RITUAL IN 1990 CAMBODIAN POLITICAL THEATRE: NEW SONGS AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST

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INTRODUCTION

On November first and second, 1990, a series of activities and ceremonies were held in Phnom Penh—the planting of a Bodhi tree, boat races, fireworks, and a parade of decorated boats—all culminating in a ceremony on the steps of the “Former Royal Palace” (as it was then officially known). There, in a Buddhist and Brahminist ritual, lighted candles were used to predict the outcome of the rice harvest, and the first new rice grains, pounded and fried into crunchy flakes (ambok), were eaten by the handful as the celebrants tipped back their heads and stared up at the full moon of the lunar month of Kattek at the auspicious place where the four rivers meet (chatomukh). The Mekong and the Tonle Sap were just past high flood, and the Tonle Sap would soon reverse course and drain away the water from the great lake, leaving the soil replenished and a vast abundance of fish trapped in the waters that remained. At this crucial moment in the ritual and agricultural cycles, the celebrants who stood on the steps of the palace were not royalty by birth, but were the triumvirate that had ruled the socialist People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) for the previous ten years: Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen.

This paper is an interpretive cultural analysis of the events surrounding the celebration of the Water Festival and their historical context that explores the meaning of the ceremonies for the actors who participated as celebrants and organizers. My analysis draws on recent discussions of public cultural displays and their political meanings. In an article reviewing the state-of-the-field on the anthropology of Southeast Asia, John Bowen wrote that the study of “publicly displayed cultural forms,” whether analyses of highland feasting rituals or of ritual speech, have long dominated the field. Examples of the study of public action from the sixties and seventies, particularly the early work of Clifford Geertz, held that the meanings of these actions were assumed by-and-large to be “intrinsic to objects and coherent among themselves.” Bowen writes,
As “intrinsic” meanings were taken to be mainly the same for all observers and thus decodable by the trained ethnographer—“looking over the shoulder” as Geertz (1972) once put it. As “coherent,” meanings were assumed to form an internally consistent pattern, whether in their semantic interreference (Geertz’s “logico-meaningful integration”), their structural interrelationship (Lévi-Strauss’s “structure”), or their dependence on certain overarching values (Dumont’s “ideology”).

This anthropological literature assumed that there was a logical, discernable meaning to the public event that could be “read” as a text by a local observer or by a trained outsider observer, the ethnographer.

More recently, Bowen notes, there has been a shift to a new approach to the study of cultural forms and displays. They are seen “not as containing meanings, but as giving rise to the creation of meanings by differently situated actors, meanings that are often in conflict with each other and that are not always resolvable to an internally coherent structure.” How do these differently situated actors interpret the events, how might these interpretations change over time, and what are the various motivations of the actors? The shift is within and not completely away from interpretive analysis. One of its aspects has been anthropologists turning toward political analysis and a focus on the relationship between culture and the nation state.

Hence there has been a reappraisal of the term “culture,” moving away from the notion that culture is a single set of ideas or meanings shared by a homogeneous population, which reproduces itself from generation to generation. Instead, scholars now recognize that the essential discourses of a place and time are made authoritative by those with the power to silence other possible interpretations. Susan Wright writes of the politicization of the concept of culture,

Each actor endeavoured to manoeuvre, in unpredictable political and economic situations, to define or seize control of symbols and practices. Symbols and ideas never acquired a closed or entirely coherent set of meanings: they were polyvalent, fluid and hybridized. Key terms shifted meaning in different historical times. When a coalition of actors gained ascendance at a particular historical moment, they institutionalized their meaning in key terms in law.

Culture may thus be described as a “contested process of meaning making,” the contest being over who has control of defining the meaning of key symbols, terms, and concepts.

Like anthropologists, many historians of Southeast Asia employ cultural forms of analysis. This paper, in the spirit of this volume, takes as a starting point the classic essay by David Chandler, “Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Perceptions of

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2 Ibid., pp. 1049–50.
4 Ibid., p. 4.
Order in Three Cambodian Texts.” 5 Chandler uses two folktales and a historical text to recreate a moment in the nineteenth century, when Cambodia was just emerging from a period of extended violent conflict. He sees the writing and performance of a historical text at the dedication of a new temple as a method of recreating social and moral order in the chaotic aftermath of violence. Chandler posits a shared cultural understanding of conceptions of order, and a moral underpinning to the pattern based on Buddhist notions of merit and the karmic consequences of one’s actions. He writes,

The word for “order” (as in, “to put in order”), or more exactly, the phrase robab rap roy, means “the way things are [properly] arranged,” to place them symmetrically like books and papers on a desk and also rank them correctly, i.e., hierarchically, the way they have been ranked before. 6

There is an important contrast in Khmer culture between wildness (prei, forest) and the quality of being settled (veal, field, or srok, country/community), the latter referring to that which is “grown, civilized, arranged, predictable.” 7 The stories that Chandler explores in his essay concern the boundary between these two realms, and historical Khmer understandings of how this boundary is constructed and maintained. For there to be social order, there must be a righteous ruler at the top of a social and moral hierarchy.

The shared cultural understandings about power and order that Chandler explains are based in Theravada Buddhism, and earlier influences were derived from Hinduism. Leaders have their positions because they have accumulated merit through numerous lifetimes—as kings, their divine energy radiates outward and encompasses others, creating order and stability—but the degree to which this order can be maintained depends on the ruler acting in accordance with the Dhamma (the Buddha’s teachings, or in a more general sense, morality). The ability of each ruler to harness that divine energy and maintain his kingdom varies “since the cosmos is always in flux, alternating between periods of coherence and fragmentation.” 8 Buddhist notions of time are cyclical; between the coming of one Buddha and the next, there will be a long period of decline, to be followed by the coming of a new ruler who will restore the Dharma, which commences a new period of steady improvement until the perfection that characterizes the time of the next Buddha and the beginning of a new cycle. 9

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6 Ibid., p. 77.
7 Chandler, “Songs,” p. 77; see also Penny Edwards, “Between a Song and a Prei: Tracking Cambodian History and Cosmology through the Forest,” and Erik W. Davis, “Imaginary Conversations with Mothers about Death,” this volume.
Chandler elsewhere describes the ritual aspects of the reign of King Duang (1848–1860), as recorded in two chronicles of the reign. He was intrigued that more than half of the documents recorded an enumeration of ceremonies, decrees, and political acts that took place at the beginning of the reign. Telling the story of the actions of the monarch at the outset, Chandler argues, “set[s] in motion a narrative performance,” like the “winding of a clock.” The King rebuilds his palace, rebuilds and repopulates Buddhist temples, reestablishes the royal patronage of Buddhism and the arts, distributes symbols of rank to officials and military leaders, institutes reforms to linguistic etiquette that set “proper responses and forms of address between people of different status,” and renames people and places. According to Chandler, the judgment of the king’s performance arose less from his dealings with other people, “but from his pre-arranged, repeated dealings with moments of the agricultural cycle, with ceremonies involving the placement and status of his officials, and with rites directed towards Hindu gods, local spirits, or the Buddhist church.”

Drawing on these historical insights, this paper analyzes the 1990 ceremonies as a parallel attempt at the end of the twentieth century to reassert social and political order in the wake of the devastation of war and revolution in the 1970s and 80s. While Chandler saw King Duong’s actions as the reassertion of a resonant Khmer cultural model in the nineteenth century, I see Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin as political actors seeking to redefine and employ key symbols in a competition for power. In this “contested process of meaning making,” they set out to assert that a new reign had already begun, and that they are the legitimate, righteous rulers of Cambodia.

The paper is divided into three sections: the first reviews the historical context, focusing on the political negotiations that would result in the Paris Peace Agreements, and the changes that occurred during this transition period; the second considers the religious context, discussing the destruction of Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge regime and its gradual rebuilding thereafter; and the third considers the stated purpose of the ritual as described in the program for the event and a subsequent state publication. What was it they said that they were doing? From these data, I posit an interpretive analysis that focuses on the ways in which the State of Cambodia (SOC) leadership appropriated the key cultural concepts, “Nation, Religion, and King,” to undergird the legitimacy of their political control. They claimed for themselves the mantle of righteous rulers who restore order and morality, while asserting their “Khmerness” in the face of accusations that they were mere puppets of the Vietnamese. With the peace deal essentially done and the return of the former King Sihanouk only a year away, why assert their political legitimacy in this particular way, at this particular moment?

