Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 45(1), pp 4–24 February 2014.
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Sacred bribes and violence deferred: Buddhist ritual in rural Cambodia

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In a rapidly modernising Cambodia, dance parties that accompany large temple celebrations and weddings have become violent arenas where young men fight with fists and knives beyond police control. In 2010, this led to a ban on dance parties during the Pchuṃ Biṇḍ celebration. This paper concerns an ad hoc bribe to lift the ban that was collected in the manner of a meritorious temple offering. I suggest that the flexible parameters of Buddhist merit-making in this ritualised context both reconfigured the bribe and palpably brought expectations of moral conduct into the energetically charged dancing arena — but only momentarily.

> 'We are afraid to have the dances because the kids come to fight. They're not afraid. They come with axes and knives — people get hurt.' (Male villager, 48)

In a rapidly modernising Cambodia, Buddhist celebrations are sites where the troubles and triumphs of the momentary world strike against both tradition and the contingent future. At the traditional dance parties that accompany large temple celebrations these metaphorical strikes can turn to actual blows as young men fight with fists and knives for reasons that remain opaque. In 2010 local authorities' inability to contain youth violence at such dances led the provincial government of Kampong Chhnang to ban dance parties at *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* temple celebrations.[1] Yet, on the last day of the 15-day Buddhist celebration at the Temple of Grandfather Flowing Water in Sambok Dung, a village in western Cambodia,[2] a Buddhist monk

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[1] The celebration will be described below; here I note the use of the ALA-LC transliteration system. Despite its sometimes awkward phonetic rendering of Khmer terms, I feel that the exact representation of each letter facilitates further research. A parenthetical approximation of the sound accompanies words whose spelling in English diverges greatly from the Khmer pronunciation.

[2] The name of the village is fictitious. This is a new village, initiated through a government-sponsored social land concession in 2000, which brought people from around the country to turn the existing scrubby secondary forest into rice fields. Ethnographic research was conducted here in 2010–12.

arranged to bribe local officials for permission to allow the dancing. The bribe was collected by two *`ācāry*[3] (pronounced 'adja') as if it were a religious offering, with the attendant objects and words of that small ritual act. This ritualisation arose spontaneously in the face of an exuberant crowd gathered for revelry; it met the communally expressed desire for a party, addressed the ban on dancing, and momentarily contained the violence of a rapidly changing social order.

Once they raised enough money the music began and people young and old danced outside, slept and gossiped inside, and filled the temple complex until the small hours of the morning. Senda, aged 73, relaxing inside the temple told me, 'It is just like the celebration should be; like it used to be, with all of us dancing together and happy.'

This paper is concerned with a moment in which the continued salience and effectiveness of Buddhist traditions was activated in the face of increasing government impotence and the growing incidence of violence among Cambodia's disenfranchised young men. Thirty years of war entailed the dismantling of religious structures under Pol Pot, their strict containment under the Vietnamese, and their social revival amid political cooptation through the 1990s. Nonetheless, the Buddhist moral framework continues to adhere to the definition of a just ruler. Such was the case before and after the French,[4] before, after and, in a distorted fashion, during the Khmer Rouge,[5] and these same sentiments continue today, despite the efforts of colonialists, communists and modernists to marginalise the political authority of Buddhism in Cambodia.[6] In her essay, 'Gaps in the world', Anne Hansen attends to the ways in which Buddhist ideas negotiate a disorderly world wherein the problem of 'extreme social violence (and its eventual cessation) is connected to the trajectory of the Dhamma in time and relative to the past and future history of human moral behavior.'[7] Bureaucratic institutions built on Western models cannot respond to issues of morality. Invocations of human rights notwithstanding, the institution of a democratic system of governance and the advancing global marketplace have produced neither peace nor prosperity for most Cambodians; violence continues to be a part of daily life.

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[3] The *`ācāry* is a ritual specialist in the service of the temple. *`Ācāry* are typically older men from the village who served as monks in their younger years. They are often well-versed in Buddhist ritual and organise temple celebrations and donations.

[4] David Chandler, 'Cambodia before the French: Politics in a tributary kingdom' (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, New Haven, 1974); Yang Sam, 'Buddhism in Cambodia 1975–1954' (M.A. thesis, Cornell University, Ithaca, 1990).

[5] The Khmer Rouge did dismantle Buddhism during their reign in Cambodia. Before their takeover, however, Khmer Rouge cadres were encouraged to observe Buddhist precepts and to behave with constraint and humility toward villagers. Once in power, the Khmer Rouge inverted Buddhist vocabulary and conceptions of morality to serve their ideological purpose. See Charles F. 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 F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall and Helen Hardacre (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994); Ian Charles Harris, *Buddhism under Pol Pot* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Centre of Cambodia, 2007); Alexander Hinton, 'Songs at the edge of Democratic Kampuchea', in *At the edge of the forest: Essays on Cambodia, history, and narrative in honor of David Chandler*, ed. Anne Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2008).

[6] Alexandra Kent, 'Peace, power and pagodas in present-day Cambodia', *Contemporary Buddhism* 9, 1 (2008) : 77–97.

[7] Anne Ruth Hansen, 'Gaps in the world: Harm and violence in Khmer Buddhist narrative', in *At the edge of the forest*, p. 57.

After the violent disruptions of the Pol Pot years, the temple was the first centralised node of authority to emerge in the rural areas, and despite the powerful narratives of state, market, and monastic decadence, the continuing revival of Buddhist tradition and authority still defines normal social life among the villagers in Sambok Dung.[8] The events described in this paper may also signal a bourgeoning boldness among provincial monks noted also by Alexandra Kent in Battambang Province.[9] My focus here however is not with the monk in this story, but rather with the charged moment in which he acted, and with the deployment of ritualised acts that invoked Buddhist morality and smoothed disruptions to the traditional celebration, allowing it to proceed 'like it used to be'. The above sentiment of normalcy is haunting, however, and while Buddhist authority remains salient at the local level, the event I describe entangles this moral authority with youth violence and government corruption.

To explicate this event, I will first briefly describe the *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* celebration in abstract terms and discuss local practices of merit, constructions of authority, and the social climate of youth violence. Then I will present a detailed description of the ritual event in which the bribe became a meritorious offering expected of all those present at the temple festival. The ethnographic moment will be followed by a theoretical discussion of ritual, complicating suggestions that ritual reinforces and perpetuates collective beliefs and solidarity[10] or legitimises power relations and produces social order.[11] Ritual often does these things, but the spontaneous and emotionally charged event I describe accentuates the transformative potential of a ritual deployed at a particular historical moment.[12] A strategically executed ritualised act met community needs in ways that were unavailable to the police, but also implicated monks and celebrants in the fractured security of the modern era. In contemporary Cambodia, as in many other pockets of poverty and disruption across the globe,[13] the promises of democracy and justice clash against the realities of corruption and the violence of inequality. In this climate, it is increasingly important to pay attention to the local processes by which social worlds and local power emerge amid disparate conceptions of order and truth. What follows is an examination of one such process.

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[8] The notion of a return to normalcy by way of Buddhism is also important among the rising middle class and scholars. For a well-done volume on the subject, see Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler, ed. *People of virtue: Reconfiguring religion, power and morality in Cambodia today* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), especially the following articles by Cambodian scholars: Monychenda Heng, 'In search of the dhammika ruler'; Ven Sovanratana, 'Buddhist education today: Progress and challenges'; and Sreang Heng, 'The scope and limitations of political participation by Buddhist monks'.

