials to recoup their expenses by extorting money from those who encounter the judicial system (Kheang Un 2006). In practice, then, this means that the powerful may manipulate the legal system in order to get morality crimes of their own definition punished while poorer victims' rights are ignored.

Women and national virtue

As has been noted in neighbouring Vietnam, 'Women, as both symbols and disciplined national subjects have provided the cultural terrain on which the government and the wider public have sought to define what should constitute "our national traditions" in the face of global capitalist integration' (Pettus 2003: 6); like their Vietnamese neighbours, Cambodian women too are celebrated as vehicles of cultural aspiration and, when deviant, disciplined as part of the nation's struggle to reconstitute itself in the post-socialist era; 'Once the female subject loses her claim to embody or represent "national sovereignty" by failing to maintain its conceptual counterpart – namely, national morality – she is represented as deserving of dispassion, physical violence, rape and, in extreme cases, death' (Edwards 2008: 227).

Khmer imaginings of traditional order are informed by the idea that women are the bearers of culture. In Ledgerwood's (1990) doctoral research she observed how Khmer refugees living in the United States conceived of moral order through gender hierarchy; the meritorious man was one possessed of power and strength, while the meritorious woman was possessed of virtue. When faced with the threat to their Khmerness posed by American culture, they

⁴ This compares with integrity ratings for NGOs and Buddhist wats +29% and +59% respectively.

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3 focused on women; ‘the idea that a woman can be equal to ... men, the idea that a woman can
4 have control over her own sexuality, is so profoundly unsettling, so thoroughly [sic]
5 disruptive of the social order to Khmer in the United States that they can only see chaos as the
6 result’ (ibid.: 1). The introduction of the socialist ideal of the brave, revolutionary woman did
7 nothing, she notes, to alter the notion that a woman sustains the social standing of men –
8 fathers, husbands and sons – through her virtue, particularly her sexual virtue (Ledgerwood
9 1990; 1994). The same logic can be seen in Cambodia today as moral disorder is blamed upon
10 the lack of female virtue and addressed through violent subjugation of women. This
11 correspondence between increasing concerns about moral degradation that have accompanied
12 recent economic change and the intense policing of female sexual morality has dangerous
13 implications for women.
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18 Some urban Cambodian women and Western NGOs are now working to prevent gender-
19 based violence and rehabilitate victims and some try to counter widespread beliefs that
20 women should not be involved in politics because they are weaker than men (Lilja 2009), yet
21 these efforts do not appear to substantially alter understandings of female virtue or
22 discrimination against women. The idea that, ‘To be an improper woman is to cease to be
23 Khmer ... and to cease to be Khmer is to cease to be fully human’ (Ledgerwood 1990: 32) is
24 perpetuated by the highest levels of leadership, percolating down through every level of
25 society.
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28 Since the early 1990s, Cambodian women have become increasingly active in political and
29 social life but this development has been shadowed by an escalation in public acts of violent
30 retribution towards women accused of morality crimes. Edwards notes how the methods used
31 to punish deviant women may be both excessively painful and disfiguring (such as throwing
32 acid in their faces, see Licadho 2003)⁵, and tacitly endorsed by Cambodia’s leadership; the
33 lack of government condemnation reinforcing the lack of social and legal sanction.
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37 In this moral schema, where a principal barometer of morality is a female’s sexual constraint
38 and conduct, violent acts which destroy lives and livelihoods attract less censure than such
39 morality crimes as sleeping with a married minister or wearing short skirts to a temple (Edwards
40 2008: 228).
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42 Edwards cites the contract killing of Cambodia’s most popular actress, Piseth Pilika in 1998
43 and the grossly disfiguring acid attack on a seventeen-year-old entertainer, Tat Marina in
44 1999 as cases in point; entries in Piseth Pilika’s diary suggest she had been having an affair
45 with Prime Minister Hun Sen while Tat Marina had been involved with another married
46 senior government official. No one has been brought to justice for these attacks, but they are
47 understood to have been perpetrated by the wronged wives of these officials. The impunity
48 which which these attacks were committed no doubt helps account for the spate of similar
49 crimes throughout the country that have followed in their wake.
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52 In 2004, Prime Minister Hun Sen issued directives to various ministries to consider how to
53 improve national morality; focus was upon women’s duties to transmit morality through
54 motherhood and to respect moral boundaries by avoiding particular professions, places and
55 forms of dress. In 2006, Hun Sen ordered the Ministry of Culture to ban the envisioned Miss
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⁵ Licadho’s report notes that 44 acid attacks were reported in newspapers between December 1999 and
November 2002. Men and women are both perpetrators and victims, though women are more frequently the
intended targets. Often they are victims of a jealous wife or ex-wife of a man with whom they have a relationship.
Many are unintended targets on whom acid splashes during an attack.