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11 Ibid., pp. 101–2.
12 Ibid., pp. 105–6.
13 Ibid., p. 106.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the three years prior to the 1990 festival, peace negotiations had been underway between the Cambodian parties and their regional and superpower backers, trying to bring about an end to the war that had ground on to a stalemate since the Vietnamese invasion in 1979. Several crucial moments of political symbolism occurred in the course of the negotiations. Hun Sen addressed Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the former king, using royal vocabulary. The general population understood this to be a momentous shift in the political landscape. In the spring of 1989, changes to the Cambodian constitution and the declaration of the new State of Cambodia (SOC) government cleared the way for economic reforms legalizing private ownership of land and the reintroduction of a market economy. Buddhist religious prayers were again broadcast on the radio. This too had a tremendous impact on the thinking of ordinary people. These were clues that perhaps there could be a shift from the communist rhetoric and policies of the last fourteen years to something that more closely resembled pre-war Cambodian society—including a return of the central icons of religion and king.

That same week, in April of 1989, Chea Sim, Hun Sen, and Heng Samrin participated in a religious ceremony to reinstall a sacred relic of the Buddha in the Sakyamuni chetey (a Buddhist reliquary known as a stupa or chedi) in front of the railway station in Phnom Penh. Thousands of people came out to see this event, which included the offering of rice to the monks by the former communist leaders of the new SOC.

In September 1989, the Vietnamese army withdrew from Cambodia. Initially there was a good deal of tension as people wondered if the Cambodian army could hold the resistance forces at bay. While there were attacks, and the resistance forces were able to establish bases on the Khmer side of the border, it became clear over time that they were not making significant gains. The SOC government continued to hold some 90 percent of the Cambodian countryside.

At the time, the common perception was that peace was at hand, that the king’s return would herald a new period of economic prosperity, and that ordinary people’s lives could return to something resembling the normalcy of the pre-war years. Everyone stopped using the term “comrade,” and there was an easing of certain restrictions, including those that prohibited contact with foreigners.15

14 The chetey had been built in preparation for the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of Buddhism, and the relic had been transported from Sri Lanka. After King Sihanouk returned to Cambodia, he announced that the location at the train station was no longer an appropriate place for the relic. Ashley Thompson has written that this was likely linked to the state of “urban decay and dereliction” at the railway station, which had earlier been a sight of “national unity and modernity.” See Ashley Thompson, “Buddhism in Modern Cambodia: Rupture and Continuity,” in Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives, ed. Stephen Berkwitz (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), pp. 129–68. But it seems logical that his disapproval was also related to the reinstallation ceremony in 1989. Only in 2002 was the relic moved to a newly constructed stupa on a sacred mountain near Oudong. The king is reported to have said that the new location, the site of an ancient capital, was a “holy place,” and that the transfer would bring “greater peace, happiness, and success to Cambodia.” Kuch Naren, “Reverential Procession Takes Relics to Oudong,” Cambodia Daily, December 20, 2002, p. 19.

15 I had only just arrived in Cambodia for what would be a three-year project, and I remember this period as a time of intense optimism. Foreigners were able to live outside the hotels in rented houses and to meet Khmer outside of the confines of the workplace. There were still Ministry of Interior operatives, who came to debrief my colleagues at the National Library
THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS

Hun Sen, the SOC prime minister and foreign minister, met with Prince Norodom Sihanouk in December 1987 and January 1988. In July 1988, at the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM I), and in February 1989, at JIM II, all four Cambodian political factions and representatives of Vietnam, Laos, and ASEAN met. A Paris conference in August 1989 included representatives of the five permanent members of the Security Council (the Perm 5). In January 1990, a meeting was held in Tokyo, where the main topics included a ceasefire to begin in May 1990 and the establishment of a Supreme National Council, the body that would symbolically hold national sovereignty during the transition period while UN forces organized democratic elections.16

Crucial steps forward were taken in 1990, paving the way for an eventual settlement. The United States dropped its support for the CGDK (Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea) to hold the seat at the UN, Sihanouk dropped his demand that the SOC be dismantled, and China pressured Vietnam and Cambodia to agree to the participation of United Nations forces in a settlement.17 The “final breakthrough,” according to MacAlister Brown and Josephy Zasloff, came in August 1990, when the Perm 5 set forth a document entitled, “Framework for a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict.” After this six-page plan was accepted by all the parties, the next year was spent, Brown and Zasloff write, “working out the details.”18 In the meeting of September 1990, the Supreme National Council was formally created. The Paris Peace Treaty was finally signed in October 1991.19

Thus, by the time of the Water Festival in November 1990, the momentum of the negotiations and the changes in world politics made it clear to people on the ground that the process was going forward, but it was unclear exactly how the changes underway would unfold, and who the winners and losers would be.

As these events were playing out in 1989–90, Westerners doing political analysis of the scene in Cambodia were divided. The most vocal analyst at the time was a

about my activities, and there were still party political meetings, where speakers railed against the evil imperialists, but no one seemed to be paying much attention.

19 A sense of outrage remained among many Khmer and international observers in response to the fact that the Khmer Rouge were included as a party to the agreements. But the fact that the DK military was the main military force of the CGDK, and that the Chinese had to be party to any agreement, meant that the Khmer Rouge were included at the table. For detailed discussions of the negotiation process and the issues surrounding the DK’s inclusion in the Paris Agreements, see Peou, Conflict Neutralization; Brown and Zasloff, Cambodia Confounds; and Ben Kiernan, “The Inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in the Cambodian Peace Process: Causes and Consequences,” in Genocide and Democracy, ed. Ben Kiernan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1993), pp. 191–272.
political lobbyist named Raoul Jennar, who was hired by a consortium of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Jennar wrote a series of reports in 1990 that, with the luxury of hindsight, seem overly alarmist. He maintained that there was “serious doubt” about the SOC’s capacity to survive beyond a period ranging from between six and eighteen months.\(^\text{20}\) This argument was based on several premises: that the Khmer Rouge resistance fighters were making significant military gains in the countryside; that the SOC could not survive economically without Russian and Eastern block assistance; that as a consequence of the reforms there was a mounting economic and social crisis, including a rise in corruption; and that there was an internal struggle for control of the SOC underway.

Jennar envisioned an internal battle between “hardliners” led by Chea Sim and “reformers” led by Hun Sen, with the latter in favor of implementing true liberal reforms and the former clinging rigidly to “Stalinist” ideals. Hun Sen was championed by Jennar as a true democrat; Jennar urged the US Senate to recognize the SOC government so as to back the reformer before a backlash from the hardliners threatened the forward pace of economic reform and peace negotiations.

French researcher Serge Thion also perceived Chea Sim as the man behind a political crackdown that took place in early 1990. He wrote, “Chea Sim could not see this internal threat without reacting. His point was that, in the middle of the delicate process of negotiations, the Party had to stick together … [Hun Sen’s] reformist views were dangerous for the people in power, because their political system was destabilized by the very process of negotiation…”\(^\text{21}\)

Historian Ben Kiernan, on the other hand, argued that the Vietnamese withdrawal had not brought about any significant change in the balance of military power.\(^\text{22}\) Writing after a visit to Cambodia in 1990, historian Michael Vickery agreed that there was no sign of imminent SOC collapse. Vickery also took issue with Jennar’s characterization of Chea Sim as a “hardliner” and with Jennar’s allegations of splits within the SOC. Rather, Vickery argued that, while the economic reforms such as a return to private property had been popular, a rising gap in wealth between rich and poor, widespread corruption, and devaluation of the riel all raised questions about the success of the reforms. Vickery submitted that perhaps Chea Sim and others were interested in restraining the reforms not because they were communist hardliners, but because they were responsible politicians concerned about the well-being of the population.\(^\text{23}\)

The propaganda broadcast by the resistance forces along the Thai-Cambodian border, widely believed by overseas Khmer, argued meanwhile that the Vietnamese army had never left. In exaggerated claims, this propaganda alleged that the SOC was not a functioning government, but was a military occupying force without popular legitimacy that would collapse if it were no longer propped up by external military force. At least some members of the Khmer resistance camped along the border, and those living abroad imagined a Cambodia waiting for them to return and retake their rightful place as rulers.