[9] Alexandra Kent, 'A Buddhist bouncer: Monastic adaptation to the ethos of desire in today's Cambodia', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24, 3 (2009): 291–303. The monk in Kent's story, the 'Buddhist bouncer', physically tackles violent youths at his temple's celebrations, putting an end to violence during the dances.

[10] Émile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1912]).

[11] Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The theatre state in nineteenth-century Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, politics, and power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

[12] Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual theory, ritual practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[13] Christopher J. Colvin, 'Shifting geographies of suffering and recovery: Traumatic storytelling after apartheid', in *Borders and healers: Brokering therapeutic resources in Southeast Africa*, ed. Tracy J. Luedke and Harry G. West (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Veena Das, 'The signature of the state: The paradox of illegibility', in *Anthropology in the margins of the state*, ed. Veena Das and Deborah Poole (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004).

Pchuṃ Biṇḍ

The *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* is a two-week celebration held toward the end of the rainy season in Cambodia during which families make offerings to their ancestors.[14] Each night of *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ,* which fills the period between the new and the full moon in the month of *Bhadraput*,[15] people gather at their local temple to make merit in the economy of care that informs relationships with spirits and ancestors[16] and in the economy of temple offerings that generate merit directly attributable to an auspicious rebirth. This ceremony is one of three major holidays in the Khmer calendar during which people travel great distances to return to their homelands.[17] Travel for *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* is distinctive because during this celebration, the *pret* (lost souls), are released by the King of the Underworld to seek nourishment and merit from their living descendants. People attempt to visit seven temples in the vicinity of their village to ensure that their ancestors find the offerings. As Sambok Dung is a new village, there are no familial ancestors at this place and discourse surrounding the celebration was focused more on gathering the living than the dead. Grandfather Teun described what the celebration meant for him in Sambok Dung:

> This is when all the children come home … our ancestors [*ṭūntā*]] are not really here, not yet. But my children and grandchildren will come here because this is where I am. I'm not an ancestor, not yet! but they will come here, the children and grandchildren. We will make merit together; we will dance and have fun together …. Our ancestors may find us. Khmer ancestors travel now too, they know we have all moved. They even go to America! … When I make an offering at our temple here, all ancestors will receive merit: the lost *pret* and my pious grandmother, too.

The residents of Sambok Dung do honour their ancestors in small shrines in their homes; but there are no *cetiy*[18] here and no bones stored at the temple. And there was little discussion about the ancestors or about missing or lost souls. In the same year, during the same celebration in Kandal Province, Judy Ledgerwood recounted local worries over lost souls and the unritualised dead from the village after the long years of war.[19] Neither my story nor Ledgerwood's can be taken as standard descriptions of rural life in Cambodia, but together they show the situated nature of beliefs and concerns, a notion which could serve as a model of sorts. In Sambok Dung the ancestors are important, but their appearance at this new and remote temple occurs in the *as if* realm between dependent physicality and established truths. The *Abhidhammapiṭaka*[20] suggests that all material arisings depend on preceding conditions: on *kamma*, which passes through all states of existence; on the spatially and historically situated mind and sensory organs; and on environmental conditions. The sense organ of the eye develops in accordance with the organism's need and potential for sight and the sense organ and material objects 'mutually strike each other', giving rise to consciousness.[21] Thus, the important focus of this celebration in Sambok Dung was not the ancestors, but that children and grandchildren would come home to *dhwoer puṇy ning rāṃ sappāy* ('make merit and dance happily together', pronounced 'twer bun nung roam sabbie').

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[14] See Erik W. Davis, 'Imagined parasites: Flows of monies and spirits', in *Cambodia's economic transformation*, ed. Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2011), John Clifford Holt, 'Caring for the dead ritually in Cambodia', *Southeast Asian Studies* 1, 1 (2011), and Judy Ledgerwood, 'Buddhist ritual and the reordering of social relations in Cambodia', *South East Asia Research* 20, 2 (2012): 191–206, for descriptions of the spirits and transactions that inhabit the imaginary of the *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* in contemporary Cambodia. For pre-Khmer Rouge accounts, see Eveline Porée-Maspero, *Étude sur les rites agraires des cambodgiens* (Paris: Mouton, 1962), pp. 315–59; Etienne Aymonier, *Notes sur les coutumes et croyances superstitieuses des cambodgiens* (Paris: Cedoreck, 1984[1900]), pp. 83–8; Adhémard Leclére, *Cambodge: Fêtes civiles et religieuses* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1916).

[15] This is in late September or early October by Gregorian reckoning.

[16] See Jean M. Langford, 'Gifts intercepted: Biopolitics and spirit debt', *Cultural Anthropology* 24, 4 (2009): 681–711; Alan Klima, *The funeral casino: Meditation, massacre, and exchange with the dead in Thailand* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); and Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of war in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), for provocative discussions of the relationships with the dead in mainland Southeast Asia.

[17] The other two are the Khmer New Year and the *Kathin* (robe offering) ceremony.

[18] This is a mausoleum-like structure for storing the bones of ancestors. The temple association is currently raising money to build a community *cetiy*, but the more popular building project is the *vihār*, which is the consecrated building for prayer and ordination in the temple complex. Participating in

The scheme of this particular celebration differs from others in that it is fifteen days long; each day, however, is much like the others. Parts of this structure are important to my story, so I will briefly outline them here. The typical ritual cycle for Khmer Buddhist ceremonies begins with monks chanting dhamma blessings at sundown often followed by a sermon; blessings and food for the monks at sunrise; and blessings and a midday meal offered to the monks after which the assembled feast together and the ceremony ends. The larger celebrations often have dancing and games at night, after the sermon. The first fourteen days of the *Pchuṃ Binḍ* celebration are divided among villagers and different groups or individuals take charge of each event, referred to as *weyn* (literally, a portion). One *weyn* begins with the sundown prayer and ends after the noon meal; the next begins at sundown, and so the cycle goes until the final feast on the full moon, at which rice and *naṃ* (sticky rice sweets) are offered to the monks and the ancestors by a large contingent of celebrants.

Each phase of the event involves many offerings: some support temple-building projects; some support the *`ācāry*, elders, and monks; others entice a monk to give a

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the building of a *vihār* makes more merit than any other act of generosity. Only ordination exceeds it in merit accumulation.

[19] Ledgerwood, 'Buddhist ritual and the reordering of social relations in Cambodia', pp. 191–205.

[20] This is the third of the three *piṭakas* (literally, baskets) in the Palī canon, the focus of which is to provide a theoretical framework that explains the causal underpinnings of the path to enlightenment. The degree to which the *Abhidhamma* retains importance as a philosophical and phenomenological text in Cambodia, as was noted in the 1970s, remains under-researched. See François Bizot, *Le figuier à cinq branches: Recherche sur le bouddhisme khmer* (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient [EFEO], 1976) and *Le don de soi-même: Recherches sur le bouddhisme khmer* (Paris: EFEO, 1981), for the pre-Khmer Rouge data. In contemporary Cambodia, local exegeses of this event, the power inherent in magically infused fetus amulets carried by witches and government ministers, and a booklet called 'The kingdom of the body' (*nagar kāy*), handed out at the robe-offering ceremony of a temple neighbouring Sambok Dung all resonate with the theoretical underpinnings of the *Abhidhamma* and lead me to suggest its continued salience in local understandings of the world.

