

Death, Memory and Building: The Non-Cremation of a Cambodian Monk

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This article examines one case of the ceremonial preservation of a Buddhist monk's body in rural Cambodia. While consistent with Buddhist relic veneration traditions and regional death ritual patterns, the case shows local actors and conditions influencing practice. The study discusses whether there is a recent efflorescence of such practices in Cambodia and whether the 'post-socialist' moment has tended to foster their revival.

How is social memory shaped and reshaped by the treatment of corpses? What kind of consciousness is this, in which entire political orders are resignified by moving dead bodies around and reburying them? Are corpses an odd form of investment, whose value is realized by taking them from the vault and putting them back again? How is one to understand the political relation of the living to the dead – a problem central to anthropology? As these examples proliferate, it begins to seem that the science best suited to understanding post-socialism is necromancy, and anthropologists will be its scribes.

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This article represents a study of the ways villagers constructed the meaning of the ceremonial preservation of a former abbot's body at one rural Cambodian *wat* (temple). This practice is a long-standing tradition in Theravada Southeast Asia and in the immediate region where the *wat* is located. The larger Buddhist implications of similar practices have been considered by scholars interested in the nature of Buddhist relics, who have examined cases of great antiquity, largely in a Mahayana context. My primary concern in this particular instance, however, is with the ways that this practice has to do with the personal dynamic of the *wat* and represents a way of remembering and underlining links to the pre-1975 past of the village, drawing on the strength of those

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¹ Katherine Vedery, *What was socialism and what comes next* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 233.

links in the process of continuing to build *wat* and village life. The saliency of this practice may thus tell us something about the particular historical moment Cambodia is experiencing.

My first visit to Wat Tang Krasang, in Batheay district of Kampong Cham, was during the rainy season retreat in 1999. During the rainy season, residents of the *wat* woke up at 4 a.m. with the beating of a huge barrel drum on the front porch of the abbot's dormitory (*kodi*, pronounced 'kot'),² an unearthly loud and deep sound which seemed to resonate through one's whole body. Novices soon lit kerosene lamps and began practising their chants, and one by one the monks straggled toward the looming dark shape of the *preah vihear* (principal ritual centre),³ lighting their way in the dark with flashlights or burning incense. On most days, the early morning chanting in the *preah vihear* would take place with the front doors opened, facing eastward, and the chanting ushered in the first signs of dawn. Once the chanting was over, the novices and *bikkhu* would, one by one, bow in obeisance to the abbot and the second-ranking monk of the *wat* before leaving the building, still in the early light. Then, in order of rank, they filed behind the abbot to parade barefoot around the *preah vihear* three times. Then, in what was for me the most moving part of the ritual, the monks gathered in a loose cluster to chant in front of a *chetëy* directly to the northeast.⁴ This *chetëy* held the uncremated body of Ngun Son, the former abbot of the *wat* who had died the previous year.

Sherry Ortner, with implicit reference to Pierre Bourdieu, writes that 'practice is action considered in relation to structure'. That is to say, the theory of practice implies paying attention at once to communally held models and to the ways people negotiate their relation to these models in the real world.⁵ Here I would like to look at a practice which seems to reflect a wider usage in Southeast Asia and relates to recognized emic and etic models for the area, but which can also be appreciated in terms of the meanings it takes on in a specific village context and in the context of a particular historical moment.

Scholarly studies of funerary ritual inevitably return to the classic early twentieth-century work of Robert Hertz on secondary burial among the Dayaks of Borneo. Hertz' intention was to explore universal patterns – indeed he claimed that mummification followed general patterns which could be drawn from his study of secondary burial.⁶ However, his work may also suggest a regional pattern of prolonged funerary rites which could even extend to the practices of Theravada Southeast Asia. The practice of delaying the cremation of distinguished monks for long periods of time has been documented for different parts of the twentieth century in Burma and Thailand, as well as Cambodia. Charles Keyes wrote about Northern Thailand in the 1960s that 'the corpse decays (*nao*) although the process can be slowed to some extent by a sort of dehydrating method used for high status laity and members of the Sangha whose bodies will be kept for months or

2 There is no completely satisfactory transliteration system for Khmer. I use here the Franco-Khmer Transcription system, which produces the closest approximation to Khmer pronunciation, even though it results in Buddhist terminology being written differently from standard spellings.

3 '*Vihear*', following the Franco-Khmer Transcription system, closely represents the Khmer pronunciation of the term which in other Buddhist contexts might be written as '*vihara*'.

4 '*Chetëy*' is the Khmer term for stupa, sometimes written in English as '*cetiya*' or '*chedi*'.

5 Sherry Ortner, *High religion: A cultural and political history of Sherpa Buddhism* (New Delhi: Montital Banarsidas, 1992), p. 12.