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\(^{20}\) Jennar, *Chroniques*, report dated June 1990, p. 10


\(^{22}\) Kiernan, “The Inclusion,” p. 209.

We now know from Evan Gottesman’s research using notes from PRK and SOC internal meetings that Hun Sen and Chea Sim were rivals, but not over ideological issues. Of the three, it was Heng Samrin who would soon be pushed aside as an outmoded ideologue. Hun Sen and Chea Sim were both pragmatists who had built their own individual patronage networks that assured them of loyal followers and resources to carry over into the new regime. While they were negotiating a deal to bring about peace, they had no intention of giving up power. They envisioned allowing the existence of “minority parties” that would acknowledge their subservience to the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP). Hun Sen said in a meeting of the Council of State in 1989, “In this society that we are currently guiding, we are not yet permitting the creation of political parties. If there is a political solution and if [opposition politicians] come [to Cambodia], there should be mutual give-and-take. They repay us by recognizing us as the central leader. We repay them by recognizing them as a legal party.”

In a meeting in July 1989 with the Ministers of Interior of Vietnam and Laos, Hun Sen announced their strategy:

“Before we didn’t expect to win militarily, and we decided to choose a political solution” he told the visitors. “But then the balance of forces shifted, and the leadership came up with the strategy of ‘no political solution concerning internal views.’” Hun Sen explained that because the party was “still seeking a political solution with regard to international views,” it was “playing both sides,” meaning that publicly it would present a more liberal face. “This is an issue that is absolutely secret in the strategy of the Party,” he added.

The plan was to agree to liberalization in dealing with the outside world, but to hold the line on allowing political change within the country. But economic change was another matter.

Jenner was correct in pointing out that the SOC faced significant economic problems, including corruption. The decision to privatize state assets was taken in an attempt to raise money to pay for the war, as well as a way to preempt any claims to state resources by returnees after a settlement. The industrial sector was transferred over to the party. The SOC leadership was also keen to proceed with distribution of land to private citizens. Gottesman writes,

Basing land rights on post-1979 possession, the regime intended to preclude claims by Cambodians returning from refugee camps and from overseas. By granting private ownership to the people, it also hoped to preempt campaign promises from the resistance.

During 1990, however, faced with a degree of uncertainty, SOC officials began selling off state property for their own personal gain. Some of the sales were sanctioned; high-ranking officials were deeded villas around the city that could be

26 Ibid., pp. 320–21.
27 Ibid., p. 320.
rented out for high profits to the masses of incoming aid workers and UN staff. But in other cases, the selling off of assets and charging of “fees” for services went beyond the “sanctioned” corruption and spiraled out of control. One foreign aid worker referred to it as “panicked looting.”28 Loyal state workers who had served the PRK for years with almost no salary discerned that if the government changed, they would have nothing to show for their years of service. So they skimmed off and sold state assets—in some cases, even their own desks. Gottesman says that, by 1990, the scope of government corruption was “alarming”; almost any government service, from health care to education, required a bribe. The minutes of the Council of Ministers shows that the leadership was aware of the problem, but refused to acknowledge it publicly.29

Jennar’s report on his October–November 1990 visit to Phnom Penh described his own dire predictions coming true. Inflation was high: the price of rice was up from 15 riels a kilo to 120 riels a kilo, and petrol from 90 riels to 350 riels a liter. The value of the riel was down, and absenteeism and corruption were up, bringing about the climate of “the end of a reign.”30

The SOC faced a problem. Within its own ranks, members feared that a new government might come to power after the UN-sponsored elections, and that concern triggered a scramble to accumulate immediate personal profit. But at the top level, the leadership was not divided. While they had feared that they might lose as much as 30 percent of the country to the resistance after the Vietnamese withdrawal, they had instead succeeded in maintaining control.31 They saw themselves as engineering a transition in which they could promise change to outsiders, thereby procuring needed concessions and resources, while simultaneously taking actions to ensure that they would retain their own grip on power. They would give the minority parties the right to exist, and in exchange the returnees would need to acknowledge their right to rule.

The History of Buddhism (1975–1989)

A set of Buddhist prophetic texts known as the Putth Tumneay carry predictions that, at the time of the midpoint in the cycle between buddhas, at about 2500 years (1953 by the Christian calendar), there will be a period of death and destruction.32 According to the most well-known lines of the various versions of the vernacular

28 For a discussion of the situation as described in the Khmer media at the time, see John Marston, “Cambodia 1991–94: Hierarchy, Neutrality, and Etiquettes of Discourse” (PhD dissertation, University of Washington, 1997). In December 1991, students and state worker protests would erupt over the sale of state property by the transportation minister, not so much, as Thion points out, because they objected to the corruption, but because they had not gotten a share. These protests were violently suppressed, and at least eight people were killed. See Thion, Watching Cambodia, pp. 188, 194–97.
29 Gottesman, Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, p. 326.
30 Jennar, Chroniques, report dated December 1990, p. 3
31 Gottesman, Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, p. 309.
32 Also transliterated as Buddh Damnây. Anne Hansen and I are currently conducting research on the range of texts known collectively as the Putth Tumneay. For a discussion of the origins of the texts and a translation of one version to French, see Olivier de Bernon, “Le Buddh Damnây: Note sur un Texte Apocalyptique Khmer,” BEFEO 81 (1994): 83–96; and “La Prédiction du Bouddha,” Aséanie 1 (1998): 43–66.
text: “Blood will run as high as the belly of an elephant,” “there will be houses in which no one lives, roads upon which no one travels,” and “people will fight over a grain of rice stuck to the tail of a dog.” During this time, the texts predict, Buddhism will be nearly completely destroyed, and the tamil, the ignorant infidels, will come to rule the land. It is understandable why many Khmer see the fulfillment of these prophecies in the period of Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979. Democratic Kampuchea (DK) deliberately set out to destroy the practice of Buddhism.

Senior monks in the Sangha hierarchy were killed immediately. The remaining monks were forced to disrobe, most by early 1976. In one study, Chanthou Boua interviewed twenty-nine surviving monks, all of whom had disrobed under threat of death. They reported that those who refused to do so were immediately taken away and presumably killed. The death toll of Buddhist monks during DK is not known. Ian Harris reports that estimates from 1980 suggested that 63 percent of monks had died or were executed, but “these bald figures shed little light on the factors underlying the deaths. In most cases, we do not know if their end was a direct consequence of their previous monk status.”

There was also widespread destruction of Buddhist monasteries; as many as one third of the temples in Cambodia had been damaged in the war, but many were completely destroyed during the DK regime. DK cadre placed explosives to blow up some buildings, or pulled them apart for construction materials. Many other temples were converted for other uses, including storage facilities, prisons, “hospitals,” and extermination centers. Buddhist images were smashed, toppled into rivers and swamps, or desecrated in other ways. Henri Locard notes that a DK slogan advised, “if you demolish a statue of the Buddha, you will gain a sack of cement.” Buddhist texts were deliberately destroyed, and the devastation was so effective that an estimated 90 percent of Cambodia’s Buddhist literary heritage was lost in that span of less than four years.

