

Reconfiguring Security: Buddhism and Moral Legitimacy in Cambodia

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The issue of security has recently gained acute relevance for theoreticians and policymakers, but the way in which culture relates to security has yet to be given the attention it deserves. This article argues that all discourses and practices of security – ours as well as those of others – are cultural in nature, are historically positioned, and therefore inescapably plural. The article uses a case study of today's revival of Buddhism in Cambodia to illustrate how an anthropological approach may be applied in order to begin challenging the inherent ethnocentricity of much security theory. It explores a particular indigenous scheme of security, and how that scheme relates to power and moral legitimacy. The way Cambodians understand and deal with danger should, it is contended, alert us to the need for social scientists and policymakers to seek culturally sensitive understandings of security. This may help us make sense of local behaviour that may seem unreasonable according to our values; it can provoke us to check and refine our theory rather than indiscriminately apply it; and it may help limit the hegemony of privileged systems of ideas and the violence these can sometimes do to disempowered systems.

Keywords security • anthropology • Cambodia • Buddhism • moral legitimacy

Misery, the arising of misery,
The transcending of misery,
The Noble Eightfold Path¹
Leading to the allaying of misery.
This, indeed, is a refuge secure.
This is the highest refuge.
Having come to this refuge,
One is released from all misery.
(The Dhammapada: Sayings of the Buddha)²

¹ The Noble Eightfold Path consists of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Buddhism teaches that it is by following this path that we may overcome suffering.

² From the translation by Carter & Palihawadana (1987: 35).

DRAWING ON a case study from Cambodia, this article argues that a new way of approaching security may be valuable. Using anthropological methods, it goes on to suggest how such a new approach might be established. The article emerges from several months of anthropological fieldwork in Cambodia,³ where I have been studying the postwar revival of Buddhism. At the very beginning of my fieldwork, I spent time in Phnom Penh. There, I met a Western woman who had been running a non-governmental organization in Cambodia for many years. She mentioned to me that, after all the efforts of her organization to alleviate rural poverty, she remained nonplussed by the villagers' continued interest in donating so much of their scarce resources to monks and the pagoda.⁴ Sometimes, she told me, villagers would even borrow money through one of her organization's micro-credit facilities to make a donation, and would then be unable to repay. Why, she wondered, could they not see that it made far more sense for them to invest in a cow or seed grain?

This anecdote captures the tension between values that promote profit-making as a means of creating security and values prioritizing Buddhist merit-making. In this article, I will suggest that notions and practices of security are ultimately cultural and embedded in deeply cherished and often unquestioned value systems. Der Derian argues indeed that 'within the [western] concept of security lurks the entire history of western metaphysics' (1995: 25) and challenges that the reason supporters of a particular form of security claim it to be necessary is simply that there happens to be 'widespread, metaphysical belief in it'. If security is understood in this way, then the universal application of any one particular definition of security, though it may appear to be a neutral, analytical tool, may actually perform as a kind of cultural colonialism.

The United Nations, for instance, has recently refined its concept of security, which previously referred to national security, arriving at a more individualized notion of 'human security' (UNDP 1994), meaning assurance of individual survival, dignity and livelihood, and protection from fear and want. The flavour of this understanding is reflected in reports such as the World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for Cambodia of 2003, which stretches to some 200 pages. The paper details various policy and institutional interventions for enhancing security; however, although the term security occurs repeatedly in the paper, nowhere is any mention made of religion, Buddhism, monks or nuns. This is striking given that many authors have noted the unique importance of the pagoda in Cambodia for ritual life, social and welfare activities, cooperative action, redistribution of wealth, healing and national identity (Brown, 1999; Krishnamurthy, 1999;

³ Fieldwork has been conducted primarily in northwestern Cambodia, but also in pagodas in and around Phnom Penh, in Takeo province, Kampong Cham province and Siem Reap province.

⁴ Buddhist temples in Cambodia are generally referred to as pagodas.

Aschmoneit et al., 1997b; Eisenbruch, 1991; Bertrand, 2004; Hansen, 2004), as well as for the legitimization of political power (Gyallay-Pap, 2002; Harris, 1999). The United Nations security agenda appears to be glossing over important indigenous security ideals and practice.

I posit, therefore, that propositions such as Alagappa's (1998: 51) – that the scope of security should be limited by establishing criteria independent of specific worldviews – are impossible to satisfy. All discourses and practices of security, including one's own, are perforce socially and culturally positioned, and they are therefore inescapably plural. It has been noted that, paradoxically, it is only by confessing to the situated and partial nature of our understandings that these may truly gain in objectivity (Haraway, 1988).