6 Robert Hertz, *Death and the right hand*, tr. Rodney and Claudia Needham (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1960).

years before cremation'.⁷ Keyes also documented a much more extensive use of the practice in Northern Thailand than is found in Tang Krasang in a text written by Phra Kru Anusaranasasanakiarti, which Keyes later translated and annotated:

When a monk or novice passes away, instead of bathing his corpse with hot and cold water, as is done for corpses of householders, wax is taken to close the ears, eyes, nose and mouth, and two or three quarts of honey are taken and poured into the mouth (of the corpse). This honey protects the corpse from decaying since (in the past) there was no medicine which could be injected to prevent decay as there is today. The corpse (of a monk or novice) must be kept for a long time, for months or years. The corpse is wrapped thickly in clerical robes and then placed in a coffin when it has been finished. The corpse is placed for merit-making at the *wat*. . . . Whether the funeral for a monk or a novice is a large or small affair and whether the corpse is kept for a long time (before the funeral) depends on the importance of the deceased.⁸

In a more recent case, Alan Klima describes the preservation in rural Thailand of the teacher of the abbot of the *wat* where he was staying in the 1990s, giving emphasis to the use of the body as an object of meditation:

For some time after his death, Luang Bu Maha Tong's corpse was kept in a closed coffin. I slept beside and lived with the corpse, because it happened to be stored in the same room that I was housed in, when I wasn't staying in Luang Bu Sangwaan's room. Later they took out the corpse, which had been injected with formaldehyde, and put it on display under a glass case on board in the large meditation hall, which had been built in the shape of a ship. It is the tradition among meditation temples in central Thailand that the corpse of a respected teacher, instead of being cremated, is kept on display in an altar, as a relic and meditation object. I spent considerable time contemplating his corpse, the first sight of which was very startling: shrunken, black, all skin and bones, dried out and hollow, wisps of disintegrating hair falling over the shriveled skin of his cavernous face; long spindly fingers and long gray fingernails.⁹

Sometimes in these villages the bodies of several monks will be kept over time until there is a large-scale group cremation. While the descriptions above are all associated with village monks, most of the documentation of the extended preservation of monks' bodies concerns those who achieved national prominence, such as a famous meditating monk who died in 1959.¹⁰ This monk's followers created the Dhammakay movement in Thailand; his body still lies in state at Wat Paknam in Bangkok. One must be careful in

7 Charles Keyes, 'From death to birth: Ritual process and Buddhist meaning in Northern Thailand', *Folk*, 29 (1987): 181–206. For other accounts see Shway Yoe [James George Scott], *The Burman: His life and notions*, 2nd edn (New York: Norton, 1963), pp. 583–8; Keyes, 'Tug-of-war for merit: Cremation of a senior monk', *Journal of the Siam Society* (henceforth *JSS*), 63 (1975): 44–59; and Keyes, 'The cremation of a senior monk', in *The life of the Buddha*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Jason A. Carbine (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 124–35.

8 Anusaranasasanakiarti and Charles F. Keyes, 'Funerary rites and the Buddhist meaning of death: An interpretive text from Northern Thailand', *JSS*, 68, 1 (1980): 1–32.

9 Alan Klima, *The funeral casino: Meditation, massacre, and exchange with the dead in Thailand* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 205.

10 Nerida Cross, 'The position of nuns in Thai Buddhism' (M.A. thesis, Australian National University, 1981).

generalizing too broadly from these reports of practices in specific times and places, which may represent very different dynamics in different contexts, but the point can be made that the practice extends regionally.

Hertz stressed that the body of the deceased continues to be identified with the soul, and that the two are in turn both linked inextricably to the set of relationships the person has had with the community. For Hertz, the prolongation of the ritual treatment of the body up until a point of second burial has to do with the continuing recognition of the soul, as well as the continued meaning the person has for the community. The second burial represents a final release of the soul from the body and, to a degree, the release of the person's relationship to the community. The idea of a 'soul' fits uncomfortably in the Buddhist tradition, although my field study does suggest some sense of the person's continued presence in connection with the maintenance of the body. I should stress that, unlike the cases Hertz described, the focus of this article is not Cambodian funeral rites in general, but only those of persons identified as exceptional, usually monks. This resonates with Hertz, however, in the degree to which these are precisely persons whose relationship to the general community was intense.

Another group of scholarly works examines the preservation of corpses in Buddhist and Christian traditions as what has been called 'full-body relics'.¹¹ I prefer not to use this term in the cases I am describing, since they do not have the antiquity implied by the word 'relic', and there is still some question about how long the bodies will be preserved. Nevertheless, the practice has an obvious similarity to what we are concerned with and helps us see the ways it can be perceived in a Buddhist context. While there is scholarly recognition that the tradition of full-body relics extends into the Theravada world, such as the body at *wat* Paknam referred to above, the most extensive literature is about Mahayana practices, where the monks' bodies might be seated in postures of meditation as an alternative to reclining. Holmes Welch writes that in China 'nonputrefaction has been taken as evidence of sanctity' and that the preserved corpses, called 'meat bodies', 'have been set up for worship like images or ancestor tablets'.¹² In many of these cases, as well as in Taiwan and Vietnam, the body was lacquered and/or gilded. A recent news article described a project to preserve the bodies of two seventeenth-century Vietnamese monks in Hà Tây province outside of Hanoi, who had died in the meditative posture and whose bodies were preserved and covered in that position to create a sort of statue.¹³

Similar practices are associated with Tibet, Mongolia and Japan, although without gilding. Bernard Faure writes that while the practice was found in many Buddhist traditions, the greatest number of Chinese cases were in Chan monasteries, where, moreover, the preserved monks were often the founders of schools. There is no such practice within Japanese Zen; the Japanese cases are in the Shigendo tradition and relate specifically to

11 Marcus Bingenheimer, 'Roushen pusa and corpum integrum – Whole-body relics in Buddhism and Christianity', in *The contribution of Buddhism to world culture*, ed. Kalpakam Sankamarayan (Mumbai: Somaiya Publications, forthcoming). Note that Klima also refers to the relic-like character of the body in the passage quoted above (*Funeral casino*, p. 205).

