

Caring for the Dead Ritually in Cambodia

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Buddhist conceptions of the after-life, and prescribed rites in relation to the dead, were modified adaptations of *brahmanical* patterns of religious culture in ancient India. In this article, I demonstrate how Buddhist conceptions, rites and dispositions have been sustained and transformed in a contemporary annual ritual of rising importance in Cambodia, *pchum ben*. I analyze *pchum ben* to determine its fundamental importance to the sustenance and coherence of the Khmer family and national identity. *Pchum ben* is a 15-day ritual celebrated toward the end of the three-month monastic rain retreat season each year. During these 15 days, Buddhist laity attend ritually to the dead, providing special care for their immediately departed kin and other more recently deceased ancestors. The basic aim of *pchum ben* involves making a successful transaction of karma transfer to one's dead kin, in order to help assuage their experiences of suffering. The proximate catalyst for *pchum ben*'s current popularity is recent social and political history in Southeast Asia, especially the traumatic events that occurred nationally in Cambodia during the early 1970s through the 1980s when the country experienced a series of convulsions. Transformations in religious culture often stand in reflexive relationship to social and political change.

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Death is an inevitable fact of life. For the religious, its occurrence does not necessarily signal life's end, but rather the beginning of a *rite de passage*, a transitional experience in which the newly dead leave behind the familiarity of human life for yet another mode of being beyond. We may never know with certainty, but it is possible that thoughtful ruminations about the significance of death, and therefore about the meaning of life, accompanied by ritual practices designed to provide emotional solace in facing the loss that death entails, are seminal to the foundational origins of religious belief and practice. Within the comparative study of religious cultures, rites in relation to the dead are as ancient as they are ubiquitous.

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Buddhist interpretations of death, and rites in response to its occurrence, did not originate in an historical or cultural vacuum. Buddhist conceptions of the after-life, and prescribed rites in relation to the dead, were modified adaptations of prevailing *brahmanical* patterns of religious culture in ancient India. In this article, I shall demonstrate how Buddhist conceptions, rites and dispositions regarding the dead have been sustained and transformed in a contemporary annual ritual of rising popularity and importance in Cambodia, *pchum ben*. Moreover, I shall analyze the ritual in terms of its fundamental importance to the sustenance and coherence of the Khmer family and national identity.

Remembering the Dead in Cambodia and Vietnam

Pchum ben is a 15-day ritual celebrated in the Khmer month of Potrobot (in September or October depending on the timing of the lunar calendar), toward the end of the three-month *sangha* (monastic) rain retreat season (*vassa*). During these 15 days, Buddhist laity attend ritually to the dead, providing special care for their immediately departed kin and other more recently deceased ancestors. The basic aim of the collective rites comprising *pchum ben* is making a successful transaction of merit-making and karma transfer to one's dead kin, in order to help assuage their experiences of *dukkha* (suffering). *Pchum ben* is now celebrated as the most popular religious occasion of the Khmer Buddhist liturgical calendar year and, in addition to the April New Year celebrations, is one of the two most widely observed holidays throughout Cambodia today.

The proximate catalyst for *pchum ben*'s current popularity is recent social and political history in Southeast Asia, especially the traumatic events that occurred nationally in Cambodia during the early 1970s through the 1980s when the country experienced a series of convulsions: first, the civil war precipitated by Cambodia's proximity to an unsettled Vietnam, itself completely engulfed in the 2nd Indo-China War¹); second, as an outcome of Cambodia's concomitant civil war, the establishment of a radical revolutionary government led by the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge from April, 1975, until early January, 1979; and finally, after the Khmer Rouge had baited the Vietnamese into a military conflict along their eastern border, a foolish adventure that ultimately resulted in a country-wide Vietnamese military occupation, the autocratic rule of yet another communist-inspired government which then controlled an enervated Cambodian society and political economy for the ensuing decade. During the first 10 of these 20 years, from 1970 until 1980, close to one-third of Cambodia's population, almost two million people (Chandler

1) Better known in the United States as the Vietnam War.

2008, 15), died from violence and neglect caused by political and military conflicts and economic experiments that turned into mad social misadventures: first from the massive number of American bombs that were dropped in the eastern regions of the country in the early 1970s (an aspect of the escalation of the 2nd Indo-China War that directly precipitated Cambodia's own civil war²⁾); second, from the intense military fighting that occurred between the U.S. supported and rightist Lon Nol (the Republic of Cambodia) who had staged a coup against the long time neutralist government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970 on the one hand, and the China-backed Khmer Rouge revolutionary forces on the other, the latter of which eventually established Democratic Kampuchea in 1975; third, and especially, from the insidiously forced reorganization of society and the menacing maltreatment of its own citizens by the Khmer Rouge for the 3 years, 8 months and 20 days that they remained in power; and finally from the appalling rate of starvation that occurred during the earliest phases of the Vietnamese occupation in 1980 and thereafter.

The vast majority of Cambodians who died during the intense American bombing campaign, the civil war, the period of Khmer Rouge power, and the Vietnamese occupation, were civilian noncombatants. During the civil war, especially after May, 1970, many innocent people in the countryside, perhaps as many as 150,000,³⁾ were killed by the devastation brought about from the intense American bombings dropped on the eastern zones of the country. Many more innocent people were subsequently killed in the consequent fighting that broke out between the Lon Nol government that had come to power with the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk's regime in 1970 and the rising forces of the Khmer Rouge.⁴⁾ Another 100,000 were to die haplessly as refugees while the war dragged

2) "Richard Nixon's May 1970 invasion of Cambodia (undertaken without informing Lon Nol's new government [the very military government that the CIA had helped to overthrow Prince Sihanouk's neutralist government]) followed simultaneous invasions by Saigon and Vietnamese communist forces. It created 130,000 new Khmer refugees, according to the Pentagon. By 1971, 60 per cent of refugees surveyed in Cambodia's towns gave U.S. bombing as the main reason of their displacement. The U.S. bombardment of the Cambodian countryside continued well into 1973, when Congress imposed a halt. Nearly half of the 540,000 tons of bombs were dropped in the last six months. From the ashes of rural Cambodia arose Pol Pot's Communist Party of Kampuchea. It used the bombing's devastation and massacre of civilians as recruitment propaganda and as an excuse for its brutal, radical policies and its purge of moderate communists and Sihanoukists" (Kiernan 2002, 19).

3) Kiernan (2002, 24); perhaps only Laos suffered more casualties from these intense American bombing campaigns.

4) On the American responsibility for the breakdown of order that led to Khmer Rouge's rise and eventual control of the country, Ben Kiernan, who has written the definitive study of Pol Pot's rise to power and its subsequent policies of genocide, (2002, 16) says: "Although it was indigenous, Pol Pot's revolution would not have won power without U.S. economic and military destabilization of ↗

on to its conclusion in 1975.⁵⁾ However, the massive number of innocent people who were simply abandoned and left to die, maltreated in baleful ways that led to their deaths, or were simply murdered in cold-blooded, systematic fashion during the period of the Khmer Rouge regime, is staggering.⁶⁾ I will write more about the nature, aspirations and impact of the Khmer Rouge on Cambodian society, especially its impact on the family, in the next section of this article, but for now I want to make the simple but very fundamental point that the vast majority of those unfortunate people who died in Cambodia during the 1970s amidst all of this social and political mayhem died “unnatural deaths.”