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Cambodia contest on the grounds that national identity could not be illustrated by showcasing girls in their underwear (ibid.: 231).

As Cambodians experience consumerist modernity flooding the country in the form of not only privatization, corruption, speculation, evictions, and the growth of the sex industry, pornography, alcohol and drugs, the moral status of women is clearly becoming the focus of growing anxiety and morally tainted women may find themselves cast adrift in a predatory world and denied a right to protection. Much suggests that women are becoming increasingly vulnerable to gender-based violence which, circularly, damages their moral standing and may leave them at risk of further intimidation or moral isolation.

Violence, virtue and vested interests

Amnesty International's investigation of rape in Cambodia (2010) revealed that corruption, nepotism and poverty are among the reasons cited by victims of rape for being afraid to report the crime. A former sex-worker who was gang-raped by six men in November 2009 was reported as saying, 'I haven't reported it anywhere ... I don't have any khnang and [nowadays, without this] there is no chance for justice', an 18-year-old girl who was raped by a fellow villager in April 2009 explained, 'The biggest obstacle to get justice is poverty' and even the Secretary-General of the Cambodian National Council for Women, Hou Samith claimed that, 'Nobody would dare to rape the rich.'

The majority of those interviewed by Amnesty International said that they had paid bribes to the police or had been asked to pay between 5 and 10 USD but often they could not afford this. The mother of an eleven year old girl, who had been raped five times by two perpetrators said: 'We were afraid to turn to the police: we know they harass, intimidate and torture people, and extort, especially weak and poor families.' Although both victims and police felt ashamed of being involved in bribery, police informed Amnesty that they had no funds for carrying out investigations and were therefore forced to take payment from victims. An acquittal, they claimed, could cost 100-200 USD, or significantly more if the perpetrator was wealthy. Victims of gender-based violence may also have to pay hospital staff for forensic examinations. Amnesty also notes that 'Because the Cambodian judiciary lacks independence and is subject to corruption, there is also a real risk that dishonest prosecutors and judges will use issues such as lack of evidence of resistance to justify non-prosecution or acquittal of perpetrators who pay them bribes' (p. 39). The situation for female victims is exacerbated by the predominance of men in the criminal justice profession and by prevalent gender attitudes among them.

Reports like this suggest that the system for helping victims of gender-based violence in Cambodia function more to bring financial benefits to predominantly male public officials than justice to female victims. For victims, encounters with the criminal justice system may involve expense and ultimately fail to bring retribution and thereby compound the initial abuse. Beliefs that sex is an entitlement for a man while a women should be 'pure' intensify the problem, rendering her largely responsible for crimes committed against her and for the impact these have on the reputation of herself and her relatives.

Women are attacked not only on the streets but also in the home. Strong imperatives to keep family problems out of public view, for women to take responsibility for family harmony and behave submissively towards men help account for the findings of the Domestic Violence baseline survey of 2005. The report notes that although women may inherit property on equal

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terms as men, and often manage and make decisions of about family finances, 'their true path to power in the social hierarchy lies in complying with moral codes of behaviour (*Chbab Srey*)⁶ requiring women to serve and respect their husbands, honour their parents, care for their children, and be modest in appearance and speech at all times' (Cecil 2005: 5). The report finds that domestic violence is prevalent in Cambodia; over 60% of respondents reported knowing a man who had been violent towards his wife and over 20% of female respondents having suffered violence themselves. Over 40% of the poorer respondents knew someone who had been raped. Although there are no reliable statistics on sexual violence towards women, centrally placed sources, including the General Commissariat of National Police, the Ministry of Women's Affairs and providers of outreach services to victims believe that the incidence of rape is increasing and that a growing number of victims are children (Amnesty International 2010).⁷