[21] Maha Thera Narada, *A manual of Abhidhamma (Abhidhammattha sangaha)* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society 1975 [1956]), www.buddhanet.net, pp. 311, 338.

sermon. When someone enters the religious celebration, the first thing they do is *jūl puṇy* (to contribute [money] to a (religious) celebration, pronounced 'jol bun'). They make their offerings in a very specific manner, which is also replicated outside the temple when the recipient of a gift wants to convey its meritorious nature. It goes like this: the money or gift is placed on the offering tray or handed with both hands to the recipient; the giver bows his or her head, with palms pressed together, fingertips touching the nose or forehead, awaiting the blessing of the recipient. Typically this is the *`ācāry*, but all givers and recipients of meritorious gifts perform this ritual. I once gave a grandmother a photograph of her and her grandson, she took it gratefully and began chanting a blessing, during which I was surreptitiously instructed to bow my head with prayer hands. In another instance a wealthy woman gave sweets to one of her neighbours and immediately bowed her head in anticipation of the blessing that was already leaving the lips of the recipient. If you give food to a begging monk, you adopt the stance while he chants the blessing;[22] even the village drunk attempted to offer blessings whenever he received money, although no one bowed their heads to receive them.

All Buddhist celebrations are opportunities to make merit; my discussions with people in Sambok Dung confirm other findings[23] that making merit is *the* important part of Buddhist rites. In contemporary practice, the temple is primarily a place for making merit. This is a forward-looking activity and meritorious acts contribute directly to an auspicious rebirth — for the individual, her parents, or her ancestors — and monks are the most worthy recipients of meritorious gifts. The current lack of infrastructure for monastic education and the dearth of older learned monks are among the many on-the-ground effects of Cambodia's war-torn history; in contemporary society, the young and undereducated Buddhist monk is less respected as a moral authority and is important primarily as a field of merit.[24] This is not to say that monks from earlier eras were unequivocally moral or that the monk's social capacity as a field of merit was less important in the romanticised past of public memory. The salient point for my argument is that the prewar temples often had numerous monks, some old and wise, some old and foolish, some powerful healers, some politically astute, and many young novices who ordained to make merit and gain social capital and education before starting their families. In contrast, the rich hierarchy of the monastic order in any Buddhist temple is thinner today and the capacity of young monks, who are often head monks in rural temples like Sambok Dung, to command moral authority is diminished. A monk's capacity as a field of merit, however, is more formulaic and comes from his regular chanting of the dhamma and his adherence to the *pāṭimokkh,* the 227 moral precepts observed by the mature monk. When I asked the villagers of Sambok Dung what it meant for them to have a temple — the grass hut was transformed in 2004 — some suggested that the village was now complete, some told me the forest spirits were finally quiet, others noted the inherent goodness in having a place for wealthy outsiders to come and make merit in the village, and every person offered some version of this sentiment: 'we now have monks and a place to make merit.'

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[22] See Katherine A. Bowie, 'The alchemy of charity: Of class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand', *American Anthropologist* 100, 2 (1998): 469–81, for a discussion of the merit associated with giving, especially the parity of the relationship between offerings to beggars and to monks.

[23] See Judy L. Ledgerwood, 'A tale of two temples: Communities and their wats', in *Anthropology and community in Cambodia: Reflections on the work of May Ebihara*, ed. John A. Marston (Caulfield: Monash University Press, 2011), for a recent discussion of the undiminished importance of merit-making in Cambodia, also May Mayko Ebihara, 'Svay, a Khmer village in Cambodia' (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1968); and Charles F. Keyes, 'Merit-transference in the kammic theory of popular Theravāda Buddhism', in *Karma: An anthropological inquiry*, ed. Charles F. Keyes and E. Valentine Daniel, pp. 261–86 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), for historical precedent.

[24] Susan M. Speigel, 'The role of the monk in Cambodian Buddhism: Crisis, change and continuity' (M.A. thesis, Northern Illinois University, 2009).

Merit and power

Temples, monks, Buddhist celebrations, and merit-making are embedded in political authority and are parts of the 'representational economy' of the Khmer Buddhist village. I use Webb Keane's term, representational economy, to encompass the practices, objects, and ideas that infuse acts and things with meaning at particular historical moments.[25] The intertwined relationship between statecraft and Buddhism has deep roots in Cambodian society: rulers rule because of their accumulated merit and the power of the dhamma and the Buddha adheres to the righteous ruler.[26] In Cambodia's current political system, religious power is segregated from political power by the internationally-imposed bureaucratic structures of the modern state, but the connection between the two is still salient for Cambodian citizens. The first resurgence of local authority after the Khmer Rouge years was through Buddhism; surviving elders created temple associations in rural villages through which they reintegrated and restructured communities.[27] When national autonomy returned in the early 1990s, political leaders staged long-forbidden Brahmanic rituals that brought religion back into statecraft, publicly demonstrating their moral capacity to rule by reconnecting the ancient power of the Khmer kings to the country's leadership.[28] As wealth increased and newly available capital flowed into the country, temple building and Buddhist ceremonies were priorities in the rural areas,[29] while Cambodian elites and politicians competed to rebuild temples more extravagant than the previous kings.[30]

Despite increased wealth and beautiful new temples, life for ordinary citizens remains dangerous and unstable. The neoliberal reforms intended to induce good governance have instead strengthened networks of corruption that funnel economic opportunities along patronage chains implicating government ministers, police officers, and school teachers alike.[31] In the current climate of economic expansion, access to the education and opportunities necessary to participate in the rising tide of wealth is denied to those unconnected to patronage chains and unable to pay bribes. Beyond exclusion, the police and the military facilitate the forceful and often violent appropriation of land and resources from those same disconnected citizens.[32]

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[25] Webb Keane, *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 19.

[26] David P. Chandler, 'Going through the motions: Ritual and restorative aspects of the reign of King Duang', in *Centers, symbols, and hierarchies: Essays on the classical states of Southeast Asia*, ed. Lorraine Gesick and Michael Aung-Thwin (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1983), pp. 106–24; Yang Sam, *Buddhism in Cambodia 1795–1954*; Stanley J. Tambiah, *World conqueror and world renouncer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

[27] Yang Sam, *Khmer Buddhism and politics from 1954 to 1984*; Nadezhda Bektimirova, 'The religious situation in Cambodia in the 1990s', *Religion, state, and society* 30, 1 (2002): 63–72.

[28] Elizabeth Guthrie, 'Buddhist temples and Cambodian politics', in *People and the 1998 national elections in Cambodia: Their voices, roles and impact on democracy*, ed. John L. Vijghen and Caroline Hughes (Phnom Penh: Experts for Community Research, 2002), pp. 55–73; Judy Ledgerwood, 'Ritual in 1990 Cambodian political theater: New songs at the edge of the forest', in *At the edge of the forest*, pp. 195–220.

[29] John Marston, 'Constructing narratives of order: Religious-building projects and moral chaos', in *At the edge of the forest*, pp. 163–94; Gyallay-Pap, *Reconstructing the Cambodian polity*, p. 93.

