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Purchasing power and pagodas: The *Sīma* monastic boundary and consumer politics in Cambodia

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Cambodia is now in the midst of reconstruction after decades of organised violence and socio-cultural disruption. This paper explores how rural Cambodians are trying to recreate order in their local worlds and it questions what impact the recent deluge of consumer values, delivered through a post-socialist political filter, is having on these efforts.

[CQ]En répondant à certains étrangers qui disaient "toutes ces fêtes appauvrissent le pays," le people khmer répond avec un solide bon sens 'qu'importe, pourvu que nous conservions ce trésor qu'est la religion du Buddha".[1]

[In response to certain foreigners who said 'all these celebrations are impoverishing the country,' the Khmer people responded with a sound common sense 'what does that matter provided we preserve the treasure of the religion of the Buddha'.]

Between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia underwent one of the most devastating social engineering experiments the world has ever seen. When the Khmer Rouge took control in 1975, the new regime systematically disrupted virtually all the social elements known to Cambodians – family, village, temple, institutions. This involved radical and often brutal breakdown of previous order and the boundaries by which it had been sustained. The restoration of aspects of pre-revolutionary order was permitted during the decade following the Vietnamese takeover in 1979, but it was not until the Vietnamese withdrew in 1989 that Cambodian reconstruction efforts started in earnest. However, this coincided with a tide of new political and economic forces.

With the end of the Cold War, major economic transition began taking place in countries that had previously been supported by the superpowers. In Cambodia, after the collapse of the Pol Pot regime, the command economy gradually disintegrated

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1 T. Khlot, *La Croyance Cambodgienne des Origines à nos Jours*, *Cambodia Report* (Phnom Penh: Centre for Advanced Study, 1996), p. 6.

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throughout the Vietnamese rule of the eighties, proceeding to fully embrace a free market system by 1990. Caroline Hughes has shown how this economic transformation formed the substrate from which subsequent political relations emerged.[2] Following the Paris Peace Agreements of 1991, the international community began buttressing the Cambodian economy with foreign aid and support for democratisation. Thus democratisation was a response to the imperatives of aid dependency rather than local forces. Hughes demonstrates that the effects of this approach in a war-torn, underdeveloped and economically unregulated context have been to deepen the divide between the prosperous, powerful and internationalised elite and the rural poor, whose resources the former increasingly exploit. Some have attributed Cambodia's current difficulties in re-establishing trust and solidarity more to this unleashing of an unchecked market economy that provides no safety nets for the poor than to the legacy of organised violence.[3]

Today, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his cronies are beneficiaries of the new conditions. The provision of foreign aid is conditional upon fulfillment of demands for democratisation set by the international community, but access to this capital is confined largely to Phnom Penh. The lack of material infrastructure beyond the city means that the country remains fragmented into isolated village political arenas where the key determinant of power is the state's ability to control the inflow of resources, often delivered as personal gifts from the powerful.[4] In order to secure continuing aid flows, Cambodian power-holders must demonstrate that they have the loyalty of local authorities and their constituencies. The government has therefore adopted a strategy of protecting the entrepreneurial interests of civil servants and military units, through whom it is able to exercise considerable control over the populace. This strengthens ties between central and local government but it also increases state intervention in local settings;[5] and simultaneously it exacerbates the marginalisation of those exploited by profiteering local and military authorities. As local authorities and power-wielders are brought under the state umbrella, thus consolidating the power of the state, the poor are increasingly excluded and their insecurity is exacerbated. Thus, although Cambodia is ostensibly following a model of inclusive politics, its system of economic relations is brutally exclusive.[6] Privatisation leaves farmers as well as the urban poor vulnerable to the interests of powerful speculators and it fails to reward them with services and amenities. The poor are frequently forced off their lands and their access to resources such as fish and forests is rapidly diminishing as these are taken over by speculators. Local worlds are being penetrated and consumed by the rich, the powerful and the armed.

2 C. Hughes, *The political economy of Cambodia's transition 1991–2001* (London: Routledge, Curzon, 2003).

3 V. Krishnamurthy, *The impact of armed conflict on social capital* (Phnom Penh: Social Services of Cambodia, 1999).

4 C. Hughes, 'The politics of gifts: Tradition and regimentation in contemporary Cambodia', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 37, 3 (2006): 469–489.

5 J. Ledgerwood and J. Vijghen, 'Decision making in rural Khmer villages', in *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, ed. J. Ledgerwood and J. Vijghen (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 2002),109–50.

6 See also E. Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the politics of nation building* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

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Order and boundaries

My interest in this paper is to examine how these developments are impacting upon local efforts to restore law and order. Mary Douglas' time-tested observations of the human propensity to construct order through the ritual establishment of boundaries provide inspiration for this inquiry. Douglas points out that, 'It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without … with and against, that a semblance of order is created.'[7] In doing so, she notes, humanity attempts to make its environment conform to an idea. Boundaries, therefore, make the world appear coherent and secure by providing means by which to manipulate both power and danger.

Despite their poverty, rural Cambodians continue to find ways to fund the reconstruction of their pagodas and the establishment of new ones. This frenetic building activity has created a historically unique situation: ceremonies are taking place all over the country to mark the consecration of monastic boundaries, *sīmas,* upon completion of the pagodas' central building – the ordination hall, or *vihāra. Sīma* consecration ceremonies were a rarity in pre-revolutionary Cambodia, but today they are numerous, often major events and they can attract substantial financial donations to the pagoda. What, then, are the ideas that are the impetus to the creation of the *sīma*? When a society has had its internal boundaries so utterly destroyed, how does it go about restoring distinctions by which to order life – distinctions between living and dead, good and evil, sacred and profane? How is this process affected and shaped by the threatening, new political economy that Hughes describes?

In an attempt to explore these questions, I shall first describe the *sīma* and its significance before presenting some of the ethnography I have collected in the course of recent anthropological fieldwork on the revival of Buddhism in Cambodia. My fieldwork has been primarily concentrated upon several rural pagodas in villages in northwestern Cambodia although it includes other parts of the country as well. The paper closes with a discussion of the perils that rural Cambodians perceive in the new political economy.

The sacred periphery: threshold of civilisation

The sacred geography of the Cambodian pagoda[8] is organised around the *vihāra*, which forms its kernel.[9] This building is surrounded by the ritual perimeter defined by eight *sīma* (Sanskrit and Pali for 'boundary' or 'limit') stones, which demarcate but do not prohibit access to the sacred space within. The stones are buried in deep pits dug on the cardinal and intercardinal points, and a further ninth hole is dug inside the temple, before the shrine. The central stone has been said to represent the Hindu deity Indra.[10] A *vihāra* is not considered ready for the ordination of new monks or for them to make their confessions until a *sīma* has been established.

