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Spirit cults and Buddhist practice in Kep Province, Cambodia

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This article focuses on the growth of spirit cults in Cambodia since the end of the Democratic Kampuchea regime through an examination of the most common type of tutelary spirit, neak ta*, in Kompong Tralach in Kep Province. The role of* neak ta *is discussed in relation to Buddhism through their representation in local legends and myths, as reported by villagers and monks, and as the focus of rituals and ceremonies, including some conducted in a Buddhist temple, Wat Kompong Tralach. This provides ethnographic data showing that during and following the destruction of Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge, and the resulting loss of monks and knowledgeable lay Buddhist specialists, Cambodians turned increasingly to older traditions such as the belief in the power and efficacy of* neak ta *to help fill a void. This examination of the enduring place and growing importance of beliefs such as the* neak ta *cult within Khmer cosmology and religious practice following decades of war and recovery deepens our understanding of the reconstruction of Buddhism in Cambodia.*

Introduction

Founders' and spirit cults have arguably grown in influence in Cambodia since the slow reconstruction of Buddhism in the country began in the 1980s. Spirit cults continue to shape religious practice and the relationships which Cambodians establish with their local Buddhist temples. This article presents research conducted in Kep Province, Cambodia, and examines how practices involving the tutelary spirits, *anak-ta-wat*, popularly known as *neak ta*, have shaped Buddhist expression in the postwar era. Specifically, this article addresses the question of whether cults and customs involving *neak ta* have grown in importance as a result of the loss of Buddhist monks and lay specialists.

Spirit cults are common throughout Southeast Asia, cutting across ethnic, religious, and political lines and referring to a wide variety of spirits — from ancestors to the spirit owners of animals and natural phenomenon.[1] They are usually

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1 Cornelia Ann Kammerer, 'Spirit cults among Akha highlanders of northern Thailand', in *Founders' cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, polity, and identity*, ed. Nicola Tannenbaum and C.A. Kammerer (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), p. 50.

distinguished from founders' cults which involve spirits that are seen as the original and ultimate owners of a particular piece of land.[2] *Neak ta* generally occupy areas of land or conspicuous topographical features (large rocks or trees, for example), but they can also have personal relationships with individuals; it is not uncommon to hear Khmers speak of a certain *neak ta* as their *neak ta*, with corresponding obligations and expectations. This article addresses the belief in *neak ta* as a whole and from this point forward will not distinguish between founders' and spirit cults, using instead the latter term to denote the entire range of beliefs related to the spirit world.

One long-standing subject of debate in the study of spirit cults in Southeast Asia is whether they are part of an integrated belief system or represent separate systems within major religions. Manning Nash's analysis of Burmese Buddhism depicts an integrated system of beliefs working in conjunction with tutelary spirits called *nats*.[3] However, Nash describes their divergent roles, with canonical Buddhism providing a 'clear view of the remoter ends of human existence', and the belief in *nats* allowing Burmese to handle day to day problems.[4] Hans-Dieter Evers observes that the inclusion of spirit cults within Theravada Buddhism, from the worship of *phi* in Thailand and Laos, *nats* in Burma, *dēvālaya* shrines in Sri Lanka, to *neak ta* in Cambodia has at times been described as one of the two divisions within the religion.[5]

Melford Spiro, taking a syncretic approach, notes that the interlocking systems of *nibbanic* or canonical Buddhism, *kammatic* Buddhism or the transfer of merit between individuals, and *apostrophic* Buddhism or the curing of illness and defence against demons, form one religion.[6] Yet B.J. Terwiel points out that while the prevalence of non-canonical beliefs and spirits in rural Thailand is interpreted as part of the broader whole, more educated individuals within cities compartmentalise Thai Buddhism to include those beliefs found in and outside the Pali canon.[7] Thomas Kirsch, similarly, portrays Thai Buddhism as a 'range of variation' made up of Theravada Buddhism, spirit cults, and Brahmanic beliefs.[8]

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, such variations have been placed alongside and within larger belief systems such as the study of identity among the Mirek in northwest Sarawak, and 'epistemologically individualistic' religions in Malaysia.[9] Research on belief systems in the region has also included traditional spirit worship and

2 F.K. Lehman, 'The relevance of the founders' cult for understanding the political systems of the peoples of northern Southeast Asia and its Chinese borders', in *Founders' cults in Southeast Asia*, p. 16.
3 Manning Nash, 'Burmese Buddhism in everyday life', *American Anthropologist, New Series* 65, 2 (1963): 285–95.
4 Ibid.: 291.
5 Hans-Dieter Evers, 'Buddha and the seven gods: The dual organization of a temple in central Ceylon', *Journal of Asian Studies* 27, 3 (1968): 541–3.
6 Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and society: A great tradition and its Burmese vicissitudes* (New York: Harper and Row, 2003), pp. 12, 186.
7 B.J. Terwiel, 'A model for the study of Thai Buddhism', *Journal of Asian Studies* 35, 3 (1976): 403.
8 Thomas Kirsch, 'Complexity in the Thai religious system: An interpretation', *Journal of Asian Studies* 36, 2 (1977): 244.
9 Tunku Zainah Tunku Ibrahim, 'The Mirek: Islamized indigenes of northwest Sarawak', *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography* 1 (1982): 17; Raymond L.M. Lee and Susan E. Ackerman, 'Ideology, authority and conflict in a Chinese religious movement in West Malaysia', *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography* 2 (1982): 132–3.

Buddhist identification in Singapore and in northern Thailand.[10] At the heart of such cults is the mediums' 'exclusive right to act as mediators between the lords and human settlers', a right which 'is supposed to pass to the hereditary heirs and successors of the original founders of the settlement, in perpetuity'.[11] Association with a spirit extends beyond successors to include every member of a social unit, particularly during times of stress. For instance, spirit cults help sustain social identities and relationships among the upland Mien of northern Thailand when those identities and the cohesion of social units are tenuous.[12]

As spirit mediums, successors to the founders of settlements are also in a position of influence. External rulers who do not acknowledge the importance of local spirits would not be able to count on the support of a populace. The historical use of spirit cults by powerful rulers such as in the granting of land to aspiring chiefs, for example, also served as a means of control. If rulers were thought to control access to spirits, they were in a position to control land use through the creation of artificial scarcities.[13] The inherent conflict, however, involves the cost of maintaining this relationship. If the cost of the relationship is too high it may be abandoned or reformed in favour of a more equitable system. Yet, the postcolonial transformation of traditional beliefs and identities, as well as the changing roles of spirit cult specialists according to type and level of patronage demonstrate that spirit cults can flourish in times of social and political change.[14]

Research on Cambodian Buddhism and its concomitant beliefs prior to 1975 was largely limited to work attributed to French scholars such as Adhémard Leclère.[15] Later work on spirit cults includes Eveline Porée-Maspero's examination of oral traditions involving the *neak ta* Khleang Moeung in the provinces of Pursat and Kampot, and May Ebihara's doctoral thesis on the village of Svay in Kandal Province.[16] These studies, along with Paul Cravath's research on the role of spirits within classical dance, underline the value of *neak ta* within local and royal rituals as well as the Khmer reliance on spirit cults as a source of stability.[17] Abdulgaffar Peang-Meth goes further and states that in Khmer society, the law of *kamma*, which holds that an individual's present life is the result of past actions, has produced

10 Ju Shi-Huey, 'Chinese spirit mediums in Singapore: An ethnographic study', *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography* 2 (1982): 3; Anthony R. Walker, 'Transformations of Buddhism in the religious ideas and practices of a non-Buddhist hill people: The Lahu Nyi of northern Thailand uplands', *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography* 5 (1986): 67.

11 Lehman, 'The relevance of the founders' cult', p. 16.

12 Hjörleifur Jønsson, 'Pedestrian politics: The social focus of founders, migration, and ritual', in *Founders' cults in Southeast Asia*, p. 234.

13 Lehman, 'The relevance of the founders' cult', p. 33.

14 See Alice D. Ba, *(Re)Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, regionalism, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 33; Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, 'An overview of the field of religion in Burmese Studies', Special issue on Myanmar-Burmese religion, *Asian Ethnology* 68, 2 (2009): 290.

15 See, for instance, Adhémard Leclère, *Le buddhisme au Cambodge* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899).