12 Holmes Welch, *The practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900–1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 343.

13 'Monks get new lease on life', Vietnam News Service, 23 Apr. 2003; my thanks to Frank Proschan for sending me this article.

the cult of the Maitreya.¹⁴ While most such cases seem to be ancient, Welch described a case in Taiwan in the 1950s:

Before Tz'u-hang died, he left instructions for his corpse not to be cremated, but to be kept in a jar for three years. If at the end of that period it was well preserved, he expressed the hope that it might be gilded and kept. . . . [After five years] they found 'a miracle. . . . On the entire body there was not one place that had rotted. it is said that in the past on the mainland some meat-body bodhisattvas had toes missing or fingers missing, but Tz'u-hang's meat-body was all there'. They were overjoyed and hired a sculptor to make the face more lifelike (with clay modelling) as well as another specialist to lacquer the whole body and apply gold leaf.¹⁵

Whether or not we want to call the Cambodian cases relics, it is helpful to remember that there is a connection here to Buddhist devotional practice toward relics. A range of scholars have written about the implications in Buddhist thinking of the 'presence in absence' suggested by relics. Relics relate as well to the importance of the stupa/*cetiya*, which in the most conspicuous cases comes to have political overtones. As Donald Swearer writes:

The Buddha relic symbolizes political authority in two ways. First, when enshrined in a *cetiya* or reliquary mound, the relic functions as a magical center or *axis mundi* for the kingdom. The enshrined relic or *cetiya* becomes the symbol par excellence of the monarch as *cakkavattin* or 'wheel turner'. Literally, the king becomes the 'hub' of a cosmosized state.¹⁶

The elaborate funerary practices for Theravada Buddhist kings are well documented and they often involve extended periods of lying in state.¹⁷ Their projection of cosmic importance relates to the model of the state as a mandala with the king at its centre, a model which takes as its ultimate reference point the early Buddhist king Asoka.¹⁸ While in life the king (often together with a key relic in a central stupa) assumes the obvious role as the centre of the mandala, it is consistent with the model that there should also be minor centres of power and spirituality clustering around the royal centre, and that these can also in a minor way serve as exemplary centres. Such a model, like those of Hertz for death ritual, is extremely useful and probably has some correspondence to rough intuitive models held by everyday Cambodians. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind their limits, to the extent that they may tend to blind us to variation and historical change

14 Bernard Faure, *The rhetoric of immediacy: A cultural critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 150, 160–1.

15 Welch, *Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 344. Could the special circumstances of Taiwanese Buddhism in the 1950s – when it faced the task of constructing a sense of the symbols of the past that would compete with those lost in mainland China – be a factor in the existence of this practice at this particular time?

16 Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist world of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 93. A summary of the literature can be found in John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 4–5.

17 See, for example, the Thai practices described in Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of death: The anthropology of mortuary ritual*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 136–41.

18 The best-known discussion of this idea in the Southeast Asian context is O. W. Wolters, *History, culture and region in Southeast Asian perspectives*, rev. edn (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1999).

that have taken place within the very frameworks they offer. They also blind us to the local-level negotiations which will take place in relation to them.

A Khmer practice whereby the cremation of monks is delayed until there can be a multiple ceremony is detailed in François Bizot for both Siem Reap and the Thai province of Surin, and was more recently described to me as occurring in Kampong Chhnang.¹⁹ In 2000 the body of one of the highest ranking monks of Cambodia, Samdech Um Sum, lay in state in a glass coffin in his *kodi* for several months prior to an elaborate cremation – although monks told me that this was categorically different from the village practice, since during the period between death and cremation an uninterrupted ritual was taking place. More relevant to Wat Tang Krasang is that one of the larger *wat* in the same district, close to the market town, has a large *chetĕy* constructed in the 1950s that held the bodies of former abbots for many years, as well as a separate one for a newly deceased abbot. At least two other *wat* in the general area have the uncremated remains of former abbots on display in decorative coffins.²⁰

A January 2003 article in the *Phnom Penh Post* described the preservation a year earlier (that is, more recently than Ngun Son) of Samdech Preah Udom Mony Men Tuon on the outskirts of the provincial town Kampong Cham. The techniques of a specialist in herbal medicine were used:

Unlike the Egyptian style of mummification, the internal organs remain inside the body. A few hours after death, an embalming fluid called Formalin is injected into the skin to prevent the flesh from decomposing. Chey [the specialist] then pours a layer of tea on the floor of the coffin, and places limestone and a cloth above that. He says the combination acts like a small oven – as liquid from the body gradually leaks out over time, the limestone absorbs the fluid and creates a gentle heat, which dries the body.²¹

This 102-year-old monk, according to the article, had been responsible in the 1960s for the construction of Wat Khemavorn, where he now lies in state. He refused to disrobe during the Pol Pot period; instead he ‘dyed his saffron robes black and hid in the forest’. His title suggests that he was a much higher-ranking monk than Ngun Son. The article reported that more than 100 people a day were visiting the body, which is displayed in a glass coffin. On my own visit to the *wat* on a weekday several months after the article was written, however, there was no evidence of large numbers of people flocking to see the body, and it became clear while talking to monks and lay leaders at the *wat* that the decision to preserve it was made by a single wealthy patron who had a strong sense of spiritual connection to the deceased monk. Nevertheless, the preservation of the body is striking.