People were forbidden to conduct religious rituals openly or practice their religious faith. Some people did offer prayers in secret or maintain small shrines within their homes, but no public displays of religious faith were tolerated. The Khmer Rouge also destroyed other religious sites sacred to the majority Buddhist

34 Ian Harris, Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), p. 179.
36 Remarkably, some survived nearly untouched. Across the central and southern plains, the destruction seems nearly total, while in certain areas people report many temples intact.
37 Keyes, “Communist Revolution,” and Sam, Khmer Buddhism.
population, such as the houses of neak ta, territorial guardian spirits, and village ancestral spirits.40

In 1978, the DK Minister of Culture, Yun Yat, declared to Yugoslav journalists that, “Buddhism is dead, and the ground had been cleared for the foundations of a new revolutionary culture.”41 All the monks had by this time been disrobed, and Buddhist ritual, which had been at the center of systems of meaning for rural Khmer, had been largely eradicated. People instead were to dedicate themselves to working for the revolution, and admire the Khmer Rouge cadre, whose dedication to the movement inspired a discipline said to be more perfect than that of the monks.42

In January 1979, the Vietnamese army ousted the Khmer Rouge and set up a new government headed by DK cadre who had fled to Vietnam and by Khmer revolutionaries who had been in Vietnam since the 1950s. This new government, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), allowed for the reestablishment of Buddhism, but with important restrictions. Monks from the Theravadin tradition were brought from ethnic Khmer areas of southern Vietnam, and in September of 1979, seven former monks, all of whom had served for between twenty and sixty years, were reordained. The Venerable Tep Vong, the first to be reordained (though he was the youngest), was the senior ranking monk. From late 1979 to late 1981, these monks reestablished the Khmer Sangha by reordaining other former monks. In rural areas, some former monks apparently simply put their robes back on and began performing rituals once again.43

The total number of monks in the country in these early years was reported differently in various sources. In 1981, Richardson reported 500 monks and 1,500 novices, and said about 3,000 wats had been restored.44 David Hawk, in the same year, cited Tep Vong as reporting there were 3,000 monks, of whom 800 had been monks before. But Hawk then received higher figures from provincial authorities, and he speculates that the numbers of younger monks were underreported to central authorities, since ordination was prohibited for those less than fifty years of age.45

In 1981, the PRK had placed a series of restrictions on the reestablishment of Buddhism, including the restriction prohibiting men under fifty years old from becoming monks. While visitors like Hawk reported some ordination of younger monks in rural areas, especially if they ordained for short periods on the occasion of the death of a parent, Keyes reported that the overall number of monks was kept quite small throughout the PRK era. Between 1985 and 1989, various sources place

40 The Khmer Rouge also set out to destroy other religious faiths practiced by minority populations in the country, including Islam practiced by the Cham people and Christianity, including Catholicism, which was practiced mainly by ethnic Vietnamese. See Ben Kiernan, The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); and Ysa Osman, The Cham Rebellion (Phnom Penh: The Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2006).
43 Sam, Khmer Buddhism, p. 80.
the numbers between 6,500 and 8,000 monks, perhaps 10 percent of pre-war numbers. While the government justified this restriction based upon the need for male productive labor, and no doubt the need for soldiers, Keyes argued that the state also likely wanted to prevent the reemergence of the Sangha as an independent institution. He wrote, “Buddhism was still viewed in Marxist terms as having a potential for offering people ‘unhealthy beliefs.’”

Other traditional patterns of religious behavior were also restricted. Ian Harris reports that monks, as employees of the state, were required to engage in agricultural labor, something specifically prohibited by their vows. They were also not allowed to go on daily alms rounds, and traditional forms of giving to the temples were discouraged. The rebuilding of temples was carefully regulated, and state-organized management committees oversaw the allocation of donations, directing a portion of these funds to “socially useful purposes,” such as the building of schools and clinics. But Harris points out that the laws that kept tight control of the numbers and activities of monks, and on the giving practices of lay people, might very well have been restrictive precisely because those laws were “subverted or ignored.”

Just as Khmer farmers had quietly begun to ignore the regulations on agricultural production as organized in “solidarity groups” or socialist cooperatives, and returned to independent small-scale agriculture by the mid-1980s, perhaps rural villages had also returned to their traditional religious practices by this time—to the extent that it was possible to do so given their limited financial resources.

Official changes issued from the central level came only in 1988, when the restrictions on ordinations were lifted. Thereafter the number of monks rose rapidly (16,400 in 1990, 50,081 in 1998–99, 55,755 in 2003, and 58,828 in 2005). Religious services began to be broadcast again on the radio. In January 1989, Hun Sen apologized in public speeches for the “government’s ‘mistakes’ towards religion.” The leadership of the PRK then began to make public appearances at Buddhist rituals, including the ceremony to enshrine the relic of the Buddha in the Sakyamuni chetey (stupa) in front of the train station in April 1989. The government also paid to construct Buddhist monuments at two of the most important sites of Khmer Rouge atrocities: the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes and the Choeung Ek “killing fields.” Keyes emphasizes the significance of the fact that the PRK government was taking responsibility not only for the living, but also for the memory of the dead.

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47 Ibid.
48 Harris, Cambodian Buddhism, p. 270, citing Heike Loschman; see also Sam, Khmer Buddhism, pp. 86–87.
49 Harris, Cambodian Buddhism, p. 274.
legitimizing their own regime by honoring those killed during the Pol Pot regime in a form that was specifically Buddhist.\textsuperscript{54}

Also in April 1989, the National Assembly of the PRK amended the constitution to make Buddhism the state religion. The detested tax on temple donations for state projects was removed,\textsuperscript{55} the first Dhamma-Vinaya and Pali grammar schools for monks reopened in 1989 and 1990;\textsuperscript{56} the Ministry of Cults and Religious affairs was reestablished in 1992; and the Buddhist Institute, which had existed in name only in the 1980s, was reestablished in July 1992.\textsuperscript{57}

From the time of the legal changes in 1989 onwards, temples began to be repaired and rebuilt around the country. The political changes meant that a significant number of overseas Khmer were returning from the United States, France, and other countries, and bringing with them funds to donate to temples. Many of these returnees wanted first of all to sponsor ceremonies to make merit for their relatives who had died in the Khmer Rouge period, most of whom had not had the proper religious ceremonies at the time of their death. Some tried to find the bones of their loved ones and paid for the construction of stupas to hold the remains. The newfound prosperity of a small group of wealthy, urban elite, including top political leaders, also began to flow to religious institutions in the form of the sponsorship of religious ceremonies and the rebuilding of temples. The rebuilding of temples is, as Marston points out, considered one of the paramount ways to earn large amounts of merit.\textsuperscript{58}

Thus in November 1990, the public performances during the Water Festival must be understood within the context of the reemergence of Buddhism. The SOC leaders were in the midst of a process of “conspicuous … public piety,” what Keyes calls an attempt to build “popular support by becoming, as had kings in the past, conspicuous patrons of Buddhism.”\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 66. It should be noted, however, that these reliquaries are not “traditional” in that the monument at Choeung Ek contains, visible behind glass, the uncremated remains of those who were executed there. The monument at Tuol Sleng subsequently collapsed since it was made of wood and never maintained. At the Tuol Sleng Museum, the controversy over a map made of human skulls was only partly resolved in 2002 when the “map” was disassembled and the skulls placed in glass display cases. Many Khmer, including most importantly King Sihanouk, have appealed for the remains to be cremated in accordance with Buddhist tradition. See Judy Ledgerwood, “The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes: National Narrative,” Museum Anthropology 21,1 (1997): 82–98; Rachel Hughes, “Nationalism and Memory in the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide Crimes,” in Contested Pasts, ed. K. Hodgkin and S. Radstone (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), pp. 175–192; and Thompson, “Buddhism in Cambodia,” p. 160–61.

\textsuperscript{55} Keyes, “Communist Revolution,” p. 63.


\textsuperscript{58} John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004); and John Marston, “Constructing Narratives of Order: Religious-Building Projects and Moral Chaos,” in this volume.

THE EVENTS

The program for the events of November 1 and 2, 1990, states that the purpose of holding the festivities is “to implement the political objectives of the party and the state in the matter of protecting and raising up the customs and culture of the people, and to create happiness among the Kampuchean people under the new regime.”  

The events of the first day included boat races on the river in front of the palace in the afternoon and an evening Buddhist ceremony at Wat Unnalaom to prepare for the next day’s procession to the Sakyamuni chetey in front of the train station. The second day began with the procession through the streets to the park in front of the chetey for the planting of a Bodhi tree. The organizing committee president, Chea Sim, planted the tree. There was then an offering of food to 180 monks.

In the afternoon, there were again boat races, and the awarding of prizes to the winners. Then at 6:00 PM, the fireworks began, along with a parade of lighted boats along the river. At 8:00, “national and international guests” began to arrive at the palace, and at 8:15 prayers began, including the taking of the precepts. This was followed by a Buong Suong blessing ceremony, the ceremony of the candles, and traditional dance and music by performers from the Ministry of Propaganda and Culture. Then the ceremony of paying homage to the moon and eating ambok took place. Throughout the evening, while a relatively small group of people were observing the ceremonies taking place within the palace, performances were under way outside on various street corners near the river. These included musical performances by some of the most popular contemporary bands, including those sponsored by the Ministry of Propaganda and Culture. Thousands of people flocked to watch the fireworks and lighted boats and to enjoy these performances.