In popular Khmer Buddhist perspectives, consistent with earlier Indian and Sinhala perspectives, which have been nurtured by Buddhist tradition as well, those who die a tragic death, whose final moments are violent, who die unjustly, or who “die in the street” rather than peacefully at home, are thought to experience grave difficulties in making the transition to the next life beyond or to a new positive rebirth in this world. While it is a question that has been debated many times throughout the history of Buddhist thought, what transmigrates from this life to the next, at least karmically speaking, is the very quality of the mental conditioning process that is consciously in play at the moment of death. In Pali, this consciousness is known as *vinnana* and more literally means “knowing awareness.” For this reason, Buddhists almost always try to assist their dying family members to engage death as peacefully as possible. In Theravada tradition, this means attempting to make the dying feeling the warmth and love of *metta* (loving kindness) and

↘ Cambodia which began in 1966 after American escalation in next-door Vietnam and peaked in 1969–1973 [under President Richard Nixon] with the carpet bombing of Cambodia’s countryside by American b-52s. This was probably the most important single factor in Pol Pot’s rise.” David Chandler, perhaps the foremost American student of Cambodian history, writes similarly: “The Vietnam War destabilized the Cambodian economy and eventually drove Sihanouk from office. Otherwise he probably would not have been overthrown, and Cambodia’s Communists would not have come to power” (Chandler 2008, 236).

5) About the desperate conditions of the country on the eve of the Khmer Rouge take over in 1975, Keyes (1994: 54) writes: “The refugee population [in Phnom Penh] could not be supported on food produced within the country since so much land had been abandoned or had fallen under Khmer Rouge control, while transportation had come to a near standstill. Despite a massive airlift by the United States of food into the country, starvation became a fact of life—or rather a fact of death—to perhaps tens of thousands of Khmer in 1974 and 1975. Starvation accelerated after the fall of the country to the Khmer Rouge and the concomitant ending of the airlift of food supplies by the Americans. The new government was incapable of feeding its large refugee population even if it had been willing to do so. While it is impossible to calculate the number of deaths from starvation between 1973 and the end of 1975, they could not have been fewer than a hundred thousand.”

6) The most recent estimates put the figure of dead under the Khmer Rouge at 1.75 million, though Chandler (2008, 25) continues to use the approximate figure of 2 million in his most recently revised *A History of Cambodia*.

karuna (compassion). Chanted, soothing, gentle and reassuring words are given to the dying while death impends. Ideally, one's last experiences should be the mirror opposite condition of violent and agitated frightful terror. Moreover, those whose deaths have not been addressed properly through ritual are regarded as not having been "laid to rest," or "put in their place," as it were, and are also thought to be experiencing badly the suffering of *dukkha* in the world beyond. People who die in terrible ways, without benefit of the comfort of their family's care, without benefit of effectively performed ritual, or those who commit questionable moral acts that require retribution, are the very types of people who become lingering ghosts, the *petas*⁷⁾ of the Buddhist "Pali imaginaire,"⁸⁾ the suffering beings who roam the margins of the world. Hence, *petas* often appear, according to ancient Buddhist literature, especially in the *Petavatthu* (Stories of the Departed) of the *Khuddaka Nikaya*,⁹⁾ or in the reports of contemporary Khmer Buddhist folk, in the "betwixt and between" condition of liminality. They often are said to appear to their loved-ones in dreams, during twilight hours, at crossroads, at the edges of the temple *sima* (consecrated boundaries), etc. The rituals constituting *pchum ben* are basically celebrated to help these suffering and wandering beings to become settled ancestors who can garner the respect and karmic patronage of the continuing family.

Shortly after the Vietnamese forced the Khmer Rouge out of their control over Cambodia in 1979, they initiated commemorations of the massive number of Khmer dead in ways reminiscent of how they had commemorated their own dead in Vietnam. That is, they emphasized commemorating the dead as fallen heroes in the war against imperialism and/or as victims of genocide. The latter strategy is quite understandable, especially in light of the fact that Vietnamese and other ethnicities suffered persecution in even greater percentages than the Khmer under the Khmer Rouge reign in Democratic Kampuchea. In fact, one of the first official acts that the Vietnamese promulgated after they had wrested control of Cambodia from the Khmer Rouge was the establishment of the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide (the infamous "S-21" interrogation center in Phnom Penh)¹⁰⁾ and what is now the "Killing Fields" memorial at nearby Choeung Ek, both established in an effort to provide heroic commemoration of the dead, and to disgrace the

7) As in the vernaculars of other Theravada-inclined cultures, Sanskrit *preta* has been adopted in common use rather than the Pali *peta*. I will use *peta* only within the context of Pali literature and *preta* on all other occasions.

8) The phrase belongs to Steven Collins who introduced it as his chief hermeneutical device in his *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (1998). See especially his General Introduction.

9) This the fifth, last and most recent of the collections of *sutras* that make up the *Suttapitaka* section of the *Tripitaka*. Those texts are regarded as *Buddhavacana*, "words of the Buddha," according to Theravada tradition.

10) For a careful and thorough analysis of this torture chamber, see Chandler (1999).

Khmer Rouge simultaneously. Hinton (2008, 68) has described the Vietnamese strategy in the following way:

Memory mixed with politics as the PRK [Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea] regime set out to establish a narrative of the recent past that would buttress their legitimacy both domestically and abroad. Genocide stood at the center of this story. The new political narrative centered around the theme of a magnificent revolution subverted by a small group of evil doers led by "Pol Pot," "Pol Pot—Ieng Sary," or "Pol Pot-Ieng Sary-Khieu Samphan clique." Inspired by a deviant Maoist strain of socialism, the narrative went, this clique misled or coerced lower-ranking cadre [including by implication, PRK leaders who were former Khmer Rouge] into unwittingly participating in a misdirected campaign of genocide. As a result, most former Khmer Rouge cadres, including, by implication, PRK officials, were not ultimately responsible for the events that transpired during DK.

The promulgation of this perspective benefitted their Cambodian collaborationists, including Heng Samrin and Hun Sen, who had originally been part of the Khmer Rouge but had defected to Vietnam about two years following the fall of Lon Nol's government when they, themselves, had felt personally threatened by the Khmer Rouge.¹¹⁾

Anthropologist Heonik Kwon has written a remarkable book about how the dead have been memorialized in post-war Vietnam, a subject of great relevance for the situation in neighboring Cambodia, given the Vietnamese "administrative presence" in the Cambodia for a decade following the catastrophes inflicted on the population by the Khmer Rouge. Kwon's examination of how the dead have been treated and remembered in post-war Vietnam is complex, subtle and insightful. Essentially, he argues (2006, 4) that the new post-colonial political elite of Vietnam attempted to "shift the focus of festivals and commemoration away from the village and the family and toward the state . . ." In the process, they attempted a "selective redemption of the past" for the purposes of rendering the state as the beneficiary of emotions for the dead. Those who had died heroically against imperialist enemies, who embodied the struggle for freedom in their heroic acts of self-sacrifice, were worthy objects of veneration and commemoration. Such was the initial manner in which the dead who suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge were fielded and interpreted for political consumption.

