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Alexandra Kent

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A Buddhist Bouncer: Monastic Adaptation to the Ethos of Desire in Today's Cambodia

ALEXANDRA KENT

ABSTRACT *Buddhist teachings have much to say about the disciplining of desire. In lived Buddhism, however, there may be considerable contestation over how canonical tenets should be understood and flexibility in the way precept is related to practice. This article uses ethnographic data recently gathered from a rural setting in Cambodia to discuss how religious legitimacy is shaped by the complex fabric of village culture and history and the contemporary ethos of the laity. Today's entrepreneurial Cambodian monks are a telling model of the times. The monk who is the key figure of this article maintains a finely balanced position at the interstices of the local and non-local; he must remain responsive to the interests of both those 'above' him, including the politicized ecclesiastical hierarchy, and those 'below' him in the village, with their desires for security and order.*

Introduction

Buddhist philosophy and teachings have a great deal to say about the disciplining of desire. Indeed, the second of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths is the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering, according to which the ultimate cause of suffering is posited as 'craving' or 'desire' (Keyes 261). The disciplining of desire and cultivation of detachment are fundamental to Buddhist spiritual development. This might suggest that Buddhism provides a cultural counterpoint to the ethos of desire that is bred by today's rapidly globalizing consumer culture.

When Buddhism is practised in local contexts, however, there may be considerable contestation over the way in which canonical tenets are to be understood and flexibility in the way precept is related to practice (Samuels, ''Practical Life''). Some four decades ago, Gombrich (*Precept*) called into question the idea that a once pristine Buddhism had been corrupted by non-Buddhist elements and he argues later that to understand Theravada Buddhism in its social context, one should probe into its 'self-definition' (*Theravada* 25). Earlier studies explored the tension between the Buddhist canon and Buddhist practice, which tends to be pragmatic or concerned with the accumulation of merit for future lives rather than salvationary and concerned with ultimate extinction. Spiro, for instance, distinguishes between 'nibbanic' (a religion of 'radical salvation') and 'kammatic' (a religion of 'proximate salvation') Buddhism. In a similar vein, Samuel identifies three orientations in Tibetan Buddhism: the enlightenment focused 'Bodhi orientation'; the explicitly

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ethical 'Karma orientation'; and the 'Pragmatic Orientation' that is directed at addressing worldly desires, such as the desire for health and prosperity.

Classical scholarly approaches to localized Buddhist practice continue to be criticized for leading to the conclusion that ''Buddhism on the ground compares rather unfavourably with the 'true' Buddhism of the Pali canonical texts, but also, and equally troubling, for yielding fragmentary presentations of the Theravada as a lived tradition'' (Samuels, ''Merit'', 125). My concern here is, therefore, not so much to identify different kinds of Buddhism, but to examine how religious legitimacy is shaped by the vicissitudes of context and historical circumstance. In this case I shall be exploring the dialectical relationship between Buddhist monasticism at a particular Cambodian temple and the country's growing consumerist ethos of desire.

Throughout the history of pre-modern Cambodia, Buddhism has played a central role in the political and moral order, in shaping Khmer ethnic and national identity (Hansen) and in nourishing the solidarity of rural communities (Khemacaro 71). The goal of the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979) was to wipe Cambodia clean of its history and culture, which is why religious practice was forbidden by the regime. Monks (*bhikkhu*s) were disrobed and many later died of disease or starvation, some were executed, and many fled the country. Temples were desecrated and literature was destroyed. The cultural devastation wreaked by the Khmer Rouge left not only refugees, but also non-exiled Cambodians suffering a radical rupture with their culture and history: they suffered ''cultural bereavement'' (Eisenbruch).

In this collective traumatisation, trust and the sense of sharing and belonging have arguably been the most significant and enduring casualties. Much has been written on the subject of trust and its special relationship to the 'risk society' and to modernity (e.g. Giddens; Seligman; Sztompka; Uslaner). For the purpose of this context, trusting an 'other' broadly means accepting him/her into one's own moral community and assuming that s/he is benevolently disposed towards one, which cannot be done easily in Cambodia today.