7 M. Douglas, *Purity and danger* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 5.
8 The pagoda was traditionally a strong community centre that provided education for boys, a refuge for the elderly, redistribution of resources, rice and buffalo banks, library facilities and healing services.
9 A. Choulean, 'The place of animism within popular Buddhism in Cambodia: The example of the monastery', *Asian Folklore Studies,* 47 (1988): 35–41.
10 M. Giteau, *Le Bornage Rituel des Temples Bouddhiques au Cambodge* (Paris: École Francaise d'Extrême-Orient, 1969).

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The structure of this nine-unit system reproduces that of the mandala – the model according to which Southeast Asian cosmological topography was traditionally arranged.[11] The mandala pattern is found in designs, diagrams and drawings but also in the architecture of great buildings such as the Bayon and Angkor Wat. Throughout Southeast Asia this pattern recurs historically in the ordering of the cosmos and the structuring of space and polities. In terms of political relations, the mandala system comprised an influential centre surrounded by relatively autonomous satellites, whose tributary leaders were given remarkable liberty as long as they paid their tributes and provided armed forces when required.[12] Political domination in this 'galactic'system did not mean dissolving or extinguishing the sovereignty of conquered units, but rather of incorporating them *in totum* into a hierarchical system through the logic of encompassment.[13]

The nine *sīma* pits of Cambodian Buddhist temples play on this ancient pattern and its satellite units. The temple area that is enclosed by the *sīma* is theoretically beyond the reach of secular power. The monastic order was largely immune to secular jurisdiction, coexisting with the ruler in an 'ambiguous symbiosis'. The power of the ruler was restricted through the application of Buddhist ethics,[14] and monks therefore embodied the authority to morally moderate secular power. The mandala-patterned local world would have fallen under the influence rather than control of an analogously structured, encompassing centre.

From the end of the Angkorian period until the mid-nineteenth century, the land of Cambodia was considered the property of ancestral spirits (*neak ta*) by people in general, rulers and populace alike. Consequently, the king could not exactly be said to own the land – rather, he 'consumed' it (*saoyreach* in royal language), much as he was said to 'consume his subjects'.[15] Resources that were extracted from rural people remained within the country, and were used for the construction of ostentatious dwellings, for patronising literati, craftspeople and artists and for reinvestment in merit-making donations to pagodas. This use of resources kept flowing through a nationwide system that provided social security and education. 'The notion of long-term wealth accumulation was alien to this way of being.'[16] The quasi-egalitarian

11 S. J. Tambiah, *World conqueror: A study of Buddhism and polity in Thailand against a historical background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

12 M. Stuart-Fox, 'Conflicting conceptions of the state: Siam, France and Vietnam in the late nineteenth century', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 82, 2 (1994): 135–44.

13 B. Kapferer, *Legends of people myths of state: Violence, intolerance, and political culture in Sri Lanka and Australia* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988). See introduction for clarification of 'logic of encompassment'.

14 I. Harris, ed., *Buddhism and politics in twentieth century Asia* (London: Continuum, 1999).

15 D. Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian past* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), p. 106. The sense of the term 'consume' here should not be confused with that of consumer culture. In this context it refers to the levying of revenue from the land by royalty or governors (David Chandler, personal communication. I am also grateful to Bruce Lockhart for pointing out the parallel with '*kin muang*' in Thailand). I. Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*: *History and practice* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 49 f. 4. Also notes the similarity between the Cambodian and Thai connections between food and governance.

16 I. Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 50.

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communities of monks were awarded authority and legitimacy through popular support and they enjoyed considerable autonomy in a decentralised ecclesiastical structure. Village monasteries functioned as fields of merit, centres for wealth redistribution, storehouses of texts and seats of learning. Rural monks were strong protectors of local tradition and a powerful source of resistance against French colonial and monastic modernising reforms of the last century. Accordingly, the eight *sīma* stones recall a relatively autonomous moral world whose integrity was to some extent protected from rulers.

At the ground-breaking ceremony that is held to seal the *sīma*, the large, ritually prepared stones or 'roots' are lowered into the holes, which are then filled in. At some temples a demarcation is made above ground by a decorated stone 'leaf'. Thus the sacred territory of the temple is demarcated from the less sacred space of the rest of the monastery grounds. The monastery is then in turn demarcated with an enclosure – generally a wall – that ritually marks it off from the profane world beyond. This stone-planting is a peculiarly regional rite since it is not found in either India or Sri Lanka.[17] In Cambodia, as in Thailand, the main pit is dug in the centre of the ordination hall, in front of the presiding Buddha image. Over each of the nine pits a spherical stone is suspended from a beam by rattan. The stone is about the size of a human head, though the one for the central pit is usually slightly larger than the others. At the climax of the ceremony, a layperson at each of the peripheral pits slashes the rattan with a machete and releases the stone into the pit. At the central pit, this part of the rite used to be carried out by a temple lay officiant, *achar*, or a member of royalty. Nowadays, for the central pit this role is usually taken by a high-ranking official, *neak thom*.

Wright suggests that the *sīma* ceremony is a survival of a much earlier, pre-Buddhist rite that has strong local anchorage; he makes a compelling case for an association between the consecration of the *sīma* in its Buddhist-domesticated contemporary form with a prehistoric earth cult in which human sacrifice seems to have figured – a suggestion that is supported by the felling of the human head-sized stones. Wright proposes that the advent of Buddhism simply reformulated and 'tamed' an ancient system of exchange over the threshold between the world of the living and the world of the non-living; violent human or animal sacrifice was replaced by merit-making.[18] Perhaps the original violence of sacrifice is echoed in the behaviour of Khmer who today attend ground-breaking ceremonies and make offerings of their own blood by cutting a finger and allowing it to bleed over the *sīma* pits in order to gather strength.

As a threshold to the underworld, the *sīma* may be understood to mark out the border of the civilised world or *srok*, keeping it distinct from yet enabling ordered interaction with the wild[19] (*prei*, lit. 'forest'), potentially destructive/potentially creative powers of the universe beyond. The pagoda is thus both a portal to and a barrier against untamed powers. By enabling access to but by also domesticating the wilderness, the pagoda ensures fertility and preservation.