16 Eveline Porée-Maspero, 'Traditions orales de Pursat et de Kampot', *Artibus Asiae* 24, 3/4 (1961): 394–8; May Ebihara, 'Svay, a village in Cambodia' (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1968), pp. 428–38.

17 Paul Cravath, 'The ritual origins of the classical dance drama of Cambodia', *Asian Theatre Journal* 3, 2 (1986): 195–9.

a fatalistic outlook. Khmer perceptions of the instability of life and lack of control have likely led to the strengthening of the role of spirits such as *neak ta*.[18]

The importance of spirit cults is evident in the increasing number of spirit mediums, the expansion of these cults and cases of spirit possession following the United Nations-sponsored elections of 1993, as well as their transnational nature among the Khmer diaspora.[19] Likewise, the re-establishment of the *boran* (old or traditional style of practice) movement in 1989 and its reliance on 'nonorthodox' practices and rituals[20] reflects a continuity with Brahmanic beliefs and spirit cults in Cambodian Buddhism in the precolonial and colonial periods.[21]

Current research on Khmer Buddhism has also focused on contemporary relationships between villagers, monastic cadres, and political elites who have made inroads into individual *wats* in an attempt to gain favour with rural communities, discourage political opposition, or even gain spiritual power themselves through association with certain temples and monks.[22] Investigations into Buddhism in pre- and post-Democratic Kampuchea, in village and temple communities (*chomnoh*), have revealed how these relationships continue to change.[23] These interactions have been further shaped by the loss of elders and lay specialists in the past three decades.[24] However, despite these changes the continuing presence of Brahmanism, magic, and supernatural powers among Cambodian Buddhist monks remains pertinent to understanding the religion.[25]

18 Abdulgaffar Peang-Meth, 'Understanding the Khmer: Sociological–cultural observations', *Asian Survey* 31, 5 (1991): 446.

19 Didier Bertrand, 'The names and identities of the *boramey* spirits possessing Cambodian mediums', *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, 1 (2001): 31–47. See also John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, ed., *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), especially Teri Shaffer Yamada, 'The spirit cult of *Khleang Moeung* in Long Beach, California', pp. 213–25; Didier Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice and its relationship with Cambodian Buddhism', pp. 151–2, 156–8, 166; John Marston, 'Clay into stone: A modern day tapas', pp. 170–2.

20 Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), pp. 33–4.

21 Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The cultivation of a nation, 1860–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), pp. 97–104.

22 See Peter Gyallay-Pap, 'Reconstructing the Cambodian polity: Buddhism, kingship and the quest for legitimacy', in *Buddhism, power and political order*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Becket Institute, Routledge, 2007), p. 92; Heng Sreang, 'The scope and limitations of political participation by Buddhist monks', pp. 241–71, and Christine Nissen, 'Buddhism and corruption', in *People of virtue: Reconfiguring religion, power and moral order in Cambodia today*, ed. Alexandra Kent and David Chandler (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 272–92.

23 See Kent and Chandler, *People of virtue*: Judy Ledgerwood, 'Buddhist practice in rural Kandal Province, 1960 and 2003', pp. 147–68; Kobayashi Satoru, 'Reconstructing Buddhist temple buildings: An analysis of village Buddhism after the era of turmoil', pp. 169–94.

24 Eve Zucker, 'The absence of elders: Chaos and moral order in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge', in *People of virtue*, pp. 195–212.

25 Ashley Thompson, 'Performative realities: Nobody's possession', in *At the edge of the forest*, ed. Anne Ruth Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asian Program Publications, Cornell University, 2008), pp. 93–119; John Marston, 'Wat Preah Thammalanka and the legend of Lok To Nen', in *People of virtue*, pp. 85–108; Erik W. Davis, 'Weaving life out of death: The craft of the rag robe in Cambodian ritual technology', in *Buddhist funeral cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, ed. Paul Williams and Patrice Ladwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 59–78.

The main purpose of this study is to determine if spirit cults involving *neak ta* have grown in importance in postwar Cambodia to fill the void left by the loss of Buddhist monks and lay specialists. The following levels of inquiry will be considered: the importance of *neak ta* in local stories and legends; the importance of *neak ta* within Kompong Tralach village; and the importance of *neak ta* within Wat Kompong Tralach.

This study does not cover the growth of local spirit cults following the *boran* movement in 1989. The *boran* style of practice differs from the *samay* (new) form, which developed during the reformist movement within the Mahanikay order in the 1910s. The reformists rejected rote memorisation of Buddhist texts and held that prayers should be chanted in Pali as well as Khmer. They also rejected the inclusion of spirits along with Brahmanic beliefs within Buddhist rituals. Although *sangha* members described Wat Kompong Tralach as *boran*, my emphasis is to provide data and analysis of the post-conflict importance of *neak ta* within a rather typical village/monastery in the Cambodian countryside. If Buddhist practice has changed in this environment due to a loss of knowledgeable and competent specialists, it is crucial to understand the changing role of spirit cults in this community.

Fieldwork for this study was conducted at Wat Kompong Tralach and Kompong Tralach village, Prey Thom commune, in Kep Province. The temple had between six to nine monks at any given time and served the needs of local farmers in the surrounding villages. Prey Thom commune had experienced prolonged fighting during the war and residents were often caught between government forces and Khmer Rouge soldiers who launched attacks from the surrounding mountains (even as late as 1994, when three Western backpackers were kidnapped and killed). As with most temples, Wat Kompong Tralach was looted, destroyed, and used as a livestock pen following the Khmer Rouge takeover of the country in 1975; it was rebuilt in 1998.

Although the temple and its monks are integral to this study, so are the local villagers who rely on *neak ta* for stability and good fortune and actively steer the use of ceremonies within the temple. Spirit cults such as those involving *neak ta* are those beliefs and practices involving spirits not normally associated with Buddhism but are used separately or in conjunction with Buddhist ceremonies and rituals. They are regarded in a number of ways: as a tool for alleviating a variety of ailments; as a physical concept to be at times feared and consulted; and as a psychological gatekeeper between humans and the unstable wilderness while facilitating interaction between the two. Therefore, it is the importance of spirit cults and practices, and specifically those involving *neak ta*, and not the workings of the temple itself that is being investigated here.

This article begins with an overview of Wat Kompong Tralach followed by an examination of local stories and legends regarding particular *neak ta* to provide a context for the historical and mythological position of spirits within Khmer culture. This is followed by an examination of the importance of *neak ta* within Kompong Tralach village and an analysis of the *neak ta* within Wat Kompong Tralach. Lastly, the conclusion sums up the ethnographic data on spirit worship and Buddhist expression within a rather typical rural *wat* as a contribution to the broader examination of Cambodian Buddhism currently underway.

Methodology and definitions

Research was conducted in 2004–5 and continued during return visits from 2008–10. Ethnographic data was obtained through interviews with the *sangha* of Wat Kompong Tralach and the people of Kompong Tralach village. Participant observation was conducted of Buddhist ceremonies in the *wat* such as *Kathen* (performed at the end of the three-month retreat for monks), *T'ngai Seul* ('Precept day', every eighth and fifteenth day of the waxing and waning moons), as well as *Pchum Ben* (Festival for the dead). Life-cycle ceremonies within the commune were also observed as were *neak ta* rituals performed at Wat Kompong Tralach and the surrounding area.

One broad finding was that knowledge about *neak ta* in Kompong Tralach varied according to age, sex, education, occupation (agricultural, trade, or urban employment), location (similar to occupation), family size, experience under the Khmer Rouge, devotion to Buddhism, and experience with or in the monastery. In most cases, the less devotion showed towards Buddhism, the more likely individuals were to acknowledge the importance of *neak ta*.

There was also a proximal relationship regarding *neak ta* and Buddhist expression surrounding rural temples as opposed to those in urban centres. In general, the research showed that the further away from cities and towns, the more *neak ta* and other spirit cults were established at *wats* and acknowledged to have a prominent role in daily life. Although this may seem a truism, it echoes the views of many Khmers as well as Erik Davis's depiction of *neak ta* as marking places of habitation within agricultural settings.[26]

Finally, there is the issue of whether 'importance' can be defined quantitatively. In other words, could one count the number of *neak ta* rituals in relation to Buddhist rituals performed, the number of lay and Buddhist specialists today versus the prewar era, or the money expended on them and thereby determine 'importance'? We know from Didier Bertrand's[27] research that traditional specialists have grown in influence, and we also know that politicians have increasingly associated themselves with certain temples and monks known for their magical powers.[28] However, the notion of political elites relying on magic and other means of divination is nothing new, General Lon Nol having been a notoriously steadfast proponent of spirit cults.