Unwittingly, this interpretation of the dead, casting them as heroic resisters to the evil acts of their inhumane enemies, actually plays out a critical element of the distorted

11) Both Heng Samrin and Hun Sen would become key political players in the formation of a new government following the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Hun Sen eventually parlayed his position as Prime Minister within the context of the United Nations sponsored elections of 1993. Though his party, Cambodian Peoples' Party (CPP), did not enjoy an outright victory, Hun Sen has remained as Cambodia's Prime Minister until the time of this writing in 2011.

pathology of paranoia that plagued the Khmer Rouge. Documents discovered at the “S-21” Tuol Sleng “interrogation center” now analyzed in some depth reveal that the Khmer Rouge leadership suffered gravely from deep obsessions of mistrust and paranoia. They brutally tortured mostly innocent village or middle class people in their custody in order to extract confessions about alleged collusions with either the CIA or with the Vietnamese. They almost completely fabricated a sustained belief in conspiracy efforts allegedly directed against them by these two supreme enemies.¹²⁾ The fact is that those who died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, either in the detention centers where mass murder was committed, or in collectivized agricultural fields of toil and hunger, were not fallen heroes from the battle fields of war. They were simply victims of maltreatment born of a collectively-held sinister psychosis, most of them confused and terrified about why they had been relocated away from their families or singled out for torture.

In his study of post-war Vietnam, Kwon deftly points out the limitations and ultimate failure of the Vietnamese state strategy to co-opt the political significance of the dead through hero commemoration. The Marxist or revolutionary “scientific” doctrine of the Vietnamese state, of course, militated against all types of superstitious acts including ancestor veneration. The dead were to be regarded as “alive” or functionally useful only to the extent that their commemorations could serve to bolster the enduring moral voice of the party or the state. In their lives and in their deaths, serving the state is what made their lives meaningful. But in such a perspective, there are a vast number of dead whose memories or commemorations simply cannot be accommodated: the dead, for instance, who fought *against* the victorious side in Vietnam¹³⁾; or, the dead who simply died because they got in the way of the fierce fighting between combatants; or, the dead who Kwon writes about at great length in his book, those innocent villagers who were massacred by Korean and American troops in the villages of Ha My and My Lai in central Vietnam. Indeed, Kwon has joined other scholars in asserting that “[a]ncestral rites . . . became a critical locus for a contest of power between the state and family.” And as in Cambodia, so in Vietnam “the demise of the centrally planned socialist economy resulted in the revival of ancestral rituals as a way of strengthening the moral basis of the family—a principal unit in the new economic environment.” In his analysis, Kwon describes how

12) The journalist Elizabeth Becker (2010) has culled and compiled the pathetic yet compelling story of one young woman, Hout Bophana, from letters and documents of her “interviews” while she was being tortured to death at Tuol Sleng. A documentary film made by a European filmmaker about Bophana is currently shown twice daily at Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh.

13) Kwon (2006: 21) points out how “fallen soldiers who also fought for national independence, but who happened to have done so on the wrong side of ‘the puppet regime’, have absolutely no right to the space of the virtuous war dead”

the return to privatized agriculture in post-war Vietnam, just as in post-war Cambodia, has led to the growing promotion of various family ritual activities and family memorial renovations “to console the spirits of the tragic dead.”¹⁴⁾

This is precisely the role of *pchum ben* in Cambodia. It has become the repository for the articulation of grief, veneration, and hope for the dead, regardless of the circumstances of their deaths. It has been the arena for the expression of actions that assuage the pains of a collective horror for some, and a way to manage a collective guilt for a few others (those who cooperated with the Khmer Rouge). It is a veritable ritual process reflecting how Cambodians are coming to terms with the tragedy of their recent past, and how some of them are dealing with the unknown facts of their own personal family histories.

It was only after the departure of the Vietnamese in 1989 that some relief came from the official sanctions of the “socialist struggle on the cultural front,” from the incessant governmental warnings about the wastefulness of religious ritual, and from the official sermons about the anti-scientific and anti-rationality of superstitious backward customs. That is, the hostility toward traditional forms of religious culture finally began to abate and people were free to publicly venerate the dead in familiar familial and religious fashion.

But there was another reason why the state-sponsored cult of the hero promulgated by the Vietnamese did not prove very effective among the Khmer in Cambodia in the 1980s. During the civil war and the subsequent Khmer Rouge period, the vast majority of those who died unnaturally did so largely at the hands of other Khmer, not against some external imperialist enemy. While it is true that many Vietnamese died at the hands of other Vietnamese during the 2nd Indo-China War, the American presence and role in Vietnam was perceived as the dominant outside and western colonial power that threatened the future of the nation. The Americans were also understood as successors to the French, as a behemoth military power that needed to be overcome and defeated at all costs. The challenge presented by the American intervention was almost overwhelming. There is no question that the American force constituted the major enemy face and that the American presence lent itself to an oppositional perspective in which the Vietnamese

14) John Marston makes a similar argument. In trying to account for the popularity of the practice of not cremating monks immediately following their deaths, he (2006, 503–504) muses that among the reasons may be the fact that “there is now a far greater circulation of money in Cambodia that there was during the socialist period, a development that has often favoured new religious projects and, logically, has opened up the possibility of conspicuous expense in the funerary expenses of monks as well.” He goes on to say that all of the monks involved in this practice were monks who can be identified with building up the religious community following the demise of the Pol Pot era.

could understand themselves as an oppressed underdog fighting heroically for independence and freedom against an invading imperialist power. Because of this, the end of the fighting in Vietnam signaled a clear victory to be claimed and cherished by that underdog, a victory won against the perception of very long odds. The very same logic obtained in Laos.¹⁵ By comparison, in Cambodia in 1979, the major external aggressors, who styled themselves as liberators of a sort, were the Vietnamese whose presence, the longer it was sustained after the initial period, was not necessarily warmly welcomed. Nor were their interpretations of the dead.

Kwon has demonstrated how ancestor rites “became a locus for a contest of power between the state and the family” in the Vietnamese context. He also argues (2006, 5) that

[the] revived tradition of ancestor worship can help to bring the memory of victims to private and communal places of worship, especially a generation after the tragedy when the victims, the young ones included, become ancestors If revolutionary doctrine preaches against all superstitious practices, including unauthorized attention to the fate of the dead, the traditional religious ideals, when revived, may counter it by adopting some elements from the politically dominant hero worship.

Inadvertently, Kwon’s description of the dynamic in Vietnam squares up precisely with the contemporary Cambodian scene, insofar as “modernist” Buddhist monks argue how *pchum ben*, as a practice of ancestor veneration, is not really found in the canonical Pali *Tiṭṭhaka*, and therefore is not essentially Buddhist. Nevertheless, they do assert that *pchum ben* should be encouraged because it is such a cardinal expression of Khmer culture, national identity and custom. This argument, itself, constitutes a kind of political statement, especially when *pchum ben*’s origins are tied to the kingship of the nineteenth century Khmer king, Ang Duang, whose reign, as we shall see, is not only equated in popular memory with a revival of Khmer culture, but was the last Cambodian reign of kingship before the French colonial protectorate was established in 1863. I will argue that the assessment of *pchum ben*’s origins as a nineteenth century phenomenon is, in the final analysis, really not historically accurate, that instead its origins are actually rooted deep in the ancient Indian past, and probably have been influenced somewhat by the medieval Chinese ghost festival as well. But, the fact that *pchum ben* has been construed in this particular cultural manner by many “modernist” Buddhist monks, as a Khmer national past time, seems to be quite congruent with what Kwon has asserted (2006, 161–163) in the post-war Vietnamese context:

15) For a detailed discussion of this scenario, see my *Spirits of the Place* (2009, 116–127).