Another very public case of the preservation of a monk’s body is Sam Bunthoern, a relatively young monk who became famous in the 1990s as a radio preacher and meditation teacher. He founded a larger centre for the teaching of *vipassana* meditation near Oudong at the foot of a hill where King Sihanouk was building a massive stupa. His

19 François Bizot, *Le don de soi-même* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1981).

20 One case is rather different, with overtones of the secondary burial described by Hertz, in that the monk died and was buried during the Pol Pot period; villagers say he was forced to disrobe during that time but never totally abandoned his religious discipline. It was in 1982 that his body was exhumed and preserved in a decorative coffin for eventual cremation.

21 Haydon Dewes and Lon Nara, ‘Mummified monk draws the crowds’, *Phnom Penh Post*, 17–30 Jan. 2003.

centre was growing rapidly at the time he was assassinated in Phnom Penh in 2002, under circumstances which have yet to be adequately explained. Sam Bunthoern's body still lies in state at the meditation centre, in the *kodi* that was being built as his residence when he died. In contrast to the preservation methods in other cases, the body seems to be in a refrigerated unit. Based on my conversations with staff on different visits to the site, it was clear to me that the preservation of the body was considered temporary and that it would eventually be cremated; one nun said that the plan was to preserve the body until the construction of the *preah vihear* at the compound was completed. On other visits, staff indicated that there was discussion about eventually replacing the body with a wax image.

One more story deserves mention as suggestive of the iconography of such cases and the narratives surrounding them – Wat Preah Pech Kdey Thlok in Baray District, Kampong Thom province. In 2003 a high-ranking official introduced me to villagers who described the case, although I was not able to visit it until 2005. The *wat* is on the site of Angkorean archaeological remains, and the case of the monk was made known to the official in connection with the discovery there of a large number of ancient Buddha images. The monk in question, Ven. Keum Vang, died in 1988; villagers regard as miraculous the fact that his body is still intact. He was born in 1917, fought in the anti-French Issarak movement in his youth under Prince Norodom Chanraingsey, and had a wife and children. He was ordained in 1973 and was therefore a monk only briefly before the beginning of the Pol Pot period, during which he was nearly killed. In the People's Republic of Kampuchea period he was ordained once again and became the abbot of his own *wat* and the ranking monk in his district. As such he was instrumental in the building of the *preah vihear* and directed other building projects as well. He was adept at magical formulas and known for making amulets, which were sought out by police and artists from Phnom Penh; he also performed blessings with water (*sraoch teuk*). Villagers say that he was a disciple of the spirit of the legendary figure Ang Phim, a nineteenth-century prince who has taken on legendary status as a spirit force.

At the time of his death, Ven. Keum Vang asked that his body be placed in the meditation posture in a large water jar and be checked after seven days. The temple leaders were uncomfortable doing this and instead put him in a traditional *lât* (inner casket) made of bamboo; there was no preservation of the body with chemicals. One year later they opened the *lât* to cremate the body and found that it had not deteriorated. The body is now in a glass case in the monks' eating hall (*sala chhan*), dressed in traditional robes and covered with a white cloth which extends the length of the body. It is certainly desiccated and in no way resembles the body of someone still living, but the skin still covers the body, which is intact and rigid. Elders at the *wat* say that since the body has been put on exhibit it has attracted many visitors, generating much money for the temple. Visitors are especially likely to come at the New Year when temple elders change the robes. Eventually the body will be cremated, but there are no immediate plans for this.

All of these monks were very much public persons, either at a local or national level. In most of these cases cremation is expected to eventually take place; the vow of Ngun Son's successor that the body will be preserved permanently makes it a more marked, unusual case and something that people would comment on. According to the current abbot, asked to describe the procedure by which Ngun Son's body was preserved, the first step, as always, would be to bow and venerate the monk – that is, to *vontea* (Pali *vanda*),

a term also used when monks pay their annual ceremonial respect to the monk who ordained them. This was followed by the ceremonial sprinkling of holy water (*srauch toek*) before the body was clothed in new robes. The *srauch toek*, a former monk later explained, would include a thorough cleaning of the body by the monk's direct relatives or closest disciples.