The fact that terrorizing women is broadly accepted, even by the local authorities and police, means victims have little hope of help from these authorities. Furthermore, women express greater acceptance of domestic violence than men; over a quarter of the female respondents said they felt that extreme violence (burning, choking or shooting) may be acceptable, particularly if a wife is insubordinate to her husband. Many women believed they could change their husband's behaviour by paying respect and complying and less than half of them felt that it was justifiable to refuse an HIV positive husband sex. These findings were constant across the age groups, though the poorer groups reported greater exposure to violence and rape, greater acceptance and less access to help. The survey notes that although donors, government agencies and NGOs have been working for more than a decade to reduce violence towards women, there is evidence that some forms of violence have instead increased. Although there are virtually no hard data available concerning the intimidation of women in Cambodia's history, there is much to suggest that their vulnerability today is one of the many manifestations of the morally disruptive effects of global intervention into a debilitated country. Cambodians themselves often report that they feel that political and economic necessity are driving them towards moral bankruptcy (Kent 2007).

Violence towards women in Cambodia today should, then, be understood in the light of the general sense of moral dissolution and lack of trust in the compassion of others that are evolving from historical developments. The intimidation of women, the impunity with which it is carried out and its justification through reference to an imagined, traditional moral scheme of which women's purity is one gauge mean that women become victims both of transgressions and of efforts to reinstate order in the face of a perceived threat to 'culture'. It is against this backdrop, in which 'Cambodian values' appear to have taken a particularly pernicious form under the pressures of recent politico-economic change, that we may understand why Cambodians are looking to Buddhism for hope. Many agree that relationships of trust in Cambodia tend to be best forged through traditional authority figures such as village elders and networks as well as representatives of Buddhism at both village and national level (Emerson 1997; Vong Sokheng & Cameron 2005). If, as the venerable Yos Hut Khemacaro⁸ claims, the Buddhist clergy is understood by Cambodians to be the 'conscience'

⁶ Around the fourteenth century Khmer Buddhist monks began composing codes of moral instruction known as *chbab* for the laity. These included a specific code for men (*chbab broh*) and for women (*chbab srey*). These are still taught in Cambodian schools today. A woman who obeys the *chbab* dutifully may be able to earn rebirth as the mother of the future Buddha.

⁷ This may, however, reflect the fact that rapes of children are more likely to be reported than rapes of adult women.

⁸ Ven. Yos Hut, head of the Khmer Buddhist Foundation, went to France to study in 1973. In the 1980s he worked for the UN border relief organization (UNBRO) at one of the border refugee camps and ran a centre for

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of Cambodian society (1998: 73), then it makes sense that in times of such unscrupulousness both overseas and local Khmer men and women are investing in their wats. Buddhism is also squarely equated with Khmer selfhood and community, both in the popular imagination and in scholarly works; the religion represents a wellspring of the values by which Khmer recognize themselves as Khmer (Hansen 2007).

Rehabilitating the universe

Anthropologists have long been aware of the importance of the religious realm in exposing a society's core values (Rappaport 1979; Turner 1974) and providing 'the fund of general meanings in terms of which each individual interprets his experience and organizes his conduct' (Geertz 1973: 127). Buddhism may be seen as a dense source of 'key symbols' (Ortner 1973) that refer people back to their cultural fundament and help them to formulate existential strategies for creating order in a disintegrating cosmos. Many Cambodians seem to view what they are experiencing as the fragmentation of their culture and absorption of its members, as sovereign individuals into an atomized world. Buddhism may offer a sense of continuity with a re-membered, encompassing cosmic oneness and refuge from feelings of isolation. The Buddhist wat constitutes a ritual space that is theoretically beyond the reach of secular power (Harris 2005: 65), and can thereby be imagined to provide refuge from the interventions of global culture as they are meted out by the state. The wat also asserts a 'cosmological axiom' (Rappaport 1999) of the Khmer universe: that female power must be subordinated to, but also nurture righteous male power. I suggest that it is by framing themselves in terms of this axiom that women may morally rehabilitate the cosmos and themselves within it. This refuge-seeking is thus a form of practice – conducted within and shaped by historical constraints – that may contribute to both critique and perpetuation of extant hegemony (Ortner 1984; 2006).