Understanding Security

The issue of security has recently gained acute relevance for theoreticians as well as policymakers, largely in the wake of terrorist activities but also as a result of escalating violence and poverty throughout much of the world. The concepts of security that have until now enjoyed political and academic currency have come mainly from the field of security studies. Throughout the Cold War, focus was upon political and military measures with which to address international threats to state security. Threats were rendered as what security studies scholars said they were, while 'anything else (no matter how great a concern for human survival it may be) is merely a problem' (Krause & Williams, 1997: 36). Scholars of critical security studies then began arguing for a historicization of the concept of security, and for attention to be paid to the power relationships within which it is socially constructed. They argued that states may in fact endanger their citizens rather than protect them. The debate began to take up issues such as economics, environmental degradation and health risks, as well as the ways in which individual security is tied to identity and community. State-centrism lost ground in favour of society-centric analyses in which security meant 'the diminution of violent conflict, especially war' (Latham, 1996: 114) or the reduction of 'structural violence' and enhanced welfare of the family and the minimizing of suffering (see Tickner, 1995: 87–188).

The Copenhagen School (see Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998) took the debate in a slightly different direction by viewing security as a kind of political speech-act – 'securitization' – in which a securitizing actor persuades its audience that a particular phenomenon represents a threat to existence. 'Securitization' is thus a form of panic politics that legitimizes the staging of emergency and the use of force.

Hansen (2000) criticizes the Copenhagen School and its focus on speech-

acts and discourse for missing the problem of silenced security issues and bodily practice. Using the example of Pakistani women, who may be stoned to death for having extra-marital intercourse, she argues that the security of these women is silenced and subsumed by the oppressive, dominant discourse. She therefore argues that security should be understood as a practice that serves to identify danger and threat through bodily as well as discursive acts. This, like the work of some of the feminist security scholars (see Blanchard, 2003), invites us to move beyond concepts and definitions that exclude various voices and begin including experience, practice and security problems that may not be expressed in 'our' terms. While Hansen's critique questions the gender-blindness of our traditions of theory-building, I wish to propose that we also explore the inherent ethnocentricity of much security theory. Although moves are already afoot to begin examining the cultural shaping of security (see, for example, Der Derian, 1995; Weldes et al., 1999; Bubandt, 2005), the debate is still in its infancy, and the role that anthropology may be able to play in it has barely been explored.

An Anthropological Approach to Security

Some scholars from security studies are now drawing upon non-Western experience and ideas to contribute to the security discussion. Ayoob (1995) and Alagappa (1998), for instance, note that while the state remains the primary – though perhaps not the only – referent object of security, its survival is not only threatened in the international arena. The most frequent threats to state security in post-colonial and developing countries, they argue, now emanate from within the countries themselves, generally as a result of failing political leadership. Leaders who are considered to be acting in ways that citizens believe threaten their world order risk forfeiting the legitimacy to rule (see Bubandt, 2005). This begs questions related, for example, to how moral legitimacy is acquired and how social roles, power relations and actions are ascribed meaning and value. If, as Weldes et al. (1999: 1) contend, 'all social insecurities are culturally produced', then the nature of and relationship between power, legitimacy and security surely need to be examined through the lens of culture.

Anthropology uses a holistic approach that conceives of culture, society and experience as interwoven. An individual's experience of security is understood to arise through a particular 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977), in the context of social networks – both of which take on meaning in relation to prevailing values and ideas. Drawing an analytical distinction between the individual and the collectivity may therefore fudge the way in which (in)security emerges out of the relationship between them. It has also been shown that the

passions of fear that individuals experience and the ways in which they express these in times of insecurity follow particular cultural logics (see Kapferer, 1997), which, in turn, are shaped by historical circumstances. Phenomena such as chronic illness (see, for example, Scheper-Hughes 1992), religious fundamentalism, violent protest (Horowitz, 2001), withdrawal into counter-cultural groups (see, for example, Reader, 1996) or democratic apathy may all be understood as cultural responses to culturally constituted insecurity.

By taking indigenous perspectives seriously, the anthropological approach relativizes academic constructions of referent objects of security. It cannot, for instance, be assumed that the objective of security is to ensure the survival of either the individual or the state. The desire to secure a particular world order or value system may, for instance, provide a rationale for suicide. This approach enables us to consider other cultural formulations as a corpus of knowledge and experience that might inform our own. Such methods are not about challenging scholars to choose between either unhesitatingly imposing their theories upon other peoples or utterly deconstructing them. Rather, these methods engage scholars in a process of *relating* their own realities to those of others.