The body was then kept for seven days. It was inside a metal *lât*, to be placed inside the larger wooden casket. (Alternatively, the *lât* can be made of glass or wood.) The *lât* was lined with *trabaek* leaves and puffed rice; as is typical, it had a hole in the top for fumes to escape, and one in the bottom to remove fluids. The *lât*, I was later told, might in other cases also be lined with charcoal or a type of aromatic wood. Sometimes internal organs are removed from the body, but this is not usually done with senior monks, and was not done with Ngun Son. Nor were chemicals injected in this instance. Often monks in a *wat* will ceremonially *vontea* the corpse following a regular schedule, with novices performing the ritual on the seventh day of the waxing and waning moons, the same day they carry out the ceremony of receiving the precepts (*soum seyl*) from the *bikkhus* in the temple. The latter in turn will venerate the corpse on the days of the full moon and the new moon, the same days they participate in ceremonial confession.

Before talking about the life of Ngun Son, I would like to address the issue of *wat* Tang Krasang as a site of memory. Observers sometimes comment that Cambodians have little sense of the past, noting that they are quite willing to tear down and reconstruct the *preah vihear*, the central building of the *wat*. While I have found this to be true in general and specifically in the case of Wat Tang Krasang, I have also found memory inscribed in other ways. The most obvious is in *chetëy*, *seyma* stones (which mark the borders of the temple) and statues; these items, whose antiquity is pointed out by villagers, are often older than the *preah vihear*. One would underline the fact that a *chetëy* as a repository of human remains is almost by definition a site of memory. Villagers pointed to one particularly old *chetëy* as evidence of the *wat*'s roots in French colonial times; a middle-aged man who said his father had studied Sanskrit in India believed that the *chetëy* was 100 years old. Villagers also told stories about the more modern *chetëy* next to it, where they said prisoners had been chained and eventually died during the Pol Pot period.²²

In the case of *wat* Tang Krasang, one of the most interesting ways memory is encoded is in its links to another temple, Wat Preah Meas (often called Wat Taprong). Villagers often identify the latter as the first *wat* of all those in the area, and the one from which all the others derived through the historical establishment of break-off *wat* with a continuing ordination lineage. Wat Preah Meas is now at the foot of a hill, but the pre-1975 structure was on the top of the hill, along with the ruins of a small pre-Angkorean shrine. The fact that lineage is traced to an ancient site is suggestive of patterns which Ashley Thompson has discovered in her study of *wat* from the Middle Period of Cambodian history (between the Angkorean and colonial eras); she often found them to be transformations of Brahmanic shrines from Angkorean times.²³

22 For a general discussion of memory of the Pol Pot period at the village level, see May Ebihara, 'Memories of the Pol Pot era in a Cambodian village', in *Cambodia emerges from the past: Eight essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Southeast Asia Publications, 2002), pp. 91–108.

23 Ashley Thompson, 'Mémoires du Cambodge' (Ph.D. diss., Université de Paris-VIII, 1999).

There is an Angkorean shrine still standing in a rice field close to Tang Krasang, although during the French colonial period some lintels from this or a similar site were taken and used to make a sort of decorative frame around the *neak ta* shrine at Wat Tang Krasang, dedicated to the spirit of that particular place. There one often finds a *moën chhkäng*, the body of a chicken stretched like a kite and suspended by a string from a tree beside the *neak ta* shrine.²⁴ Doubtless, no one at Tang Krasang would consider this to have anything to do with the preservation of Ngun Son – but to me the discourse of the power of life-in-death represented by the ‘non-Buddhist’ *moën chhkäng* cannot help but resonate in some way with the power of his own life-in-death, both paralleling and contrasting with the image of the preserved body of the monk.

Wat Tang Krasang does not have a shelter where the bones of persons killed during the Pol Pot period are collected in a sort of shrine, but there is at least one other *wat* in the same district which does; according to its abbot, the bones came from a nearby field which had been a major killing site. While some early commentators suggested that the more famous collections of human bones at Choeung Ek or the Tuol Sleng Museum were inconsistent with Cambodian custom, such collections of bones are now not infrequent in rural *wat*, where their early political message seems to have now taken on some of the Buddhist overtones of the reliquary.²⁵

Ngun Son was a pre-1975 monk who, like almost all monks, was forced to disrobe during the Pol Pot period, when *wat* buildings were destroyed or fell into disrepair when put to other uses. The first *wat* in the area to re-organize after Pol Pot’s overthrow was Wat Preah Meas. Villagers see a connection between the fact that it was the origin of other *wat* in the area and the fact that it played that role again after Pol Pot. A charismatic monk who re-ordained at Wat Preah Meas at this time, and still resident there, is described in especially strong terms as having *baramey* (spiritual power or Buddhist perfection), to a degree that one villager said went beyond what Ngun Son possessed. Ngun Son married and had a child during the Pol Pot period, so the decision to re-enter the monkhood meant giving up his family life. He was among the monks who re-ordained at Wat Preah Meas; shortly afterwards, he set up Wat Tang Krasang, a few kilometres away.

Because of this area’s proximity to a chain of hills, guerrilla fighting was extensive during the 1980s and up until the time of UN-sponsored elections in 1993, when fear of Khmer Rouge attacks meant there could be no polling in the village. Monks describe periods of conflict when they were forced to take refuge in neighbouring homes. During the 1980s and most of the 1990s, Ngun Son was the primary driving force at Wat Tang Krasang, negotiating with local authorities and urban donors to gradually expand its facilities. Until a road was repaired in the mid-1990s with the financial assistance of Prime Minister Hun Sen, the area of the *wat* was quite inaccessible to the outside world, even by motorbike. It was after the construction of the new road that Ngun Son finally organized the building of an impressive *preah vihear*, which was in its last stages of construction at the time of his death.