17 M. Wright, 'Sacrifice and the underworld: Death and fertility in Siamese myth and ritual', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 78, 1 (1990): 43–54.
18 Ibid.
19 See Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian past*, p.77.

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In parts of Southeast Asia, the mandala and 'galactic polity' that the *sīma* recalls have been profoundly affected by modernisation and nation-building. In Thailand, for instance, more competitive, pluralistic cultural forms have been brought to bear upon the totalising constructs of earlier polities; competing visions of authority have arisen hand in hand with increased wealth, modern education and mass communication.[20] Cambodia's encounter with modernity, however, has taken quite a different course, initially through communism[21] and presently through internationally directed democratisation and economic liberalisation. The rural poor can hardly be said to have become genuinely participant in the processes of modernisation. Instead, security continues to be pursued in Cambodia through reference to past forms of order.[22] The pagoda may therefore still offer hope of restoring local microcosms of a universal order, in which the ideal ruler – the righteous king – is supposed to ensure the proper relationship between ordered life and the forces of chaos.

Transactions with the dead: p'chum ben

The symbolic charge of the sacred perimeter is clearly manifested in the Festival of *P'chum ben* – the Festival of the Dead. It is perhaps only when the sanctity of the threshold between the living and the dead – the *sīma* – is ensured that infernal powers can be pacified and regulated. *P'chum ben* is celebrated in pagodas throughout the country, with local variations, and takes place in accordance with the lunar calendar in September–October, beginning on the full moon of the month of *photrobot* and continuing throughout the moon's wane. The 14 days are known as *kan ben* (taking the balls of glutinous rice), while the final day is formally known as *p'chum ben* (gathering of the balls of rice). During this festival, the gates of the underworld are opened and the spirits of the dead are given a fortnight's release. These spirits, conceived of as hungry ghosts, are thus enabled to commune with the world of the living and beseech their living relatives to feed and care for them through the intermediaries of Buddhist monks.

The celebration, which marks the end of the rainy season and the beginning of the season of growth and fruition, enables the living to transfer merit, in the form of the specially prepared rice balls, to the ghosts of those who have died with stores of bad *kamma*. Some of their suffering may be alleviated in this way, and their sojourn in the realms of Hell might even be shortened. Khmer people reason that since one cannot know the fate of one's ancestors, a general donation should be made on their behalf, even though they may reside in a Heavenly realm. On the final day of the fortnight, people gather at the temple to distribute the rice to the spirits by throwing it over the *sīma* of the *vīhara*, out into the surrounding area where the spirits have gathered. This is conducted as day breaks and afterwards the families return home to prepare offerings

20 J. Schober, 'The Theravada Buddhist engagement with modernity in Southeast Asia: Whither the social paradigm of the Galactic polity?', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 26, 2 (1995): 307–25.
21 J. Marston, 'Democratic Kampuchea and the idea of modernity', in *Cambodia emerges from the past*, ed. J. Ledgerwood and J. Vijghen (DeKalb: Centre for Southeast Asia Publications, Northern Illinois University, 2002), pp. 38–59.
22 Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian past*; A. Thompson. 'The suffering of kings: Substitute bodies, healing, and justice in Cambodia', in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, ed. J. Marston and E. Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 91–112.

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of food on a straw mat with which they ask their ancestors for protection. The festival ends with the return of the ghosts to their infernal home, often by floating their symbolic representations on a hollowed banana tree stem along the river, back to the underworld. The gates of Hell then close upon them once again.

This ritual is centrally concerned with the transfer of spiritual merit through the medium of the rice balls (*ben*), mediated by monks who are considered the primary source of merit. These activities fall within a general moral economy of giving within Theravada-Buddhist cosmology, an 'economy of merit', which differs fundamentally from the utilitarianism of consumer economies. This system works such that accumulated merit, achieved particularly through generosity, determine a person's position in the Buddhist great chain of beings.

There are close associations between the Khmer celebration of merit-transfer to the dead and themes of prosperity and regeneration of the *srok* (nation, but also civilised world). Porée-Maspero[23] has described how the royal version of this festival includes images of crocodiles and *nagas* (the untamed serpent of the underworld) and how it is also the occasion for consecration of a new Buddha statue. The royal rite is concluded 24 hours earlier than those in the rest of the country, invoking the spirits of the dead and asking for the protection of both the king and all the inhabitants of the kingdom. Alongside this, the various Brahmanic deities are also invoked to mark the end of their rainy season retreat – to welcome their powers back to the world.

It has been reported that in the villages around Phnom Penh, the same day that *p'chum ben* is celebrated, a celebration is also held in honour of the earth deity, here known as *Thvay Brah Phum*. Just as offerings to the dead were made on a straw mat in the home, so now offerings made to the deity and prayers are offered to ensure a good harvest. Similarly, reports of buffalo racing being held in association with *p'chum ben* have been made[24] – the racing being explicitly associated with bringing fertility to the fields.

The role of Khmer monks as domesticators of potentially dangerous spirits, such as the *bray* spirits of those who died a violent death,[25] or the tutelary *neak ta*,[26] has already been noted as has Buddhism's role in harnessing power for the sustenance and welfare of the Khmer universe.[27]A laywoman I asked about *p'chum ben* told me that those people who are alive today and who steal, act violently and disrupt social order are the reborn, restless spirits of those who died under the Khmer Rouge regime. Even corrupt officials and brutal leaders can be explained in this way. Since those who died under the Khmer Rouge regime were not cremated in the presence of monks their souls are not controllable. The portal to the underworld, it seems, remains open for these souls; disorder is erupting in the midst of society and the *sīma* can no longer reliably

23 E. Porée-Maspero, *Cérémonies des douze mois: Fêtes annuelles Cambodgiennes* (Paris: *Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur la Civilisation Khmere*, 1985).
24 S. Bou, 'An athletic offering to the world of the spirits', *Phnom Penh Post*, Phnom Penh, 20 October 2001.
25 A. Choulean, 'La communauté rurale Khmère du point du vue du sacré, *Journal Asiatique,* 278, 1–2 (1990): 135–54.
26 A. Forest, *Le Culte des Genies Protecteurs au Cambodge* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992).
27 F. Bizot, *Le figuier à cinq branches: Recherche sur le Bouddhisme Khmer* (Paris: École Francaise D'Éxtrême-Orient, 1976).

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keep them at bay. The rapid revival of *p'chum ben* since the end of the war may be understood in part as an attempt to reassert the distinction between the realm of the dead and that of the living, and thus to mollify the country's traumatic history.