It has been argued that 'indiscriminate broadening of the definition of security threatens to make the concept so elastic as to render it useless as an analytical tool' (Ayooob, 1997: 121). I am aware that I may provoke such criticism, but this would be to misread my intention. I am arguing against the indiscriminate application of simple definitions, and arguing instead in favour of meticulous work to reveal the limitless complexity of contextualized discourses and practices of security, including our own. Definitions – our definitions – are speech-acts, and 'all speech involves an attempt to fix meaning, to define a particular situation . . . and any successful speech act implies as a consequence the exclusion of other possible constructions of meaning' (Hansen, 2000: 306). Any attempt to define other people's security for them necessarily excludes those people's own constructions of meaning. Our conceptual grids are the result of our own history of ideas, and they make random divisions between heart and mind, individual and collectivity, politics and religion, state and citizen, and more. I therefore urge that we keep our intellectual framework clear yet perpetually provisional, so as to sensitize our inquiry to other people's realities, allowing our way of organizing our world to be informed, if not radically critiqued, by the ways in which they arrange their worlds.

Insecurity in Cambodia

The 1980s saw Cambodia, like many other countries, providing a stage for the playing out of Cold War superpower interests. With the end of the Cold War, Cambodia's internal conflict too was officially terminated with the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991, though violence continued long after between warring factions. Organized violence is therefore still a vivid memory in Cambodia, and a multitude of other threats continue to keep people uncertain and fearful (see Owen, 2003).

Hughes (2003) has examined the triple transition that the Cambodian state has been undergoing since the 1980s under the scrutiny and choreography of international interveners, initially inspired by the peacebuilding optimism of the post-Cold War era: from command economy to free-market economy, from war to peace, from authoritarian rule to democracy. She concludes that economic liberalization, which includes no safety nets for the poor, has led to internationalization of the privileged rather than democratization of the populace. The result is increasing elitism and growing co-optation and monopolization of local political economies in rural areas by profit-hungry urbanites and officials. One of the clearest instances of this is land speculation. Land-grabbing by the powerful, frequently armed military or police, from poor villagers whose property rights are rarely registered or respected is reported almost daily in the Cambodian press. Those guilty of crimes are seldom brought to justice since they are generally well-connected within 'strings' (Khmer, *khsae*) of protective social networks (see ABC, 2005; Ana & Berthiaume, 2005; Cambodia Justice Initiative, 2005; Coren, 2003). The newspapers also report daily on kidnappings, killings, lynch law, landmine accidents, illegal deforestation, HIV/AIDS and prostitution. Cambodia's endemic corruption (Nissen, 2005), degenerate judiciary and culture of impunity (Öjendal et al., 2001) are all too commonly noted. Some 40% of Cambodians still live below the poverty line, and, for the poor, access to food, healthcare, jobs, education and impartial arbitrators of disputes is far from assured. The combination of this history of collective traumatization with today's new inequalities has made the sense of trust, sharing and belonging perhaps the most significant and persistent casualty of the past.

Rural Cambodians are generally suspicious of the corrupt and politicized secular institutions, such as the police, the judiciary or politics. Recourse to officials may even exacerbate insecurity, since 'fees' are demanded and services are far from reliable. Protection and support tends instead to be sought through networks of patronage, kinship or, importantly, traditional authority figures such as elders, monks and nuns (Vong & Cameron, 2005). Despite – or perhaps even because of – the fact that postwar Cambodian Buddhism suffers from an aching lack of expertise, authority and legitimacy,

and is both politically manipulated and sometimes corrupt, Cambodian villagers in particular continue to pour their efforts into reconstituting their religion. The landscape is now peppered with restored and new pagodas, often supported by overseas Khmers as well as locals. Religious festivals are growing each year, and even the poorest try to contribute something to the pagoda at the major annual religious festivals. Many poor are keen to see their sons enter the *sangha*⁵ in order to keep them off the streets, hopefully out of gangsterism, and to secure them food, accommodation and an education.⁶

Power and Protection in Khmer Buddhism

For the powerful in Cambodia, Buddhism represents a source of potential threat to their privilege. By offering the poor masses and the intelligentsia hope of curbing the excesses of abusive power-wielders, as well as protection from various other dangers, it provides a subnational, non-state referent object of security, to borrow Alagappa's (1998) terms. But Buddhism is also a traditional source of power and legitimacy for leaders. Thus, it lies at the heart of a struggle over the power to secure worldly order.