24 Asked why a chicken would be offered in this way on the grounds of a *wat* (a practice to me inconsistent with basic Buddhist thinking), villagers answered matter-of-factly that it was because the particular *neak ta* in question liked chicken.

25 Such a perspective is found, for example, in Judy Ledgerwood, ‘The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crime: National narrative’, *Museum Anthropology*, 21, 1 (1997): 82–98.

On my first visits, the door to the *chetĕy* was sealed; monks pointed out a tube coming out of the roof which they said provided an outlet for noxious fumes. Two years later my visit to the *wat* coincided with *Pchum Ben*, a two-week period in which the dead are commemorated; the door to the *chetĕy* was now open, revealing a colourfully painted coffin and a portrait of the deceased abbot. While the *chetĕy* was first opened for *Pchum Ben*, the door remained open for several years afterward. In 2002 monks reported that there had been an elaborate ceremony to cleanse the corpse and change its robes, with the participation and observation of a large number of people from the lay community. The procedure was extensively photographed, and monks showed me the pictures un-self-consciously, as they obviously had to many previous visitors.

The meaning of the preservation of the body is amplified by other practices commemorating the monk – practices which like the preservation of the body underline the idea that he was in some ways still a presence to be dealt with. By 2000, the second year I visited the *wat*, there was a shrine to the deceased abbot in the *kodi* where he had lived, now the residence of the new abbot and a few novices – large enough to take up such a large area that a smaller number of novices could sleep there. The shrine was similar to those found in the homes of traditional healers (*kru Khmaer*) and spirit mediums, who devote such a shrine to their teacher (sometimes a spirit teacher) or, on occasion, to their mother and father. Here a picture of the monk was propped on a mat leading to a stepped altar draped with curtains, on which were three successively higher images of the Buddha. On the altar were candles and artificial flowers, while arranged next to and in front of the Buddha image was the whole range of items associated with the monkhood: candles, incense, monks' robes, fans, begging bowls, books, cigarettes, betel and other personal items.

Another memorial to the abbot was a painting of him on the inside of the eastern door of the *preah vihear*, directly facing the central Buddha image of the *wat*. The portrait of Ngun Son seated at a small round table was obviously based on a photograph of him hanging on the porch of the abbot's *kodi*. Next to him was the portrait of another monk who had been in the *wat* prior to the Pol Pot era. It seemed strange that the latter should be depicted instead of the current abbot, who would have been second-ranking monk when Ngun Son was alive; this was surely in part simply because he represented pre-Pol Pot Cambodia. This monk, I was told, had never been an abbot, but like Ngun Son was associated with building projects; he was *pukae kâsang* (gifted at building) – a high compliment in the Cambodian monkhood.

Why preserve Ngun Son's body in this way? The simplest explanation given was that Ngun Son had requested it. The other reason frequently cited was their profound love and respect for him – something we must constantly bear in mind, even if for the non-Cambodian observer the question remains of why one would choose this particular way of expressing love. The abbot of another *wat* in the district also said he wanted to preserve his predecessor's body indefinitely because he couldn't bear the thought of him being lost forever (*băt ăh*).

Other monks seemed puzzled by the abbot's insistence that the body would be preserved permanently; the second-ranking monk at the *wat* even said that he did not think it was scriptural to do so. As far as I have been able to verify, this is not true, but his observation points to an intuitive cultural sense that the period between death and cremation is temporary. If we take the term 'liminal' to refer to a temporary period when

categories of life and death are blurred, as Arnold Van Gennep described them, we could say that the new abbot was taking a sacralizing liminal process and attempting to transform it into a sacralizing institution.²⁶ Some members of the community, no doubt following a logic similar to that of Van Gennep, felt that for re-incorporation of the community to really take place, there should be a cremation.

A young monk at one of the *wat* near Tang Krasang, which also maintains the body of an ex-abbot, offered the explanation that the body attracts the interest of the lay community, who enjoy seeing it and participating in cleansing ceremonies, making generous donations in the process. Others have suggested that when a monk's body has lain in state for a long period of time, the eventual cremation will generate much more interest, be much more elaborate, and result in much greater numbers of donations. These rather materialistic explanations could be re-read to suggest a Durkheimian invocation of community coming into play: the corpse generates communal activity.

A psychological element in the relationship between Ngun Son and his successor enters into the local interpretation. The attraction of the new abbot, Ven. In Eat, as a leader of the *wat* grows naturally out of his physical stature; his firm, commonsense insistence on monastic discipline; and his unrestrained willingness to actively lead work projects. At the same time, he is a quiet, un-presuming man who tends to defer to other monks in giving sermons. Ngun Son was described to me as a monk gifted at Vedic magic formulas; this, one villager said, was his *seyl* (Pali *sīla*) – a word which in Khmer sometimes means 'morality' but in this context probably refers to personal religious discipline. This enabled him to negotiate effectively with local authorities. It is harder to imagine the new abbot in this role. In my first visits to the *wat*, the load of ritual surrounding the deceased abbot seemed to reflect a continuing deference to him by his successor, a way of saying that he was still the abbot of the *wat* and that the successor could never hope to fill his role. The new abbot was at first reluctant to sit in either of two preaching chairs on the porch of his *kodi*. By the following year, however, he sat un-self-consciously in the smaller of the two chairs and, seemingly empowered in part by the very shrines to Ngun Son he had put in place, seemed to be more comfortable in his role. On my more recent visits to the *wat* there has been only one chair and no indication at all of any insecurity in his position as abbot.