We also know, though, that while monasteries in urban areas were in decline as early as 1959, by the 1960s the number of ordinations rose again as the government began recognising educational certificates issued by monastic institutions.[29] Likewise, following liberation in 1979 Cambodians immediately began rebuilding temples, usually out of wood for lack of funds and supplies, but later out of more permanent materials with the help of the Khmer diaspora.[30]

Simply assuming that *neak ta* and other spirits grew in importance because Buddhism was all but destroyed, therefore, is insufficient given the fact that when

26 Erik W. Davis, 'Between forests and families: A remembered past life', in *People of virtue*, p. 135.
27 Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice', pp. 151–69.
28 Gyallay-Pap, 'Reconstructing the Cambodian polity', p. 92; Marston, 'Wat Preah Thammalanka', pp. 85–108.
29 Malada Kalab, 'Monastic education, social mobility and village structure in Cambodia', in *Changing identities in modern Southeast Asia*, ed. D.J. Banks (Paris: Mouton, 1976), p. 165.
30 Ledgerwood, 'Buddhist practice in rural Kandal Province', p. 158.

presented with the opportunity Khmers have chosen to engage in Buddhist practice. Further, relying solely on responses to questions about whether spirit cults are more important than Buddhism is unsatisfactory, given that opinions expressed may not accurately reflect practices and actions. Admittedly, the use of qualitative measurements is necessary for this study. The difficulty in measuring 'importance' is that quite often word and deed vary according to context. While there are Khmers who patronise *neak ta* shrines regularly, indeed more frequently than their visits to the local *wat*, they may hold greater reverence for the collective significance of Buddhist rituals, particularly during ceremonies such as *Pchum Ben*. Likewise, while I knew several people who completely renounced Buddhism, they still admitted to making small offerings to *neak ta* from time to time when ill or to influence the outcome of a significant future event (such as a long trip).

Yet, this latter example may be discounted as unimportant or done 'just in case', similar to hanging a horseshoe over one's door: an individual may not actually believe it will bring luck, but it may be such a common cultural practice that it is done out of what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as *habitus*: something done without reflection or consciousness.[31] However, I disagree with Bourdieu's criticism of researchers who focus on agents as conscious and rational actors. Those who acknowledged *neak ta* 'just in case' made a conscious decision to do so; they were motivated more out of uncertainty than by a lack of consciousness. Indeed, the irregularity of their seeking the help of spirits suggests that greater reflection would be needed as such events fell outside of what was normally anticipated.

'Importance' for this study, therefore, is defined as the value attached to a given ceremony or belief with respect to another for the purpose of bringing about a desired outcome. The frequency of rituals, although an imprecise measurement given that value and time are not necessarily linked, will also be considered for comparative purposes (i.e. the relative amount of time spent or times engaged in *neak ta* versus Buddhist rituals).

Kompong Tralach village and Wat Kompong Tralach

About 20 kilometres south of Kampot town is the village of Kompong Tralach in Prey Thom commune, Kep Province. The commune contains the villages of Kompong Tralach, Damnak Chang'aeur, and Thmei with close to 1,500 families and 444 hectares of cultivated rice land producing over 650 metric tonnes of rice annually. Wells and water taps provide more than half of the water for the commune with the rest obtained from rainwater or from a dam to its immediate north. Kompong Tralach village with more than 350 families is all but indistinguishable from other villages in the country. Its inhabitants are mostly rice farmers; however, some men are also engaged in outside work such as in salt fields to the northwest while some women sell food or baked goods at the local market.

Wat Kompong Tralach stands towards the north of the commune in Kompong Tralach village and is a traditional rural *wat*, small both in terms of its size and the number of monks serving the needs of the surrounding community. The monks

31 C. Jason Throop and Keith M. Murphy, 'Bourdieu and phenomenology', *Anthropological Theory* 2, 2 (2002): 185–8.

belonged to the Mahanikay order, the larger of the two Buddhist orders in the country (the other being the Thommayut). The temple was said to have been built in 1897 by a man named Chung who became the temple's first abbot. During the Democratic Kampuchea era it was destroyed, and the ruins used as a stable for livestock and as an execution site.

The *wat* was rebuilt between 1998 to 2000 with funds from Prime Minister Hun Sen (whose name appears on the *vihear*'s façade) along with donations by expatriate Khmers whose names are inscribed on the walls of the *sala*. There were also several stupas towards the rear of the temple and graves of less solvent villagers to the north-east of the *vihear*.

The temple's monks and lay specialists as well as villagers in the vicinity were threatened by remnants of the shattered Khmer Rouge as late as 1999. The elderly abbot, himself a local who had been a monk prior to 1975, took it upon himself to build a shrine (*taub*) for the victims of the Khmer Rouge whose remains were scattered throughout the surrounding countryside. Little more than a shed, the shrine is still the site of ceremonies during Buddhist festivals and other auspicious occasions.

The shrine for the *neak ta* of Wat Kompong Tralach is in the northeast corner as in most *wats* and its spirit is said to look after those within the area.[32] There was also another shrine for the spirit built at the base of a large tree near the *vihear* donated by a Cambodian expatriate living in the United States. The importance of the *neak ta* to the *wat* and those within the commune (and without) cannot be overstated; the *neak ta* acts as an ally and defender as well as a potential bearer of misfortune.

This duality is reflected in my conversations with the monks. '*Neak ta* is the original religion of Cambodia,' remarked Loak Bati, a resident monk in his early twenties, as he spoke of the importance of the tutelary spirit for local villagers, 'before Buddhism there was *neak ta*.' Loak Poun who was of a similar age and from Prey Thom commune observed: 'Buddhism in the city, *neak ta* in the countryside.' And although some monks made it a point to note that spirit cults were separate from the *dhamma*, they acknowledged that spirits such as *neak ta* can nonetheless act as a type of protector of the sacred space of the *wat* to ensure people adhere to good Buddhist practice and behave in a respectful manner.[33]

In the 1930s, K. Chea, Cambodia's minister of religion, lamented over the fact that magic was common within numerous branches of the Mahanikay sect as well as the fact that many monks were known for their ability to conjure spells, control spirits, and contain demons (as well as being expert gamblers).[34] However, as Penny Edwards notes, the success of Theravada Buddhism from the twelfth century onwards was 'undoubtedly tied to a selective adaptation and integration, dictated by both monks and their lay constituencies, of existing animist and Brahmanist practices.'[35] Indeed, Rüdiger Gaudes points out that the role of spirit cults within Cambodia was described by Chinese emissary Zhou Daguan during his visit to Angkor from 1296–97: 'The decisive folkloristic motif in the account of Zhou

32 Ang Chouléan, 'The place of animism within popular Buddhism in Cambodia', *Asian Folklore Studies* 47, 1 (1988): 36.
33 Ibid.: 36–7.
34 Edwards, *Cambodge*, p. 97.
35 Ibid.

Ill. 1 The shrine (*taub*) for victims of the Khmer Rouge at Wat Kompong Tralach

Daguan … is the notion of the necessity of understandings between human beings and the ghosts that are regarded as the true lords of the land. This understanding is achieved by a king's linkage with a supernatural person or power'.[36]

Notwithstanding K. Chea's lamentations, the spirits and deities comprising Khmer cosmology were part of everyday life, invested in the monarchy, and interwoven into the cultural landscape. Brahmanic beliefs, Hindu deities, local spirits, and the teachings of the Buddha formed a holistic worldview varying according to village tradition and monastic focus.

During the Khmer Rouge era and the destruction of the monasteries, traditional ritual practices continued, albeit clandestinely. The repression of Buddhism and the 'extirpation of folk culture' had already begun in some areas by 1973.[37] However, extirpating beliefs that survive through individual expression would prove to be next to impossible and many villagers in Kompong Tralach believed that *neak ta* were still active during the Khmer Rouge regime.

36 Rüdiger Gaudes, 'Kaundinya, Preah Thaong, and the "Nāgī Somā": Some aspects of a Cambodian legend', *Asian Folklore Studies* 52, 2 (1993): 348.