The shattering of Buddhism by the Khmer Rouge (1975–79) and the subsequent decade of constraints under the Vietnamese occupying regime meant that much of Cambodia's religious heritage was destroyed. Rural Buddhism in Cambodia had long provided various forms of security for the people. Since it began permeating rural life in the 13th century, up until the time of the French protectorate and, ultimately, the tumultuous final decades of the 20th century, the pagoda provided villagers with education for their sons, a refuge for the elderly, a system of wealth redistribution through lay pagoda committees (Aschmoneit et al., 1997a,b), agricultural knowledge (Chay Navuth, 2002) and a centre of community life (Delvert, 1961; Brown, 1999; Kent, 2003).

The monks also tamed cosmological dangers by propitiating and domesticating powerful and potentially destructive spirits, such as local tutelary spirits (see Forest, 1992), hungry ghosts or the restless dead (Ang Choulean, 1990). In rural Buddhist practice, monks acquired magical powers by performing particular kinds of meditation and adhering to strict codes of conduct, derived partly but not exclusively from the Buddhist canon (see Tiyanich, 1997). They became repositories of knowledge about how to pro-

⁵ Within Buddhism, the term *sangha* is usually used to refer to the ordained order, or community, of monks.

⁶ However, many are simply struggling too hard to survive to spend much time at pagodas, while others prefer to spend time watching television shows and films that are bringing a new wave of foreign culture into Cambodian life.

tect and empower themselves and others, and still today monks in Cambodia may perform tattooing, provide sacred amulets and provide blessings to protect people or even make them invincible.

Khmer Buddhism traditionally not only provided material and cosmological security, but also was a font of moral and political security. The area enclosed within the sacred and ritually demarcated boundary (*sīmā*) of the pagoda is theoretically beyond the control of secular power. It therefore represents a centre of autonomy as well as of moral rectitude. Perhaps as early as the 14th century, Buddhist works of moral instruction, known in Khmer as *chbap*, were written, apparently mostly by monks (see Harris, 2005: 86–89; Chandler, 1984). These provided moral instruction not only to the laity, but also to the political and aristocratic elite. Throughout the Buddhist world, monks have also historically led movements that contested unrighteous leaders. The concept of the righteous king, or *dhammarāja*, was indeed the fundament of the pre-modern Cambodian polity, and his role included protection and patronage of the religion. In this way, Buddhist monks have long played a crucial role in the moderation of political power. Prior to French bureaucratization of the *sangha*, monks were relatively decentralized and had strong roots in local communities, where their loyalties lay and their legitimacy was earned. With their moral legitimacy and, often, superhuman powers, they represented formidable protection for the local universe from abusive leaders.

On the other hand, Buddhism was and remains a source of both legitimacy and power for leaders. In Cambodia, power is still conceived of as dwelling in the Buddhist pagodas, and access to such power is a necessary component of political survival. Politicians eagerly patronize pagodas – with some even spending time as monks – to access this power, as well as to display their own power and merit through the success of the pagodas they support (Guthrie, 2002). They seek in the pagoda not simply political power, but the power of transcendent virtue, a sacred force or energy known by the Buddhist technical term *pāramī*, (meaning mastery or perfection). *Pāramī* can be accessed through the practice of righteous deeds (*bon*), such as donating to the pagoda or giving alms to monks. Today's politicians may also try to co-opt monks, because monks are trusted by the people, though Kalab (1994: 70) insists that monks will only maintain such trust as long as they remain independent of any government and are free to express ethical opinions, something many monks are keen to do.

Powerful people in Cambodia are considered to have been born to privilege because they have large stores of accumulated merit from past lives. They are known in Khmer as *neak mean bon* (people with merit). But although they may be considered to have a right to possess power, this does not mean that they are necessarily awarded moral legitimacy. Moral legitimacy is achieved by exercising one's power in ways that resonate with Khmer religious notions of

righteousness and proper world order. One middle-aged *achar* (Khmer lay pagoda officiant) commented:

If our country's leaders had *dhamma* in their mind, they would not kill their own people. But nowadays they almost never practice *dhamma* because they are crazy with money, power, girls. Some of them used to be monks when they were young, but they forget everything they know of *dhamma*.⁷

The introduction of procedural democracy to Cambodia in the early 1990s meant that a new system of formal legitimization arrived, based upon numbers of votes. Cambodians, however, are more than aware that vote numbers are easily manipulated by means of fear or reward, and that they give little indication of the extent to which the populace deems the rulers legitimate. It is then primarily through reference to Buddhism that both power and moral legitimacy are fashioned, and it is perhaps in this arena, therefore, that we should be looking for the mechanisms by which security in Cambodia is modelled – whether we are referring to the security of the leaders/state or of the people.