Justin McDaniel commented on an earlier version of this article that what was involved may not have been so much real insecurity as a need to make a show of public deference to his predecessor as he negotiated his new position.²⁷ Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, describing cases of elaborate funerary memorials in Borneo, have demonstrated that in these cases the importance of the person who died was much less consequential than that of the person who organized the building of the memorial, who used that project for his own prestige – a possibility it is judicious to remember in other cases.²⁸ Here I think that Ngun Son was indeed important but that something was being drawn on and used by his successor as well.

26 Arnold Van Gennep, *The rites of passage*, tr. Monica B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 146–65.

27 Justin McDaniel, personal communication, 19 June 2003.

28 Metcalf and Huntington, *Celebrations of death*, pp. 144–51.

The key to understanding Ngun Son is the fact that he was regarded as *pukae kâsang*, which in Cambodian terms implies not just that he was a good project organizer and fund-raiser – meaning that he had the will and energy to generate merit – but that he had a spiritual gift, one we could describe as a font of merit which enabled him to generate more merit. On my early visits monks at the *wat* speculated that once the *preah vihear* was ritually consecrated, Ngun Son would be cremated. They understood the logic that the building project was in some sense his and that he continued to help with it. (By the same logic, a monk who was *pukae kâsang*, even though he had never been abbot, was painted alongside Ngun Son in the *preah vihear* mural.) In fact, the *preah vihear* has now been ritually consecrated, but the new abbot continues to vow that he will not cremate Ngun Son.

The ability to build was in this case the ability to rebuild, the ability to recreate and even go beyond what had existed prior to Pol Pot. In this sense Ngun Son's projects were more than just the construction of buildings; they amounted to the creation of social organisation focused on the *wat*. He played a determining role in the re-formation of a kind of community – a ritual return to origins with even, I suggest, overtones of regeneration of cosmos, the cosmogony described by Mircea Eliade.²⁹ His successor's sense of inadequacy, however much it may have been rooted in a difference in character, also had to do, I believe, with the fact that having only been ordained after the Pol Pot era, he could never link the past to the present as Ngun Son did. The latter embodied lineage in two ways – by the fact that he was a monk at Tang Krasang both before and after the ruptures of Pol Pot (and thus bridged the gap) and by the fact that he ordained at Wat Preah Meas and then re-founded Wat Tang Krasang, thus recreating the process whereby, in village tradition, one had in ancient times been the parent *wat* of the other.

No one at the *wat* ever suggested that the presence of the corpse had to do with meditation practices focusing on death and decay, as Klima reports taking place in Central Thailand.³⁰ However, a Khmer form of *vipassana* meditation was practiced at the *wat*, and so this possibility cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, it seems likely that some kind of exchange with the continuing power of the deceased monk, rather than a focus on his impermanence as a human being, may be the more relevant factor in this case. It should be noted that when people in the area of Tang Krasang were asked why the body was preserved, no one referred to merit-making, the conceptual framework most commonly given in the ethnographies of Northern Thailand – although, obviously the fact that the preservation of the monks will generate donations does relate to making merit, and any revered monk will of course represent a font of merit. Ritualized systems of exchange, as they underlie the fabric of Cambodian society, are doubtless coming into play as well. Merit-making is primarily conceived in terms of a person's actions in relation to the *wat* and the monkhood. As has often been pointed out, the latter institutions constitute a field whereby the community can generate merit – and thereby re-generate itself as a community. As we have said, Ngun Son as a monk was very much a part of this field, and the project of building the *preah vihear*, which he organized, would have generated great merit for him as well as the community of those who donated.

29 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and reality*, tr. William R. Trank (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1963).

30 Klima, *Funeral casino*.

Merit, of course, is accumulated toward one's karmic destiny, but it also represents a faith in one's 'symbolic capital' in the community, to use Bourdieu's phrase.³¹ While the explicit term 'merit-making' tends to be restricted to specific practices, the pattern of giving with an implicit hope of return has a more general usage, not inconsistent with the whole literature which has developed around the classic work on gift exchange by Marcel Mauss.³² Exchange in the parent-child relation is echoed in the exchange that takes place in other hierarchical relations and informs a *mandala*-type social formation – all with great fluidity with respect to the power relations involved and many ins and outs of personal negotiation. Exchange practices also enter into spirit practices, such as in offerings to the *neak ta*. (As mentioned earlier, a crucified chicken is given to the *neak ta* because 'he likes chicken'.) While villagers did not speak of the veneration of Ngun Son in the language of 'merit', it is evident that some sort of practice of exchange was going on with him after his death.