Globalization and organized violence have eroded much of the moral and social fabric of 'traditional' community life. Today, Cambodia is awash with stray elements of modernity: a liberal market economy, the commodification of land, procedural multi-party democracy, the Internet and mobile phones, an influx of foreign TV programmes, and intensifying and accelerating communication between villages and towns. Influences like these breed new desires, although Cambodia's entrenched poverty leaves a gaping discrepancy between the new desires and the ability of the masses to satisfy them. The new political economy (see Hughes, *Political Economy*), with its competitive consumerist ethos and increasing exclusion of the poor, engenders suspicion and envy and thus deepens the mistrust left in the wake of war. In this context of post-conflict reconstruction, rapid change and persistent insecurity, frenetic religious revival is taking place.

This article discusses the contemporary revival of Cambodian Buddhism and its interplay with the climate of desire—rampant consumerist culture—that has emerged in the wake of decades marked by devastating violence. Can a Cambodian monk reconcile this new ethos with the ideals of renunciation that have historically been perpetuated by Cambodia's public space *par excellence*, the monastery, and if he can, how might it be done? The question many Cambodians

seem to be asking themselves today is whether the *sangha* (the Buddhist brotherhood of monks) can temper the new waves of unbridled avarice or whether they are simply being swept up by these forces and serving them.

Buddhism(s), Renunciation, and Desire

Accelerating social, economic, and religious pluralism in today's nation states and global orders seems to be accompanied by the growth of competing visions of society and of Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia (Schober). The rules of the Buddhist monastic order, enshrined in the *Vinaya Pitaka*,[1] provide a complete way of life and ''The key to this life is that victory over craving which results in 'being content with little'' (Gombrich, *Theravada* 88). Like medieval Christian monks (Asad), Buddhist monks are, according to the Buddhist canon, to hone passion into virtue through strict physical and mental discipline.

In localized expressions of Buddhism, however, this canonical vein is generally embedded or submerged in a religious complex replete with tensions, heady paradoxes, and what are often considered 'non-Buddhist' elements. In fact, monks who enact radical renunciation (by following a strict interpretation of the canon) are often regarded with considerable ambivalence: as, on the one hand, awe-inspiring embodiments of Buddhist ideals, but, on the other hand, as removed from the world of the Buddhist laity, their cultural norms, and their expectations of the clergy (Silber). As one of my informants put it, ''even though our monks break discipline, they help people and that's better than having stricter monks who can't help anything''.

It is safe to say, however, that the Buddhist monastic robe condenses widespread notions in Southeast Asia about the accumulation of spiritual power through the renunciation of *personal* desire: ''Monks who are perceived as self-serving and having worldly goals will inevitably lose the respect of fellow monks and the laity'' (Swearer 110). The power accumulated through renunciation may be directed towards personal salvation or it may be transmuted into merit and prosperity for the benefit of the non-renouncing laity. Making donations to monks is a primary way for lay people to access merit and boons; monks are generally believed to acquire superhuman powers through their practice, which are useful to the laity. Therefore, working out an acceptable *modus vivendi* between monks and lay people in any particular setting requires ongoing negotiation between popular desires, local and non-local renderings of Buddhist notions of renunciation, and the particular will of local monks. For this reason, I propose, a rich understanding of Buddhism *in situ* requires analysis in terms of historical, politico-economic, and cultural factors rather than straightforward evaluation against a yardstick of the de-historicized Pali canon.

Khmer Buddhism in Today's Context

Cambodia's particular history and the country's current political economy play a major role in shaping the religion today. These are morally turbulent times in Cambodia. One of the problems that almost any middle-aged or elderly

Cambodian will describe about society today is the swelling ranks of unruly youth. The post-war population explosion has taken place against the backdrop of a dearth of moral elders (Zucker). An *achar* (lay temple officiant) in his mid-60s from a village in north-western Cambodia captures this widely shared feeling:

> Nowadays we always have fighting in the temple so nobody is surprised by it any more. When I was young, I never saw young people fighting in the village. The young used to listen to the old and didn't dare make problems... If one young man was bad, he would be criticized by everyone and no one would befriend him, so he would be isolated. One day not long ago I saw a group of gangsters in the temple and decided to talk with them—I wanted to know why they liked to fight and make the whole village insecure. They didn't know why they liked fighting. They said, sometimes, if they saw newcomers in their village during a ceremony, they wanted to fight them, even if they'd never met them before. They were afraid of being arrested, but they still wanted to fight. They said that the police could only detain them, but not stop their desire to fight. They couldn't explain their feelings, because sometimes, when they saw someone, they suddenly wanted to fight, but at other times they wanted to help people. They said, when they wanted to fight, their eyes became red and their bodies went into a kind of shock. Hearing those young gangs, I thought about the time of the Khmer Rouge régime. Lots of people were killed and they died with anger. The gangsters are probably the reborn victims of the Khmer Rouge, so when the victim and the killer meet each other, the victim wants revenge, even if they've never met before in the present life.

Cambodians frequently refer to the loss of their religion and culture during the years of organized violence as a major root of today's problems and many maintain that religious-cultural regeneration is essential to the re-establishment of social order. Officialdom in Cambodia today is associated with extortion and corruption (Nissen) and, although the religious realm is certainly not free from corruption, it nevertheless remains one of the very few social realms that is still seen as a source of moral order and hope (Kent, ''Reconfiguring''). Following the abolition of Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge, the religion was both constrained and manipulated by the Vietnamese occupying régime of the 1980s; for this reason, although there is widespread restoration of temples and increasing numbers of young men are ordained—in many cases as a means to access free education and secure food—respected religious mentors for young monks are in short supply.

Attuning their practice to this historically novel climate, today's up-and-coming Khmer monks may be relatively autonomous and highly enterprising, recognizing opportunities and organizing resources to take advantage of them. This stretches the notion of 'successful' monasticism to include the new religious entrepreneur, who is sensitive to popular demands, an innovator who sets up and manages a temple like a project, assuming responsibility and taking risks, but, ideally, always with the interests of his community at heart. Wat Thmei, a temple described in more detail below, is led by a monk of this entrepreneurial kind, who makes use of the social and cultural resources available to him to address popular demands for protection, security, order, and the reconstitution of the community.

'The New Temple': Wat Thmei[2]

Wat Thmei lies in a rice-farming village around 15 kilometers from the town of Battambang. The land is flat and, although some trees grow near the water, the rest of the landscape is featureless, consisting of paddy fields. The houses in the village are on the whole simple wooden constructions on stilts, with thatched roofs. Many are dilapidated. To get to the temple, one follows a narrow dirt lane, flanked on one side by houses and on the other side by a stream. The temple lies almost at the edge of the village, becoming visible as a break in the line of small houses. Several substantial concrete buildings stand in the compound, with more buildings under construction. Behind them are a long, low wooden school house and a temple pond.

The temple was founded in 1999 by a group of local elders. Previously, the wooden building had housed a center that provided medicines for the elderly on a co-operative basis. This had been established by the maternal grandfather of the current head monk, the Ven. Sambath, and was supported by foreign donations. In those days, people say, the villagers were suspicious of it, because they thought it was under the control of missionizing Christians. Because of this, the center arranged for the Ven. Sambath to come to the center from the nearby temple, where he had been ordained, and some Buddha statues were installed. This increased the center's popularity, but the sponsors then stopped the funding and the locals were too poor to maintain it. The villagers in this area did not have their own temple before, but the situation motivated the Ven. Sambath to seek external support.

The Ven. Sambath began attracting support from Khmer-Americans who still had some connections with the area. Since 2001, several large concrete buildings—including residential cottages, a dining hall, a meeting hall, a library, and toilets—have been constructed and a bridge has been built with temple funds on the other side of the creek. The main shrine hall (*Preah Vihear*) was still incomplete in 2008 and no consecration ceremony had yet been held. When I first visited the temple in 2003, there were two fully ordained monks, four novices, and a handful of nuns living there. By 2008, numbers had increased to some 20 monks and novices.

The Ven. Sambath soon established a reputation for fortune-telling and healing. A steady stream of temple visitors come from local villages, the town of Battambang, and even farther afield to seek help with worldly problems, illness, and life crises. The Ven. Sambath usually performs a water sprinkling ritual for his clients, chants Pali stanzas from a secret palm-leaf manuscript, and may give them protective amulets. Usually people make donations in return.