Sok and the 'State' of Well-Being

Elsewhere (Kent, 2004) I have described how Khmers construe their world as one of primeval chaos (see also Mabbett & Chandler, 1995: 124), in the Hindu sense of a source of both creative and destructive potency. I suggest there that the destructive potential is regulated by the symbolic complex of Buddhism. Without this regulation, the moral logic of Khmer self-identification, well-being and nationhood threatens to dissolve.

A key notion for understanding this logic is the Khmer concept *sok*,⁸ which translates roughly as well-being or peace of mind. The word *sok* is derived from the Pali term *sukkha*, which means the absence of suffering or, better, the absence of 'unsatisfactoriness' (*dukkha*). According to Buddhist thought, *dukkha* is overcome by transcending the passions and desire, and by practising virtue. Accordingly, well-being comes to mean not simply the abolishment of suffering or uncertainty – since these are inevitable in life – but rather the ability to limit desire and transcend unsatisfactoriness, both for oneself and for others. The Khmer term *sok* therefore draws upon a system of meaning that goes beyond our notion of security and is inextricably tied to Buddhist understandings of virtue. The head nun of one pagoda kindly gave

⁷ *Dhamma* has several meanings, including ultimate reality, cosmic order and the nature of being. The Buddha acts as a channel through which *dhamma* is brought to people, thus studying *dhamma* can also mean studying the Buddhist teachings.

⁸ The Lemon Khmer–English Dictionary (Version 1.0) cites some 40 Khmer words of which *sok* forms the root. The semantic domain these cover includes tranquility, peace, happiness, health, security, comfort, well-being and ease.

me a copy of the notes she had prepared for teaching villagers about the concept of *sok*. In the introduction, she writes:

Making merit eliminates all kinds of sin. In order to make merit, we must make donations, follow precepts and meditate. People will get *sok* when they practice these three things.

An expression that came up repeatedly in my fieldwork was *sok phluw chet*, meaning the achievement of well-being through the mind/heart. The Khmer word *chet*, derived from the Pali *citta*,⁹ refers to both the mind and the heart, thus to both the intellect and the passions. Many monks and nuns but also laypeople I have spoken to have told me they seek *sok phluw chet* in the pagoda. Sometimes they do this through meditation or studying Buddhist teachings, but laypeople may also seek it in the form of blessings performed by monks, or through making donations to make merit. Experiencing *sok phluw chet* means remaining emotionally and intellectually steady and unaffected by the vicissitudes of the world.¹⁰

Chet is actually the vehicle for both creating and conquering suffering and desire. An elderly *achar* explained to me that people can cause suffering both with their body and through speech, and both of these are controlled by the *chet*. It is, he said, by training the *chet* that we are able to prevent sin and suffering. Many informants used the phrase *chet sngāp* (Khmer, calm 'mind') to describe the goal of studying Buddhist teachings and meditating. A kind and generous person will usually be described as having *chet la'aw* (*la'aw* means virtuous, good, kind).

Power, itself a complex term,¹¹ and its legitimization in Cambodia need to be seen in the light of these pervasive ideals. Cambodians are all too aware of the brutal workings of raw power:

Mr. Suen is a soldier who has rank (*bon sâk*), guns, raw power (*amnach*), and a back (*khâng*). In our society, when people like Suen have a big back, they have raw power and often abuse those who don't have backing (in Hinton, 2005: 115).

It is the potentially destructive nature of this kind of raw worldly power that the religious system offers hope of containing. Beneficent power is symbolized in Cambodia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia by the sunshade, which forms a central ingredient of Buddhist ritual. The sunshade provides shade from the harsh sun and protection from the elements, just as a powerful patron or king – represented by the central pole – provides protection from

⁹ Pali *citta*, meaning 'the heart (psychologically) i.e. the centre and focus of man's emotional nature as well as that intellectual element which inheres in and accompanies its manifestations i.e. thought' (The Pali Text Society Pali-English Dictionary; available at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/>).