Buddhism is certainly undergoing rapid regeneration in Cambodia today. However, this is taking place in an unprecedented historical setting in which the means of differentiating the sacred and the profane, such as the *sīma*, are being subjected to entirely new pressures.

Dollarising the pagoda

With the rapid rebuilding of temples taking place in present-day Cambodia, ground-breaking ceremonies are frequent, but the re-establishment of order that they might predicate is now framed by new factors. In Giteau's descriptions of the ground-breaking ceremonies she observed in the sixties, the villagers themselves were the main providers of the necessary resources.[28] She noted that the public donations, including money, were placed in the *sīma* pits as done today, and that the money could be removed by the pagoda committee members for use to defray the costs of the ceremony. No mention is made, however, of officials or of the use of donations for pagoda 'development'. Nowadays, the pagoda has become the hub not only of local communities but of diasporic communities, spread across the globe; a great deal of the economic support provided to temples is now coming from overseas Khmer, or the urban wealthy within Cambodia. The monkhood is suffering from a lack of religious expertise, scholarship and legitimacy after its losses in the decades of disruption, and villagers as well as monks are now facing poverty, a competitive market economy and widespread commodification of culture. Against this background, ground-breaking ceremonies have become important scenes for the enactment of a new kind of political theatre in which power is demonstrated and relations of economic dependency regimented.[29]

Reconstructed pagodas in Cambodia today vary greatly, though all are affected by the monetarisation of the religious economy. Some are actively involved in the community and provide a variety of facilities to their constituency. Many restored pagodas have once again become important centres of cultural activity for festivals, death rituals and merit-making. The annual festival of the dead, *p'chum ben* and the *kathin* ceremony, when parishioners make merit by donating new robes to the monks, are both very popular. Moreover, inside some pagodas, efforts are made to heal the disorders that have so brutally disrupted Khmer culture.[30]

At some of the pagodas I have observed, focus is upon the study of Pali and the Buddhist texts, while others promote meditation practice. Some pagodas, particularly in poor rural areas, have only a small handful of monks, little food and almost no

28 Giteau, *Le Bornage Rituel des Temple Bouddhiques au Cambodge.*
29 See Hughes, 'The politics of gifts', who argues that 'patron-client relations', which were formerly relatively flexible and negotiable, have become fixed and immutable since today's patrons hold the menacing power to dispossess the poor.
30 D. Bertrand, 'A medium possession practice and its relationship with Cambodian Buddhism', in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, ed. J. Marston and E. Guthrie (2005), pp. 150–69.

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possibility of studying or of providing for their community. There are also pagodas at which corruption and embezzlement by monks has been reported.[31] Some pagodas are now carrying out agendas set and sponsored by international non-governmental organisations, which can hazard religious legitimacy if monks become steered more by a secular, development agenda or foreign money than by their religious vows. Urban pagodas in Phnom Penh are generally packed with young monks, many of whom have acquired ropy reputations as fast-living young men who are simply exploiting the pagodas for free accommodation or quite other purposes than practising Buddhism.

One new rural pagoda, currently still under construction in a village in northwestern Cambodia, which I shall call Wat Thmei, takes in local youths as novices, employs locals for construction work, provides evening tuition in Khmer language for the village children and healing and blessings for visitors from near and far. The local villagers are small landholders or wage labourers, living off their rice, fishing or water-cress gathering. Few are able to contribute much money to the pagoda, but the head monk has worked tirelessly to attract donations and with these has developed a lively community centre with some 18 novices and monks in residence. There are also several renunciant women living on the premises and a stream of laypeople who come to stay at the pagoda for healing, and who make small donations or provide services.

At Wat Thmei, construction is being financed predominantly by Khmer American supporters who either wire money from America or make donations when they visit. The pagoda committee members explained that because these people are living abroad, they want to invest in concrete structures so that they can see how their money is spent. The growing interest in financing ostentatious temple buildings may be explained in part by a general monetarisation and commodification of culture, but also in part by the climate of mistrust, greed and corruption. A building provides some kind of concrete guarantee that the money has actually been invested in the pagoda. An elderly layman from a village in Battambang district reminisced:

> In the past we didn't know what the dollar was, or what the US was. Everything was developed by the local people … [who had a] … strong relationship with each other … Many people would go and build the pagoda by delivering sand, logs, earth, providing food, providing water … People in the past didn't like to use money to build the pagoda but they like to help each other … My parents always provided sacks of rice to the people building the pagoda and sometimes my parents went to join in the building work because they had a lot of free time after farming their rice.

Where once villagers would have donated labour or rice to their temple, the pagoda has now become absorbed into the market place where labour and goods are traded in exchange relations. The moral dubiousness of this new, market-driven world is a recurrent theme, as the elderly man expresses – the accuracy of his nostalgic memories being perhaps less interesting than his critique of contemporary values and his portrayal of a lost moral order:

31 E. Guthrie, 'Buddhist temples and Cambodian politics', in *People and the 1998 national elections in Cambodia*, ed. J. Vijghen (Phnom Penh: Experts for Community Research, 2002), pp. 59–74.

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> In the past, people made donations into the holes by putting needles, thread, money, cloth and things that they brought from home. They didn't buy things from the market … In our modern society people like to buy offerings like pens, books, mirrors, combs … When people have many things to choose from to make donations with, they will not have the commitment to making merit, they will just compete for merit. They want to show off their donations to others … People in the past were afraid of *bon/bap* [merit and sin] so no one needed to guard the holes and make sure nobody stole donations from them … and everything was buried, not just the stone. People in the present time don't think about *bon/bap* but only about *loy* [money].

Some older people from other parts of Cambodia have complained to me that the burgeoning of new, colourful pagoda structures creates a competitive religious ethos that goes against Cambodian tradition and against Buddhist principles. One well-educated Phnom Penh woman showed me the rural pagoda she was supporting, approximately half an hour's drive from the city, where the monks live in simple wooden housing and walk barefoot. There, she said, the colours on the *vihāra* are muted and gentle in style and the monks live simply. She complained bitterly about the gaudy style of many of the new temple constructions along the road back into Phnom Penh, saying that Cambodians 'no longer know their own culture'.