[30] Guthrie, *Buddhist temples and Cambodian politics.*

The historically deep roots that entangle political leaders with Buddhist morality also connect monks to the patronage of political leaders. Monks both uphold and critique political leaders in what Ian Harris calls an 'antagonistic symbiosis' between the monastic order and the governing bodies.[33] Cambodian Buddhist monks marched against colonial abuses[34] and actively denounced the violence and corruption of the emerging state in the late 1990s.[35] In contemporary Cambodia, the monk's status as a voting citizen increases monastic capacity to disrupt the political status quo, but also intensifies political coercion and repression of monks and violent responses to monastic protests.[36] Not all monks choose to fight against power, however, and monastic self-interest and naiveté often conspire with the political need for legitimation, connecting monks to the capital that feeds political patronage chains.[37] The capacity of Cambodia's political elites to build temples and sponsor elaborate merit-making ceremonies create what have been described as 'chains of merit and menace' in which undereducated Buddhist monks are tied to corrupt politicians.[38] This binding, some say corrupting, of monastic power by the ruling elite does not stretch to all corners, however, and in some places Buddhist monks may be emerging as local brokers of authority beyond both political patronage and monastic discipline.

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[31] Simon Springer, *Cambodia's neoliberal order: Violence, authoritarianism, and the contestation of public space* (London: Routledge, 2010); Caroline Hughes and Kheang Un, eds, *Cambodia's economic transformation* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012); Sovachana Pou, 'Progress and challenges of education in Cambodia today', in *Cambodia: Progress and challenges since 1991*, ed. Sothirak Pou, Geoff Wade and Mark Hong (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).

[32] Caroline Hughes et al., 'Local leaders and big business in three communes', in *Cambodia's economic transformation*, pp. 245–65; Andrew R.C. Marshall and Prak Chan Thul, 'China gambles on Cambodia's shrinking forests', Reuters, 7 Mar. 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/07/us-cambodia-forests-idUSTRE82607N20120307; Paul Vrieze and Kuch Naren, 'Six villagers reported shot in Snuol land dispute', *Phnom Penh Post*, 29 July 2012.

[33] Ian Charles Harris, ed., *Buddhism, power and political order* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.

[34] Bunchan Mul, 'The umbrella war of 1942', in *Peasants and politics in Kampuchea, 1942–1981*, ed. Ben Kiernan and Chanthou Boua (London: Zed, 1982).

[35] For instance, in 1997 a prominent newspaper ran a letter from monks that called for leaders who 'call themselves true Buddhists to conduct themselves in a Buddhist manner and prevent the worsening of the political situation in the country', cited in Bektimirova, *The religious situation in Cambodia in the 1990s*, p. 67.

[36] Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 190–224. My field notes from the 2008 national elections reveal that monks who refused to become members of the ruling Cambodian People's Party were threatened with physical violence and defrocking.

[37] Simon Springer, 'Culture of violence or violent orientalism? Neoliberalisation and imagining the "savage Other" in post-transitional Cambodia', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34, 3 (2009): 305–19. See also Heng Seiha, Kim Sedara, So Sokbunthoeun, *Decentralised governance in a hybrid polity: Localisation of decentralisation reform in Cambodia* (Working Paper no. 63, Cambodian Development Resource Institute, Phnom Penh, 2011). For a discussion of the ways that monks become embroiled in this process see Ian Charles Harris, 'Entrepreneurialism and charisma: Two modes of doing business in post-Pol Pot Cambodian Buddhism', in *Expressions of Cambodia: The politics of tradition, identity, and change*, ed. Leakthina Chan-Pech Ollier and Tim Winter (London: Routledge, 2006).

Kent describes a monk in Battambang who curbs violence with violence, beating youths who fight in his temple. Unlike the police, with whom parents can negotiate, the monk holds non-negotiable power and contrite families accept the bruises. The monk I describe here is far less charismatic, but he did safely administer public wishes by going outside his ritually determined role. Monastic authority and integrity is not on the rise in Cambodia,[39] but villagers suggest it is a more trustworthy mode of contemporary authority than the democratic fiction currently being enacted. One man explained it this way: ‘`*āṇācakr,* [state power, pronounced ‘anachak'] can't control the fighting, but *Buddhacakr* [Buddha power, pronounced ‘Buddhachak'] can… They are different. The Buddha controls the heart; the police control only the body.'[40]

Markets and power

The local authorities of Sambok Dung do not attend Buddhist celebrations or make lavish offerings at the temple, but they do facilitate access to the amenities of the global market through administration of state projects and the enforcement of laws. During my research, the state administered a World Food Program road-building initiative, surveyed household wealth to determine eligibility for national health services, and measured land for land title. These were in addition to the everyday duties of signing marriage and death certificates, property sales, and facilitating microfinance initiatives. The laws enforced primarily concerned managing forest extraction and land claims. ‘Illegal' logging is carried out locally through a tight network of bribes and warnings accompanied by enough arrests and confiscations to keep wood flowing through mills owned by military personnel. Land claims are administered by the village head, who in Sambok Dung allowed purchased but undeveloped plots to remain or be resold according to his discretion, which swayed with the potential for personal profit. As one 50-year-old villager put it: ‘They have all the power, but they use it to steal from us. They are supposed to protect us, but they don't even see us; they see only the rich and powerful — we are not safe.' Similar sentiments of fear and insecurity pervaded my conversations with others in the village.[41]

Kent suggests that Khmer Buddhist conceptions of security are different from those of the international community: a secure state is not one that has a defensible border and an army to uphold it, but rather a secure state is one in which the power of authority is bound by the *sil,* the Buddhist virtues, the *sima,* the sacred boundary of the temple, and the saffron robes of the monk.[42] This was not universally reported in Sambok Dung, but the efficacy of *`āṇācakr* was suspect. There were programs by which people glimpsed the promises of democracy and development: microfinance or locally administered road-building projects funded by international organisations that paid villagers in rice for their labour. But if a bridge was broken or a woman recently widowed, it was the temple association, not the village head, that raised the money and/or the labour needed. This kind of local leadership was instigated by the *me khsāl*, literally 'the master of the wind'. In Sambok Dung, this was the head of the temple association, but William Collins notes that the term is elsewhere used to refer to many transient leaders and is indicative of Buddhist authority, as monks come and go as they please. It implies impermanence, flexibility, and 'accountability to prevailing rules of expectations' only as is expedient.[43] The flexible and transient authority of temple-based leadership was more trusted in Sambok Dung than the authority of the village head or police chief, but access to loans and lucrative logging came through the latter.

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[38] Penny Edwards, ‘The moral geology of the present: Structuring morality, menace and merit', in *People of virtue*, pp. 213–38; Hughes et al., *Local leaders and big business in three communes*, p. 259.

[39] Kent, ‘Peace, power and pagodas', pp. 77–97; Harris, ‘Entrepreneurialism and charisma'; Speigel, ‘The role of the monk in Cambodian Buddhism'.

[40] The same distinction between state power and Buddha power is noted in, William Collins, *Grassroots civil society in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Center for Advanced Study, 1998).

[41] This is in contrast to local sentiments recorded in 2006 that suggest the decentralisation initiatives of donor nations have made Cambodian politics more like the idealised politics of the donor. See Joakim Öjendal and Kim Sedara, ‘Korob, kaud, klach: In search of agency in rural Cambodia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37, 3 (2006): 507–26.

For much-desired cash, villagers trust *`āṇācakr*. Consumer capitalism and obvious wealth starkly contrast with obvious poverty at the margins of the state in Sambok Dung. This juxtaposition is a new addition to the representational economy of subsistence farmers and the new desires that arise in the competitive modern economy foster suspicion and envy.[44] The *Abhidhamma* suggests that such phenomena do not arise independently. The confluence of the visibility, inaccessibility, and desire for material goods occurs in the spatially and historically situated mind and sensory organs of individual villagers, dependent on physical and environmental conditions, and attached to states of existence in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.[45] Despite the esoteric nature of the *Abhidhamma*, my interlocutors responded to life's events with this underlying understanding of contingency and continuity. Consumer capitalism is not a monolithic event understood in the same way by all, but it does inform an arena in which disenfranchised youths vent their frustrated desires on each other.[46] Throughout Cambodia, the dances at large temple celebrations have become one of the sites[47] where local boys brawl and maim each other in acts of intergroup violence that local authorities are unable to contain.