37 David Chandler, *Brother Number One: A political biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999), p. 96.

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The importance of *neak ta* in local stories and legends

'The most powerful *neak ta* in the area is Chum Teav Mao', the Ministry of Information's local representative in Kampot town said as he leaned back in his chair and listed the names of the powerful *neak ta* in the province. He explained that Chum Teav Mao was also a title given by the king to the wives of high-ranking government officials, especially those of ministerial rank.

From 1866–1944 Chum Teav Mao (also known as Yeh Mao) was very powerful and widely respected. Before 1866 the *neak ta* had only a small shrine with a tiled roof. However, a Chinese man seeing the small structure decided to make a 3-square-metre shrine with a tin roof for the spirit. Upon completing the new shrine he asked the *neak ta* for a winning lottery number, which Chum Teav Mao gave him in a dream. However, the *neak ta* was a capricious spirit that could also cause harm and hurt people who crossed the road near the shrine without first asking permission. In 1900 a Westerner (presumably French) heard of the *neak ta*'s power and travelled to the shrine which he shot at with a rifle, taking away the spirit's power. Although in a weakened state, when the Japanese invaded in 1940 and relocated people from Kampot to an area near Chum Teav Mao's shrine, the spirit's anger revived, resulting in the death of many, especially men, creating a colony of widows. After 1944 Chum Teav Mao's influence subsided once again, although it remained a powerful spirit.

The symbolism in this story is hard to miss. The waning of the *neak ta*'s power coinciding with invasions and the occupation of Cambodia by foreign powers is at one time a corollary of the country's suffering as well as an explanation for it. What is curious, though, is that the protagonists — the Chinese man who built the shrine, the Westerner who shot at the shrine, and the Japanese soldiers who forcibly relocated people — are not the ones who suffer Chum Teav Mao's wrath. Rather, it is innocent Khmers who are punished.

These lessons can be heard in many Khmer parables. Sometimes people are victims of their own greed, and at other times they fail to appreciate powerful forces set against them.[38] Even so, the fatalism often expressed regarding the country's decline in the region is set alongside epic tales of Khmer warriors (such as that of Khleang Moeung, below) and an appreciation for outwitting one's opponent. One such story learned in primary school was recalled by Chatorn, 21, who proudly called himself a *Kmai sot* (a 'real' Khmer, i.e. not of mixed ancestry):

> Originally there were two *neak ta*: Neak Ta Dtuek [water] and Neak Ta Phnom [mountain]. A small family had a beautiful daughter. The father said he will marry his daughter to Neak Ta Phnom, who goes to the home of the family. Neak Ta Dtuek hears this and becomes angry. He creates a big flood and a huge lake that kills many people. But, Neak Ta Phnom also has great powers, more than Neak Ta Dtuek. He creates a huge mountain which holds the lake on top, defeating Neak Ta Dtuek.

Such stories provide a frame of reference for interpreting modernity while giving credence, perhaps even validation, for the use of power. Insolence and avarice are met

38 Alexandra Kent, 'Recovery of the king', in *People of virtue*, pp. 116–23.

with invasion and occupation, while the *neak ta* remain a potent force in Khmer life (Gaudes provides variations of this legend in both royal and local accounts).[39]

Such stories and legends do not stand alone, though, but are actualised through performance and sites of worship. And while some monks described *neak ta* and Buddhism as distinct from one another, the role of such forces as *parami* binds the two together, making their division more a consequence of academic expedience than actual practice. *Parami* refers to the ten perfections or virtues of the Buddha that allowed him to reach *nibbana*. Its popular expression has come to mean a benevolent form of power as well as benevolent spirits who take on the persona of mythico-historical individuals who can occupy *snangs* (mediums) either by force or through invitation.[40] Malevolent spirits such as *bray* who occupy mediums can also be transformed into *parami* when trained and pacified over time.[41]

The ability of mediums such as *kru parami* to focus *parami* for specific ends is relevant in a discussion of magic or divination given their specialty in the field and devotion to Buddhism. Although some are associated with religious figures and there are monks who also act as mediums (which violates the *vinaya*, their code of conduct), *kru parami* are normally ordinary people who uphold Buddhist virtues and follow the precepts and *dhamma.* Indeed, Bertrand describes the interactions between such mediums and the *sangha* as 'constant'.[42] Even the local ministry official above noted their importance as he outlined steps for finding lost property. First, one was to travel with a monk to visit a *kru parami* and elicit the help of Chum Teav Mao. Traditional music — *kmai boran* — would then be played to call on the *neak ta* which would enter the *kru's* body and divulge the location of the lost property. Bertrand also cites some mediums being patronised by monks for physical, spiritual, or even financial support.[43]

Several monks at Wat Kompong Tralach described the use of special powers which legendary monks had in the past; some acknowledged that there were monks today who could invoke such powers to achieve certain ends. None were said to live in the area, but the monks related how they themselves would consult spirits on auspicious occasions such as funerals and weddings or to diagnose illnesses (however, they said that these were distinct from *neak ta* ceremonies).

While appearing to be outside of their normal duties, the capacity to wield such forms of power has come under the scrutiny of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), ministries, and politicians who have associated themselves with specific *wats* and individuals. Elizabeth Guthrie has even claimed that Hun Sen's actions in this regard are meant to evoke images of kingship and define him as the legitimate successor to the kings of the ancient capital of Oudong, where he has reconstructed the complex of Wat Weang Chas.[44] The association of certain temples with *parami* through the iconography of particular statues or buildings has also increased since the end of the

39 Gaudes, 'Kaundinya, Preah Thaong, and the "Nāgī Somā"': 334–8.
40 Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice', p. 151.
41 Ibid., pp. 151–2.
42 Ibid., p. 160.
43 Ibid., pp. 156–8.
44 Elizabeth Guthrie, 'Buddhist temples and Cambodian politics', in *People and the 1998 national elections in Cambodia*, ed. John Vijghen (Phnom Penh: Experts for Community Research, 2002), p. 68.

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war.[45] These constructions have been known to attract hundreds of people in Phnom Penh and throughout the countryside.

The magical efficacy of a spirit further varies according to historical precedent, status, and geographical location. Although Bertrand describes *neak ta* as having no central authority or strict hierarchy,[46] rural villagers do recognise local hierarchies related to specific *neak ta* in their region and a general order throughout the country. For example, in general, a *neak ta* occupying the royal palace will be seen as more powerful than one occupying a home in a small village. Likewise, the statues of the nationally known *neak ta* Kra Ham Kor, Preah Chao, and Cambong Daek located in front of the royal palace are said to protect Dong Kaoeuk, the national *neak ta* of the flag.[47]

However, while rural villagers may accept an hierarchy of *neak ta* and their importance relative to their position within the country, interviews with urbanites demonstrated that their knowledge of spirit cults was poorer than that of their rural counterparts. And this also extended to the perceived power of *neak ta* as a force in everyday affairs. As a woman from Phnom Penh put it, 'You hear a lot of this in the countryside.'

The importance of spirit cults intertwined with legends also has broader implications. One powerful *neak ta* is Khleang Moeung. He is considered a *bodhisattva* ('Buddha to be') as well as a *neak ta*. During a historic engagement with the Thais in modern Pursat Province, Khleang Moeung sacrificed his own life by jumping into a well dug by his soldiers in an attempt to defeat the invading force; he was followed by his wife and two of their children. Upon their death, the Thai army was overcome with dysentery and forced to retreat. Afterwards, a small temple was built on the site where Khleang Moeung and his family were said to have sacrificed their lives. Today he is said to reside underneath a nearby fruit tree believed to have special powers.

Khleang Moeung's influence is both national and transnational. Ashley Thompson relates her experience of a celebration organised by a Khmer American family in the ancient capital of Oudong in which a medium called upon the spirit of Khleang Moeung to enter his body, thus, summoning the spirit of the dead man in support of the living.[48] Indeed, spirit possessions involving Khleang Moeung are common throughout Cambodia where incarnating the *neak ta* allows mediums to re-enact the spirit's heroic deeds. In Long Beach, California, home to the largest Khmer population in the United States with over fifty-five thousand individuals, a shrine to Khleang Moeung has been built which carries similar significance for the diasporic community.[49]

It is reasonable to ask whether such a shrine for Khleang Moeung would have been built abroad in the pre-DK period or whether such a construction is the result of the experiences Khmers and Cambodian Buddhism went through. Small shrines to

45 Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice', p. 166.
46 Bertrand, 'The names and identities of the *boramey* spirits': 42.
47 Ibid.: 38.
48 Thompson, *Performative realities*, p. 105.
49 Yamada, 'The spirit cult of Khleang Moeung in Long Beach', pp. 213–25; Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, pp. 33–4.

neak ta more than likely would have had a place amongst Khmer communities abroad regardless of the events of 1975–79, given their role in protecting homes and ensuring general well-being. Yet, such shrines would have been a far cry from being large structures for mythico-historical figures.