Although the Ven. Sambath's role is fundamentally and crucially that of a Buddhist *bhikkhu*, the strictness of his adherence to the 227 precepts stipulated in the *Vinaya* text seems to be of little interest to villagers, who are in any case generally not well versed in the scriptures. The Ven. Sambath is considered to conduct himself with acceptable decorum, but, perhaps more importantly, he addresses some of the villagers' most pressing desires for the restoration of security and order—moral, physical, social, psychological, cultural. He cultivates social networks for protection and support, performs ritual healing, attracts resources and uses these for community services and for the construction of the vital community center; he is accumulating power and manages it in the

service of the villagers. More controversially, his program for the restitution of order also includes the selective use of violence.

Pragmatism, Politics, and the Temple

One of the most basic security strategies for Cambodians is the cultivation of links to powerful individuals through networks (known in Khmer as *khsae*, literally meaning 'string'), which can provide protection and support for dependent 'clients'. Since the introduction of procedural democracy in 1993, Cambodian *khsae* have tended to run along the arteries of political parties. As I have discussed elsewhere (Kent, ''Purchasing''), with the restoration of temples now fervently going on throughout Cambodia, an important way of establishing politically expedient *khsae* is by inviting powerful politicians to officiate at the (re)consecration ceremony of a new or restored temple hall. The Ven. Sambath is a practical monk, wise to the benefits and risks of political maneuvering. This is how he reasons with regard to the consecration ceremony which is provisionally planned at Wat Thmei for 2009:

> We will invite high-ranking officials from the political party that won the elections [CPP, Cambodian People's Party], because we can derive profit power (*chomnayñ umnaich*) from them... *Chomnayñ umnaich* means we can get protection and support from the officials, we can ask them for favours and have a good relationship with them... then the authorities won't make problems or interrupt the temple's work... It is not important to invite officials from the party we support—we must simply understand our situation. The CPP is powerful and has big money. The temples that have good connections with the CPP always have money and protection, while those that don't usually remain isolated and poor... Wat Thmei is a new temple and is poor, so we need supporters.

A small, poor rice-farming village like the one in which Wat Thmei is located would have limited opportunities to attract attention and donations from the rich and powerful without the intermediary of a politically proficient figure such as a monk. The theatrical gesture of giving alms to monks by icons of the government's protection racket, as part of a chain of merit, but also of menace (the threat of withheld protection), is very much part of the contemporary Cambodian scene (Hughes, *Politics*; Edwards).

The Ven. Sambath's strategy seems to be common among enterprising monks: in order to tame or at least to tempt and milk tyrants in the service of local security agendas. Many villagers, particularly older people, lament this kind of politicking in today's temples. However, insofar as they understand it to be performed for the betterment of their community rather than for the benefit of self-seeking monks, they not only accept it, but often actively support successful entrepreneurial monks with their own regular donations. As one elderly villager put it,

> After Pol Pot everything is completely changed... Monks didn't used to get involved in politics or in raising money to build the cottages and temples... Today, people don't focus so much on the good or bad behavior of monks, but only on their ability to build the temple.

Cambodians seem acutely aware of the way history influences monasticism. In Buddhism's own terms, the problems of today are simply part of the inevitable cosmological cycles of time, through which the religion itself progresses through dissipation and regeneration. An elderly layman explained that

> Nowadays, most monks only manage to follow at most 50% of the discipline, but they're still considered to be monks who should be supported by people. We are not living in the Buddha's time, so everything is different.
>
> If a monk today wants to practise strict discipline, he must stay in the forest or far away from society, because current society is not a place for monks to practise discipline—the whole society is polluted by people; people change everything so monks who stay in society have to change, too.