Youth violence

The representational economy of Sambok Dung's residents includes a healthy dose of violence linked to events of the past, in the ever-present memories of Khmer Rouge and other wartime atrocities; events of the present, as violent youth encounters are boasted and gossiped about locally; and in the stories of arbitrary arrests and vicious land grabs that get closer to home each year and shadow the future for many. The literature on youth violence in Cambodia does not particularly address the countryside save in Melina Czymoniewicz-Kippel's study,[48] which describes urban-influenced and gang-associated youth violence in an area near Siem Reap. The clashes in Sambok Dung involved boys from one neighbourhood meeting boys from another. These clashes often took place at Buddhist or wedding celebrations, but sometimes at the market or at a local shop. Six bloody fights occurred in the area during my fieldwork. The reasons for fighting were embedded in stories of jealousy and territory, but this was often opaque, hidden behind an 'accident' that sparked off the violence: a spilt beer or trod-upon foot. Beyond girls, territory, and accidents, the voices of the young men I spoke with resonate with Messerschmidt's observation that violent behaviour can be an avenue for enacting models of powerful manhood for men who lack the capacity to achieve the 'traditional indicators' of successful masculinity.[49]

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[42] Kent, 'Peace, power and pagodas', p. 77.

[43] Collins, *Grassroots civil society*, p. 27.

[44] Caroline Hughes, *The political economy of Cambodia's transition, 1991–2001* (London; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. xx.

[45] Maha Thera Narada, *Manual of Abhidhamma*, p. 311.

[46] Kent, 'A Buddhist bouncer', pp. 291–303.

[47] Fighting can also break out at other venues where alcohol and dancing converge, such as smaller wedding parties.

In contemporary Cambodia masculine attributes complement and contradict one another in ways that echo the constructions of authority discussed above. Ancient Khmer sources recount the exploits of conquering kings both in battle and sexual prowess[50] and the later *cpâp prus* (literally 'rules for men', pronounced 'chabap proh') suggests that a good man should be content with his place, be hardworking and productive, and show kindness and compassion toward others.[51] Both long-held constructions of manhood are salient in Sambok Dung, but the attributes of the king are favoured by the hegemonic masculinity of the neoliberal global order: predicated on heterosexuality, breadwinning, and aggression.[52] In addition to conquering women, earning money, and spoiling for a fight, masculine performance also includes consuming. Nancy Deutsch and Elina Theodorou suggest that aspiring to consume helps to achieve 'male responsibility'[53] and in urban Cambodia, Trude Jacobson finds that the markers of consumer society show earning potential and social power, but more importantly show a man's ability to overcome obstacles. Overcoming obstacles in Cambodia's rapidly changing social order and in the resource-scarce environment of the rural village tie directly into a man's ability to provide for the family, articulating a tension between the good man, hardworking and content with his life, and the successful man, always striving for more.[54]

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[48] Melina T. Czymoniewicz-Klippel, 'Bad boys, big trouble: Subcultural formation and resistance in a Cambodian village', *Youth & Society* (2011): 1–20 [online, doi: 10.1177/0044118X11422545].

[49] James W. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and crime: Critique and reconceptualization of theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993); See also Gary Barker, *Dying to be men: Youth, masculinity, and social exclusion* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[50] George Cœdès, *Inscriptions du cambodge* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1937–66).

[51] Seṅ Ṅuan Huat, *Cpâp prus, cpâp srī* (Bhnaṃ Beñ: Seṅ Ṅuan Huat, 1965).

[52] It is suggestive that contemporary conceptions of desirable masculinity are similar to those of a conquering king. On hegemonic masculinity, see, Robert W. Connell, 'Masculinities and globalization', in *Gender through the prism of difference,* ed. M.B. Zinn, P. Hondagneu-Sotelo, and M. Messner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Richard Howson, *Challenging hegemonic masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 73–6.

[53] N.L. Deutsch and E. Theodorou, 'Aspiring, consuming, becoming: Youth identity in a culture of consumption', *Youth and Society* 42, 2 (2010): 229.

[54] Trude Jacobsen, 'Being broh: The good, the bad, and the successful man in Cambodia', in *Men and masculinities in Southeast Asia*, ed. Michele Ford and Lenore Lyons (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 95.

Among the youth of Sambok Dung, the inability to make money and buy things slipped into desires to lay claim to women and land. One young man explained the fighting this way:

> When we see the boys from the other village we want to fight them. I don't know why. It's like we want to divide the territory between us [*caek phaen dī jā muay gnā*]. It's hard for us, you don't understand. We have no money. We go to the forest to make money, always afraid. Police and the companies, they could take our motos, take our wood. We sleep on top of the moto, always watching. In the village there is no work … Sure we grow rice, but not enough: you can't get anything with rice. You can't put rice in the moto.

Another had this to say:

> I never know why they fight. We all want more than we have. Sometimes they just see someone new at the celebration and they want to fight them, maybe they have motos or new clothes. Maybe they want to look for girls. They're not mad and have no grudge; they just want to fight them. Sometimes … they want revenge or may be jealous over a girl. Most of the time we go to the parties to have fun — but it's easy to fight. On the dance floor feet get stamped … arms swing …

The voices of these two young men express the hardship here and also the fast and intense lives of young men. The boys are poor with rising desires for consumer goods and few avenues for safe and steady work, but they are also typical youths, like the *`ācāry* below, who travel to neighbouring parties to have fun. In this era, however, play is closer to fighting, and the opaque intentionality in the fight-stories told — feet stamped upon, arms swung — are gilded with the regular presence of weapons.[55] The fighting is sometimes about something, jealousy or some offence, but it is often indeterminate: a vague menace and threat from the other tinged with fear and excitement. The sentiment that it's easy to fight at the dances was strong, which lends them an air of danger: some youths avoid the dances and others seek them out.[56] Overriding all this was the sentiment that the parties are for fun.

This was true for everyone. Buddhist festivals, especially the major ones where young people return home to celebrate with their families, are important and anticipated events — and are seen as fun. The dance parties at Buddhist celebrations are remembered fondly by everyone over 30. It is the violence that is decidedly new. One *`ācāry* told me:

> We never used to fear the dances. I met my wife at a dance. I came from a neighbouring village… during the celebrations we would all go to the other villages for the parties… I never came for the prayers, we were young — the sermons are for the old! We all came to dance happily together [*rāṃ sabbāy*], it was a time for fun and for the young people to meet and dance together.

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[55] Typically knives, swords, and clubs — no one can afford a gun.

[56] See Sean Afnan Morrissey, 'Performing risks: Catharsis, carnival and capital in the risk society', *Journal of Youth Studies* 11, 4 (2008): 413–27, for an interesting discussion of risk-taking and risk-avoidance in constructions of masculine identity.

Pchuṃ Biṇḍ 2010, Sambok Dung

The festive buzz around Sambok Dung swelled as youths returned to parental homes from their places of residence elsewhere as migrants or as married couples. The six *weyn* I attended during the 2010 *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* celebration followed the pattern outlined in the previous section, except that the dancing and games portions of each celebration was marked by social change.