The moral economy of giving and the sīma *ceremony*

Since 1993, when the new constitution awarded Cambodian monks the right to vote, their role has also become sharply politicised and many pagodas now bear party colours. The village pagoda offers a platform for political posturing by those seeking votes in rural communities. The inclusion of monks in the procedures of democracy also means that politicians are anxious to control particularly those monks with grass-roots popularity and leadership qualities. The pagoda may offer an avenue to education for poor, ambitious young men from the countryside but it may also become a hothouse of political foment. Conflicts between these disenchanted youths and the authorities can be highly charged. Articles in the Phnom Penh Post in 1998 described how activist monks had dared to defy the authorities by participating in street protests, supposedly against violence,[32] and how police had responded by beating and reputedly even murdering monks following the alleged political murder of a monk on 7 September of that same year.[33] In October 2003 12 monks in a Phnom Penh pagoda were threatened with expulsion after supporting the Sam Rainsy party in the national elections.[34] The poverty and desperation of this new generation of monks, however, also makes them easy prey to co-optation by the wealthy. All these factors influence people's perceptions of monks and their expectations of them as providing a morally autonomous, politico-spiritual barrier between the local world and outside threats. Though some Cambodians feel that the devastation Khmer Buddhism has suffered may

32 S. Chea and J. Eckhardt, 'Activist monks dare to defy authorities', *Phnom Penh Post*, Phnom Penh, 20 July 1998.

33 L. McGrew, 'Buddhism and beatings', *Phnom Penh Post*, 22 July 1998; L. McGrew, 'Pagoda politics: A view from the temples', *Phnom Penh Post*, 22 July 1998; S. Pok and B. Moorthy, 'Monks walk a tightrope between peace and politics', *Phnom Penh Post*, 22 July 1998.

34 J. Frommer, 'Wat threatens pro-SRP monks', *Phnom Penh Post*, 21 December 2003.

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be irreparable, many still look earnestly towards their religion as the only hope of recreating order and cohesion in their splintered world.

The *sīma* ceremony distils the way in which the new religio-political economy is impacting upon local worlds. The numerous ground-breaking ceremonies taking place to mark the erection of new *vihāras* are great social events. The festivities take place over several days. The ceremony I witnessed in Battambang began with the deep holes being dug and then decorated with a roof structure and fence and slung with a large cloth that fell inside the hole. Visitors began streaming to the pagoda to make offerings into the holes, purchasing small packages to drop in containing combs, mirrors, notebooks, pens and so on – various symbols of success and beauty in a future life. On top of this, cash donations were dropped into the holes, including the ninth hole at the centre of the sanctuary. The stream of visitors came from far a-field, bringing with it tradespeople selling trinkets and snacks, fortune-tellers, pick-pockets and beggars. At night the atmosphere became intense, with crowds pushing their way along the clockwise circumambulations of the *vihāra* before entering to make their final donation before the shrine and offer prayers. On the final day of the ceremony, the *sīma* stones, which had been standing at intervals within the monastery grounds before groups of chanting monks from this pagoda and others, were felled into the holes to close them and ritually 'plant' the sacred limits. The chopping of the rattan for the main hole was performed by Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng, accompanied by the district governor, police commissioner and other influential officials. The ceremony was overseen by both military and police officers. The district governor opened with a speech in which he declared his loyalty to the government:

> In the past, I never thought about ground breaking ceremonies, because our country was in the civil war. Pol Pot did not allow people to make merit or build pagodas. But now people have survived the civil war and they are happy to make merit. All thanks to the efforts of the government.

A member of the pagoda committee then made a speech, noting publicly that the pagoda had now been able to construct a new funeral room at a cost of over US$10,000, aided by the support received from His Excellency Sar Kheng. Sar Kheng himself then announced that he had been at a ground-breaking ceremony the previous day and was due to attend another the following day:

> I am often invited by pagoda committees and local authorities to be the chairman for their ground-breaking ceremonies. Even though I am busy trying to solve the political deadlock in my country, I still come to join this ceremony. If a pagoda has an internal conflict between the *achar*, head monk and committee nothing in the pagoda can be developed. It is the same for the whole country. If all political parties start negotiating to find a solution, then we will have no problem … I am disappointed that some political parties do not cooperate with the government to find a solution to this deadlock.

At the end of his speech, Sar Kheng donated 10,000 riel each to 43 gathered teachers, 1,000 riel for each student in attendance and 3,000,000 riel as a donation for the main hole in the middle of the pagoda. He then awarded gold medals to seven people, including one monk, and a further 14 silver medals, six bronze and 33 certificates of admiration. Finally, he inaugurated the funeral room before returning to

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cut the rattan and seal the *sīma*. Political power and its attendant propaganda thus take up a novel position, right at the core of the sacred space of the pagoda.

Those I have spoken to about the meaning of the *sīma* and the ground-breaking ceremony have spontaneously constructed their narratives around a common core concerning the notion of sacrifice.[35] An elderly woman in nearby Battambang explained that when she was young, ground-breaking ceremonies were rare events, but she remembered seeing how people offered valuable items. She recalled that it was forbidden to remove anything that was offered into the holes and for this reason people were careful to keep their children from falling in since it would be taboo to pull them up again and they would have to be buried along with all the other offerings. The elderly woman noted that after the Khmer Rouge period, people would dig around the pagodas in the hopes of finding the treasure they knew should be there in a desperate struggle to survive. The woman's narrative is threaded on a symbolic motif portraying how the sacred boundary was literally disembowelled and the values buried deep within it removed, scattered and consumed.

An elderly nun told of how her father used to say that in his time the pagodas had never put a white cloth into the *sīma* holes. Instead the donations had simply fallen to the bottom of the hole and a small fence was always built around the hole to prevent people from falling in. He had also explained to her that the donations should be buried forever and never removed and she believed there was evidence for this in the fact that so many instances had occurred of people digging up treasures around the pagodas – gold, silver, plates, pots and kettles:

> After the Pol Pot regime some people tried to dig round the temples in order to look for something and sometimes they could get gold or silver; this shows that in the past people liked to bury all of their donations in the ground after the ceremony.

During the reconstruction of Wat Norea on the outskirts of Battambang town, she said, the head monk had ordered people to dismantle the old temple and in doing so they had dug up many donations such as gold rings and silver plates. The elderly nun then reflected on the changing attitude towards these donations:

> In our modern society they don't like to bury donations in the ground because they think they cannot make a profit this way. But if they sell the donations they will be able to develop the pagoda … I only think that the pagoda committee shouldn't take everything out of the holes. Something should remain buried … They should keep something that is valuable in the ground, like the people in the past buried their donations in the ground for the people in the present.

The matter is not, however, as simple as just making sure that valued items are offered permanently out of respect for the pagoda and in an effort to preserve ideals and order for future generations. The act and symbols, the nun went on to explain, are powerless unless those who engage with them practise the virtues with which they are

35 Buddhism attaches great value to the notion of selfless giving, as exemplified in the Vessantara tale of one of the Buddha's previous lives, when the Buddha demonstrated his selflessness by giving away his wife and children.