Violence, Vindication, and *vinay*

The temple is, as it always was, the singular public space of the rural community. Cremation always took place at the temple and it was at the temple that locals gathered for festivities, dances, and entertainment, even to listen to the radio (Delvert; Ebihara). Wat Thmei has revived some of these traditions and thus hosts local festivities, of which the Khmer New Year is among the most popular, but also the most rowdy. Young people come to dance at the temple, with some getting drunk and causing problems. The Ven. Sambath is granted the authority to police his temple, even to administer corporal punishment. He said:

> We used to have a lot of problems at Khmer New Year, but this year we just had a couple of problems. One was when a group of drunk young men came and picked a fight with a man who was dancing in the temple. I intervened and beat the drunk ones so they ran away from the temple... These gangsters aren't afraid of the police, but they're afraid of me. The police don't fight gangsters, they just arrest them and release them.
>
> I can fight bad men in the temple and I get no problems from the police or authorities, because I have power [*umnaich*, political power or authority] from them, because of my connections. Without connections, I would have no power. People in this village pay respect to me and some are afraid of me. I tell people that if anyone makes problems in the temple, I will fight him. Not all people living in the village support me, but they know that I build lots of things for the village and people benefit from my achievements. People know that what I do is good for the whole village.

Some villagers are relieved that their monk is prepared to deal with young trouble-makers with a firm hand, although this may be with a sense of resignation rather than admiration. An elderly layman who lives not far from the temple explained:

> Even if we think the head monk is wrong to fight gangsters, we can't do anything because he's a monk... In terms of the law and Buddhist discipline, the head monk is wrong, but in terms of social order he is right... The villagers don't want to have this fighting, so what the monk does is right for them.

One might expect other authority figures, such as the police or village chief, to decry the monk's high-handed management of local youth. However, the

village chief, a man in his late forties who lives in a typical wooden village house on stilts, claimed that he supported the monk's methods. Like others in the village, the chief is well aware of the discrepancy between ideal behavior and efficacious action, but he opts for the latter, saying:

> Buddhism teaches monks to be calm and devote themselves to practising *dhamma*, they shouldn't get angry or fight... But the head monk helps me solve many problems in the village, so I don't mind what happens in the temple... all of those gangsters are sons of villagers and some villagers are my close friends or relatives... whenever there's a fight, both sides always claim that they were innocent and shouldn't be punished. Even if the head monk knocks someone unconscious, he is still supported by people and sometimes the parents of the gangsters come to the temple to apologize to him for their sons' behaviour and they ask him not to blame the parents for not advising their sons. But if I fight a gangster, people criticize me... If I arrest two gangsters and release one, people will say I took a bribe or I am biased.

The chief excuses the Ven. Sambath's breaches of Buddhist precepts by referring to his good intentions and to the limited options he has: "The head monk holds ceremonies not for himself, but to make everyone happy... the gangsters can't be advised with polite words. They are uneducated (*neak khmeeun gaar uprom*[3]), so only fighting them or arresting them will prevent them from doing bad." The monk's use of violence is thus considered not so much as a breach of monastic discipline as a desirable, if regrettable, public service. Significantly, the village chief described the head monk as practising good 'discipline', but he considers discipline not as obedience to the Buddhist *Vinaya* (discipline), but as obedience to the will of the laity:

> Villagers pay respect to the head monk because he has good discipline (*vinay la'a*). If he didn't have good discipline... he would not have enough money to build the temple... Good discipline means the monk doesn't make problems with people, he helps people, builds the temple and holds ceremonies for people to enjoy... He cures disease, so his good reputation is known by many people, both young and old. People who are holding a ceremony or party can go to the temple to borrow chairs, tables, plates, and other things.

The way in which notions of discipline are driven by the context, according to the specifics of the circumstances, rather than derived purely from scripture is sometimes articulated with great clarity by locals. A lay villager in his sixties reasoned for instance that

> People now don't have time to make food for monks so they donate money instead, even though they know that the discipline forbids monks to touch money. In the past, the monks could study in the temple so they didn't need money, but nowadays they have to study at private school so they need money. We don't criticize monks for touching money because we know it is necessary for them to study.
>
> The discipline of the Buddha is one thing and it is the same everywhere in the world, but the monks' practice differs according to the given situation. If the community does not like monks touching money, the monks would be breaking the discipline, if they did, but, if the community does not mind them touching money, the monks will be appreciated for practising the discipline well, because they can make money for the temple. There is only one discipline which

originates from the Buddha, but people's understanding differs and people have their own reasons for protecting their particular ideas.

The Dilution of Discipline and Power?