A fear of violence had prompted provincial officials to ban the dances that in previous years would have continued for as many nights as the villagers could afford. The ban provoked a variety of responses in nearby villages. One neighbouring town thought they could avoid the fights if they held the dance during the day. Even though police were paid to protect participants, concealed knives produced multiple injuries and one hospitalisation. News of this spread quickly from village to village. The conversations I heard detailed the violence, how many and what wounds; and offered various laments: 'They're not afraid; even with the police, they still fight; they don't even know why they do it; we want the dances, but how can we protect ourselves? Even in the daytime they fight; and in Tuk Jen, they were fighting there too.'

In Sambok Dung, the temple authorities decided to simply ignore the law and allow parties. The first dance was called on the fifth *weyn*. The sponsor of the *weyn* justified the violation in this way: 'We never have problems with fighting in this village. We are like family here and the boys don't need to fight together.' In addition to having benign youths, the residents of Sambok Dung were financially incapable of funding fourteen nights of dancing. Thus the official sanction was locally deemed to apply to the wealthy and connected, and not to the poor and remote. On the evening of the fifth *weyn* youth began to gather outside the temple as the monks chanted.

During the sermon, a scuffle broke out when a small contingent of Cham (Khmer Muslim) boys rode in on their motorcycles. The Khmer youths took physical offence at the presence of the interlopers and both groups exchanged words as well as blows.[57] No one was hurt, but the adults inside the temple responded with a swift and blustery disbandment of the youth who had assembled to dance. Disgruntled rumbles spread through the village the following day and the next as well. So, when one of the school teachers wanted to hold a dance for the ninth *weyn*, he was given permission. This *weyn* and dance were sparsely attended, perhaps because the school teacher was not a permanent resident of the village, and while there was loud music there were not enough young people to dance or to fight.

In the closing days of *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* there had been so many rogue villages whose flaunting of the law led to substantial injuries that the authorities vowed serious punishment for further violations. By the final day of *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* all the furthest-flung younger family members had returned to Sambok Dung and excitement was high for the final celebration. That night as the monks chanted their blessings, a crowd gathered outside the temple.

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[57] Relations between the Khmer and the Cham in Cambodia are not typically marked by violence; see Kok-Thay Eng, 'From the Khmer Rouge to Hambali: Cham identities in a global age' (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2013). This contrasts with some Muslim minorities in Southeast Asia, see, Moshe Yegar, *Between integration and secession: The Muslim communities of the southern Philippines, southern Thailand, and western Burma/Myanmar* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002); Irving Chan Johnson, *The Buddha on Mecca's verandah: Encounters, mobilities, and histories along the Malaysian–Thai border* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).

Inside, members of the temple association fretted about this unexpected development. Word had circulated that the law would be upheld and there would be no dancing at the temple. Nonetheless, small waves of neighbourhood youths entered the temple to make donations for the sermon and receive blessings from the *ācāry*, while larger waves filled the yard outside. The monk preached for an hour about the changing social landscape of Cambodia in which youths no longer accept the teachings of their parents and the temple. The sermon was broadcast via speakers outside the temple, as is customary when the sound system is operational, and the monk explicitly connected contemporary violence to youths who are disconnected from their parents and from Buddhist teachings. By the end of the sermon, the temple grounds were packed with more than 150 youths prepared to dance. The leaders of the temple association conferred with the *`ācāry* and the head monk about the appropriate course of action. In the typical absence of local government representatives — the village head and the local police — the monk, the *`ācāry,* and the head of the temple association, the *me khsāl*, had to act.

Using the microphone, one of the *`ācāry* queried the crowd about their desire for a dance; there was a raucous and affirmative response. He asked those assembled if they could refrain from violence, which was met with another roar in the affirmative. He looked meaningfully at the others with raised eyebrows and a slight grin. The *me khsāl* was very uncomfortable with this turn of events and unwilling to sanction the dance without explicit authority.

Then the head monk made an unexpected move. Acting the part of *me khsāl*, who attends to protocol only as expedient, he picked up his cell phone and called the police chief. The monk described the situation at his pagoda and asked permission to hold the dance. After about twenty minutes, the police chief called back and told the monk that if he could raise 250,000 riel (just over US$60), the police would look the other way and they could have the dance. But he said that they would be responsible for their own security and would be prosecuted should there be any violence. The word went out that we had to raise money for the bribe and two of the *`ācāry* placed a lit candle on the offering tray and walked out into the crowd. The *me khsāl* was against letting them dance and had been instrumental in breaking up the dance during the fifth *weyn* in fear of violence. I asked him what he thought: 'I don't know,' he said, bemused and resigned. 'The monk made the call and the people agree. We'll *báng sâc*, [to bribe, literally to put meat in the soup] because they asked for it… the kids will *jūl puṇy* and we will dance…' A woman chimed in, 'They [the police] can't protect us, but the Buddha can.' One of the grandmothers added, 'We won't have any trouble. Look, [pointing to the kids making offerings] they come to make merit, here in front of us all.'

Offerings were made in traditional fashion. Everyone who placed money on the tray bowed their heads and put their hands together in prayer position while the *`ācāry* chanted a blessing. This was a very public display and I saw small groups of youths whispering together, pulling money out of their pockets, counting, and then approaching the *`ācāry* en masse to make their offering. The elders were not the only ones for whom paying the bribe was equated with making merit. One young woman told me: 'I can *jūl puṇy* here and we will have a safe dance. We are not afraid. I have money from my job and come here to make merit with my parents for the Pchuṃ Biṇḍ. We young people like to dance and we respect the Buddha. We all *jūl puṇy* and promise to *rāṃ sabbāy* and not to fight.'[58] A young man said: 'We want to dance. Maybe they want to fight, but we just want to have fun. Maybe fighting is fun for them, I don't know their hearts *[`át sgāl citt ge]*, we will jūl puṇy so everyone can dance. Maybe if they *jūl puṇy* too, they won't fight.'

Most of the parents and grandparents present relinquished their fear and saw in this event the power of the Buddha and good children making merit. For some however, the descent into the corruption of the current age signalled something else. One devout woman, aged 55, was quite angry and said, 'I don't like the monk supporting corruption… He should follow the Buddha's law… and the police should follow their law. What will happen without any law?' The youths did not give voice to the contradictions of communal law breaking. Rather, they focused on the respect and respectability exhibited through the act of offering: because they had money to give, everyone could dance. There is another element here that the quote above points to, and that is the capacity for such an offering of merit to transform fighters. 'Maybe if they *jūl puṇy* too, they won't fight.'

I watched a group of young men in tight jeans and gelled hair huddle together to count their money. As the *`ācāry* approached they did not come forward all together to make their offering, but jostled each other, pushing one to the front when the offering tray approached. He grabbed a friend and together they stood, still shoving at each other and grinning, but with the respectful posture required of the moment. The form of the ritual forced for a moment a change in their comportment in front of all assembled.