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associated. On the final day of the ground-breaking ceremony a symbolic thread (*khsae*) is strung around the perimeter of the *vihāra* and when the thread is finally cut, people scramble and compete with each other to catch hold of a piece with which to ensure themselves access to the protective power of the boundary. The thread is believed to protect against misfortune or sickness. The nun had a sage comment on this:

> Khmer people think that the thread from the *sīma* could bring them good luck and protect them when they have a problem, and protect them from disease. Some people even end up arguing in their rush to get a piece of the thread. I think it is useless to challenge each other to get the thread because it will only protect *neak meun sel* (people who follow precepts) but it doesn't protect bad people. Anyone can get the thread of the *sīma* but not all of them can get protection. Nowadays we have a lot of thread but we always curse people, we are boastful, we don't pay respect to each other and we often make trouble so one day we will have doom and that is the day that we are beaten by other people. If we follow precepts, the thread will be able to protect us. We must be humble, respect older people, not look down on other people, not abuse the rights of other people.

In stories such as this, the *sīma* and its powers are narratively connected to the idea that protection from danger and disorder depends upon upholding a familiar cultural universe. The nun explained: 'When we believe in something, we must pay respect to it … when we believe in *sīma* we have to follow the precepts because the *sīma* was made by monks.' She elaborated by saying that thread from the *sīma* ceremony gives only temporary *sok* (contentment, well-being) but to ensure happiness in future life/lives we must attend to our *kamma* – the moral account according to which we shape our destiny. The sacrifice of desire and selfhood informs the values by which Khmer identify themselves as Khmers.[36]

Commentaries such as these draw together the notions of self-sacrifice, morality and Buddhism into a symbolic cluster, manifested in the pagoda *sīma*, which signifies protection from dangerous powers but also their propitiation in the service of continuance of the world. Several monks have told me how the pagodas that they come from still have treasures or amulets buried beneath the entrances to the monastery grounds and how these protect and empower the pagoda – the centre of civilisation – and its inhabitants and congregation.

Appropriation of the sīma stones

Villagers' assessments of what is happening to the pagoda capture a consistent theme of moral disintegration concomitant with the mono-directional penetration of 'power', both economic and political, into the sacred space of the pagoda. This inverts the ideal, mandala pattern of order in which 'power' is concentrated in the centre and emanates outwards.[37] The elderly layman cited earlier mentioned, as have many older

36 A. Hansen, 'Khmer identity and Theravada Buddhism,' in *History, Buddhism and new religious movements in Cambodia*, ed. J. Marston and E. Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), pp. 40–62.
37 A. L. Hinton, *Why did they kill? Cambodia in the shadow of genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

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people, that the interference of *loak thom* (alt. *neak thom*, 'big men', high-ranking officials) into the pagodas is a new development:

> Not only did we not get support from the US in the past but we didn't have any support from *loak thom*. In the past, *loak thom* were not interested in supporting the pagoda by making large donations because the support of the local people was enough. In the past the *loak thom* only liked making donations to Buddhist ceremonies because they liked to get merit but they didn't use their money for building pagodas because they didn't want to interfere with the local people.

An elderly *achar* at a temple in Battambang explained that the importance of the *sīma* thread (*khsae*) for laypeople has increased greatly in recent times:

> People right now want to live in happiness but they don't know where to look for happiness. That's why they try to get protection from the *sīma*. People don't want to study dhamma or practice *sel* (precepts) but they want the *khsae*[38] to protect them.

Like the nun cited earlier, an *achar* explained that people mistakenly believe the *sīma* holds power, but in fact it holds nothing and it makes no difference whether things are buried in the holes or not because protection is achieved through the practice of good manners. The *sīma* is a manifestation of this, but without the upholding of correct values, it is worthless and powerless. However, it could be argued that the power of the *sīma* is perhaps not so much dissipating as being co-opted in the service of a new world order, providing for the tastes of the powerful at the expense of the poor. The *achar* commented upon the way in which *loak thom* are joining the scramble for *khsae* threads with increasing vigour and in growing numbers, but his moral condemnation is stark:

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

The newly rich and powerful support the pagoda in exchange for good publicity and recognition. This is quite in keeping with traditional patterns of legitimacy seeking.[39] Nowadays, however, merit-making by political actors appears to be less about support of a relatively autonomous cultural entity, and more about the annexation of the village world. Ironically, perhaps, this process of penetration takes place at the invitation of locals themselves. At Wat Thmei, an official from the district office of the Ministry of Religion and Cults in a casual discussion related the following:

> I have the power to make certain decisions about the pagoda, but I trust the head monk so I let him manage most things according to his plan … This place is not yet a *wat* but it

38 It is possible that the *achar* was deliberately playing on the ambiguity of the word *khsae*, which is also used to refer to 'strings' of influential, social relationships that can be mobilised for protection.
39 E. Guthrie, 'Buddhist temples and Cambodian politics', in *People and the 1998 national elections in Cambodia*, ed. J. Vijghen (Phnom Penh: Experts for Community Research, 2002), pp. 59–74.

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is just an *asram* because it hasn't been recognized by the Ministry's Provincial officials, but the Provincial officials don't dare to stop the construction work because the pagoda is supported by many people … I don't go to see those officials very often any more to try and persuade them because we have our own way to force them to register our pagoda officially.

In June 2006 the communal elections will be held and the political parties will need to gather votes so we will take the opportunity to register our pagoda during the campaigning. If no political candidate can help us during the commune elections, we will wait until 2007 because in 2008 we will have the national elections so all the parties will be campaigning throughout the country. All the parties like to visit people and if the people are holding any large ceremonies like ground-breaking ceremonies the parties will compete with one another to attend in order to appear in public and attract votes. I think our pagoda will be completed within two years and then we must have a ground-breaking ceremony for the *sīma*.

I have talked to the head monk about which party official to invite and I have asked him to think carefully about the long-term benefits that each party might provide for the pagoda. For myself, I think we cannot avoid inviting Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng, because he is a high-ranking CPP [Cambodian People's Party] official but also a parliamentarian for Battambang. We could invite another official but they must be from the CPP because the CPP is the biggest party and it has many officials among the people that the other parties don't have, and plenty of networks in the villages throughout the country. The CPP is the strongest.