The program included a section entitled: “The history of the ceremonies of boat racing, floating lights, paying homage to the moon, and eating ambok.” According to the program, these ceremonies have been celebrated since ancient times, but were eradicated during the genocidal Pol Pot regime. Now,

After liberation, on the Seventh of January 1979, when the Angkorean motherland and our Khmer people were restored to life, all customs and practices, religion and national traditions, were restored. Our party, government, and the Front work continuously, vigilantly to insure that every opportunity is

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60 Department of Religion, Office of the National Front for the Solidarity, Building, and Defense of the Kampuchean Motherland, Phnong Bon Om Touk Bantaet Bratip Sampeah Khae ak Ambok Danghaer ning Damdaom pothi preuk (Phnom Penh: Office of the National Front for the Solidarity, Building, and Defense of the Kampuchean Motherland, 1990), p. 1. The program is modeled on earlier prerevolutionary forms from the 1950s and 60s. While these earlier versions usually contain a schedule of the events, dress code, and locations, only the 1959 version contains an explanation of the meaning of the events. This is provided in French and English, apparently for tourists. See Ministry of Information, La Fête du Retrait des Eaux (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Information, 1959). I would like to thank Pic Bunnin, the director of the Buddhist Institute Library, for helping me locate these early programs.

61 In fact, the races were so popular that they were extended to a third day.

62 These crowds were notable for the time, given restrictions on movements in the countryside and the fact that some people were deterred from attending for fear of violence. In 2002, after a decade of freedom of travel and four years of complete peace in the country, an estimated two million people came from the countryside to Phnom Penh for the Water Festival. Charlotte McDonald-Gibson and Lon Nara, “Festival Time,” Phnom Penh Post, November 22–December 5, 2002, p. 16.
available for laypeople and monks widely and openly to preserve and respect religious practices according to religious beliefs and national traditions. In this year of the horse, BE 2534, AD 1990, our party, government, and the Front are enthusiastic and delighted to have been able to arrange the celebration of these three ceremonies discussed above so that the people, the Buddhist faithful, can enjoy the celebration of their national traditions.63

The history of the boat races emphasizes that, during the Angkorean period, Kampuchea had a great naval force, as is documented by temple bas-relief images. In particular, mention is made of Jayavarman VII, and the defeat of Cham enemies by his naval forces. Citing documents from the Buddhist Institute library,64 the history section notes the navy of King Ang Chan, who protected the provinces of Kampuchea Krom with three types of boats. At this time of year, at the full moon of the month of Kattek, in the season of eating ambok, the ministers of the four directions would assemble the navy and army to train for one day and one night.65 The main point of the essay is that Cambodians, and particularly the leaders of the current government, are heirs to a long heritage of superior military skill, passed on continuously since ancient times.

The third point in this section notes that the ceremony is similar to seasonal ceremonies held elsewhere in the world, including Europe. The ceremonies honor the debt of merit that is owed to the Preah Kongkear, the spirit of the river, and to Preah Thorani, the goddess of the earth, who together maintain all life by restoring the fertility of the earth through the annual flooding. The program notes, however, that this ritual activity is really about the scientific realities of the annual flooding cycle and its effects on the lives of farmers.

The history given of the custom of floating the lights makes reference to several religious sites and temples, noting that the ceremony honors Preah Karikum Kaev in the world of the nagas and the buddhas at these aforementioned sites.66 While the program does not provide an exact history, it emphasizes the fact that Buddhist texts are the source for the origins of the practice and that the performance of the ceremony produces good fortune for the people and for the nation.

The history of the custom of paying homage to the moon and eating ambok tells the story of a Bodhisattva (Pothisatv), from the jātaka tales (the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha), who is born as a rabbit. This rabbit offers himself up as food to a Brahmin, who is Indra in disguise. Since the Brahmin cannot take a life, the rabbit

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63 Department of Religion, Pithi Bon Om Touk, p. 6.
64 The Buddhist Institute Library had not yet been re-established at this point, though some books previously printed by the Buddhist Institute were available at the National Library.
65 Department of Religion, Pithi Bon Om Touk, pp. 7–9.
66 I was unable to locate a further elaboration of this reference. The only history I was able to find regarding the floating of lights tells of two white crows that lost five eggs, each of which was found and protected by a different animal. Human children hatched out of the eggs and were raised by their respective animal parents. As adults, they all became monks and found each other again, eventually discovering the identities of their true parents. Because these five orphans cannot return to care for their parents, the offerings given over to the water are puja in honor of their parents. This article does also note that there are at least two other explanations for the source of this practice. See Pich Sal et al., Reuang preng teak tong neung tumniem tomloab khmaer (Folktales related to Khmer customs) (Phnom Penh: n.p., 1994), pp. 142–46. (The title page bears the imprint of the Buddhist Institute, but this reprint is authorized by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts; no date of original publication is given.)
leaps into the fire to kill himself. In a further act of piety, he first rolls on the ground to remove any insects. But Indra magically saves him and raises up his image to the moon, which is why Khmer see the image of a rabbit on the full moon.\textsuperscript{67} This is why, the program concludes, Khmer make offerings of ambok and bananas to the full moon during the month of *Kattek*.

In this official history of these annual ceremonies, explanation of one of the crucial parts of the ritual sequence is omitted. The program does not offer a description or history of the ritual of the lighting of candles and the study of the pattern of the wax dripping to predict the rainfall patterns across the country for the coming year—though this was surely the crucial feature of the festival for rural rice growers.

This particular ceremony was previously held annually in the palace, presided over by the king and performed by a Brahmin, though it had not been conducted since the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk in 1970.\textsuperscript{68} Candles, one for every province, are placed in a row on a piece of wood or bamboo and lit. The wood is then turned so the candles drip wax on a length of banana leaf underneath. The person officiating then interprets the drippings and makes predictions for rainfall prospects for each of the provinces for the coming year. As the candles are being lit, prayers are offered for abundant rains.\textsuperscript{69} During this ritual in 1990, the ceremony was performed by an official from the Ministry of Propaganda and Culture, who, I was told at the time, was of the lineage of Brahmins who had served Khmer kings in the past. The following year, the newly returned Prince Sihanouk would preside over the performance of the ritual.\textsuperscript{70} Olivier de Bernon notes that it was after the return of the king in 1991 that the descendants of the bakou, or palace Brahmins who had served in the old regime, were found and brought back into service in the palace.\textsuperscript{71}

In 1990, the organizers might have wished to play down who was performing and officiating at this modified, previously royal, sacred ceremony. However, one did not need to be either royal or Brahmin to perform the candle ceremony per se. In fact, the handbook on royal ceremonies that describes the performance of the ritual in 1958 by King Suramarit specifically notes that there is little difference between the ceremonies in the palace and those conducted among the people.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{67} This is essentially the same story provided as a source for the custom in Pich Sal, et al., *Reuang preng*. These authors add that the foods that are eaten at this celebration—*ambok*, tubers, and taro—are all favorite foods of the rabbit. Pich Sal et al., *Reuang preng*, pp. 145–46.

\textsuperscript{68} See ibid., p. 141; and Chap Pin, ed., *Preah Reach Pithi Tvear Tossameas*, vol. 3 (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1960), pp. 119–30.

\textsuperscript{69} Chap Pin, *Preah Reach Pithi*, p. 127.


\textsuperscript{71} Olivier de Bernon, “À propos du retour des bakous dans le Palais royal de Phnom Penh,” *Renouveaux religieux en Asie* (Paris: EFEQ, 1997). De Bernon notes the performance of the ceremony at the Water Festival in 1994 by the new, reorganized corps of bakou (p. 33). De Bernon’s piece discusses the return of the bakou to palace service, including the fact that only fragments remain of the texts that had previously been used, which in any case the surviving bakou are unable to understand.

