

Interactions of Religion, Kinship, Landscape, and Memory in Post-Genocide Cambodia

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INTRODUCTION

How does a country heal after losing more than 1/5th of its population in the span of 4 years? How do people reconstruct their lives after geographic, familial, and religious bonds have been systematically broken? These are the questions I sought to answer in my research about Khmer Buddhist revival in post-genocide Cambodia.

BACKGROUND

From 1970 to 1975, Cambodia underwent a civil war that caused mass instability and displacement. Then, in 1975, the Khmer Rouge came into power. What followed was the genocidal regime known as Democratic Kampuchea (DK). During DK, the Khmer Rouge sought to turn Cambodia into a classless agrarian society through deportations and mass collectivization. The destruction of the family, the base unit of Cambodian society, was central to DK ideology, as was the abolition of religion. Khmer Buddhism—a fusion of Theravada tradition and spirit cults—was stamped out. In 1979, after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese, Cambodians traversed the country to return to their villages of origin. For some, a homecoming was impossible until the late 1990s due to continued instability.

PCHUM BEN, a holiday unique to Khmer Buddhism, is the annual festival for the dead. During its 15 days, ghosts who have not yet been reborn because they died in an unnatural way (*pret*) are believed to visit the world of the living. To help *pret* towards rebirth, people give offerings in the name of ancestors to monks, who then transfer karma to the dead. The majority of those who died under DK died unnaturally and without ritual, which gave *pchum ben* added meaning in the post-genocide period. *Pchum ben* literally means “gathering of rice balls,” which refers to the traditional ritual of offering rice balls to *pret* during the festival.

FINDINGS

Based on my research, I have found that communities reconstructed themselves socially, morally, and spiritually by finding continuities from the past to the present through kinship bonds, landscape, and ritual. This is especially evident during *pchum ben*:

- Bilateral kinship networks gather to make merit for common ancestors. People visit different temples in different groups to make offerings of gifts and food, strengthening social networks that had been damaged during DK. *Pchum ben*, by focusing on the family and reuniting the living for the dead through traditional ritual, assists in the remaking of kinship bonds alongside that of a stable spiritual order.
 - After DK, the moral condition of many ancestors was uncertain, so in order to ensure a moral equilibrium, the living must make merit for all the deceased. Through rituals like the tossing of rice balls, the living collectively provide opportunities for the rebirth of all *pret*. When *pret* receive merit, they also bless the living and provide protection for them, and so the relations between living and dead are mutually beneficial; the reinforcement of the moral and spiritual order also reinforces the social order of the living.
 - In the aftermath of genocide, communities often prioritized the rebuilding of temples, many of which had been turned into prisons or had become mass graves during DK. *Pchum ben* represents a geographic return: during the festival, people go back to their villages of origin to make merit at these local temples because of their historical significance to a lineage. During *pchum ben*, it is also common for villagers to give offerings to *neak ta*, local guardian spirits embedded in the physical landscape. *Neak ta* provide geographic and spiritual continuity between the pre-conflict era and the post-DK era.
- There were and are many things standing in the way of social reconstruction, especially the post-DK shortage of monks and elders with knowledge of ritual. The extent of religious, social, and geographic continuities varies greatly, and so revival has looked very different in different communities in Cambodia.



FURTHER DIRECTIONS

During *pchum ben*, both women and men visit temples and participate in rituals. However, during regular observances, far more women, particularly women elders, attend temple than men. It is also older women who are most likely to give monks food and gifts during their alms rounds. Women maintain the sangha, and as I continue my research, I plan on focusing on the role of women elders in Khmer Buddhist revival.

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