However, it is also true that without the Khmer Rouge there would be no Khmer diaspora, or at least it would not have come about in the manner in which it did. If anything, legends such as those of Chum Teav Mao and Khleang Moeung demonstrate a need for a cultural touchstone with the past; something that has proven to be resilient, providing Cambodian Buddhists with a degree of continuity which the monasteries have not always been able to maintain. Legends and stories of spirits such as *neak ta* also provide a context through which Khmers make sense of events which have been largely outside of their control. As Cambodia's 'original religion', spirit cults provide one of the foundations for Khmer identity, distinct from Buddhist teachings while at the same time integral to the practice of Buddhism throughout the country.

The importance of spirit cults within Kompong Tralach village

Not all villagers take the supernatural seriously, however. In fact, some younger Khmers described themselves as atheists or not having any religion. Two young men who disavowed belief in Buddhism acknowledged that they would call upon their *neak ta* for help if they were in trouble. The first was Tola, 24, a Chinese-Khmer who actually used the term atheist to describe himself and was confident that young people his age held similar views. 'The temple is for old people,' he said on one occasion as he fixed to his motorbike a banana flower which he was going to drop off at the temple as an offering on behalf of his mother. He insisted that this was for her, though, and that if his mother had not asked him he would not bother visiting the *wat*.

Despite his professed atheism, Tola still deferred to the monastery for certain activities, specifically regarding funerary rites, for instance, cremation vs burial: 'The monk tells you what to do. Pali is very strong, very strange, very incredible, but the monks know.' The *pamsukūla* subritual within a Buddhist funeral which Tola referred to — the management of death — lies at the heart of what Davis calls the 'the core of monastic authority',[50] whereby monks exert their influence over spirits. Indeed, for Tola following traditional burial practices was critical, 'You put the head west. If you put the head this direction, that direction, that direction — the ghost comes back and kills you. It's the monks who know.'

As Davis demonstrates, however, one of the main functions of Buddhist funerals is the separation of powers inherent in the conception of self — the *vinnana* (Buddhist), which is reborn after death and linked to karmic morality and moral choices, and *pralin* (Brahmanist), fundamental spirits in all growing things associated with vitality.[51] The other young man, Wet, 22, gave a more pragmatic answer regarding *neak ta* and the restoration of *pralin*, 'If I'm sick I pray, "Oh please *neak ta*, help." But that's it. *Neak ta* is strong here.' When I asked whether he ever went to the

50 Davis, 'Weaving life out of death', p. 61.
51 Ibid., pp. 65–7.

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temple, he replied, 'No. Now we have *Chris-sasana* [Christianity].' 'But,' he added, 'Buddhism isn't a real Khmer religion — it came from India.'

Wet's father and mother converted to Christianity in the late 1990s after meeting Christian missionaries. Yet, although they described themselves as Christian, Wet's mother would still prostrate before Loak Poun (the monk noted above who was a childhood friend of Wet's) in the traditional manner when he and I visited. Despite their conversion, both belief in *neak ta* and Buddhism still played a part in their lives. Wet also attributed his father's escape from a Khmer Rouge collective in 1978 to a *neak ta*'s help. Moreover, even after their adoption of Christianity, Wet's father was dismayed when Wet and his younger brother chose not to become monks.

Others regarded those who prayed to *neak ta* instead of visiting the local *wat* with a certain lightheartedness. Vithu, a local farmer in his mid-forties with a penchant for humour smiled when asked about people's reliance on *neak ta*, 'I think they're too lazy to go to the *wat*!' Although made in jest, Vithu's comment is perceptive. Even though Wat Kompong Tralach usually could count on a good turnout for annual festivals, a *neak ta* ceremony can be conducted in one's home; being able to forgo a trip to the *wat* likely plays a part in the viability of the spirit cult and probably always has.

Although *neak ta* are still considered to be strong in the area, as with Bertrand's research there were no mediums (*rūp*) in the village as well as a general confusion over the names of the various *neak ta*.[52] Tola, Wet, and Wet's younger brother Watt went back and forth over the issue before finally admitting that they did not know. The assistant village chief who was in his mid-forties resolved their dilemma by providing the names and hierarchy for the presiding *neak ta* in the commune, including the *wat*: Neak Ta Dta Māk (in Wat Kompong Tralach); Neak Ta Kah Kaio (in Prey Thom Commune); and Neak Ta M'jeh Srok (the generic name for *neak ta* of a local area such as a plot of land, or a house).

While the younger men could not remember the names of the local spirits and instead had to resort to asking an older member of the community, they were all sure of one thing: *neak ta* were powerful in the village and wider commune and also had a distinct hierarchy, the local *wat's* tutelary spirit being the most powerful. When asked where they could be found, the assistant village chief paused, looking about for effect — 'Everywhere!' he exclaimed. Indeed, although, as pointed out earlier, knowledge of *neak ta* differed depending on age, sex, and occupation, everyone was quite sure that they were copious throughout the region.

Pattana Kitiarsa positioned the various beliefs within Thai Buddhism according to the legitimation of state power, class, and gender: the Buddha is always at the top, followed by male Indian and Chinese deities and royal spirits, female deities, with tutelary spirits occupying the lower level.[53] Alexandra de Mersan, likewise, cites a configuration among Burmese spirits associated with the former kingdom of Arakan similar to its administrative divisions which may have been a system employed by leaders to assert control over local populations.[54] From my fieldwork I would note that

52 Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice', p. 159.

53 Pattana Kitiarsa, 'Beyond syncretism: Hybridization of popular religion in contemporary Thailand', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, 3 (2005): 484.

54 Alexandra de Mersan, 'A new palace for Mra Swan Dewi: Changes in spirit cults in Arakan (Rakhine) state', *Asian Ethnology* 68, 2 (2009): 312.

as a rough rule similar hierarchies can be found in Cambodia; the Buddha is stationed at the top, followed by various Brahmanic deities, down to local configurations of *neak ta* with heroes and historical figures holding positions above village spirits (Marston cites a similar hierarchy in reference to the *neak ta* Khleang Moeung having authority over local *neak ta* in Kompong Cham Province[55]). However, the placement of *neak ta* in these hierarchies is by no means static and can be repositioned according to the individual, desired outcome, as well as geographical space.

It was agreed that Chum Teav Mao, for example, was beneath the Buddha, but the spirit's connection with the land and its presence in specific geographic locales (in Kep, the spirit occupied a tree in front of King Sihanouk's former residence overlooking the sea) meant that it commanded greater acknowledgement in the area surrounding its shrine than a spirit living farther away in places such as at Wat Kompong Tralach, which had its own hierarchy. Indeed, it would be highly unlikely for someone to conduct a ritual near Chum Teav Mao's shrine without acknowledging the spirit (a few informants were reluctant to even go with me to have a look at the spirit's tree of residence). But then again, this was something locals would probably never consider in the first place. The spirit's primacy in the area was not challenged by any other, and any change in status that occurred did so as one moved away from one spirit's sphere of influence to that of another. The only thing that remained unchanged was the Buddha's position at the top of the hierarchy.