\textsuperscript{72} Chap Pin, *Preah Reach Pithi*, p. 128; see also Ministry of Information, *La Fête*. 
The ceremony using candles to predict the rains is performed on this important ritual occasion in many parts of rural Cambodia. Salieng Mak reports that the ceremony is still performed in Sophy village in Kompong Speu province. Three rituals are held together: “bon ak ambok, sampeah preah khae, and samrak tien,” which she translates as “starch rice,” “moon praying,” and “rain prediction.” They are held on the full moon night of the month of Kattek, and the “aim of the whole ceremony is to give thanks to the land, water, and environment, and to predict next year’s rainfall pattern.” The ceremony starts at midnight (though Mak reports that it started a bit earlier); the achar and two other men light three sacred candles of pure beeswax. The three candles represent the three neighboring districts of Longvek, Samrong Tong, and Phnom Srouch. The wax-dripping patterns are read by interpreting shapes: for example, the figure of a gun means war, a good pile of candle wax means good harvest, and a figure of a rat means rat infestation. Mak says that in 1993 when she witnessed the ceremony, the prediction was for less rain in her district, news that might prompt the farmers to use some irrigation. That year did indeed bring drought; she said the prediction was “close to reality,” though not entirely accurate. She emphasized that those farmers still make decisions, such as what rice varieties to grow, based upon these predictions. She recommends that the process receive further study.

In Svay village, in southern Kandal province, a village elder also reported that the candle ceremony had been held annually until 2002. Here, too, three candles were used, to predict rainfall in Kandal Stoeng district, Bati district to the south, and north towards Phnom Penh. The ceremony was not held in 2003, as the achar who used to conduct it had recently died.

In Sambo village in Kompong Thom province, Navuth Chay records the celebration of the ceremony, which he translates as “the full moon sacred candle dripping festival.” Here the ceremony uses twelve candles, representing the twelve months of the year, which are kneaded into six candles, one for each of the six rainy months of the year. The candles are attached to a length of bamboo, to which are also fixed two clusters of incense sticks. This more complicated arrangement reflects the fact that Sambo villagers grow more than one kind of rice each year, and use the

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73 Leclère has a description of the ceremony as it was performed in the nineteenth century; he notes that the ritual is certainly of Brahmanic origin and resembles a festival held in India in honor of Lakshmi. The participants asked the moon to “be our protectress.” Adhémar Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1899), pp. 377–79.


75 Ibid.

76 Ibid. Mak uses the word “priest,” which I take to mean achar, or Buddhist lay officiant, who is reported to conduct the ritual in other places.

77 Ibid., pp. 147–48.

78 This is the village where May Ebihara conducted ethnographic research in 1959–60 and again in the 1990s, near the border of Kandal and Takeo provinces. Dr. Ebihara said that she did not remember the ceremony being performed in that year (personal communications), but in Meach Pon’s research on the ceremony in Takeo province, he notes that temples in an area will often rotate holding the ceremony over a number of years, to ensure large crowds. See Meach Pon, *Brapeini ning tumniem tonloab khmaer* (Khmer Customs and Traditions) (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 2001), p. 276.

incense sticks also to predict the outcome of the rice harvest in their upland fields. The pattern of the drippings on the banana leaf, as well as the manner in which the wax drips, will predict not only the rainfall amounts, but also related natural disasters. The burning of the incense sticks predicts how well the upland fields will “fire” when the downed forest cover is burned away. The villagers reported to Chay, as they had to Mak, that they use the predictions to guide agricultural decision-making for the coming year. For rural farmers, the candle ceremony is still considered important for predicting rainfall patterns.

There is another aspect of the celebrations that the official program does not mention, and that was not evident at the formal ceremony at the “former” Royal Palace that night in 1990: in the village versions of these rituals, the communal preparation and eating of the ambok was traditionally an occasion for great fun and flirting among young people. Meach Pon, in his book on Khmer customs and traditions, describes the “bon moha ambok” as it was previously celebrated in Takeo province. He notes that the ritual process involved the whole community making the ambok together, pounding the rice grains and frying the flakes, all to the cadence of the sounding of a gong. Then when the ambok is ready, young women will try to feed it to the young men, stuffing it in their mouths, while yelling, “are you full?” Since the mouths of the young men are stuffed with the dry ambok, they cannot answer and the girls will thus try to feed them even more, all the while laughing and joking. The girls will also ask, “Will there be rain this year or not?”—“phlieng ru min phlieng?” As when games between teams of young men and women are played at Khmer New Years, this game provides direct physical contact between young men and women who are otherwise traditionally kept at a discreet distance. But Meach Pon reports that this custom is dying out in Takeo and exists now only in the memories of those sixty-years old or older.

The elder from Svay reported that the ambok ceremony in her village had also stopped in the last couple of years (she explained that in Svay they prepared the ambok in advance of the celebration). She remembered fondly the ceremonies when she was young, when the young people would flirt, feeding the ambok to the young men and asking, “phlieng” or “reang,” rain or dry? The villagers would bring certain foods—tubers and taro and bananas—as well as ambok, the foods noted in the story above as those preferred by the rabbit.

Thus two of the most important functions of these rural ceremonies—paying homage to the moon and eating ambok—were to predict rainfall and to stage a communal event that would allow young people to flirt and have fun. Certainly

81 Meach Pon, Brapeini ning tumniem. Meach Pon’s article was reprinted, without any citation or credit, by the popular woman’s magazine Kulthida in the November 2001 edition, pp. 30–31. They added pictures of several young women gleefully trying to stuff ambok into the mouth of a young man.
82 Leclère reported that after the ceremony there were “popular games”: “I have been told that in the course of this festival, tender words are uttered and love pledges exchanged, the moon being taken as witness and made keeper of the vow.” Leclère, Le Bouddhisme, p. 379.
83 Meach Pon, Brapeini ning tumniem, p. 284.
there were always differences between rural performances and state-sponsored ceremonies, with the former allowing for more frivolity. 84

The ceremony at the palace in 1990 included performances of classical Khmer dance and music. The dances were from the Khmer classical repertoire, including dances that would have been performed in the palace for royalty during the pre-war years. The dances performed that night included traditional forms that were only just beginning to be performed again after the withdrawal of Vietnamese advisors. When the PRK regime governed, the arts had served the propaganda interests of the state, and dances were devoted to communicating direct political messages rather than performing classical forms. 85 Here the traditional (royal) dances were allowed in a new context.

**ANALYSIS: WHY DID THEY HOLD THE EVENTS?**

By sponsoring these events, the leaders of the SOC were asserting their legitimacy as the rulers of Cambodia—in the context of the launching of the new State of Cambodia—to their rivals in the other factions and to the international community, as well as to the population that they governed inside the country. They were seizing control of the right to declare the meaning of the three key cultural symbols of what it means to be Cambodian, the words that would become the national slogan of the new Kingdom of Cambodia: Nation, Religion, and King.

**NATION**

First, Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin used the occasion to declare that they were nationalists, and, even more basically, that they were Khmer. This was a direct effort to cleanse themselves of ten years of association with the occupying Vietnamese army. The meaning of the boat races, as explained in the program text, focused on a national legacy of successful naval warfare, and while this could be taken to be directed at their military adversaries in the resistance, the historical victories mentioned are those that defeated enemies from the east. By noting that Cambodia had ruled the lower Mekong delta as recently as the time of Ang Chan, the SOC rulers were comparing themselves to rulers who had stood up to the Vietnamese.

They were announcing publicly that now that the Vietnamese were gone, “we Khmer” could go back to doing things the Khmer way. This discourse would have had a particular appeal to those in the border camps and among the Khmer overseas who were convinced that their country suffered from “Vietnamization.” Through a series of visits to France and the US, the SOC leadership had embarked on a campaign to appeal directly to overseas Khmer; this process involved accepting several transnational returnees into the SOC government. 86 The program makes this

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84 On the shift from boisterous ceremonies in Northeast Thailand to forms of more staid state-controlled Thai Buddhism from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, see Kamala Tiyawanich, *Forest Recollections: Wandering Monks in Twentieth-Century Thailand* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997).