A Durkheimian view of religion would emphasize that ritual exchange with the dead benefits not so much individuals as the continued life and direction of the community defined by the *wat*. Even if one questions the Durkheimian principle that religion will always symbolize social cohesion, one can recognize that at certain historical moments, when there is a particular need for social cohesion, religion is one thing that can serve to embody it. Surely in some sense Ngun Son's body has been preserved because in a very specific time and place it was needed. Marcel Bloch writes that 'death as disruption, rather than being a problem for the social order, as anthropologists have tended to think of it, is in fact an opportunity for dramatically creating it'.³³ The enigma of Ngun Son's life in death had something to do with the relation of the remembered past to the present of the *wat*, as well as its future. It had to do with the question of what is necessary for building to take place, ultimately a question of how communal impetus and direction can be reached. Ngun Son's continued concrete presence at the *wat* provided a spiritual basis for the on-going construction of community; arguably there was a particularly great need for this at the time of his death.

That such practices are particularly salient in post-socialist Cambodia tells us something about more general cultural processes which are taking place in the country. Katherine Vedery's calculatedly outrageous statement, quoted at the beginning of this article, raises questions about the degree to which the practices we are describing are linked to the particular historical moment Cambodia is experiencing. It is difficult to measure how widespread the preservation of monks' bodies was prior to 1975, and the sense of a sudden recent efflorescence of the practice may be due to a number of factors. First, such a practice was restricted in the socialist period and has only recently been revived. Second, since officially only men over 55 were allowed to be monks during the 1980s, the most important leaders of the monkhood during that period would be

31 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 41.

32 Marcel Mauss, *The gift: The form and reason of exchange in archaic societies*, tr. W. D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990). For mainland Southeast Asia, a classic text relating to these issues is Lucien M. Hanks, 'Merit and power in the Thai social order', *American Anthropologist* 64, 6 (1962): 1247–61. I discuss them in a Cambodian context in John Marston, 'Cambodia 1991–1994: Hierarchy, neutrality and etiquettes of discourse' (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1997).

33 Maurice Bloch, 'Death, women, and power', in *Death and the regeneration of life*, ed. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 219.

reaching the age of their death about the same time. Finally there is now much greater circulation of money in Cambodia than there was during the socialist period, a development which has often favoured new religious projects and, logically, has opened up the possibility of conspicuous expense in the funerary practices of monks as well. Related to this last point is the fact that there is more competition among *wat* for salient identity which will attract donors.

Thus, traditional models are coming into play; however, it is difficult to avoid the sense that the on-the-ground practice of preserving monks' bodies is significantly affected by the historical moment and by the particular set of relations at this particular *wat*. The Khmer Rouge period, so often inscribed in public memory by graphic images of death, surely colours this practice – even while the monk's death complements by its purity the remembered violence of the period. More concretely, the monks enshrined were foundational figures who dealt with the disruption represented by the entire socialist period from 1975 through the 1980s. Given the lack of data, it is risky to make any generalizations about pre-1975 practices in comparison with those of the present time. The case of Ngun Son may suggest that monks of lower rank are being preserved more readily than was done prior to the war, as the pre-war cases I have evidence of all held high administrative rank in the *sangha*. There is nothing to suggest that, as with the current cases (with the possible exception of Sam Bunthoern), they were known for their ability to use supernatural Vedic formulas.

All the monks who have recently been preserved have been known as builders (*pukae kâsang*). Again with the exception of Sam Banthoern, who in different ways revived traditions, they have also consistently been figures who bridged the historical gap, having been monks both prior to and after the Pol Pot period. All this is to say that they embodied social memory in a particular way, at the same time that they embodied a new building-up of the community. I have written elsewhere about the preoccupation with religious building in the post-socialist period, which has focused on construction at the expense of other aspects of Buddhist practice, in some cases with semi-millennial movements focused on specific building projects.³⁴ Here we see the commemoration of powerful builders to such an extent that their relic-like corpses become foundational to continued building.

One should not in all of this forget the role of their successors or other members of the community who made the decisions after their deaths to enshrine them. Part of the post-socialist condition, as it entails active reformation of social memory, is the question of who can claim continuity with the dead and use that claim to establish their own legitimacy in the community. As the Vedery quote indicates, at the moment of a shift away from socialism, or perhaps the moment of any major shift in social organization, the consequent crisis of social memory will tend to focus on corpses as the ultimate index of the past, which as such is also the foundation on which a new future can be built.

If 'practice is action considered in relation to structure', then perhaps the structures most relevant to the issues we are considering are the *mandala* configuration (with, in this case, a local-level exemplary centre) and models of appropriate death ritual where an

34 John Marston, 'Clay into stone: A modern-day *tâpas*', in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), pp. 170–92.

intermediate 'liminal' period is prolonged in the case of persons of prominence. Yet a third structure is provided by the social narrative of the past proceeding on to the future. To understand how practice comes into play, we must recognize that such models may vary in intensity in different historical periods, another way of saying that there can be different quantities of action. Moreover, intensity may be more needed at one historical period than another. Inevitably individual players enter into this process, manoeuvring differently according to what they conceive as their interest, which relates as well to the needs of the community as a whole – again in relation to historical circumstances. Social memory, as in this case concretized in death ritual, provides a way of creating community, which will also inevitably entail a vision of its reproduction.