I want to invite the high-ranking official from CPP but that doesn't mean that I follow the CPP. I just want the pagoda to get support and protection from the CPP. As you see, all the village chiefs are CPP, almost all the commune chiefs are CPP, almost all the police and military police are CPP, all provincial governors are CPP, so why don't we invite them to attend our ceremony and get support from them? Since almost everything in the country is under the control of CPP we have to be flexible. If we don't invite CPP officials to attend the ceremony, that means they will ignore us for ever. The relationship between the pagoda and the local authorities will be cut off and if we have a problem they will not come to help us because we don't support them. If Mr Sar Kheng attends the ceremony, then our pagoda will become a recognized *wat* straight away because no one would dare oppose it … I just want to help the head monk become an officially recognized head monk who is approved by the Provincial head monk. I have petitioned many times already but they just refuse and tell me that the pagoda doesn't even have a land title.

Not far from this pagoda is another, larger and recently renovated pagoda that held its ground-breaking ceremony several months before the above conversation took place. The official remarked to my assistant on what had happened there. All sorts of high-ranking officials had been making donations in the run up to the ground-breaking ceremony but the head monk opted to invite Prince Ranariddh of the FUNCINPEC (French abbreviation for *Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif*, which translates to 'National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia') party to officiate at the ground-breaking. Local Cambodian People's Party members, including

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the commune chief, the district chief and police commissioners duly attended the event to see the prince in the flesh, but no police security was provided and the Cambodian People's Party officials were clearly disgruntled. Not long after the ground-breaking ceremony it became evident that donations had dried up. The pagoda became increasingly isolated in the village. The head monk's problems were apparently exacerbated by the fact that one of Prince Ranariddh's deputies asked if he could borrow money from the pagoda funds in order to make donations to other pagodas – a strategy wealthier Cambodian People's Party officials presumably would not have had to stoop to. The head monk obliged but was never repaid and the pagoda was left indebted after the expenses of the ground-breaking ceremony. The last I heard, one of the leading *achars* had resigned because of the financial difficulties the pagoda was facing. There was no recourse to powerful networks for help.

This is the politico-economic reality that villagers know they must navigate in order to survive. Impoverished villagers, lacking the resources to rebuild their pagodas while being keen to purchase the services and goods necessary to keep up with the general competition among temples, turn to wealthy donors for economic support and for political expediency. The trend for inviting mistrusted, morally bankrupt officials to officiate at ground-breaking ceremonies may be economically profitable or politically necessary, but it is costly in other ways. The *achar* cited earlier explained:

> High-ranking officials think that having a chance to cut the thread of the centre hole is lucky for them because not many people have a chance like that … Around 1992, I invited the Provincial Governor to join the ceremony to our wat and he was happy to be invited because he could appear in public and also have a chance to cut the *sīma* thread of the centre hole in the temple. He made a donation of 2 million Riel and the other officials gave 500,000 Riel each. The ceremony can make a lot of money when high-ranking officials join. When those officials went back, they took a lot of *sīma* thread because there was no one who dared to compete with them to get the thread in the temple. The governor shared the thread with his followers. I remember that the governor even asked to have the stick that carried the stone. The laypeople also asked for the sticks that had carried the stones but they didn't take a whole stick but broke the sticks into many small parts so that they could use the pieces as necklaces to put on their children and protect them from sickness.

Today's officials are portrayed as consuming the *sīma* symbols – the thread and the stick – for their own benefit and largely at the expense of the locals. As the boundary is perceived to be consumed by high-ranking officials, so too is the sanctity of the sacred centre within which it is called into question. An elderly villager gave the following account:

> When people are clever at making money, monks are also clever at making money, because monks come from laypeople. Now monks try to find ways to make money by inviting high-ranking officials to join their ceremonies. Pol Pot destroyed the morality of living in the pagoda so people stopped paying respect to each other and especially, they stopped fearing *bon/bap*. People now don't consider the pagoda as a respected place but they consider it a business place to make money.

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Danger, boundaries and the moral perils of exchange

Ever since Douglas published her seminal book *Purity and danger*,[40] the symbolic potency of boundaries has been a central theme of anthropological interest. Douglas brought attention to the way in which community, selfhood and meaning are structured with the help of classification systems; phenomena are organised and made distinct by creating clear boundaries between them: us/them, male/female, sacred/profane, inside/outside, good/evil, crop/weed and so on. That which transgresses these culturally constructed boundaries becomes 'matter out of place' – dirt, danger, violation – and it requires redress to maintain an ordered world. However, the risky enterprise of traversing boundaries is also necessary for perpetuation of social and physical life: eating, sexual intercourse, marriage, birth, death, trade relations, ceremonial exchange, gift-giving and so on. For intercourse over boundaries to be harmonious and civilised, though, the integrity of each of the parties must be maintained and the relationship negotiated according to a shared moral scheme.

In the Cambodian Buddhist context we have seen that a great amount of ritual attention is devoted to the maintenance of a boundary between the moral, civilised or tamed world of the pagoda and the profane and wild world outside its perimeter, between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In sum, the boundary may represent a familiar cultural form that was associated with security in the past and that may therefore promise hope of security for many Cambodians for the future. It once perpetuated and nourished cosmological and social order – a mandala – in the face of ever-present chaotic and potentially destructive powers. On the one hand, the boundary maintained integrity and autonomy and, on the other, it harmonised the structure of the sub-unit with the overall and superordinate structure of the cosmological totality.

Shifts in the morality of exchange relations, notions of giving and of sacrifice are intimately connected to historical shifts in relations of political and economic power.[41] Referring to the historical changes that took place in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, Parry notes that the urban and commercial expansion of the period entailed a progressive subversion of the autarky of the village community.[42] As in recent Cambodian history the medieval European village was characterised by production being primarily for use and for exchange within the local community. Medieval theorists criticised the use of money and trade by 'outsider' urbanites 'from the standpoint of this disappearing world of self-sufficiency and production for use'.[43]

Curtin, who has discussed changing trade relations in history, makes a pertinent observation of the divine career of the ancient Greek god Hermes, who was originally a god of boundaries and, since trade took place between communities at their boundaries, he later became the god of trade. Hermes, however, was less respected than other gods. With the increasing penetration of urban-based trade into the autonomous

40 Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966).
41 A. Kent, 'Divinity, miracles and charity in the Sathya Sai Baba movement of Malaysia', *Ethnos* 69, 1 (2004): 43–62.
42 J. Parry, 'On the moral perils of exchange', in *Money and the morality of exchange*, ed. J. Parry and M. Bloch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 64–93.
43 Ibid., p.84.