[the] revival of ancestor worship in Vietnam, then, is not merely a restoration of traditional social ideals but rather an invention of a countermeasure against dominant political convention The revived ancestral worship in Vietnam contributes to undoing the legacy of the war by assimilating the historical duality of “this side” and “that side” to the traditional unity of the family.

In Cambodia, *pchum ben* seems to have functioned exactly in this kind of way once the Vietnamese left the country for good in 1989 and the Khmer were left to embrace their own social lives publicly once again: *pchum ben became a major celebration of the family on a national scale, and something of a celebration of the nation on a family scale*. In Vietnam, it seems to be the case that “the popular revival of ancestor worship frustrated the political leaders who saw it as hampering the prospects of an economically prosperous nation The family worship practices and the popular ritual economy appeared to some officials to be the apparition of an old ghost that would hinder the nation’s march forward into the prosperous commodity market economy” (*ibid.*, 111). Moreover, “[t]he forceful emergence of ancestors and ghosts into the public arena hitherto dominated by war heroes crystallizes the decisive shift in power relations between the state and society. Changes in the social life of the dead, in this context, mirror changes in the political life of the living” (*ibid.*, 178).

No such kind of state skepticism regarding ancestor veneration has been seen in contemporary Cambodia. Indeed, as Judy Ledgerwood (2008b) has insightfully demonstrated, Cambodia’s political leaders after the departure of the Vietnamese, despite the fact that some were one-time Khmer Rouge members themselves, have aligned themselves publicly since 1990 with traditional forms of Buddhist ritual practice, to the extent that Buddhism was declared the country’s state religion in 1993. While there may not have been skepticism from the political players about the emergence of *pchum ben*, it is also true that the changes in the public ritual life of the country mirrored corresponding changes in the relationship between state and society. From a political point of view, *pchum ben*’s popularity rests not only on the basis that it is a Buddhist practice, but because it is understood primarily as a Khmer practice.

I think, however, that more than national politics and Khmer identity is at stake in this discussion. *Pchum ben*’s popularity has more to do existentially with the fact that it celebrates the health and well being of the family and the village or community. As Kwon (2006, 182) has stated in the final conclusion to his study:

An ideal place for remembering the victims of mass death, if there is such a place, might be home, where they can be remembered as ancestors It should be a place where kinship, free from traditional ideologies and political control, reconciles with the universal ethic that all human beings have the right to be remembered. The revitalized memory of mass death relies on this universal

norm as well as on the morality of local kinship unity¹⁶⁾

Indeed, sociologically, it was the family unit in Khmer society that suffered the most from the social, economic and political spasms of the 1970s and 1980s in Cambodia. The current popularity of *pchum ben* seems to be a register of the relative reclaimed health not only of Khmer political fortunes that appeal to the culture of traditional Khmer Buddhist identity, but of the health of the nuclear and extended family as a social institution in Cambodia. Insofar as villages are often made up of intermarried extended families, the village is also the object of ritual rehabilitation as well.

Within the context of this discussion regarding commemoration of the dead in Vietnam and Cambodia in the aftermath of the 1970s and 1980s, it also needs to be emphasized, if we are going to understand why *pchum ben* is so popular in the Khmer milieu, that Khmer ancestor veneration and Vietnamese ancestor veneration do not exactly correlate. Vietnamese conceptions and practices of ancestor veneration have been much more conditioned by the historical presence of Confucian ideology and practice within Vietnamese society and culture. As a result, the worship of tablets symbolic of ancestral presence on an altar within the home, or the construction of small shrines dedicated exclusively for the worship of a family's lineage, are norms of cultic behavior in the typical Vietnamese household that are not found among the Khmer. Veneration in the Vietnamese family context is a continuous or daily cultic affair. In Khmer society, despite the fact the family is without a doubt the most important social unit in society, the worship of ancestors is much more the byproduct of indigenous beliefs in spirits and Theravada Buddhist conceptions of the afterlife, the latter of which I shall discuss in some depth shortly. A key difference, then, between the Vietnamese and the influence they have derived from Chinese Confucian and Mahayana Buddhists on the one hand, and the Khmer Theravada Buddhists on the other, is that the dead and the living in the Khmer context are not continuously intertwined. In Khmer Buddhist culture, in effect, the dead are given their own place and time, and their contact with the living is therefore limited to those times and places when and where the two are allowed to come together. That place is the Buddhist temple and that time is the *pchum ben* ritual season toward the end of *vassa*. The interaction at these times and places is intense, and it occurs within the

16) Moreover, "[t]he memory of tragic death is left in a void in the monument of heroes, whereas in ancestor worship it becomes an essential part of the spatial structure of worship, representing a generalized anonymity worthy of a particular kind of respect" (Kwon 2006, 154–155). He continues by stating that further differences between hero commemoration and ancestor veneration, aside from the state and familial bases respectively are this: that in the state hero cult, the "politically challenged" and those who died unproductively in relation to the cause are excluded. In ancestor veneration, it is true that genealogy leads to exclusion, but almost everyone has a family to belong to.

context of an annual family reunion.

According to Ang Choulean, the noted Khmer archeologist and anthropologist, *pchum ben* solves a contradiction or paradox that is deep-seated in Mon-Khmer culture. In ancient Mon culture, the dead were dispensed with quickly, or “rejected,” as it were, and “kept at bay.” Following seven days after death, there was virtually no more exchange between the living and the dead. The dead were, at that time, laid to rest ritually and thereby divorced from the continuing reality of the living world. Ang Choulean believes that this notion of the rejection of the dead, or the separation of the living from the dead, remains unconsciously present among today’s Khmer and contrasts sharply with the emphasis placed on revering one’s ancestors that has come by way of Indian influence through Buddhism, or by way of Chinese influence through Confucian rites. The contradiction is resolved through the temporary period of 15 days during *pchum ben* in September/October when the spirits are permitted to gain access to their living descendants in the world.¹⁷⁾ In other words, the dead have been given a limited time and limited space, and that time and that space is perhaps the most spiritually potent that can be imagined in Khmer religious culture: the intensified time period of ascetic religious pursuit among the monks in the Buddhist monastery during the last weeks of the *vassa* rain retreat and within the continuously sanctified ritual space of the *sima* (boundary) of the *wat* (temple).