Once the offering was collected and the music started, the monk retired to his quarters. When I talked to him the next day at the final celebration he had this to say:

> There were hundreds of people gathered outside to dance, and another big group inside who wanted the dance. What was I supposed to do? The dance is important. I am not afraid of the police; I did it to make the people happy. They trust me, the people and the police, and I knew the kids wouldn't fight here in the temple… They all gave their money to the *ācāry* and received the blessing. They *rāṃ sabbāy* and they *dhwoe puṇy* [to make merit], they fight and they *dhwoe pāp* [to do harm].[59] They all wanted to dance and knew they had to agree to not fight, I was not worried… maybe I did act outside the *pāṭimokkh*, but I did it for the people, not for me.[60]

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[58] Many of the youths who had money to offer were migrant labourers. Their salaries can be manifested as social capital in the village through temple offerings, which can also cleanse the often immoral nature of their work or living situations away from home. Often, low salaries preclude such remittances, but many can get money back to their villages. See Annuska Derks, *Khmer women on the move: Exploring work and life in urban Cambodia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), pp. 179–83, for a discussion of morality and agency among Phnom Penh's migrant workers.

[59] The terms *dhwoe puṇy* and *dhwoe pāp* are often used as opposites. In this structure doing good is associated with making merit and doing ill with demerit.

[60] The 227 precepts that make up the *pāṭimokkh* govern a monk's behaviour in the world. The monk broke many precepts, all having to do with refraining from political action.

Ritual effects

In the event just described, youths publicly received blessings by making meritorious offerings destined for corrupt officials. The objective of the ritualised bribe collection was not to establish collectively held beliefs, to ensure social unity, or to create particular types of subjects, effects often ascribed to ritual performance. Rather, the objective was a bloodless dance party. That it was attempted through a ritualised act steeped in the representational economy of villagers, I suggest, shifted official corruption and youth violence into the moral framework of Buddhist beliefs and invoked for a moment the potential for social unity and meritorious youths. This is subtly, but importantly, different from Durkheim's suggestion that rituals perform collective representations and engender social solidarity.[61] In certain contexts, in the prescribed ritual performances of the *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* celebration, for example, this may be the case. The spontaneous ritualisation of bribe collection, however, lacked the certainty of a formal event and did not explicitly perform anything. It did however transform the moment. The emotional intensity embedded in the collective desire for a dance, what Durkheim described as 'collective effervescence', encountered the ritual structure of meritorious offerings at a historical moment in which corrupt officials and violent youths inhabit the social landscape. The mutual striking of these elements transformed illicit bribes into meritorious offerings and forced edgy youths to make those offerings.

Durkheim suggests that the ritual enacts social consensus and strengthens group solidarity and that the 'collective effervescence' of participants 'gives birth to religious ideas'.[62] His is a model in which participants mistake their own collective generative energy with the power of an external divinity. In my model, participants understood the generative potential of their collective energy and included, but went beyond, Durkheim's suggestions of social cohesion and collective beliefs to insist that the solidarity was only momentary. The collective unity fostered by the large Buddhist celebration of *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ* encountered the sanction against dancing, the ubiquitous fighting, migrant labour and salaries, and the institution of the bribe. The powerful desire for a community dance at the temple entangled with the representational economy in Sambok Dung — which included the monk and *`ācāry*, the temple offerings, the intergenerational participants, the dhamma, the Buddha, and the police — and informed what transpired.

Keane focuses on the intimate and transformative work of ritual forms and objects and on the multidirectional nature of ritualised pathways. The bits of collective life with which continuity is negotiated from contingency cross wide ranges of seemingly distinct social fields and 'situate words, things, and persons (along with other agentive beings such as spirits [or the Buddha]) dynamically within the same world with one another'.[63] In this way, the corrupt officials and the righteous Buddhist king can fold together for a moment via the transformational action of placing bribe money on a gilded tray with bowed head and hands in prayer while a blessing is chanted. Even more palpable was the opposite transformation of gangsta youths into meritorious children as they performed the rite. Keane points out how ritual forms and objects connect place and space to new ideas through practices steeped in the known and the familiar and this event shows that the process also works in reverse, connecting the present to old ideas through the movements and sensations of the body.[64]

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[61] Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life.*

[62] Ibid., p. 164.

[63] Keane, *Christian moderns*, p. 20.

Keane describes how a conservative form of ritual speech facilitated Christian conversion in Sumba. The ritual form, he suggests, implied an 'underlying continuity', but also carried 'a re-envisioned present into the remembered past'.[65] The 'mutual striking' of the past and the present that reorders social worlds adjusts the past, which must be remembered in such a way as to accommodate the present. The effervescence of collective energy and a strategically performed ritual transformed fear and contained violence in a way unavailable to the police, but some of my interlocutors worried that the future of Buddhist morality may have also been transformed. The rituals of Buddhist practice tap deeper social roots than anything Western-style police forces can access, but there was no consensus over which roots were tapped and what impact the corruption of the bribe may have on the health of the tree. Participants offered personal and unique interpretations of the event that belie the suggestion of solidarity and unity, but the grandmothers resting in the temple felt secure while youths danced with abandon in ways that brought the remembered past of happy village celebrations into the unstable present. Collective effervescence energised the space between ritual form (constant in this context) and ritual meaning (fractured and varied among individual subjects), giving rise to what people described as a triumph of Buddhist morality over police enforcement.

This is not a claim to a universality of form and effect; none suggested that the violence would stop because of this triumph or that the technique could be replicated. On the contrary, the *Abhidhamma* suggests that all material arisings depend on preceding conditions: material objects and the organs of perception 'mutually strike each other' amid a field of influences and instigate the loose systematicity of conscious perception experienced as reality.[66] Buddhist theory deepens Catherine Bell's suggestion that ritualisation 'catches up all the experienced and conventional conflicts … juxtaposing and homologising them into a loose and provisional systematicity'.[67] This provisional systematicity also inhabits the past and informs the future. Actions and speech are products of the mind, but are embedded in a field of constant becoming that is dependent simultaneously on the past, *kamma*; the present, mind and matter; and the neverending future of birth, decay, and death.[68] Invoking Buddhist theory here deepens academic theory. It also, and more importantly, better situates that theory into the social context of the ritual actors in this study.

For Bell, ritual is a kind of 'flexible strategy', a 'culturally strategic way of acting' that requires complicity and consensus, but only to the point of public display.[69] For the actors at the *Pchuṃ Biṇḍ*, this was understood, but the public display was entangled with the past that adhered to the ritual, with the body of the ritual participant, *and* with the past and future lives of the participant. The contingency and flexibility of such a moment 'defies the notion of an always'.[70] There is no replication of the event and no constant way of being for the participants. One woman summed it up saying,

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[64] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

[65] Keane, *Christian moderns*, p. 172.

[66] Ibid., p. 338.

[67] Bell, *Ritual theory, ritual practice*, pp. 105–6.

[68] Ibid., p. 399.

[69] Ibid., pp. 8, 218.

> We don't really know why they didn't fight. It depended on many things; we know they made the offering and accepted the blessing. Maybe it was the blessing? Maybe it was *kamma* or the power of the Buddha? I don't know. Maybe it started with the blessing and then they were just having fun. It's hard to know, but I think we all wanted it to work.

This sentiment speaks to social solidarity as well as to the iterative, contingent, and interdependent quality of lived experience expressed by the *Abhidhamma*. It also invokes the *as if* quality of ritual that for Adam Seligman et al. refers to the 'never-ending work' of making social worlds, of performing the illusion of a 'shared, potential space between separate egos'.[71] 'We all wanted it to work', she said. Seligman et al. suggest that the illusion acknowledges not shared community values, but the 'desire for' shared community values and the 'fractal complexities' of the boundaries that separate egos.[72] The contingency and complexity of social worlds play out in fields of significance at once familiar and individually interpreted. No one can know why there was no fighting at this event. The ritualisation of money collection by the *`ācāry* was motivated by form: he said, 'I didn't think or decide; this is a *puṇy*, we are at the temple, this is how we collect money.' Nonetheless, the moment was powerfully infused with meaning: one grandmother told me, 'We don't need to fear the fighting. They made the offerings and it's like a promise [*sanyā*]. They are good children and want to follow Buddhism.'