Ian Harris cites survivors as stating that they maintained spirit shrines during the Democratic Kampuchea years, yet he goes on to describe how people's constant movement after 1975 severed links between villagers and their ancestors, resulting in a breakdown in the belief in spirits, including *neak ta*.[56] However, belief in spirits such as *neak ta* may not have broken down so much as they were set aside like so many other aspects of Cambodian life in the struggle for survival. Older villagers I interviewed noted that during the war *neak ta* remained despite the displacement of individuals, or like Chum Teav Mao, they simply waited for another day. These villagers also tended to know the names for distinct *neak ta*; men often could point to specific locations (such as under large trees or occupying specific features of the landscape) more so than women (particularly younger ones). This latter observation is likely attributable to the fact that females in the village spent more time at home while males could travel freely. It also reflects Davis's analysis of masculine and feminine spirits; the former often marking agricultural land and the latter private homes.[57]

Yet, *neak ta* are not simply seen as passive spirits but are believed to be active agents within villagers' lives. A dam immediately north of Wat Kompong Tralach originally built by forced labour under the Khmer Rouge and later rebuilt with World Bank funds collapsed several years ago, destroying homes, crops, livestock, and in general creating chaos throughout Kompong Tralach. Both villagers and monks attributed the breach to damage caused to the shrine of the dam's *neak ta*. A ceremony for the spirit attended by all the monks at Wat Kompong Tralach was

55 Marston, 'Wat Preah Thammalanka', p. 88.
56 Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 176.
57 Davis, 'Weaving life out of death', p. 135.

conducted afterwards (and paid for by the local government water authority) to appease the spirit and ensure that there would be no more catastrophes.

The *neak ta* shrine stood in the middle of the dam and measured 2 square metres. It was the largest shrine I had ever encountered and within it were various offerings, mostly loose cigarettes, but also a few small treats wrapped in banana leaves. On top of the structure were several small statues of the Buddha arranged around what looked at first like a larger one on its own small metal pedestal. 'It's not Buddha, but similar,' Loak Gern, 23, said as we stood looking over the shrine. He added that, lacking other objects to symbolise *neak ta*, other small figures were sometimes used by villagers.

As we stood there an elderly woman with two small children made her way towards us before prostrating in front of the shrine. She chatted with us for a bit, telling us about her life and the day the Khmer Rouge came to her village, forcing her and the rest of the inhabitants to move far away. She recalled that the shrine was built on the site of a famous *wat* that the Khmer Rouge had destroyed when they began construction on the dam. Loak Gern confirmed the story, adding that the local water authority was now in charge of the project and had itself constructed the shrine.

The size of the shrine was likely due to the fact that it held such a commanding role over the dam and, therefore, the well-being of those who lived in the area. Its location on the site of a former *wat* and the fact that many were said to have perished while constructing the dam during the Democratic Kampuchea years were also likely to be important factors. Although the current monks did not know much about the former *wat*, the old woman's tale and the central placement of a large 'Buddha' figure on the metal stand at the top of the shrine echoes images of *bray*. While normally known as the evil spirit of a woman who dies in childbirth, when a *bray* is bound to a building's column it is transformed from a malevolent presence into a guardian spirit.[58]

In earlier conversations Loak Poun had described the separation of *neak ta* from Buddhism. However, following our encounter with the elderly woman he gave a more qualified answer: 'Buddhism and *neak ta* — the same', he said, placing his two index fingers together. 'For example, *neak ta* in my *wat* helps people there. *Neak ta* in the dam lets people have water but it can also destroy houses.' Similar to Alain Forest's and Bertrand's findings,[59] here what has been termed the Buddhicisation of *neak ta* is likely at work. Bertrand describes this process as occurring due to a lack of people worthy of becoming mediums for the spirit, as to become a *neak ta* is to be reborn in a type of Buddhist mode.[60] Although *neak ta* were said to be strong in Kompong Tralach village and Prey Thom commune, the absence of mediums has meant that the spirit's perceived potency has been incorporated within popular Buddhist expression in and outside of the monastery.

58 Ang, 'The place of animism within popular Buddhism in Cambodia': 38; Davis, 'Weaving life out of death': 68.

59 Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice', p. 159, citing Alain Forest, *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge: Analyse et traduction d'un corpus de textes sur les 'Neak Ta'* (Paris: L'Harmattan), p. 212.

60 Ibid.

The breach in the dam and the power of the *neak ta* to cause such a disaster had a profound impact on local residents. This was reinforced by the death of a man from Kompong Cham in a tractor accident while repairing the dam. The scale of the event called for an equally large ritual response. Although unconfirmed, the presence of the figures, while dismissed as dissimilar from the actual Buddha, may represent an attempt by locals to pacify the resident *neak ta* through establishing a subordinate or guardian relationship with the Buddha similar to the relationship established with *bray* noted above (researchers have demonstrated similar relationships in Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and Myanmar).[61]

If this is indeed part of a broader Buddhicisation process, though, it raises questions regarding the capacity (accepted or expected) of *neak ta* to cause harm. That is, if the lack of worthy human interlocutors can be attributed to the spirits' rebirth in a Buddhist mode, does that mode preclude, facilitate, or stand neutral to harmful acts attributed to *neak ta*? That question cannot be answered in this study. However, from interviews and observations it would appear that it is not a singular 'mode' but 'modes' in which *neak ta* operates, some of which are more or less inclined towards the *dhamma* depending on the context. It should also be noted that no other *neak ta* shrine in the village nor the one at Wat Kompong Tralach had a similar arrangement of Buddha figures within or near them.

The importance of spirit cults within Wat Kompong Tralach

Some members of the monastery, as Loak Gern mentioned, were certain of the importance of Buddhism within Khmer society. When asked directly if the belief in *neak ta* was more important than Buddhism, his answer was sure: 'Buddhism is more important but they do different things.' He went on to explain that the domestic, everyday concerns that rural inhabitants contend with are generally the purview of *neak ta*: protecting one's home, alleviating illness, ensuring adequate rain — whereas that which sees to the betterment of one's future life or creates merit for an individual's ancestors are issues left for the Buddha.

Monks at Wat Kompong Tralach would often speak of their two roles — being party to an event and participation in it — as existing side by side. Loak Poun's insightful remark, 'Buddhism in the city, *neak ta* in the countryside', is indicative of these roles and the importance that villagers attach to spirit cults. Given that the official religion, Buddhism, was dismantled during the Democratic Kampuchea era, the traditional spirits of the countryside, which could withstand the pogroms, belayed people to forms of worship that they could count on.

The canonical segregation of rural religious practice does not prohibit the inclusion of those practices within the sacred space of the *wat*, however. Likewise, certain ceremonies outside of the temple performed in times of need, such as life-cycle ceremonies or calling on the assistance of local *neak ta* during droughts, involve monks chanting the *dhamma*. Unlike the *pamsukūla* ritual mentioned above, influence over spirits is not necessarily in the hands of monks who stated that their chants

61 See Ju, 'Chinese spirit mediums in Singapore': 3; Walker, 'Transformations of Buddhism': 67; George N. Appell, 'The ecological and social consequences of conversion to Christianity among the Rungus of Sabah, Malaysia', *Contributions to Southeast Asian Ethnography* 11 (1997): 71, 90; de la Perrière, 'An overview of the field of religion in Burmese Studies': 199–200.

were done out of respect and to contribute to the overall harmony of an event. They did admit, however, that with great study some monks could control spirits, *neak ta*, as well as become *kru parami*.

In many ways the monks' presence at such ceremonies represents a type of insurance or an extra layer of ritual performance done more to assuage villagers' concerns that they have done enough to ensure a successful outcome. Yet, the monks' attendance is also important to ensure that their particular *wat* will continue to receive support from the community. Foregoing a ceremony would likely hurt the relationship which both parties rely on to maintain social harmony within the village and wider commune. Although monks at Wat Kompong Tralach would describe their duties as distinct from those involving *neak ta*, they accepted the fact that the inclusion of *neak ta* was an integral part of worship at the temple and their attendance and performance at services outside of the *wat* was normal and even expected.

Loak Bati described the relationship between Buddhism and *neak ta* in this way: 'There is Buddhism and *neak ta*. *Neak ta* looks after family and you must pray to it if you're sick. You pray to Buddha for merit but *neak ta* lives here [the *wat*] too.' This was reflected in the different relative quantities and items involved in gift-giving for *neak ta* and Buddhist merit-making activities. After some discussion the monks of Wat Kompong Tralach agreed that each month, people would undertake to do the following: one offering, once a month to *neak ta*; and one offering to *neak ta* and the Buddha every *T'ngai Seul* and any other Buddhist ceremony. There was an extra offering made to *neak ta* each month, though one could hardly conclude that the temple's *neak ta* is more important simply because of the extra offering. Even so, the quantity of offerings made to the *neak ta* for the maintenance of harmony is substantial.