Family and Religion in Buddhist Cambodia: The Impact of the Khmer Rouge

The great popularity of *pchum ben* in contemporary Cambodia may be generally a byproduct of the social, economic and political upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s that resulted in such a huge spike in the death rate, but its surge in national importance is also due specifically to the manner in which it has abetted the recovery of the nuclear family. In pre-colonial Khmer culture, it can be argued that the family and the Buddhist *sangha* were not only the two most important social units in society, but they were essentially the *only* social units constitutive of Khmer society, with perhaps the only other social grouping being military units maintained by the royalty. This was not always viewed positively by outside observers. In the following passage, David Chandler (2008, 126) describes how this social fact was fielded, and rather poorly, by some European colonialists:

French writers in the nineteenth century often denigrated Cambodian society [one of them referred to its institutions as “worm-eaten debris”] and compared it unfavorably with their own “rational,”

17) Personal interview with Ang Choulean, Reyum Institute, Phnom Penh, October 13, 2010.

centralized one or with that of the Vietnamese [I]n Thai and Cambodian villages, in the nineteenth century at least, there were no “durable, functionally important groups” or voluntary associations aside from the family and the Buddhist monastic order, or *sangha*.

One particular incident, the assassination of the French resident, Felix Louis Bardez, at Kompong Chhnang in 1925, is quite revealing with regard to the importance of the family and the *sangha* in Khmer society on the one hand, and the kinds of French insensitivities to local cultural norms that often left them held in contempt by the local people on the other. The event has been described in some detail by Chandler (*ibid.*, 191–194), but I briefly summarize it here to illustrate the larger point. While collecting taxes in the village of Kraang Laev, the chief monk of the local *wat* had told Bardez that local people simply did not have enough money to pay. Bardez, who even after 15 years of service in Cambodia could not speak Khmer, would have none of it, and told the chief monk to persuade the villagers that they should pay the requirement by whatever means possible. He used the rather unconvincing argument that just as one should honor one’s parents, since the French were now the parents of the Cambodian people, the villagers were duty bound to cough up the money. Bardez also allegedly insulted the villagers by suggesting that if they could afford to build their new Buddhist temple, then they should be able to pay their taxes to the guardian familial French. Subsequently, Bardez and his two assistants were twice attacked, the second time costing him his life. In retrospect, it would seem as if this French administrator could not have played his hand any more poorly. He not only insulted the Khmer concept of family and threatened its well being and future livelihood by insisting that taxes be paid,¹⁸⁾ but he also badly misjudged the colonial state’s importance in Khmer eyes by criticizing the villagers for putting their efforts into constructing a temple rather than “patriotically” supporting the French administration of their country. It would also seem as if Bardez was totally ignorant of how important supporting the *sangha* is to the ideology of merit-making as well.¹⁹⁾

18) As in Laos, the French were notorious in Cambodia for giving very little in return for the taxes they exacted, especially in the countryside.

19) A further example of French colonial arrogance has been noted by Chandler (2008, 207). He describes the efforts of the French *resident*, Georges Gautier, in 1943 who announced “his intention to replace Cambodia’s forty-seven-letter alphabet, derived from medieval Indian models, with the Roman one Gautier and his colleagues viewed the reform as a step toward modernization, which in turn was seen unequivocally as a good thing. In a pamphlet devoted to explaining the reform, Gautier attacked the ‘Cambodian attitude to the world’, as ‘out of date’ and compared the Cambodian language to a ‘badly tailored suit’. The addition of a supposedly more rational French vocabulary to Romanized Khmer, Gautier thought, would somehow improve Cambodian thought processes. Citing the example of Romanization in Turkey, while remaining diplomatically silent about the Romanization of Vietnamese, Gautier seems to have believed that the virtues of the reform were as self-evident as what he thought of as the primitiveness of the Cambodian mind.”

That the family and *sangha* remained the pillar social units of Khmer society is born out in the landmark ethnography composed by May Ebihara, an anthropologist who produced the only thorough academic ethnography of Khmer village life before the maelstrom of events that swept the country into chaos in 1970 and after. Ebihara's work was wide-angled and dedicated to understanding the totality of Khmer village worldviews. She reported (1968, 364) that Khmer villagers, like Sinhalese, Thai and Burmese Buddhists, conceive of their religious culture in terms of what is essentially a single religious system and did not

segregate various elements of village religious beliefs and practices as deriving from one religious tradition or another Buddha and ghosts, prayers at the temple and invocations of spirits, monks and mediums are all part of the same religious culture and simply different aspects of which are called into play at different, appropriate times.

What she goes on to report, then, is commensurate with what many other later ethnographers of Southeast Asian societies would assert: that the *sangha* and the family not only constitute the two social institutions of greatest significance in Theravada-inclined societies, but that the relationship between the two is also of paramount importance. What we shall see, when analyzing *pchum ben* in detail, is that family and *sangha* are understood as mutually interdependent.

It is worth reviewing some of the salient statements that Ebihara provides regarding the nature and importance of the family in Khmer culture and society, for they help to reinforce the thesis that *pchum ben* is the ritual manner in which the family's sustenance has recovered and is now celebrated. She states (*ibid.*, 111), for instance, that

. . . the nuclear family can be considered the most fundamental social group in Khmer society, bound together by a variety of affective, economic moral and legal ties. The strongest and most enduring relationships are found in the bonds between husband and wife, sibling and sibling, and especially parent and child. Even after a family has split into the various families of procreation of the different offspring, members of the former obtain deep affection for and frequent contact with one another . . . the Nuclear family is often the basic economic unit of production and consumption which cooperates in subsistence activities and shares produce, income and property. It also frequently acts [and is considered by others to be] a single social unit in other endeavors; e.g., in cooperative labor exchanges, the *quid pro quo* is calculated basically in terms of the amount of work owed by one family to another; in contributions to Buddhist and life cycle ceremonies, a gift is often meant to come from the family as a whole; and in community activities each family or household gives a certain amount of money or labor.

Ebihara (*ibid.*) goes on to point out that relations between family members are defined, supported and sanctioned by "Buddhist precepts and teachings, by belief in ancestral spirits (*meba*) who oversee their descendants' conduct . . ." (*ibid.*, 112). This

last point about the *meba* or ancestors is of particular importance to the meaning of *pchum ben*, insofar as it indicates something of the reciprocal relationship that obtains between the living and the ancestral dead. The living need ancestors to function as guardians, markers or symbols of their own moral bases. And so they need to rehabilitate those ancestors about whom they are unsure. The unknown status of one's ancestor(s) is one of the great moments of pathos that is so frequently encountered at *pchum ben* rites in Cambodia today. Penny Edwards (2008b: 221) has underscored how important it is that

[a] moral genealogy links current generations to the standard of ancestral behavior: here, ancestors become moral arbitrators, and represent a mythical standard of morality against which contemporary generations can be judged by current elders.

That is, the bond between the living and the dead is an expression of their moral dependence upon each other. This is particularly true when the dead being venerated are one's parents. In Khmer culture, the bond between parents and offspring is perhaps even deeper and stronger than between husband and wife.²⁰ The importance of this relationship likely has been a staple of Khmer society since the days of the great Angkor civilization, at least from what we know of the ritual and cultural expressions of its elites, particularly within the context of the veneration of parents and Saivite Hindu adaptations from the ninth through the thirteenth century, CE.²¹ Kings often built temples to honor their parents and identified them with installed images within of Siva and Parvati (or Uma).