Buddhism played a central role in village and urban life in Cambodia from the 13th century until its complete annihilation by the Khmer Rouge in the latter 1970s. In the 1980s, when the country was controlled by the communist Vietnamese, a tightly state-controlled regrowth of the religion was permitted. With the departure of the Vietnamese and the formal establishment of peace in the early 1990s, restrictions on religion were lifted and the country has since seen a widespread explosion of temple restoration, and the number of monks and novices has risen sharply from that time onwards. Despite the fact that this resurgence has been dogged by deep politicization of the monkhood, cooptation and corruption of the clergy by the powerful and a dearth of respected religious experts (see Heng Sreang 2008), Buddhism has largely recovered its status as a cultural axis in which the majority of Khmer – both women and men – continue to invest trust and hope of a restoration of moral order (Kent & Chandler 2008). The realm of Buddhism is, though, marked by pervasive gender inequity that, the theoretically equal potential for enlightenment notwithstanding, can be interpreted as having been misogynistic and androcentric in all periods (Crosby 2002: 85-87; Sponberg 1992).

Laynuns in Cambodia

Given Buddhism's androcentrism, the enthusiasm shown by women for supporting and participating in it may at first glance seem incongruous. In 2000, there were an estimated

dhamma discussion. He has been a consultant for Cambodian associations and NGOs for the past decade and works actively to raise funds for community development.

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10,000 laynuns (*don chees*)⁹ in Cambodia (Löschmann 2000). Many wats in Cambodia house greater numbers of renunciant women than they do monks and novices despite the fact that the ordination of daughters, unlike sons, brings little religious merit to parents. This, combined with the fact that women are expected to care for ageing parents and will likely need the support of their own children in order to survive at the wat, means that young women who are interested in ordaining are usually strongly discouraged by relatives. While a man who ordains commits himself to following 227 precepts, Cambodia has never had an order of fully ordained nuns (*bhikkunis*) and women who become laynuns or *don chees* vow to follow only five, eight or ten (see also Guthrie 2005). Those who follow ten precepts wear white while those who follow eight may wear a black skirt. As for men who become monks, a woman who becomes a *don chee* ritually removes herself from the world of sex and procreation. While monks and novices gain access to free education and may gain food security by performing alms rounds, these benefits are not open to women. Although some women who enter the temple are invited to participate in ceremonies for the laity and may receive donations, *don chees* are for the most part dependent on the support of relatives for their keep. The structure of the Buddhist religious hierarchy also means that making donations to *don chees* brings less merit to the donor than does donating to monks.

The relationship between women and the Buddhist *sangha* (brotherhood of monks) in Theravada Southeast Asia has been the subject of considerable debate (see Keyes 1984). Although female renunciants should theoretically be able to acquire as much merit as men, there is major discrepancy between Buddhism's egalitarian ideal of merit and the practical limitations of Buddhist women's lives (Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2000: 1). Female subordination has been inherent within Buddhism since the earliest times and women are broadly considered karmically inferior due to misdoings in previous lives. No matter how rigorous her practice or how extensive her knowledge of the scriptures, a Cambodian *don chee* cannot achieve equal religious standing to that of a monk¹⁰, though she may achieve recognition for her discipline and be awarded significant moral authority, even in relation to monks. Women who reside in the wat are mostly seen as house-keepers or servants of the monks and the wats often provide little support for their spiritual training. In general they are past reproductive age and they are often stereotyped as destitute, broken women who are thought to be withdrawing from secular life rather than actively pursuing a religious vocation (McDonald-Gibson 2003). As is the case for renunciant women in neighbouring Thailand (see Lindberg-Falk 2002), *don chees* attract little public attention and younger ones are commonly depicted as those who have been ill, suffered some misfortune or are 'broken-hearted'. Further, a woman who is considered to have breached the secular moral order, even though she may have been cheated or abused, is likely to have to struggle hard to attain any religious credibility at all.