There was a general consensus on gift-giving for the Buddha and gift-giving for *neak ta* within the *wat*. Any significant event (such as the building of a new home or undertaking of a journey) requires a ceremony for *neak ta*. During Buddhist ceremonies gifts for neak ta were always given before those to the Buddha, and when giving gifts to the *wat's neak ta* one was to also include gifts to the *neak ta* of one's home (although on this point there was disagreement). The following gifts were said to be among the favourite of the local *neak ta*: boiled chicken, fried rice, fruit, wine, cigarettes, and small cakes.

When I later spoke with Loak Poun about this 'menu', he agreed with my observations, adding, 'but this came from Brahmanism [*promenh sasana*]'. The importance of the *boran* style to Wat Kompong Tralach in many ways was cathartic for the older *sangha* members. They were not only very proud of the temple but of its reputation as a traditional *wat* which drew support from Khmers living overseas. There was a sense that its reputation and adherence to the old style of practice provided it with greater legitimacy compared to other temples which drew their patronage from more elite circles. It is the rebuilding of *wats* such as Wat Kompong Tralach which may have been the real catalyst for the greater degree of inclusion of disparate beliefs within Buddhist practice in Cambodia today than in prewar years. As noted above, Forest and Bertrand described the Buddhicisation of *neak ta* as occurring due to the lack of mediums for spirits reborn in a kind of Buddhist mode.[62] While my research supports

62 Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice', p. 159.

Ill 2. A *Bachai Buon* ceremony honouring a local family's elders in Prey Thom commune. The *achar* (seated right) with a microphone is calling the local *neak ta* as monks (far right) from Wat Kompong Tralach look on

their findings regarding fewer mediums, what also needs to be considered is what the impact of rebuilding *wats* played in that process.

Cambodians began rebuilding temples almost immediately following the Vietnamese invasion. Yet, a temple is merely a building, and without a competent *sangha* versed in Buddhist rituals, religious practice will likely reflect beliefs which lay people know best or at least those relevant to their needs. In prewar times there were roughly 60,000 monks; a number which dropped to almost zero between 1975–79. By 1981, 500 monks and 1,500 novices were ordained, and a year later an official report put the number of monks at 2,311 — 800 of whom had been monks before 1975.[63] In 1981, though, only men over the age of 50 of good moral character with no connection to the Khmer Rouge were allowed to become monks as young men were needed to fight the ongoing insurgency. By 1991, there were about 20,000 monks and according the Ministry of Cults and Religion more than 50,000 by the turn of the century.[64] Yet, given the level of destruction and loss of competent monks, traditional knowledge, and literature, monastic training remained weak compared to the prewar years, something both monks and villagers in this study readily admitted.

63 Charles Keyes, 'Communist revolution and the Buddhist past in Cambodia', in *Asian visions of authority: Religion and the modern states of East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Charles Keyes, Laurel Kendall, and Helen Hardacre (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), p. 61.
64 Ledgerwood, 'Buddhist practice in rural Kandal Province', p. 149.

Throughout the 1980s and '90s as more and younger monks were ordained, they likely stepped into a temple context in which spirits such as *neak ta* had become or were in the process of becoming institutionalised within popular local Buddhist expression. Indeed, the poor quality of monastic training coupled with the delayed ordination of young men due to the ongoing war and needs of reconstruction may have added to this process. Thus, the Buddhicisation of spirits such as *neak ta* may be due both to a lack of mediums for the spirit beyond the confines of the *wat* as well as an overall lack of competent monastic cadres within the newly constructed or restored temples.

Looking over the new murals being painted on the walls of the *salaa* depicting various scenes from the life of the Buddha, Wat Kompong Tralach's monks described the various beliefs practised within the temple as part of Buddhism but having different historical antecedents: Brahmanism came before Buddhism while belief in *neak ta* was indigenous to Cambodia. Clearly and without any confusion in their minds, both were seen as aspects of Cambodian Buddhism even though each had their own respective specialists and ceremonies. The table below shows the different aspects of beliefs practised within Wat Kompong Tralach:

Two things are noticeable in the table. First, the gifts to *neak ta* appear more mundane compared to those for the Buddha. Second, that more *neak ta* than Buddhist rituals are performed in an average month.

One may question the need for rituals for *neak ta* within the confines of a temple. After all, the emphasis on the Buddha and merit-making activities would seem to trump concerns for a tutelary spirit. Yet, the temple's *neak ta* was said to be particularly active, even dangerous, for anyone who entered the temple grounds at night or failed to acknowledge its presence. Older members of the *sangha* told

Table 1: Rituals performed at Wat Kompong Tralach

	Offerings[a]	Prayers	When rituals are performed	No. of times rituals are performed per month
Buddhist	A. Money B. Gold C. Silver D. Steamed rice E. Vegetables F. Fruit	*Dhamma*	Every eighth and fifteenth day (*T'ngai Seul*); annual festivals	Varies but at least every eighth and fifteenth day (*T'ngai Seul*)
Neak Ta	A. Boiled chicken B. Fried rice C. Fruit D. Wine E. Cigarettes F. Small cakes	Personalised prayer	When needed and before every Buddhist ceremony	Varies but at least once a month and every eighth and fifteenth day (*T'ngai Seul*)

Note: [a]These examples were given by monks and villagers, although both admitted offerings could differ from *wat* to *wat*. Likewise, food offerings for *neak ta* would also likely differ depending on village tradition.

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me of an incident during a *Kathen* celebration at the temple several years before when a man died on the grounds after angering the temple's *neak ta*. During the *Kathen* ceremony lay people make merit by offering new robes to monks. The man had apparently hooked up some loudspeakers for the event to a large tree near the *vihear*. Unfortunately, this tree was the home of the *neak ta*, but the man had not performed a ritual to ask permission to attach the speakers to the tree. While finishing up, a loudspeaker fell on him and he later died from his injuries.

I found it curious that the spirit brought about a death on the *wat's* grounds — in front of the *vihear*, no less. However, those present dismissed this by saying that the fact that it happened in the temple did not influence the outcome. In fact, the *neak ta* was said to have caused the accident specifically because no request was made or ritual performed. Many of the younger monks deferred to their elders' interpretation. Loak Gern and Poun were both in agreement that the older members of the *sangha* were more knowledgable about *neak ta*: 'I don't know,' Loak Gern said hesitantly, 'They know more about that.'

Whether their position as younger monks dissuaded them from analysing the issue further or whether they accepted the *sangha* members' interpretation, both did not dispute that the *neak ta* was perceived as powerful enough to cause the accident. Both monks were from Prey Thom commune, yet, they differed from other young men their age given their desire to eventually move to the capital for further study, either at the Buddhist University or a public/private institution. Both were well-versed in the *dhamma*, had travelled within the country, and had ambitions which stretched beyond Wat Kompong Tralach and Kep Province. However, although both were considered to be very devout by local villagers, they were realistic about their role in the community and recognised that their analyses of events attributed to *neak ta* were not necessarily shared by other members of the *sangha*. In many ways Loak Poun's remark, 'Buddhism in the city, *neak ta* in the countryside,' was as much a dose of pragmatism as it was a lament.

The contemporary relationship between the *sangha* and *neak ta* is perhaps better illustrated by a meal I attended at Wat Kompong Tralach. Within Prey Thom Commune there was a classical music group made up of five local ex-soldiers, several of whom still wore their old army trousers or field-jackets, who played at festivals and other events. Normally they would not perform at a *wat,* but on one occasion during *T'ngai Seul* the *sangha* decided to pool their money together for a concert. The group set up their traditional instruments in the *salaa* — two large drums (*sampho*), three standing string instruments (*tro*), and one smaller drum (*skor dai*). The *salaa* was filled with the regular *sangha* members arranging the offerings that would accompany the music. The program lasted close to 20 minutes and was played prior to the monks' usual noontime prayers.

I had attended noontime meals at the temple several times, but what was different on this occasion was that the *sangha* asked the group to play to appease the *neak ta* of the *wat*, Neak Ta Dta-Māk. Before the group began playing they called out to the *neak ta*, asking it to come and accept the offerings. As I sat next to the other monks in the *salaa* listening to the performance, I asked Loak Poun whether the group's presence in

the *wat* and playing music for the *neak ta* somehow ran counter to Buddhism. 'No,' he replied, 'they play for *neak ta*, *bray*, *devedas*, and Buddha.'