Of those commentators who have written about the subject of the family's importance within Khmer society, Erik Davis' (2008a, 133) reflections are among the most perceptive and comprehensive. He has clearly pointed to how the social experience of the nuclear family becomes paradigmatic for how processes within Khmer society-at-large are envisaged and then negotiated. He writes:

The more intimate one's relationship with another, the more hierarchical that relationship, such as in the case of mother and child. The Cambodian family maps larger Cambodian society more flexibly than does the traditional Western family. Family boundaries appear loose, and various

20) As Ebihara (1968) reported: "In general, the bond between parents and children is perhaps the strongest and most enduring relationships in village life. Even when an individual marries and establishes a family of procreation that comes to take precedence over the family of orientation, deep-rooted sentiments and feelings of obligation persist toward parents and are manifest in mutual visiting, aid in times of need, and abiding concern (*ibid.*, 119) . . . Affection and loyalty among siblings are encouraged, and serious discord among family members both siblings and parents and children is thought to be punished by ancestral spirits" (*ibid.*, 120).

21) For studies of ancient Khmer society, political structures and religious culture, see Hermann Kulke (1978), Ian Mabbett (1978), and Alexis Sanderson (2003–04).

types of adoption, god-parenting, and other forms of “fictive kinship” have been documented. One’s created family, in addition to one’s birth family, produces the known and civilized world that we inhabit. This network of family members defines and delimits the boundaries of the social world, the land in which one may safely travel, the person one may trust and upon, on whom one may rely, and the networks of intimacies that compose our emotional geographies, those spaces where we recognize the emotional landmarks, and where we can navigate with more experience and confidence than with strangers. People say that this is true of family members all the way, potentially, to the “seventh generation”

While the penultimate sentence in the quote from Davis constitutes a powerful assessment of how the family functions for the epistemology of Khmer social psychology,²²⁾ the final comment about seven generations of ancestors is also particularly relevant specifically with regard to *pchum ben*. It was commonly believed in medieval China (Teiser 1996, 220–221) that ancestors continued to receive support from their descendants for seven generations before they were reincarnated as members of the family once again. This popular Chinese tradition may have had some influence on the reification of the Khmer conception, for the same belief about the possibility of supporting ancestors for seven generations remains in play during *pchum ben*. Family ancestors of the past seven generations can be assisted and supported by means of karma transfers that occur during *banguskol*, a merit-generating ritual of chanting Pali *suttas* that is performed by Buddhist monks at the behest of family descendants during the final day of the *pchum ben* season.

These views from various scholars writing about the centrality of the nuclear family unit in Khmer society and culture underscore why the revolution orchestrated by Khmer Rouge was so socially and psychologically traumatic, especially for those who managed to survive when the rest of their family members did not. Francois Bizot, a French scholar of Khmer Buddhism whose own intimate experiences with the Khmer Rouge, owing to his own extended incarceration in one of their detention centers, is revealed dramatically in his dialogues with the convicted murderer who was in charge of the notorious S-21 (Tuol Sleng) interrogation center. In this classic confrontation recorded between perhaps the most knowledgeable western student of Khmer culture and society on the one hand, and one of Pol Pot’s chief lieutenants on the other, Bizot has managed to illustrate how the ideology of the Khmer Rouge was completely antithetical to the social and moral norms of traditional Khmer Buddhist society and culture. Because of

22) Zucker (2008, 202–203) succinctly reiterates what Davis has stated more elaborately: “The language of social thought was limited and did not travel far beyond the use of family relationships as metaphors for broader political and social occurrences.” This language is seen expressly in the manner that King Sihanouk referred to his subjects as “his children” and himself as a “father” in relation to them (Chandler and Kent 2008, 6).

Bizot's deep knowledge of Khmer language and religious culture,²³⁾ and because of his extensive rich and remarkable years of life experience in Cambodia, I emphasize his perspectives on the Khmer Rouge in what follows, especially as he analyzed what was at stake for the Khmer family and the Buddhist *sangha*.

To begin, this is how Bizot describes in general the ethic of the Khmer Rouge revolutionary cadre: "Denunciation is the first duty of the revolutionary. They quoted the example of some young men who so loved the revolution that they were unafraid to denounce their fathers or their brothers" (Bizot 2003, 54). In place of the traditionally strong kinship bonds of the family, the Khmer Rouge demanded absolute loyalty and, as an organization (*angkar*), jealously guarded its position of authority and brooked no competition from other social forms or groups whatsoever. Chandler's depiction (2008, 258) of the young people between 15 and 25 years of age who formed the core of Khmer Rouge cadre is not dissimilar to Bizot's:

Owing everything to the revolutionary organization, which they referred to as their mother and father, and nothing to the past, it was thought that these young people would lead the way in transforming Cambodia into a socialist state and in moving the people toward independence, mastery, and self-reliance. To the alarm and the confusion of many older people, these often violent Cambodians became the revolution's cutting edge.

It is not altogether surprising that the ethic of these young Khmer Rouge cadres was antithetical to the cardinal values of traditional Khmer society, for "[i]n every way their behavior validated the arguments of those who had already suggested that the Khmer Rouge had drawn its forces from the most marginal of Cambodia's population. These were men and women, and perhaps above all children, who had dwelt on the outskirts of society, for whom the cities and those who had lived in them were centers of corrupt behavior inhabited by their oppressors" (Osborne 2008, 143). Indeed, according to Bizot, most of the Khmer Rouge cadres were not drawn from the agricultural countryside, which was definitely the case with the cadres constituting the Pathet Lao in Laos, wherein the powerful linkages between Theravada Buddhism and the agricultural way of life, between religion and rice, had been wedded and nurtured for centuries. Rather, these were youth, ironically, who were largely drawn from the city. In putting together a profile of their quixotic yet iconoclastic character, Bizot (2003, 62–63) writes just how far the Khmer Rouge would go to debase the

23) Bizot was arguably the most knowledgeable western student of Khmer Buddhist culture and society of his generation. His studies concentrated not only on inscriptions, textual interpretations, and sculpture of the Khmer elite, but also on the ritual, mythic and symbolic expressions of popular Khmer religion. See Harris (2005, 311–312) for a representative list of his long bibliography of contributions to the study of Khmer culture.

traditional system of values. To place letters of Buddhist doctrine in contact with the regions of the body considered “impure” was an absolute sacrilege, one no peasant would risk committing. Only town-dwellers would be capable of such iconoclastic radicalism. The majority [of Khmer Rouge cadres] were poorly integrated Sino-Khmers, the sons of shopkeepers or frustrated employees. Having replaced the traditional village structures with fraternal solidarity, motivated by a sincere idealism, and appalled by the gap between the rich and poor, they shared an existence outside of the rural world, which they knew nothing about. None of them had ever tended rice fields. The way they roamed around the countryside proved they had no respect for crops, gardens, trees or pathways. Nor did they show any deference to sacred images or to anything Buddhism held dear, regarding it all as peasant superstition, cultivated from Angkor by every monarch, to subdue the people. Paradoxically, these city folk, who loathed the plough, the soil, the palm groves and domestic animals, who disliked the open rustic life of the villagers, had an idealized concept of the Khmer peasant as agent of the perpetual revolution, a model of simplicity, endurance and patriotism, the standard against which the new man would be measured, liberated from religious taboos. In this contradictory scenario, Buddhism was replaced by objectives dear to the Angkar, in order to ensure the triumph of equality and justice. The Khmer theorists had substituted Angkar for Dhamma, [as] the personification of Teaching