The role of the female is, as Guthrie (2001) explains, above all to nurture and protect the male Buddha; analogously, in Cambodia, 'A virtuous woman can marry the laziest, ugliest man in the world and on the basis of her virtue, enable him to rise to be a kind. A virtuous woman "nourishes" a man' (Ledgerwood 1990: 26). Ultimately, then, by steering men towards righteousness, equanimity and compassion, a woman who nurtures Buddhist values creates a safer and more morally sound social environment for both herself and others.

⁹ Buddhist female lay devotees are known as upasika.

¹⁰ This situation is similar for female Buddhist renunciants in Thailand, see Lindberg-Falk M. 2002. *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Nuns Challenge Gendered Order in Thailand*. Göteborg University, Göteborg

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However, despite these numerous constraints, for women whose virtue has been called into question, becoming a renunciant makes sense. There is an oft-cited saying in Cambodia that while men are like gold, women are like white cloth; dirt washes off men but women remained stained for ever. Donning the unstained white cloth of the *don chee* therefore makes a resonant and visible statement about her purity. Furthermore, the attraction of the religious realm for women may also have something to do with the fact that women's spiritual agency in Cambodia was probably formerly far stronger than it is today. Guthrie has made a compelling case for the fact that the *don chees* are the 'heirs of an ancient form of female asceticism that was once accorded high status in Cambodia [and that the] ... marginalization of the *tūn jī*¹¹ ... seems to be recent, the result of attempts to standardize Cambodian ordination traditions by Buddhist intellectuals during the twentieth century as as the influx of Western ideas about women and religious asceticism' (2005: 134). Guthrie goes on to critique recent well-intentioned western interventions¹² that were designed to promote religious equality for women by training them in social work and as counsellors for victims of domestic violence and trauma. She argues that this agenda reflects contemporary western (and Christian) ideas about appropriate behaviour for religious women and that this may in fact reduce the status of *don chees* as ascetics, interfere with their meditation and *dhamma* studies and, thereby, with the primary goal of personal salvation. However, despite the tempering of religion by reforms and foreign intervention, Cambodian women's devotionalism does still appear to offer them a chance to acquire merit and a religious standing that has cultural currency, historical resonance and personal meaning.

Embodying Peacefulness

Even within the patriarchal order of the wat, there are opportunities for women to experience communion and reconstitution of self. On my second trip to Cambodia, in 2003, I visited Wat Norea, a wat not far from Battambang town. At the time, Wat Norea housed a community of laynuns with a core of some eight women who meditated most afternoons under a small shelter on the wat grounds, behind the main hall (*preah vihear*). The group was headed by a dynamic *don chee* in her mid-fifties while the others in the group were older. When I accompanied the women for their meditation sessions I noticed a young girl dressed in white robes like the *don chee* and sitting in the front row each day. She sat serenely throughout the meditation with a frozen expression on her face. She paid no attention the presence of myself and my male research assistant but after meditation she would put her head low on the floor and touch the head nun's feet and then creep close in beside one of the elderly *don chees* and sit huddled against her while the *don chee* put her arm protectively over her shoulders. When it was time to get up and leave the hall, the women would help the girl get up, as if she was physically debilitated, and lead her by the arm away towards their cottages.

One afternoon when the girl and the older woman had left the hall, the head nun explained to my research assistant and myself that the young girl was only fourteen years old and had been brought to the laynuns by her mother. Apparently the girl was physically well and used to behave normally but her mother became concerned after she suddenly became withdrawn, stopped speaking and refused to interact with other people. It was not clear whether the mother was aware of any reason for the girl's dramatic change of behaviour, but if so, she had not told the nuns. The head nun did not wish to speculate on the matter. Gradually, over the two weeks that I spent visiting the wat regularly, the girl began to open up and even speak a

¹¹ Alternative transliteration for the phonetic system used here, *don chee*.