This new interpretation of Buddhist legitimacy and the new schemes of empowerment of Khmer monks are, however, not without their detractors. The new Buddhist effervescence also breeds contestation, and ambivalence. One elderly ascetic woman (*don chi*) commented, for example, that ''when people are clever at making money, monks are also clever at making money, because monks come from lay people''. As merit-making becomes increasingly shaped by materialism and political arrangements, there is a sense of moral disintegration. One villager in his seventies commented that

> The head monk makes money through his fortune telling, healing and amulets—which are against the rules of Buddhism. However, even if the head monk acts contrary to Buddhist rules, if he brings development for the whole village, no people or religious officials would dare criticize him.

The interpretation of the notion of discipline as sensitivity to popular opinion rather than obedience to religious mentors should also be understood in light of the fact that the ecclesiastic hierarchy in Cambodia today is deeply politicized. The Supreme Patriarch (*sangharaja*) of the main Buddhist Order, the Mohanikay, was ordained in 1979 under Vietnamese rule, has held political posts, and is widely considered to lack knowledge in Buddhism and to be a puppet of the current government. Cambodians therefore recognise the impossibility of regenerating discipleship in the absence of legitimate, politically autonomous religious authorities and perceive a weakening of religious power in today's religious entrepreneurialism. One elderly villager expressed skepticism towards the Ven. Sambath, commenting that

> I don't support the head monk when he fights, because I always think about discipline... The head monk should make himself respected, but not threatening... the gangsters don't respect the head monk, they hate him... I think, if he disrobed, the gangsters would fight him. The only reason they don't fight him now is that they're afraid of accumulating *bap* [demerit].

The same villager viewed the Ven. Sambath's power in terms of loss and weakness compared with how things were in the past, when forbearance and obedience to taboos were among the foundations of social order:

> Khmer people used to have lots of magical knowledge, but because they don't trust each other, this knowledge has not been passed down and now not many Khmer people have magical power... The old people [who have knowledge] don't trust people today, because they're afraid they'll use magic to mistreat others out of anger. In the olden days, people who had magical power were always patient and never boasted. Today people lack patience.
>
> The Ven. Sambath has some magical power, but not like in the olden days, when strong magic was effective against all kinds of black magic. When I was young, there was an old man called Ta Rith who had magical power, but he never showed off. One day Ta Rith was invited to have a drink with his friend

> and there were many other men who joined them. They all got drunk and one of the younger ones got angry with Ta Rith, because he was so talkative, and he hit Ta Rith so he fell to the ground. Ta Rith didn't fight back, but kept smiling. Three days later, the young man went to see Ta Rith with some friends to get help, because his hand had swollen up. Ta Rith decided to heal the young man's hand and he wasn't angry with him, but before he healed the man, Ta Rith gave him a lot of advice about not fighting others in future.

Not only did this man claim that today's brokers of spiritual power *are* less 'potent' than in the past, but he also believed that they *must be* less potent, because they are morally unfit to wield such power safely: "I think, if people nowadays had strong magic like Ta Rith, there would be big problems because they would use their magic to kill each other... Magical power is only for good people, not for the bad."

This kind of pessimism and apprehension of moral decline is common among Cambodians, not only among the elderly, but also among those who are too young to know what Cambodia was like before Khmer Rouge times. There is a pervasive sense of loss that is hardly surprising, given the unspeakable brutality that Cambodians have suffered in recent times. Brutality has now taken on a new guise—profiteering local élites that are 'backed' (Khmer, *knâng*) by officials of the central state (Hughes, *Political Economy*). The temple and its monks are being reconstituted, as the seats of control over desire, but now in accordance with the way in which both the poor and the land itself are becoming victims of rampant and unscrupulous exploitation.

Conclusion

This article is particularly inspired by Jeffrey Samuels's recommendation that the legitimacy of Buddhist monks be understood in relation to local perceptions, not simply in relation to textual doctrine. Samuels argues for a phenomenological approach which brings the emotions of the laity to the fore. I have taken these ideas as a springboard for exploring some of the ways in which Cambodian monks are garnering legitimacy in today's particular politico-economic climate. Certainly, as the material shows, there are Cambodians who themselves evaluate their monks according to what they understand to be the Buddhist canon, but I have tried to position these voices within the complex fabric of village culture and history.