He later noted that as the ceremony took place in the *wat* the Buddha would necessarily be included out of respect. Outside the *wat* or even at the northeastern part of the perimeter where the *neak ta* shrine was located, the Buddha would not be included. As one of the protectors of the *wat*, the *neak ta* may be the recipient of offerings and music, however, within the temple it was recognised that its place was lower than the Buddha's. The offerings that were given, though, were much more elaborate than those for the Buddha or monks. A meal consisting of a stuffed, roasted pig, rice, vegetables, and rice wine was brought into the *salaa* and displayed before the music commenced.

It is safe to say that normally one would never bring alcohol into the *wat*, nor offer it to the Buddha. Since the ceremony was paid for by the local core *sangha* members (all of whom were over 50) and approved by the abbot (who was 74), it was not a case of younger monks bringing in forbidden material without realising it ran counter to tradition. When I enquired about the alcohol Loak Poun replied that although it was not to be given as a gift for the Buddha, 'But *neak ta* … it's okay.'

The stuffed pig took centre-stage on a cloth blanket with the other dishes in fine silver bowls displayed around it, clearly showing that more time had gone into the preparation of this meal than for a normal noontime one. This may be attributed to the infrequency of such ceremonies as well as the fact that foods such as pork and alcohol cannot be consumed by monks. The dichotomy of the elaborate meal for the *neak ta* compared to normal meals also demonstrates the space allotted to the various traditions within the temple. Based on observations on the use of space and *neak ta* rituals in relation to the buildings in the *wat* (such as the *salaa* and *vihear*), there would appear to be room for grey areas that expand and contract according to the ritual, practitioners, and desired outcome of a given ceremony.

Given its rarity, *T'ngai Seul* or another festival would likely provide the best possible venue for such a ceremony. And while the younger monks did not take part in the ceremony, they were present for it. Was their attendance a form of participation? If not, did their presence act as a means of adding potency to the ceremony, and if so, is that not itself a mode of participation? The junior monks did not read too much into it as they were all in their early twenties and more concerned with their studies. When questioned, they responded that since the ceremony was held before the recitation of the *dhamma* they were naturally seated in their customary places. However, when I pressed Loak Poun on whether the monks' presence would benefit the ceremony and, therefore, the overall harmony sought, he and the other members of the *sangha* conceded, 'It's good for everyone to be here.'

Conclusion

Legends surrounding *neak ta* still play an important role in Khmer life, offering lessons regarding correct behaviour, explanations for historical events, as well as providing a framework through which people make sense of events which have largely been out of their control. They also provide for continuity and a cultural touchstone for the 'original' beliefs of Khmer society which have proven resilient during periods

when other institutions such as the monastery and the *sangha* have failed or been destroyed.

At the village level, the cult of *neak ta* is regarded as highly important — for some, more so than Buddhism in their day to day lives. Tutelary spirits continue to be defined by their relationship with agriculture and connection with auspicious landmarks, while there is widespread acceptance of their ability to cause harm if disrespected or not properly acknowledged. However, the sacredness surrounding the monastery and the ability of monks to discern the actions of spirits were also respected even by those who had converted to another religion or disregarded Buddhism altogether.

This comingling of Buddhist rituals and spirit cults also occurred in Kompong Tralach and its *wat*. However, this was largely driven by the importance of a particular *neak ta* and the context in which it existed. *Neak ta* occupying important, large structures were seen as more powerful than those in individual homes. Further, the more important the *neak ta*/context, the more Buddhist artefacts and ceremonies were present. Whether this was to establish a subordinate or guardian relationship to Buddhism is unclear, but statements by monks, villagers, and the work of other researchers demonstrate that this comingling varies according to ritual, aptitude of monks, and local tradition.

Within the temple the presence of the *neak ta* was accepted as were acts, either for good or ill, which the spirit was said to bring about. Further, Wat Kompong Tralach's *neak ta* was offered more gifts in a given month than the Buddha. Although, monks described Buddhism as being more important in cities while spirit cults held greater sway in the countryside, they also described Buddhism as being more important than spirit cults for Cambodian society as a whole. *Sangha* members, specifically older members who spent most of their time at the *wat*, described Buddhism and Buddhist ceremonies as important for the country's stability. Yet, many also admitted that *neak ta* were important, particularly after the war, given the lack of individuals well-versed in conducting Buddhist ceremonies.

There is also the interconnected issue of the Buddhicisation of *neak ta*. Bertrand has argued that the lack of individuals of proper character capable of acting as mediums due to *neak ta*'s rebirth in a type of Buddhist mode has led to the greater inclusion of the spirit within the monastery than in prewar times.[65] However, what also needs to be considered is the impact that the postwar temple construction in relation to monastic training and the slow ordination of monks has had on this process. As Khmers began to rebuild temples almost immediately following the Vietnamese invasion, there was still a deficit of monks and lay individuals capable of performing Buddhist rituals. The rebuilding process, coupled with the slow course of training competent monks, may have contributed to the Buddhicisation of *neak ta* as lay people conducted rituals relevant to their needs or which they themselves were capable of performing. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, it is likely that newly ordained monks stepped into a temple context in which the inclusion of *neak ta* had already or was quickly becoming institutionalised within Buddhist expression.

65 Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice', p. 159.

How different is this from the pre-Democratic Kampuchea period? That is difficult to answer. We know that the inclusion of *neak ta* within Buddhist rituals occurred well before 1975, and as Edwards observed, the fusion of local spirits and Hindu deities layered with Brahmanic beliefs and Buddhist teachings created a holistic cosmological worldview within the lives of Cambodians.[66] We also know that the *boran* style of Buddhist expression with its inclusion of spirits and Brahmanic elements was commonplace, so much so that the reformist movement in the 1910s began as a reaction to these traditional practices. In a meeting with King Sisowath, Samdech Chuon Nath, one of the reform movement's leaders, noted that matters concerning the *vinaya* had all but disappeared due to the loss of literature and knowledgeable scholars as the result of frequent wars.[67] K. Chea's observations about the condition of Cambodian Buddhism in the 1930s reveals a similar status quo regarding spirits, magic, and Brahmanic beliefs. Yet, the events of the past three decades and more have brought considerable changes to Buddhist expression and the role of Khmer cosmology in the lives of ordinary Cambodians.

Current research on Cambodian Buddhism has largely focused on its post-1979 reconstruction and this has included an examination of spirit cults and specialists. That said, previous research on Cambodian Buddhism pre-1975 is limited, and the religion's expression in the country then certainly did not receive the same attention by anthropologists and other social scientists it does today. We can say with a fair degree of certainty that today many Khmers rely more on *neak ta* than Buddhism, even at local temples, which is attributable in part to experiences under the Khmer Rouge along with the destruction and at times haphazard reconstruction of monasteries. By that measure, *neak ta* and other spirits are more important for many Khmers.

Since the twelfth-century introduction of Theravada Buddhism to the country, different beliefs have taken precedence at various historical periods while in the modern era, certain aspects of Khmer cosmology have shifted, occupying greater space in relation to others. From the protectorate, to the monastic reforms of the 1910s, to the Khmer Rouge and the 1979 Vietnamese invasion, the pantheon of spirits and beliefs and their role in the lives of Cambodians have ebbed and flowed in importance, reflecting internal strife, population displacements, and invasions.

A telling illustration of the importance that *neak ta* have maintained within Cambodia despite the country's social upheavals can be seen in an example given by a group of former soldiers. After describing their training — 'We were given guns and put in the forest' — they related how both government and Khmer Rouge soldiers relied on *neak ta* during the conflict; the Khmer Rouge to a greater degree. They also noted large shrines constructed near Mt Bokor and other mountains in neighbouring Kampot Province that both sides would regularly patronise for protection from the other.

Unlike Buddhism and its temples, the belief in spirits such as *neak ta* was never destroyed. Indeed, *neak ta* remained important for those engaged in the very dismantling of the monastery. Tutelary spirits could change with the cultural currents, adapt

66 Edwards, *Cambodge*, p. 98.
67 Ibid., p. 116.

to loss, and even provide an explanation for that loss. From the accounts of monks and villagers in this study, the permanence of *neak ta* and their connection to the land appear to be integral for a people for whom dislocation has been all too common. In the end, the importance of spirits such as *neak ta* may lie in their role in maintaining cultural continuity in times of need. When the two seemingly permanent aspects of Cambodian society — the monarchy and the monastery — vanished, the country's other *neak ta* remained, like Chum Teav Mao, waiting for another day.