¹² Guthrie is referring to the German sponsorship of the Association of Nuns and Laywomen of Cambodia, which was founded in 1995.

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3 little to me. She looked at me intently and did not smile but asked me demurely where I came
4 from. I subsequently heard that she began to function socially after several weeks with the
5 nuns and that she then returned to her mother. One of the older nuns then explained to my
6 research assistant and myself, shaking her head and looking at the ground as she did so, that
7 she feared the girl had experienced some kind of sexual abuse and she could only hope that
8 she would be safe now.
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11 It is not possible to draw too broad a conclusion about this particular young girl, since the
12 information I have about her is so limited. Certainly, from what I could observe, her marked
13 social withdrawal and need to lean on the older women changed during the time I observed
14 her. To what extent this was due to the direct effects of meditation itself, or to the fact that she
15 found herself within a moral hierarchy, away from men¹³ and under superiors who were
16 elevated by dint of their discipline and learnedness is impossible to say. Many Cambodians I
17 have interviewed tell me that they have found peace of mind through regular attendance at the
18 temple and through meditation. They claim that this subsequently influences their attitudes
19 and responses to the pressures of their daily lives. Regardless of the gender order of the
20 Buddhist wat then, it does offer both men and women access to knowledge of a powerful,
21 culturally validated technique for managing distress.
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26 **Wat Andauk**

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28 Wat Andauk lies in a village some 20 km northwest of Battambang town. It houses a large
29 community of laynuns and is renowned for the fact that some twenty percent of the more than
30 one hundred nuns are under the age of thirty. The wat is built on a hillock, with the *vihara*¹⁴ at
31 the top, the monks' quarters surrounding it and the nuns' quarters lower down the hill, on the
32 periphery of the compound. Higher status nuns, including the head nun, live in concrete
33 cottages just below the monks. Lower status nuns live more peripherally, in wood and thatch
34 cottages still further down the hill. The higher status nuns study *dhamma* teachings and they
35 teach morality to other nuns and laypeople. However, despite their learnedness, the nuns
36 receive formal *dhamma* teachings from the monks, they stitch the monks' robes, serve the
37 monks' food and clean the wat compound. The nuns are responsible for preparing food for
38 and serving the monks before they are permitted to eat their own midday meal. When I asked
39 the head nun of Wat Andauk why they were not permitted to perform alms rounds she
40 responded, '*Don chee kwah bon*' (nuns lack merit).
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45 The moral authority of the leading *don chees* at Wat Andauk is widely acclaimed in
46 Cambodia. The head nun told me that she has seen many women seek refuge at the wat from
47 abusive husbands and these laywomen, she explained, may come from as far away as Phnom
48 Penh; their husbands may be powerful and wealthy men in the city. There were no such
49 women in residence during the time I spent visiting Wat Andauk, but the head nun told me
50 that if a laywoman sought help there, the nuns would teach her *dhamma* and help her calm her
51 mind. In this way, she reasoned, the woman would then be able to set an example to her
52 husband. She described how one high-ranking man had come to collect his wife from the wat
53 after she had left him and spent several weeks there and how he had appeared deeply ashamed
54 of himself in the presence of the nuns. The head nun felt that this was a far more effective
55 way of inducing moral correction in wayward husbands than direct confrontation.
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¹³ At this wat, the monks are active in another area of the grounds.

¹⁴ Shrine hall.

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As described above, women have little recourse to secular authorities for help in such situations and moral codes tend to attribute blame to women for family disharmony. Although a newly married woman will often initially bring her husband to live with her parents, once a woman is removed from her parents there is little support for her should she be subject to abuse; she may instead be held responsible and punished with moral isolation. For these reasons, the wat provides a unique possibility for women who are confronted with the terror of abuse and moral isolation to find refuge, communion with other women who may be willing to share their stories, and security (Khmer *sok*¹⁵).