86 Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, pp. 284–86.
nationalist pitch in several ways, first in its specific appeals to Khmer history and the fact that the boat races date back to Angkorian times. In this regard, it is interesting to note that they make the connection not only to the glories of Angkor (the ultimate symbol of Khmer national identity), but specifically to Jayavarman VII, the quintessential Khmer king.87 As Benedict Anderson, O. W. Wolters, and others have noted for other societies in Southeast Asia, claiming power involves stating not only your connections to previous rulers, but to the most powerful of former rulers.88

The dancers and other performers from the Ministry of Propaganda and Fine Arts (soon to change to the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts) were clearly delighted to be able, once again, to do things the Khmer way. Gottesman notes that the PRK had faced a fundamental dilemma with regard to the revival of traditional cultural forms. While such a revival was generally supported by Khmer, especially educated Khmer, and it could help combat their image as puppets of the Vietnamese, “so much of what Cambodians thought of as their cultural heritage reminded them of Sihanouk and the royalist movement against which the PRK was struggling militarily and politically.”89 Now the performers were relieved of the obligation to convey exclusively anti-West, anti-royal, anti-coalition propaganda and could return to performances of the beloved Khmer classical dance.

As nationalists, the three SOC leaders also wanted to present themselves as united, a show of solidarity in the face of swirling rumors that internal divisions threatened the party. It was imperative that they show the resistance factions that they would not let any internal differences affect their solidarity in the face of the returnees, and indeed this show of solidarity has helped maintain their strength in the years since.

Holding the boat races also symbolized national unity by bringing together competing teams from around the country—though in this first year of the revived races not all provinces were represented. The competition also brought together crowds of people from around the country, a situation heretofore impossible since the PRK had limited internal travel to prevent infiltration by the resistance forces. The candles used in the ceremony represented each province, and the predictions of the rains were national, rather than local or regional, as in rural versions of the ceremony. Taken together, these ritual elements orchestrated and conveyed a sense of a reunited and rededicated kingdom to the population.

**Religion**

The SOC leaders were proclaiming through the planting of the Bodhi tree and the palace rituals, as with the installation of the relic in the Sakyamuni chetey the year before, that they were Buddhists. This meant most importantly that they were not Khmer Rouge, the notorious infidels who had deliberately tried to destroy religion.


89 Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, p. 218.
Much of PRK/SOC propaganda for a decade had focused on the fact that the population owed a debt to the PRK for literally saving their lives in the face of DK genocide, while blaming the horrors of the DK on the “Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan genocidal clique.” While many PRK leaders, including the top three, had served in the DK regime, and they claimed the victory over the American imperialists and Lon Nol in 1975 as their own, their legitimacy lay in having saved the Khmer people from the DK. Appeals to the Buddhist notion of a debt owed (kun) has been a major theme in CPP campaigns through all of the national elections since 1993.

Further, by lifting state restrictions on religious practice in 1989, the SOC leadership had already learned how enthusiastically the people welcomed a return to full state support for Buddhism. The program notes that the party, the government, and the Front work hard to make it possible for the people to practice their religion; indeed, in the program, they take credit for supporting religion throughout the PRK. Hun Sen’s remarkable apology in 1989, when he confessed to having made mistakes with regard to religion, shows the SOC’s need to rally the people’s support during election campaigns by presenting themselves as devout Buddhists. In 1990, the leadership had already begun to support the reconstruction of certain temples.90

The entire ceremony—and in particular the lighting of the candles—is conducted to invoke the gods, the devata, the gods of Brahmanism, the buddhas, and bodhisattvas to intervene and provide Cambodia with the rains so crucial for the growing of rice, the staple food.91 The livelihood of the people depends on the answering of these prayers. The rulers establish their legitimacy by performing the ritual and thus demonstrating that they act in harmony with the natural world; their missive to the gods brings the rain, the floodwaters, the fish, the fertility, and the harvest.

I do not mean to suggest that Heng Samrin, Chea Sim, and Hun Sen literally believed that by performing the ceremony they would bring the rains and restore fertility. Perhaps that is why the program does not play up this aspect of the two-day event (one witness to the ceremony clearly remembers Hun Sen trying to hurry along this part of the festivities).92 But there is evidence that Khmer farmers in rural communities still trust in the predictions and the efficacy of ritual action. Residents of rural communities were able to convince two young Khmer academic researchers that the ceremony was effective, or at least that its effectiveness “required additional study.”93

The program also links the celebrations to scientific, rational, “modern” facts about the annual flooding, the reversal of the river, and the replenishing of the fertility of the soil. While the program states that the Water Festival rituals are conducted to offer thanks to Preah Kongkear and Preah Thorani, the spirit of the river and the goddess of the earth, it goes on to explain that this event “reflects the

90 By the 2003 election, the image of the CPP as the “Party of Buddhism” was central to their reelection campaign. Fieldnotes, 2003.
91 Ministry of Information, La Fête, pp. 126–27.
92 One of the other foreigners present in 1990, Australian ethnomusicologist William Lobban, remembers that Hun Sen became impatient waiting for the candles to drip and ordered the Brahmin to cut it short and get on with the “reading” (personal communication).
93 See Mak, “Rainfed Lowland Rice Farming”; and Chay, “Society and Culture.”
actual characteristics of the geography and the way of life of the farmers who live along the river."\textsuperscript{94} The socialist literary forms of the previous ten years of PRK rule were heavily steeped in such appeals to realism. This section of the program also notes that the ceremony is similar to one performed in Europe, making a link to the West and therefore to “modernity.”

The leadership appealed to Buddhist beliefs by invoking one other theme. The SOC leadership recognized the potency among their citizenry of millennial ideas about a coming change of leadership in the aftermath of the devastation predicted in the \textit{Putth Tumneay}. The various versions of the \textit{Putth Tumneay} discuss a time of terrible death and destruction, characterized by inversions of the social hierarchy: children will not respect their parents, students will not respect their teachers; “the gourd sinks and the broken pot floats,” the text predicts; and the evil, ignorant, infidels will come to rule the land. By openly sponsoring Buddhism and Buddhist ritual activity, leaders of the SOC clearly meant to distance themselves from communism, since they understood that the people knew communists to be infidels, non-believers. This characterization of communists as the evil infidels predicted in the texts was most commonly made with reference to the Khmer Rouge, but also to the Vietnamese.

The \textit{Putth Tumneay} predictions had a particular resonance in that year, 1990, the year of the horse. In certain versions of the text, the year of the horse and the next one, the year of the sheep, are said to mark a transition, following which there will be one more brief period of conflict, “crossing a field of white” (i.e., bones), before it is time for the coming of the \textit{Preah Bat Dhammik}, the righteous savior predicted in the texts.\textsuperscript{95} While the three SOC leaders might not have been trying to claim (at this stage)\textsuperscript{96} to be the savior(s) noted in the text, they most assuredly did not want to be seen as the infidels whose decline and demise were imminent. The goal was to show that the transition was complete, that order and social hierarchy already had been restored, with them situated in their rightful place at the top.

\textbf{KING}

Finally, it is with regard to the notion of kingship that the reestablishment of the festivities is most ambiguous. On the one hand, the holding of a royal ceremony in the “former” royal palace in the midst of negotiations with the former king could be taken as a direct affront, the message being: If you do not complete the negotiations and return, we are capable of proceeding without you. On the other hand, the

\textsuperscript{94} Department of Religion, \textit{Pithi Bon Om Touk}, pp. 9–10.
\textsuperscript{95} As I wrote this article in 2002, we were again at the crucial point in the twelve-year cycle when the coming of the \textit{Preah Bat Dhammik} was at hand. There are a significant number of millennial movements that are linked to waiting for the arrival of this just and righteous ruler and the period of peace and prosperity that his reign will herald. Some of these movements are linked to building projects, as noted by John Marston, “Clay into Stone: A Modern-Day Tapas,” in \textit{History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia}, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), pp. 170–96; and Marston, “Constructing Narratives of Order,” in this volume.
\textsuperscript{96} During the outbreak of violence between the royalists and CPP in 1997, Hun Sen referred to a line of the text on television, apparently trying to cast himself as the \textit{Preah Bat Dhammneuk}. See Elizabeth Moorthy, “‘Cooking the Shrimp is Past’ ... What Next?” \textit{Phnom Penh Post}, August 29–September 11, 1997, p. 1.
reestablishment of the festival could also be read as an invitation to the former king: Return now and everything can be as it was before ... we will allow the monarchy to resemble its previous form.