¹⁰ See Tiyanich's (1997) enthralling descriptions of how Thai forest monks of the 19th century were able to still the aggressions of tigers and snakes with their powers of mind.

¹¹ The Cambodian notion of power is complex, and there are numerous Khmer words that all tend to be conflated in translation, rather misleadingly, into the single English word 'power'; see Hinton (2005) for a detailed account.

danger to clients or subjects (Hinton, 2005: 111). Following the widespread Hindu/Buddhist logic of hierarchical encompassment (Kapferer, 1988), these 'shaded' subordinates may in turn be uplifted by the righteous power of their protector.

This provides a frame of reference for the evaluation of leadership. Throughout the Buddhist world, peace and prosperity are conceptually linked to the idea of the synchronized rotation of the 'two wheels of *dhamma*': the wheel of worldly authority (*ānācakkā*) and the wheel of the *sangha* (*dhammacakkā*) (see Harris, 1999: 3). It is the duty of the righteous ruler to steer these wheels correctly. In Cambodia, this idea is as pertinent now as ever. Heng Monychenda, director of the Cambodian non-governmental organization Buddhism for Development, has coined the apt term 'dhammocratic' to convey his argument that today's leaders need to be obedient to the moral teachings of the Buddha (Heng Monychenda, 2005). He notes that Cambodians see hope of security in virtuous, just rulers (*dhammika* rulers). Similarly, a young monk I interviewed several times told me that while it is the duty of all people to nourish four states of mind: kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity,¹² these are quintessential qualities for leaders. Like many Cambodians, he blamed the evil and corruption taking place in Cambodia today upon the lack of righteous leaders.

Power Penetrates the Pagoda

Two crucial factors have radically altered the dynamics of the religio-political realm in Cambodia today. The first of these is the political co-optation of the *sangha* through its leadership. The second is the subsuming of the sacred role of the monks into the process of democratization. In 1979, when the Vietnamese ousted the Khmer Rouge from large parts of Cambodia, they reordained seven Khmer former monks in an attempt to earn some legitimacy among the people. The youngest of these, the Venerable Tep Vong, was subsequently appointed head of a unified *sangha*,¹³ and was later also given political positions as Vice-President of the Khmer National Assembly and Vice-President of the Central Committee of the Khmer United Front for National Construction and Defence. The party that evolved under the supervision of the Vietnamese and later succeeded them (see Gottesman, 2002), the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), has since continued to support the Venerable Tep Vong, who remains the Supreme Patriarch of the *sangha*. However, he is popularly considered to be poorly trained in Buddhism and simply the

¹² In Pali, the four sublime states, or *brahmavihāra*, are *metta*, *karuṇā*, *mudita* and *upekkhā*.

¹³ Prior to the Democratic Kampuchea era, Cambodian Buddhism consisted of two brotherhoods or *nikayas*.

mouthpiece of a Vietnamese-friendly government¹⁴ – and thus as part of a foreign threat to Khmer national integrity and interests. When he argued prior to the 2003 elections that it was against the ascetic vows of monks to cast political votes, this was lauded by CPP supporters but dismissed by many Cambodians as a political statement of his support for the CPP, which he knew most monks opposed.

The second important development came with the Paris Peace Accords of 1991, which enshrined the right of universal adult suffrage and thereby absorbed monks into the Cambodian electorate for the first time ever. This formalized fault-lines already emerging among exiled Khmer monks during the 1980s (Harris, 2001: 85), along which tendencies towards party-political schisms among monks could deepen. The fact that monks are traditionally respected authority figures with strong grass-roots anchorage and nationwide spread meant that when they became voters politicians became very conscious of the need to control them, particularly if they were popular and charismatic. Many young monks in rural areas today are marginalized, disenchanted young men, and although this may exacerbate mistrust between them and the powerful, it can also make them easy prey to manipulation by the wealthy.

At one rural pagoda I visited in Takeo province, the local people were complaining bitterly that their head monk was having his arm twisted to comply with the wishes of the village chief. The chief had insisted that the pagoda invite the prime minister to officiate at the consecration ceremony for a new building. The head monk and many of his congregation wanted to keep politicians out of the pagoda, but they were afraid of ‘trouble’ and so they gave in. The middle-aged woman who told me about this explained that this would give the village chief an opportunity to win favour with the powerful, and that it would also give the politicians a chance to manipulate the villagers by offering gifts, demonstrating association with their pagoda and monks and possibly also striking fear into those who did not intend to repay the honour with loyalty. Her story portrays the monks as obeying the interests of worldly power-holders. This is a complete inversion of Khmer ideals, according to which world sustenance depends on the righteousness of leaders who both support but also obey *dhamma*.