In the March 2006 issue of the magazine *Khmer Apsara* an article exposed the story of a young Cambodian Buddhist nun, whom I had met some months earlier. Just under the title there is a full-face photograph of her and her wat, Wat Andauk, is named, so it was easy to recognize her. The way in which the story was elicited by the journalist is not made clear, and it is difficult to know how much journalistic license accounts for the rather sensational (by Cambodian standards) disclosures. The title of the article, which my assistant felt was somewhat licentious, literally translates as ‘Maiden Teacher Who Ordains Because of Love’ and the story runs as follows:

Because of her behaviour in following the precepts and her nun’s clothing this nun looks older than she is. She is only 30. She did not ordain just recently but came here to stay, seek tranquillity and learn *dhamma* when she was 22 years old ... What inconsolable suffering did she hold in her mind that made her decide to become a nun when she was so young? With a calm face that nevertheless failed to completely hide her distress, nun Nget So Thea confessed, ‘I became a nun because of a broken heart. Before becoming a nun, I was a primary school teacher in my home province. In 1994, I was a student ... I got to know a man from my village and who was studying with me. Our friendship gradually grew into a strong love. Together we collected memories; we went for walks ... and wherever we went, we always swore together that we would hold one another’s hands at a wedding ceremony after graduation. With sweet promises this man made me believe in him until I gave him everything without thinking about tradition. I made a mistake in 1995 ... because I thought that we would soon be married and I trusted him in particular because he was my neighbour ... the man decided to get engaged to the daughter of a rich family in the town in 1995, the same year I had to sit my final exams. I asked him many times to break his engagement but he said I was poor and his family would not allow him to marry me ...’

In early 1996, she became a teacher ... but because her first love had caused her such sadness she swore never to love again and she soon decided to leave the school in order to become a nun. Her parents did not agree to her ordination and her father instead tried to make her marry a middle-aged man living in Phnom Penh but she refused and left home to go and stay with her father’s older sister ...

‘... after I’d been living with my aunt for 10 days, her son-in-law raped me while I was sleeping. Even though I struggled to get away I could not and at last I was just left to cry alone.’

She explained that her aunt and cousin – who was the wife of the rapist – soon learned of what had happened. ‘My cousin and aunt were very angry with the man and wanted to report him to the police but I didn’t want them to because I didn’t want the neighbours to know about this as I would feel so ashamed.’

¹⁵ See Kent A. 2006. Reconfiguring Security: Buddhism and moral legitimacy in Cambodia. *Security Dialogue* 37:343-61

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‘I felt such sadness after all that had happened. In 1997, I came to this pagoda to attend a consecration ceremony for a new building and I saw many nuns walking to the new building. I felt so calm when I saw the nuns that I too decided to become a nun here. I don’t know what I did in my past life to make my present life so full of bad luck ... I stay in the pagoda and learn *dhamma* in order to calm my mind, eliminate passion and to build happiness (Khmer *sok*, contentment) for the future. I swear to remain a nun for ever. I will not resign. My regrets about the past have been resolved by shaving my head and wearing white clothes.’

I asked my assistant to elicit the opinion of a young monk we knew. He was 22 years old and had been a monk for six years. He read the story and responded as follows.

Becoming a nun was her wish and it is the best way for her to solve her problem and find *sok* ... When she learns *dhamma* and begins to understand her problem, the nun will no longer be upset or disappointed with the world ... and she will save merit for her next life. She will realize that her problems resulted from sin committed in a past life so she will not be angry with anyone or be afraid of being blamed.

This nun is earning merit because she didn’t make problems for other people, she didn’t file a report to the police or cause her boyfriend problems ... this means she provides *sok* for everyone ... This young nun must have made merit in a past life too since that’s why she wanted to become a nun in this life instead of committing bad deeds to deal with her problem.

She is probably saying everything because she wants to warn other women not to follow her bad behavior from the past ... But the important thing is that the nun practices *dhamma* well and if people see that then they’ll start supporting her again, even if they stop initially after reading the article.

This story, and the monk’s commentary, reveal how female gender and vulnerability intersect. It is notable that neither the monk nor the woman herself deride the boyfriend for his breach of trust or the rapist for his abusive behaviour. It is the woman who is considered to be stained by what has happened to her.¹⁶ Although the wat provides a possible avenue for her to repair her moral status, here too she is subordinated to the monks and her questionable background also calls her religious legitimacy into question.