Even without reference to the former king, in the face of his looming return, the three former communist leaders were, I would argue, making the case that order had already been successfully wrested out of chaos, and thus they had already assumed the mantle of the just king themselves. The prospect of these three SOC leaders performing a royal ceremony recalls Chandler's cultural analysis of historical materials from the nineteenth century. Like the composition and chanting of the text Chandler describes in the “Songs” piece, and the performance of ceremonies in the historical chronicles of King Duong, the celebration of the ceremony in 1990 was about the ritual recreation of social hierarchy in the aftermath of the devastation of Khmer Rouge rule and the civil war that followed. In the nineteenth century, after the devastation of war, examples of orderliness, Chandler writes, such as “an elegant ceremony, a design in silk, or a properly chanted poem,” would have been few and far between. Sponsoring the events was a way for the SOC leadership to demonstrate that they were capable and willing to recreate the old social order—on their own terms—through social activities and ritual performances. In form it was, literally, the way that things had been done before.

Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin were seeking to enact, however uncomfortably, a series of actions and a ritual activity that would appeal to a Khmer public that was still (to varying degrees) steeped in a tradition of celebrating hierarchical arrangements of leadership tied to the public demonstration of political, economic, and religious efficacy. They were demonstrating that there was an established political order, as per Khmer tradition, even if they were not royalty. Marie Martin, writing in early 1990, suggested that the Khmer population was favorably inclined towards the recent withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and the redistribution of land to private owners (as they were to the new freedom of religion). She writes,

> Khmers are likely to accept favorably these two positive reforms, even if offered by someone other than the god-king. The main point is to survive by adapting traditions to the requirements of the new political power and, if peace lasts, the Khmer will be grateful to those who know how to preserve it, allowing the population to live decently.97

The SOC leaders demonstrated that they were in control and capable of providing order by carrying out the festivities without any social disruptions or violence. The resistance had exploded a couple of devices in central Phnom Penh in 1989, but nothing spoiled the evening for the crowds who took to the streets these two days in November 1990. Rowers of the boats and those who came to watch had been able to travel and enjoy the festivities in safety.

The funds spent for such an event was also a display of economic power. In this period, when the city electrical supply was irregular, inflation was rampant, the top elite still drove around in Russian Ladas, and most people still rode bicycles, spending on brightly lit boats and fireworks showed that the state did have some resources at its disposal. Chandler’s work emphasizes the linkage between

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possessions, particularly those that are bestowed by and received from a ruler, and the legitimacy of one's authority. "Propriety" and "property" are directly linked, with good rulers making merit by distributing wealth and titles to their subjects.

This transition period in 1990 was clearly marked by just such a distribution of titles and property. As Gottesman points out, the SOC regime was busy dividing up state assets, a process that helped to ensure loyalty within the party and among state workers who received a share, while preempting attempts by the returning resistance politicians to gain access to the resources or use pre-1979 ownership as a campaign issue.98 High-ranking officials received property in the city that they could use to generate personal income. Regular Cambodian citizens were also being told that they had regained ownership of their land, a factor that was to prove crucial for CPP support in rural areas in the 1993 election.99

The year 1990 also marked the beginning of a new period characterized by ostentatious displays of wealth, and the public distribution of gifts by the ruling party, which were meant to establish the core legitimacy of the CPP, and, in particular, of Hun Sen. These activities, of course, echoed the elaborate public displays by Prince Sihanouk in the 1960s, when he would travel to the countryside, often by helicopter, to hand out gifts to his "children." In the post-1993 Kingdom of Cambodia, the new CPP elite mimic this pattern, proving their political "prowess"100 by returning a portion of their wealth directly to the people through building schools, sponsoring ceremonies, and passing out sarongs and packets of MSG to crowds of rural poor. Such distributions are the public media face of Cambodian politics today, the main focus of television "news."

Discussing King Duong’s reign, Chandler also notes how the reestablishment of royal legitimacy was linked to changes in "linguistic etiquette," as the king changed proper forms of address in recognition of new status among those he favored. Marston has studied the ways that changes in language during the transition period between regimes are linked to forms of social hierarchy.101 The SOC reinstated the use of certain titles, and took for themselves, as political elites, the title Samdech. This title previously had been commonly used for royalty and was a term of endearment for King Sihanouk among the rural masses, who referred to him as Samdech Ov or "Papa Prince."102 Other titles previously issued by kings, including "Oknha," reappear as commodities. Differences in status among the masses also reflect this new acknowledgement of social differences, as the term "comrade" disappeared and

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98 Gottesman, Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, pp. 318–19.
99 It would turn out that these papers were not formal titles to the land, but only notices that title had been applied for. Today some two-thirds of rural farmers do not have proper title to their land, a fact that is sometimes exploited by local or military authorities out to grab land for themselves.
100 Wolters, History, Culture, and Region.
102 The 1967 Buddhist Institute Dictionary also notes the use of the term to refer to the Supreme Patriarch of the order of Buddhist Monks as well as royalty. The term is applied to a person of great power, a person of merit (neak mean bon), Vacanamukram Khmae (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute [1938] 1967), p. 1317.
old titles such as “lok” (sir) and Ey Uttam (Your Excellency) have been reestablished. Most importantly, the CPP leadership was successful at claiming to have restored Buddhism. The CPP has outstripped the Royalist FUNCINPEC (Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendent, Neutre, Pacifique, et Cooperatif, National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia) party to become the major benefactor of important temples in and near Phnom Penh since the reestablishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993. Just as “gifts” have flowed directly from individual politicians to rural people, so, too, the money has flowed from CPP leaders directly to individual temples and monks, mostly for building projects. The Ministry of Religion and Cults and the educational system for monks remain dramatically underfunded and tightly controlled. The role of primary donors is therefore significant. While formerly the king and his party were the chief supporters of religion, this role has largely been usurped by the CPP leadership, those who have the money to make large donations and therefore to make merit.

Hun Sen, in particular, has made gestures in the years since 1990 that suggest he sees himself more as “king” than “strongman.” In the 2003 election, he said that he would not campaign, but would keep himself neutral and above politics, imitating the political status of King Sihanouk. At the new airport terminal building, Hun Sen erected a stone inscription taking credit for the construction of that new complex. In 2003, he released a statement to the press denying that he was a reincarnation of Jayavarman VII, and that, in fact, he was not of royal lineage. The statement said that it was necessary to issue the denial because so many people were confused and thought that, in fact, he was Jayavarman VII returned.

Over the course of the twelve-year cycle and beyond since the last year of the horse, the leadership of the CPP has been very successful at retaining power. They were able to retain control over most decision-making processes and resources. Yet they do not entirely control the meaning of key cultural concepts in quite the same way as they could in 1990, when they still had a monopoly on power. Competing voices have emerged, not least among them those of the once—and for a time, again—king, Norodom Sihanouk, and his son King Norodom Sihamoni, who seek to offer their own definitions of nation, religion, and kingship. But given the CPP’s continued near-monopoly over the state bureaucracy and the broadcast media, theirs is still the clearest voice, particularly as it reaches into the countryside.

The SOC/CPP leaders were successful in their bid to claim legitimacy by acting as kings, ceremonially and politically, while the negotiations for a settlement were still underway. They took these actions before the return of the former king, forestalling his claims to authority. They acted to seize the authority and power to define the key cultural symbols of nation, religion, and king to their own advantage.

103 A renaming of places also occurs at this time. Streets in Phnom Penh that were previously named for royalty, and which during the socialist period were renamed to honor anti-French resistance/millenarian figures, have been rechristened with their original royal names.


Part of the beauty of Chandler’s original “Songs at the Edge of the Forest” essay was that he argued that there were two contrasting perceptions of moral order in nineteenth-century Cambodia. These were not the perceptions of the powerful as opposed to the powerless, or of the literate verses the illiterate; rather, the first was a “celebration of hierarchical arrangements, operating, ideally, in the common good” and “the second was an attempt to survive inside the framework of what was going on.” 107 The audience listening to the chanting of the text in 1856 could share in the understanding of (or hope for) Cambodia as a recreated set of hierarchical relationships that would provide them with security and prosperity. But they also lived with the memories of a time of death and destruction, when the very model itself had been called into question. They had crossed over the boundary between the forest and field and back again; they had to find a way to live in the darkness at the edge of the forest. Maybe the Khmer rural population today is willing to accept the “shade” of the CPP reign as the best shelter they can find—the restoration of an imperfect order in an imperfect world.