Not only did the Khmer Rouge insist on a loyalty that transcended the bonds of family and village relations, but they seemed, at least from Bizot’s considered perspective, to function, as he implies towards the end of the statement above, as a kind of surrogate for the Khmer Buddhist monastic *sangha*.²⁴⁾ In a truly remarkable passage, and as it turns out a very historically significant one²⁵⁾ (the second of the two long quotes that I promised above), Bizot writes of his dramatic confrontation with his interrogator, Comrade Douch, while he was being held captive at a remote prison site in the early 1970s. In this long passage at the heart of his personal memoir, he asserts analytically how the Khmer Rouge, with their zealous loyalty to the foundations of *angkar*, had managed to develop a programmatic ideology that was analogous both to the *dhamma*

24) As Bizot has asserted that the Khmer Rouge constituted a kind of quasi-religion of their own, Keyes (1994, 57) discusses how it is that they viewed their own Communist Party members as engaged in more perfect behavior than monks. Quoting Yang Sam, another scholar with intimate knowledge of the situation in Cambodia during Khmer Rouge hegemony, the ideal party member was described in this way: “He/she persevered in improving his/her personality by loving and respecting people, being honest, protecting people’s interests, confessing his/her misdeeds, using modest and polite words, and avoiding adultery and polygamy, avoiding drinking, avoiding gambling, avoiding thievery.” Keyes goes on to add himself: “Although many rural people appear to have been impressed by the similarity between the disciplined moral authority of the Khmer Rouge cadre and that of members of the *sangha*, the Khmer Rouge sought to create a world that was the moral inversion of that of Buddhism.”

25) Douch was convicted by a United Nations sponsored war crimes court in the summer of 2010 for his direct role in the deaths of some 17,000 people who passed through the S-21 interrogation center that came under his administrative purview.

and *sangha* of the Theravada tradition, a view that is scoffed at by Douch in the end. Yet, Douch's comments also belie *angkar's* suspicion of the family. Bizot's insights are powerful and provocative, and well worth a thorough consideration in determining how the family and the Buddhist *sangha* were the primary social victims of the Khmer Rouge purge. In turn, it is both the family and the *sangha* that are the social entities revived and celebrated within the ritual contexts of *pchum ben*.

"Comrade!" I began, "You speak about Angkar the way that monks speak about Dhamma. So I want to ask you this: is there some ideologist among you, constructing a revolutionary theory based upon the myths and rules of the Buddhist religion?"

Douch was taken back.

"Because, after all," I went on, "are you not defending a new religion? I've followed your educational lessons. They're not unlike courses in Buddhist doctrine: renouncing material possessions, *giving up family ties, which weaken us and prevent us from devoting ourselves entirely to Angkar; leaving our parents and our children in order to serve the revolution*. Submitting to discipline and confessing faults—"

"That has nothing to do with it!" Douch cut in.

"There are ten 'moral commandments' that you call *sila*," I persisted, "that have the same name as the ten Buddhist 'abstentions' [*sila*]. The revolutionary must accept the rules of a *vinaya*, exactly as the monk observes a religious 'discipline' [*vinaya*]. At the start of his instruction, a young soldier is given a pack containing six articles (trousers, shirt, cap, *krama*, sandals, bag), just as the novice monk receives a regulation kit of seven items—"

"These are intellectual ravings!" he broke in.

"That's not all! Wait, comrade," I said, raising my hand. "Look at the facts. In everything you tell me, and in what I have heard myself, one finds religious themes from the past: taking on a new name, for example; enduring hardships, rather like ritual mortification; even the soothing, enticing words of Radio Peking announcing the advent of a regenerated people, born of the revolution. In a word, the Communist leaders to whom you are accountable want to impose an initiatory death on the nation."

My speech was answered by a stubborn silence.

"Comrade Douch!" I continued, raising my voice before he could start speaking again. "The resoluteness of the teachers who speak in the name of the Angkar is unconditional. Sometimes it is even devoid of hatred and purely objective, as if the human aspect of the question did not come into consideration, as if it were an intellectual concept. They mechanically carry out the impersonal, absolute directives of the Angkar, even going to extreme lengths. As to the peasants who come under your control, they are subjected, purely and simply, to a sort of purification rite: new 'teaching', (*rien sur*) new mythology and an amended vocabulary that no-one initially understands. *Then the Angkar is adopted as family, while true kin are rejected*. And after the population is divided into 'initiates' and 'novices'. The first constitute the true people, that is to say, those who have been won over; others are those who have not completed the period of preparation and training; only after that can they be admitted into the former group and acquire the superior status of an accomplished citizen. Need I go on?"

"That has nothing to do with it!" Douch repeated. "Buddhism benumbs the peasants, whereas the Angkar seeks to glorify them and build prosperity of the beloved homeland on them! You

attribute scholarly ravings to bogus ideologues when they belong only to yourself. Buddhism is the opium of the people. And I don't see why we should draw our inspiration from a capitalist past, which is the very thing that we want to abolish! When we have rid our country of the vermin that infect people's minds," he went on, "when we have liberated it from this army of cowards and traitors who debase the people, then we will rebuild a Cambodia of solidarity, united by genuine bonds of fraternity and equality. First we must construct our democracy on healthy foundations that have nothing to do with Buddhism. Corruption has seeped in everywhere, *even among families. How can you trust your brother when he accepts the imperialists' wages and employs their arms against you?* Believe me, Comrade Bizot, our people need to rediscover moral values that correspond to their deeper aspirations. The revolution wishes nothing for them besides simple happiness: that of the peasant who feeds himself from the fruits of his labours, with no need for the Western products that have made him a dependent consumer. We can manage and organize ourselves on our own to bring radiant happiness to our beloved country." (Bizot 2003, 110–112; italics mine)

What Bizot has managed to indicate so adroitly in this incredible passage is not only how the Buddha's *dhamma* and *sangha* could be demonstrably eclipsed and replaced functionally in favor of the *angkar* and its own substantially similar code of moral discipline, but how the family was regarded by the Khmer Rouge as an impediment to the realization of its utopian aims for Cambodian society. From the Khmer Rouge perspective, the primary social institution of the Khmer family was linked to the evils of private property ownership and capitalistic production, in the same way that Buddhism was understood as an opiate of the people repressing a true vision of egalitarian society. Both family and religion (especially Buddhism), therefore, had to be eliminated in the march forward into a true socialist society. The social and intellectual functions of the family and Buddhism could be aptly replaced, and necessarily so, by *angkar*.²⁶⁾

Douch's concluding rant against Bizot was no idle threat. What happened to Buddhist monks and Buddhist institutions when the Khmer Rouge seized control in 1975 is a terrible tale, yet it must be told so that it can never be forgotten. The broadside attack on Buddhism was but a part of a larger process taking place in which the Khmer Rouge