Ascribing Buddhist motives on the part of all the youths attending the dance may be optimistic. While some did profess such sentiments, groups of young men were uncomfortably forced into adopting the posture of meritorious children and grandchildren by the nature of the money collection ritual. The youths did not really make a promise as the grandmother above suggested, but they did behave in a way that effectively 'shift[ed] the problem' of their destructive potential into terms that could be collectively incorporated by the participants.[73] The threat of violence is not resolved, but is instead translated into the signifying field of the ritual, in which gangsta youths bow their heads to receive blessings. Through this act the young men did not necessarily communicate respect, they were obviously posing and trying not to laugh, but they 'generated bodies identified with respect'.[74]

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[70] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 250.

[71] Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael Puett and Bennet Simon, *Ritual and its consequences: An essay on the limits of sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 42, 25.

[72] Ibid., p. 100.

[73] Bell, *Ritual theory, ritual practice*, p. 106.

[74] Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 51.

The bribe, intended for the corrupt officials of an exploitative and ineffective state, *became* a meritorious offering, a traditional ritual to influence a better rebirth. This transformation took place by means of the ritual objects of any typical Khmer Buddhist ceremony: money, offering tray, and blessings. Beyond the formalism of Keane's representational economy, however, becoming meritorious in the effervescent field of the potential dance party could slip uncomfortably at any time into a realm where bribes and violence erupt from under their cloak of moral promise with what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls 'the shock of the uncanny'.[75] In this slippery dialectic, the interaction of body and environment with 'the emergence of the ritualised agent' did not resolve or complete the tension as Hegel poses, but engendered rather, a 'deferral of signification … beyond the rite itself … into the world at large'.[76] The public performance of religious offerings and blessings signified that the participants acted within the field of Buddhist moral action, but also as complicit actors willing to descend into, and perhaps resignify, the state's corruption.

Conclusion

This is the raggedy edge of the Cambodian state and Cambodian monasticism: neither set of laws held sway in the face of a collective desire for a dance party. In this scenario, the state's incapacity to ensure basic security is parodied by the local temple's capacity to do so: the structured, hierarchal systems of *`āṇācakr* could not control the violence, but the fluid and flexible *Buddhacakr* could.

The Theravada Buddhist tradition in Cambodia has a long history of rising and falling in prominence according to the power and whim of political actors. Behind such fluctuation is the enduring notion that effective statecraft is achieved by balancing the morality of *sil,* the Buddhist virtues, with the destructive tendencies of amoral power. Political leaders in Cambodia must grapple with this. Some have purposefully destroyed Buddhism: the Vietnamese in the early nineteenth century[77] and the Khmer Rouge in the mid-twentieth century. The French attempted to manage this power,[78] and the current leaders are coopting it: constructing lavish temples and cultivating kingly attributes.

The deep connection between religion and statecraft in Cambodia was present in the ethnographic moment recounted above. Other pasts were also present: the past in which youths travelled to many towns to dance and have fun during the big celebrations and the very recent past of knives and blood drawn in violent dance encounters. Chakrabarty suggests that the moment of practice in which the past slips unnoticed into the present can produce a little jolt of the uncanny, an uncomfortable feeling produced when the repressed past breaks momentarily into the present.[79] For the modern subjects in my story, there was both uncanny discomfort and conscious entering into the flow of contingent and interdependent events. Some youths *jūl puṇy* so that they and the others could dance, embracing the traditional logic of merit to directly affect the present moment and their future rebirths. Others were more discomfited by the ritual: particularly those sporting urban attire and coiffeur, their demeanour studied and aloof. Perhaps when confronted with the expectation to bow their heads and receive the blessing, they recognised something, something deliberately forgotten and a bit uncomfortable that haunts purposeful hair and prayer hands alike. It could be this same haunting that sparked the ire of the few who contested the monk's actions and sensed a real problem with the visceral enactment of Buddhist morality descending into the corruption of the state.

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[75] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 175.

[76] Bell, *Ritual theory, ritual practice*, p. 105.

[77] When King Ang Duang re-established the Khmer monarchy at Udong in 1848 Buddhism had been decimated by Vietnamese control of the Cambodian state. Descriptions of the textual, architectural, and educational state of the Theravada monastic tradition at that time could have also described the post-Khmer Rouge era. See Chandler, 'Going through the motions'; and Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and practice*, p. 46.

[78] Penny Edwards, *Cambodge the cultivation of a nation, 1860–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 169.

[79] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 175.

This discomfort was experienced by a minority, however, and most elders spoke of their abated fear and of good children making merit. In this way, the ritualised money collection constituted 'a particular dynamic of social empowerment' in which potential troublemakers and dissenters were shown to be in the minority and the social field of peers, monks, and grandparents was explicitly visible. Bell's interpretation of ritual as a 'flexible strategy',[80] in which 'there is no point of arrival', only the constant invocation of new terms that validate and cohere to the old,[81] is I think quite close to the way that people experienced this event. What was important to participants was not the outcome — no one knew what would happen. But people were willing to *guess* what would happen in an arena where the bodies of youths were visibly making merit amid the infinite potential of invoked *Buddhacakr*.

The ritualised bribe collection was not remarkable in itself; it is common for ill-gotten gains to be cleansed once they are placed in a temple. Apparently this cleansing works both ways. In the same silent manner that the past slips into the present, the sacred and the profane (both unstable constructions of the modern imagination) mutually inform each other in the realm of *Buddhacakr*. The money is a bribe, and becomes such when it transfers from the *`ācāry* to the police chief, but at the temple it is a meritorious offering. This ontological slippage is suggestive of the still palpable disconnect in Sambok Dung, and in Cambodia more broadly, between *`āṇācakr* and *Buddhacakr* — a disjuncture that is deepened by the segregation of religion from social authority.

Some called this a triumph of *Buddhacakr* over *`āṇācakr*. In this paper, I have also offered a critique that favours local Buddha power over state power — not all states, that's a critique for another time — simply the Western-imposed bureaucracy and democratic fiction currently floundering in the Kingdom of Cambodia. Systems of governance grow regionally and fuse with local patterns over time. The patron–client network, a system based on local hierarchal relationships of mutual dependence, has morphed under neoliberal capitalism into a bureaucratic system in which local officials are at the bottom of patronage chains linked to the international donors and corporations now at their apex. These chains exclude smallholders and citizens while starving local officials with tiny salaries that engender corruption, graft, and violence — this exclusion and corruption is what plagues villagers and engenders violence. The grandmothers knew that the youth would not fight in the face of a meritorious offering, especially one made in front of all assembled, but this moral obligation was not available to the police who have been charged with containing violent outbreaks. The effective confluence of morality and authority was not seen as *a model* with which to control the fighting more broadly. Indeed, the notion of a lasting totality was rejected by participants; the event was distinguished by the immediate and ephemeral quality of contained violence. Nonetheless, the strategic invocation of mutually understood ritualised practices, in which the desire for shared values was communally expressed, gave rise to an instant of solidarity, of redemptive hegemony, in which the escalating violence at temple celebrations was momentarily contained — just as the grandmothers said it would be.

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[80] Bell, *Ritual theory, ritual practice,* p. 218.

[81] Ibid., p. 106.