Cambodian society suffers from the legacy of its recent history of violence and cultural dissolution. The dearth of secular moral authorities puts particular pressures on monks to perform a civilizing mission at grassroots level. Furthermore, the country's embrace of the liberal market economy and democratization has meant that the urban, powerful élites are increasingly penetrating the world of the villages. Therefore, Cambodian monks now play an especially delicate role at the intersections between the local and the non-local, the powerful and the poor. The monk I have described channels authority and wealth from above and outside to the villagers, who in turn have invested their confidence in him. To maintain his position the Ven. Sambeth must balance the power and interests of those 'above' him, including the politicized ecclesiastical hierarchy, with the needs of those 'below' him in the village.

His sensitivity to the will of others, together with his ability to operate with apparent autonomy, earns him a degree of trust. By convincing people that he is powerful, but that his intentions are benign, he garners their support. It should be noted, however, that monks have some leeway in responding to popular desires, since many Cambodians will donate even to monks whose credentials seem questionable, because it is the act of giving, they claim, that brings merit; whether the monk is good or not will bear upon *his karma*, not the *karma* of the donor. Nevertheless, in a small village with tight social networks, such as that of Wat Thmei, it would be most unlikely for a monk to establish a booming temple enterprise without appealing strongly to both local and non-local values.

In this way, the forms that Buddhist monasticism take at any point in time or space reflect the ethos of the laity. Today's entrepreneurial Cambodian monks who bring profit and investment to the village temple are a telling model of the times. Some look to this new breed of monk as a crucial form of cultural capital or even civil society in an age when little else can be trusted.

As the material discussed here shows, however, there is considerable ambivalence about today's Cambodian monks. Some see them as a sign of the inevitable, cyclical decline of true Buddhism. This stance is perhaps closer to that of the earlier scholarship that Samuels responds to. This is the view that is inclined to evaluate the *sangha* in terms of the Buddhist canon and that underlies the logic of reformism that has historically arisen when the discrepancy between the canon and practice becomes too great. The reformist stance sees danger in monks becoming a model *of* society and promotes the idea that they should be a model *for* the laity.

Two modes of purification or reform of the *sangha* have been described by Harris (6–7): 'top–down' and 'bottom–up'. By the first, Harris means the historically commonplace efforts which Buddhist kings classically made to lay down royal edicts on monastic discipline. By the second, Harris means the withholding of support for monks by the merit-making lay community. Although Cambodia still has a king, it is questionable whether he would be able to instigate the kind of purification achieved by earlier kings. Although many lay people grumble about unruly monks, particularly in the city, it seems unlikely that, in today's climate, the Cambodian rural laity would be inclined to enact 'bottom–up' purification. The material I have presented suggests that enterprising rural monks who show that they can manage the new politico-economic situation in ways that enhance the security of their increasingly vulnerable communities may simply be too valuable to be criticized.

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Alexandra Kent is an associate professor of social anthropology based at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen. Her doctoral research comprised a study of a Hindu revitalization movement in Malaysia, published under the title Divinity and Diversity: A Hindu Revitalization Movement in Malaysia in 2005. *Prof. Kent's post-doctoral research includes a study of Chinese participation in Hindu religion in Malaysia and, more recently, the revival of Buddhism in Cambodia.* CORRESPONDENCE: *The Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Leifsgade 33, 2300 Copenhagen, Sweden.*

NOTES

1. *Vinaya Pitika* means, in Pali and Sanskrit, 'basket of discipline'. It is the smallest of Buddhist *Tipitaka* ('triple basket') and regulates monastic life according to the rules attributed to the Buddha.
2. The name is fictitious. Its literal meaning is 'The New Temple'. Since Wat Thmei does not have an ordination hall yet, it does not strictly qualify as a *wat* or pagoda, but should be referred to as an *ashram*, a community of monks. However, both the local people and the monks expect the completion of their ordination hall in the near future and already refer to their temple as a *wat*. For the sake of simplicity, I am following their use of the term.
3. A derogatory expression that literally means 'uneducated people'.

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