¹⁴ Several of my informants spoke disparagingly of the links they believe the government has with Vietnam. One contended that Prime Minister Hun Sen built his residence close to the Vietnamese border in order that he could easily escape Cambodia should events turn against him. Some complained that illegal logging is being carried out by Vietnamese companies that have paid off Cambodian officials for the privilege of devastating Cambodia’s natural resources.

Leadership and the Loss of Virtue

The powerful, while certainly still Buddhists who view Buddhism as a source of mystical as well as political power and are concerned with merit-making, are nevertheless popularly perceived to have torn loose from Buddhism's moral containment.

In the past, the rural pagoda was largely the product of local labour, but today pagoda construction has been monetarized, and poor villagers have to turn to wealthy outsiders for financial support. New and renovated pagodas are burgeoning in Cambodia, and consecration ceremonies are therefore common. The ceremony consists of creating a ritual boundary (*sīmā*) by burying eight large, ritually prepared stones at the cardinal and intercardinal points around the pagoda hall and a ninth in the centre, before the shrine. On the final day, the stones are suspended over the holes from a beam by rattan, and a thread is wound around the whole circuit. The growing trend for inviting morally dubious officials to hack the rattan and release the stones into the pits is, it seems, economically profitable but costly in other ways. One elderly *achar* in a town in northwestern Cambodia explained how the consecration ceremony is now becoming consumed by powerful officials. He gave the following commentary:

High ranking officials think that having a chance to cut the rope of the centre hole is lucky for them because not many people have a chance like that. . . . Around 1992, I invited the Provincial Governor to join the ceremony to our pagoda and he was happy to be invited because he could appear in public and also have a chance to cut the *sīmā* rope of the centre hole in the pagoda. He made a donation of 2 million riel [\$500] and the other officials gave 500,000 riel [\$125] each. The ceremony can make a lot of money when high ranking officials join. When those officials went back, they took a lot of *sīmā* thread because there was no one who dared to compete with them to get the thread in the pagoda. The governor shared the thread with his followers. I remember that the governor even asked to have the stick that carried the stone.

The newly rich and powerful contribute economically to the pagoda in exchange for good publicity and recognition (see Guthrie, 2002), but they also consume the sacred symbols – the thread and the stick – for their own benefit and at the expense of the locals. The *achar* continued, adding his moral critique:

Not only the poor try to look for *sīmā* thread but also high ranking officials; we can see all ground-breaking ceremonies have high ranking officials to come and join as a chairman in the ceremony and when they go back they will get thread to get good luck or protection . . . [but if] . . . we committed a lot of crime and mistreat people then even though we have a big bunch of thread, we still go to hell.

Many of my informants have noted how corrupt leaders fear the monks. The *sangha* has always represented a font of subversive ideas,¹⁵ and for the state it

¹⁵ In 2003, a group of monks was threatened with expulsion from their Phnom Penh pagoda for having voted for the Sam Rainsy Party (Frommer, 2003: 1).

represents a threat: an alternative referent object of security. The violent suppression of monks who protested about election irregularities in 1998 is a case in point. Several told me they could not believe that the police who so brutally attacked the protesting monks were Khmer. One monk who was present claimed he had been close enough to the attackers to see that they were Vietnamese, and he said he also heard from friends that large numbers of Vietnamese had been brought into the city just a day or so before. Such stories portray the prime minister and his government as a foreign threat that is literally waging war on the pillars of Khmer culture, rather than as righteous leadership that is devoted to protecting and serving the nation and religion.

Several people have told me that they believe government officials like to support any monk known to be good at magic. In a *sangha* that today lacks scholarly excellence, non-partisan respected monastic leaders and basic material security, it is easy to see how such patronage may co-opt and corrupt young, poor monks who are struggling to find a place in a morally dilapidated and institutionally shattered society.

Nevertheless, magical rites are familiar to villagers and do help them with pragmatic concerns. This means that the patronage of such monks by the powerful has consequences for the current '*mission democratrice*'. Politicians today can nourish forms of Buddhism that villagers recognize, and in so doing win the votes they need to earn democratic legitimacy (as defined by the international community). This means that the construction of legitimacy in Cambodia is undergoing a historically peculiar reshaping in the shadow of dramatic social change; the power of leaders over their people is now buttressed by foreign capital and foreign stage direction. In the popular imagination, this setup may be weakening the notion that the symbols of Buddhism can any longer exert a restraining influence upon leaders. While Cambodian leaders have always exploited the symbols of religion, today the antagonistic symbiosis that historically structured the relationship between king, clergy and people is undergoing radical redefinition.