Nevertheless, the wat offers a unique cultural space in which Cambodian women today can hope to find refuge from moral disruptions in their society.¹⁷ Life in the wat may enable a woman who experiences moral isolation in the secular world to reconstitute herself as a virtuous being within hierarchy and order. From the perspective of the outside observer, the wat may reproduce the gender hierarchy that makes women’s position so precarious in the first place, but the closer look offered above has hopefully shown that there is a more complex cultural logic at work.

Conclusions – refuge and renaissance

I have argued here that global pressures upon a debilitated country like Cambodia may have particularly iniquitous consequences for the security of women. Today’s global influences to

¹⁶ Most the rape victims interviewed by Amnesty International reported feeling shame after being raped, and some described themselves as *khouch* (spoiled) and said this would limit their marriage prospects, see Amnesty International. 2010. *Breaking the Silence - sexual violence in Cambodia*, Amnesty International Publications, London

¹⁷ Tragically, there have been reports in Cambodian newspapers of monks raping and even murdering women and children.

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3 liberalize the economy bring new opportunities for national elites to morally disengage
4 themselves from their poor. In the absence of a strong rule of law, culture of restraint and an
5 institutional framework that reliably addresses the needs of the poor, this may generate new
6 kinds of vulnerability that permeate the whole of the society. In Cambodia, and other
7 underdeveloped countries, we are witnessing how brutal disciplinary measures now have
8 broad currency as part and parcel of the stabilization of neoliberal political economy. This all
9 tends to fuel a rampant culture of impunity and laissez-faire attitude to extrajudicial killings
10 and violence and to thus entrench a climate of fear and mistrust. In the Cambodian case, I
11 contend here, these global changes are stirring anxiety about morality and culture – panic
12 about the state of the universe.
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16 The intimidation of women in Cambodia deserves special attention because of the way in
17 which the female body is used as the keystone of national moral integrity. As emergent
18 materialist culture unleashes the patriarchal realm of politics and business from Buddhist
19 values, and avarice mounts, the onus falls to women to rekindle the Buddhist religion and the
20 rectitude of men. The women who are mutilated by sulphuric acid attacks and shootings for
21 the misdemeanours of adulterous men, or the stories of those who have suffered gender-based
22 abuse show how women are made accountable for transgressions – breaches of trust, rape,
23 adultery – perpetrated by men.
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27 In the current climate of corruption and impunity, unprotected women are therefore
28 particularly vulnerable to victimization and moral isolation; mobilizing retributive justice is
29 not a viable option for the poor or marginalized, particularly if they are female. The most
30 accessible, but also culturally unproblematic refuge from this fear and isolation is not through
31 opposition to oppressive values and social forces. As the brief examples here highlight, the
32 Buddhist *wat* is, at least theoretically, the exemplary centre of merit-based moral order and to
33 seek cultural renewal there is, therefore, a way of reorientating oneself in relation to a morally
34 disordered world. This may be achieved through embodied practice, such as meditation, as
35 well as through communion with trusted others, as seemed to be the case for the young girl
36 described above.
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40 As Ledgerwood (Ledgerwood 1990: 24) notes, ‘Being virtuous means having others see that
41 you are virtuous, and having others talk about you as being virtuous’. Performing the role of
42 *don chee* is one of the most visible ways in which a Cambodian woman can demonstrate her
43 virtue. The *don chees* are clearly not, then, striving to explode the cultural strictures that
44 subordinate women. Instead, they use the constrained agency at their disposal, take
45 responsibility for regenerating a recognizably Khmer moral universe and anchoring
46 themselves within it. This move is culturally associated with women’s power to bring
47 wayward men to heel in a non-confrontational way, by inspiring and enabling their moral self-
48 correction and thus bettering society for all. The potential rewards for such women are
49 acknowledgement and respect that they may otherwise be denied.
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53 The rationale behind such women’s choices presents us with a smoldering question; is it
54 Cambodia’s brutal history and supposedly misogynistic culture or is it the ingestion of war-
55 torn societies into the global system and the cultural disintegration it is felt to engender that is
56 experienced as the more pernicious threat by vulnerable women today?
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