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world of the village, Hermes became known as not only a messenger but also as the god of merchants and a trickster and thief, 'a marginal god for people who were marginal to Greek society. Plato himself disliked trade, which, like other professions based on a search for profit, was hardly compatible with a life of virtue, as he understood it.'[44]

There are some interesting comparisons to make here with contemporary Cambodia, where the elite, now increasingly swept up into networks of exchange that extend beyond Cambodia's borders, are frequently considered by villagers to be swindlers and cheats. These new 'merchants' are often directly associated in people's minds with the exploitation of forest and other resources, including people. This process ultimately breaks down the sustainability and integrity of local worlds. The utilitarian ethic of personal profit-making that underlies these activities and the social positions of the exploiters conflict with traditional understandings of virtue and world order, particularly as they are expressed in Buddhist teachings. The powerful are breaking apart and consuming local worlds. Parallel with this is a new kind of speculation in symbolism, exemplified by the appropriation of *khsae* thread by powerful people. This demoralises the *sīma*, which becomes reconstituted in the popular imagination as a protector of material values rather than of sacrifice and merit-making.

Virtue, as rendered in the Buddhist teachings and the five precepts that all Khmer Buddhists are supposed to observe, is promoted as merit-making. The economy of merit is more or less diametrically opposed to the economy of profit and the two systems stand in tension with one another. Today's villagers are poor and therefore dependent upon the donations made by the rich, often assumed to be ill-won. In more recent history, with the mandala system disrupted by colonialism, modernisation, war and now democratisation, villages and their local economies are no longer autarkies under the influence of powerful 'centres' but have increasingly become dependencies under their control. At the same time, the new breed of powerful, consumerist patron is often deeply mistrusted or feared. The elite in turn seem to be making away with the symbols by which the local universe is protected and sustained – recalling the fickle nature of Hermes and the ambiguities of all boundary concerns. The material presented above suggests that the new order is perceived to be undermining the integrity, both moral and economic, of a disappearing world. The misgivings of the eloquent elderly villager cited above are poignant:

> After the Pol Pot regime, we have dollars and many supporters from foreign countries, but local people don't support their pagodas like they did in the past … I think that money can change everything, especially Khmer tradition.

The threat to rural Khmer culture that the people cited in this paper identify is not simply to do with the trauma of the past. Nor should it be understood as a threat to a previous, timeless and changing cultural entity. It seems, rather, that the threat of unrestrained greed that has come in the wake of conflict but hand in hand with the development mission, is threatening to disrupt the very logic by which the Khmer universe remains, for Cambodians, recognisably Khmer. Villagers' abilities to maximise

44 P. D. Curtin, *Cross-cultural trade in world history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 6.

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their security and reconstitute a familiar cultural universe – in which the pagoda plays such an indispensable role both in the material and spiritual sense – is in the balance.

Conclusion

Khmer Buddhism has played a crucial role in Cambodian culture for centuries both in the royal court and widely throughout the country. Not only has the pagoda historically provided a variety of social services, healing and moral order for communities, but the *sangha* (brotherhood of monks) was formerly a formidable power that held Khmer identity and culture intact despite repeated waves of aggression from foreign invaders. It was involved in ordering the world and occupied a unique position as moral authority and mediator of power between ruler and ruled, human and nature, living and dead.

Although the power of the monkhood was eroded to some degree by colonialism and modernising reform in the last century, this paper has concentrated on the devastating effects of more recent historical change. The integrity of the religious system was deeply rent by the Khmer Rouge and the revolutionary attempt to break with all vestiges of past culture. Knowledge and experience were lost in the vast numbers of monks, books and pagodas that were destroyed. Today, as the international community pours money into the reconstruction of secular institutions in Cambodia, Cambodians themselves are investing remarkable energy and resources into reconstructing their religion. This religious renewal testifies to the resilience and self-reliance of Khmer villagers in particular, and also to the central importance of religion in Khmer life. However, the question is whether Buddhism is regenerating or degenerating. The decimation of Buddhism in Cambodia that took place in the latter half of the seventies has left the sacred, integrative moral centre vulnerable to the disintegrative power of a global market of goods and ideas. The Cambodian elite now seeks legitimacy and sustenance in a consumer-driven global arena and it simultaneously escapes moral regulation by a strong Cambodian *sangha* that has firm popular anchorage. As one Phnom Penh intellectual phrased it, 'Cambodian leaders today are like a hot-air balloon, just lifting off. The people don't support them. They just cling on so they won't get left behind.'

The *sīma* boundary may be understood as once having 'contained' a Khmer universe. It distinguished a morally ordered and civilised world from the potentially chaotic powers beyond. The pagoda boundary still recalls the ancient mandala system, in which geopolitical, architectural and spiritual patterns echoed one another in hierarchical series. In the mandala system, cosmological order was reproduced at every level of the hierarchy, each level being encompassed – as a sovereign unit with a sacred centre – by the divine agency of the ideal ruler. The *sīma* rites also suggest a link with sacrificial propitiation of the Earth deity, in whose hands lie fertility and prosperity. The proper ordering of relationships involved both the social and the natural environment. Although the ancient world of the Khmers was certainly never perfect, harmonious or unchanging, it was perhaps coherent – the autonomy, integrity and prosperity of the local world being envisaged as sustained by the *sīma*. Today, protection can no longer be promised by demarcating sacred space and distinguishing this from secular power and greed. On the contrary, survival means inviting consumer politics right into the sacred core.

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The remarks made by informants cited in this paper contain a keen sense of the dissolution of civilisation and moral order. Their commentaries are interspersed with a resigned critique of the monetarisation of the *sīma* ceremony, of the transformation of merit-making into profit-making, of the dissociation of the *sīma* thread from the Khmer code of behaviour and propriety it has stood for. In their words, such demoralisation leads inevitably towards Hell. Patronisation of temples by the powerful, to gather divine power and moral legitimacy, is nothing new in Cambodia but it is now taking place within the framework of a new political economy and against the background of a seriously morally and intellectually weakened *sangha*. In Cambodia, monks may be losing their ability to check power in the interests of their rural congregations since they themselves are now vulnerable to manipulation by powerful others. The commentaries offered by the Cambodians cited in this paper betray the distress that so many Cambodians feel today over what they perceive to be the dissolution of an intelligible Khmer world. This offers provocative counterpoint to the global culture of consumption and sheds a critical light upon the ideology of development that may inadvertently be contributing to the weakening of the *sangha* and the *sīma*.

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