Reconfiguring Security

Vulnerable Cambodians are struggling in historically unique and unfamiliar circumstances to rebuild a familiar cultural scheme. A leading motif in this scheme is the need to control *chet*, the keystone of suffering. The informants cited here portray powerful officials as co-opting the *chet* of the *sangha* in an effort to fulfil an agenda set by the international community for rebuilding 'security' in Cambodia – through democratization, economic liberalization and aid donation. This agenda may be prompting penetration of rural worlds

by the powerful, who exploit rural resources to get ahead in the new economy but also try to gather rural votes to satisfy international demands and thereby earn further international donations. The former role of Buddhism, as both moral moderator of political excess and conferrer of legitimacy, may be undermined by this new cultural tide. While today's morally depleted and subservient Buddhism may still be helping secure the power of today's elite as monks are co-opted by them, it may be less able to put a brake on their brutality or despotism. Buddhism is perhaps not presently equipped to perform its time-tested task of transforming raw, uncivilized power into legitimate, moral power. This may ultimately deprive the vulnerable masses of hope of *sok*.

Buddhist theory holds that the continuance of the world is assured only when a just leader keeps the two wheels of *dhamma* spinning in harmonious, dynamic equilibrium. If one is allowed to spin too quickly, the Buddhist universe cannot continue on its straight course but will spin into a cycle of destruction, as Cambodia did under Pol Pot. Accordingly, religion and politics cannot be understood in isolation from one another. From this point of view, the ultimate referent object of Cambodian security might be appropriately defined as *dhamma*, eternal cosmic order. This is not some quaint, exotic cultural curiosity but provides a powerful explanatory model of experience and history for Khmer people. Not only the nightmare of the Khmer Rouge regime but also today's culture of corruption, impunity and insecurity can be rendered comprehensible through reference to this, as well as other Khmer Buddhist ideas. As such, these ideas can also provide promising templates for the future.

The real dangers faced by Cambodians every day, along with the ways in which Khmers understand these and try to avert them, should alert us to the need for social scientists and policymakers alike to seek culturally sensitive understandings of security. My intention in presenting this case study has therefore been to demonstrate why analysing security as a cultural phenomenon is relevant and to give an example of how this may be done, by working through local language, custom and ideas. My presentation has, I hope, shown that situated practices and discourses of security undergo constant reinvention in their encounters with one another, and that they are therefore not only culturally but also historically shaped.

I opened this discussion by describing how scholars and policymakers have been struggling to nail the concept of security to a firm, indisputable set of ideas supposedly independent of any particular worldview. Yet these people and their ideas are very much products of their particular traditions. They are also socially positioned within a global community in which some discourses and models are materially supported and conceptually privileged over others. I suggest that anthropological analyses may help to problematize the privilege awarded to the views of the international elite, and hopefully to

bring some of the understandings that these have tended to overshadow into the debate. Terms such as 'dhammocracy' are not simply cultural curiosities but could be genuinely engaged with as useful ways of understanding how security might be shaped.

Today, our dominant way of construing security is as a political issue, in which religion, if it is considered at all, is perceived to be a distinct or more or less subordinate element (Hasenclever & Rittberger, 2000; Laustsen & Wæver, 2000). Such a construal has been awarded the power to impose itself upon other worlds. It does so in a quest for 'world-acculturation' (Geertz, 1968: 58), clothed as democratization and development: package solutions to the problem of ensuring security for referent objects of our designation. The illustration above, however, shows that ideas and practices that differ from our own may be deeply implicated in indigenous processes of establishing moral legitimacy and world order. The imposition of one, powerful cultural logic – with its material and institutional trappings – upon another, without engagement and dialogue at all levels, may even damage some of the most fundamental principles of that 'other' and thereby jeopardize its own attempts to create security.

Understanding security through the local linguistic, historical and cultural framework may be useful in several ways. It can help us in making sense of local behaviour that may seem unreasonable according to our own value systems; it can prompt us to continually check and refine our own thought rather than simply applying it; and it may limit the unchecked hegemony of particular systems of ideas and the violence these can sometimes do to disempowered systems. Perhaps it is time to consider the mechanisms by which different discourses and practices of security are, in fact, secured.

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