26) Harris (2005, 182–189) has an especially poignant section in his book that is focused on the "internalization of Buddhist symbolism and language" into the mindset of the Khmer Rouge. He writes that "there can be little doubt that internalization of aspects of an older religiously inspired thought universe was pervasive during the period" (*ibid.*, 184). Specifically, he examines the similarity between *sila* and the 10 basic "moral rules" that the Khmer Rouge inculcated, the penchant for and practice of self-sacrifice and the life of self-examination exhorted in the *Vinaya*, how the term *patikasamuppada* ('dependent or conditioned origination') was employed to translate "dialectical materialism," etc. In the same vein, Chandler and Kent (2008, 7) describe how "[t]he concealed leaders of the party, or *Angkar* [the 'Organization']", envisioned themselves as the new, moral substitute for the *sangha*. Alternate, pre-revolutionary sources of domestic or community-based power—the *sangha*, older family members, and local spirits—were discredited. The moral order was now rendered as the imposed, historically inevitable egalitarianism of the impoverished population, supposedly liberated from the shackles of the past and from a wide range of dominations."

sought to dismantle virtually any previously established bases of personal, familial or religious identity.²⁷ Skidmore (1996, 6) has described this process as an attempt to “restructure personality”:

The major focus of Khmer Rouge personality restructuring was . . . manifested as an attempt to strip Cambodians of their sense of personal individuality and collective identity. In destroying Buddhism in all its forms [disrobing of monks, smashing of effigies, etc.], in uprooting them from their homes, ancestors and guardian spirits; in forcing them to live silently in communal huts; and in removing all personal effects and sentimental items, conformity was enforced, and individualism shattered. The place of a person within a particular cosmological, societal, and familial world was abolished as effectively as the Khmer Rouge could manage. (brackets are Skidmore’s)

Others have described what happened during the time of Khmer Rouge hegemony as a consequence of misplaced, zealous revolutionary fervour. Chandler, for instance, in describing the program inculcated by the clandestine leaders of “the revolutionary organization” (*angkar*), says this:

They sought to transform Cambodia by replacing what they saw as impediments to national autonomy and social justice with revolutionary energy and incentives. They believed that family, individualism, and an ingrained fondness for what they called feudal institutions, as well as the institutions themselves, stood in the way of the revolution. Cambodia’s poor, they said, had always been exploited and enslaved. Liberated by the revolution and empowered by military victory, these men and women would now become the masters of their lives and, collectively, the masters of their country. (Chandler 2008, 256)

Writing in a somewhat different and more abstract vein, but describing in detail the precise means by which the Khmer Rouge went about systematically attacking the foundations of social memory, Hinton (2008, 62) argues:

[In] their radical experiment in social engineering, the Khmer Rouge launched an assault on the past, seeking to obliterate everything that smacked of capitalism, “privatism,” and class oppression. This attack ranged far and wide. The Khmer Rouge targeted Buddhism, the family, village structure, economic activity, and public education—key socio-cultural institutions through which memory was ritually, formally and informally transmitted. More specifically, they assaulted social memory by burning books and destroying libraries, banning popular music, movies, media, and styles, destroying temples, truncating communication, terminating traditional holidays and ritual events, separating family members, homogenizing clothing, and eliminating private property, including photos, memorabilia and other mementos.

27) Skidmore put matter rather succinctly when she wrote (1996, 5): “The destruction of ‘traditional’ social structure and the inculcation of a sense of collectivity as opposed to individuality took a myriad of forms. The concept of family was abolished, and people lived in large shelters on the collective farms.”

Ian Harris has focused comments about the impact of the Khmer Rouge more specifically on the Buddhist *sangha*, but he has also pointed out how even the less institutionalized dimensions of Khmer religious culture suffered atrophy because of the manner in which the population was uprooted. Virtually all city folk were forced into the countryside, but most villagers were also forced to move to new locations where make-shift communes had been hastily established. Basic living conditions in these new contexts were extremely harsh, as villagers were not allowed to bring hardly any personal accoutrements with them. So while “[i]nformants [say] . . . that they surreptitiously maintained spirit shrines during the Democratic Kampuchea period . . . , the frequent movements of the population after 1975 severed the links between villagers and their ancestors. In consequence, belief in the whole panoply of autochthonous mythological beings, including the tutelary spirits, or *neak ta*, began to disintegrate” (Harris 2005, 176). My point in emphasizing this citation from Harris at this juncture is to underscore how *pchum ben* would eventually become the ritual means by which links with the ancestors would be restored.

While the nuclear family, including links to ancestors, disintegrated under Khmer Rouge policies, institutional Buddhism was practically destroyed. Buddhist monastic leaders of the *sangha* should not have been caught so off guard when the Khmer Rouge finally seized power in April, 1975. “Even before the outbreak of the civil war that would end the short-lived Khmer Republic [1970–75], the CPK [Communist Party of Kampuchea] was pointing to the economic burden that so many unproductive monks place on the country. Not only were they leeches upon society, but they also taught the doctrine of karma, which underpinned the belief in ‘natural inequality’ and encouraged the laity to passively accept the status quo”²⁸⁾ (*ibid.*, 163; brackets mine). At the conclusion of the civil war, the attacks ceased to be simply ideological in nature and became institutional and physical instead. The Khmer Rouge leadership may not have been exactly sure about its practical plans for the Buddhist *sangha* in the years immediately leading up to the collapse of the Lon Nol government in April, 1975. But a ruthlessly clear policy of eradication of all urban monks became evident from the very first day of their control. Most senior monks in Phnom Penh were killed immediately (Ledgerwood 2008b, 204). Harris (2005, 175) describes in painful detail what happened to the *sangharaja*, the chief monk (or *sanghareach*) of the dominant Mahanikay fraternity, and therefore the leading

28) This is the classic Marxist critique of karma, one that ignores the fact that it is not only an explanation for how and why events and situations of the present unfold, but it is a forward looking and empowering concept owing to the fact that it emphasizes the present: the quality of one’s inward dispositions gives rise to behavioral actions that become part of the conditioning process thereby determining what will become later.

Buddhist cleric in the country during the first day immediately following the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge:

After the communists had taken the Information Ministry on April 17, 1975, Ven. Huot That, the Mahinikay *sanghareach*, made a radio broadcast that appealed for a cease-fire and called on commanders to meet with the ousted military High Command, using the words “Now we have peace, put down your guns” [Cited in Kiernan 2002, 36–37]. Huot That then returned to Wat Unnalom, where he was falsely accused of having a wife and children in Paris. Evidence brought before the Vietnamese-backed trial of Pol Pot in 1979 affirmed that Huot That was executed at Wat Prang in the old capital of Udong the following day. It is widely believed that he was crushed by a bulldozer. (brackets mine)

The leading monks of the *sangha* were easy targets. Yet, initially, there seems to have been some inconsistency in how the urban monks of Phnom Penh and how the monks of countryside *wats* would be treated, especially in those areas of the countryside that previously had been nominally under Khmer Rouge control.

In the waning months of the Lon Nol government in the spring of 1975, the ranks of the *sangha* in the capital city had swelled as many frightened young Khmer men had sought to avoid conscription from either side of the civil war and had managed to find their ways to Phnom Penh to seek refuge in the city’s major *wats* as *samaneras*, novice monks. Harris (2005, 177–178) describes how these monks were treated in comparison to established rural monks:

The Khmer Rouge called these monks “imperialists,” “April 17 monks” or “new monks” in comparison to many rural monks who the Khmer Rouge referred to as “base monks.” With the fall of Phnom Penh, “new monks” were rapidly laicized, and virtually none remained in robes by the beginning of the 1975 rainy season. In any case, they had no means of support, for the laity were no longer allowed to support the *sangha* A few monks managed to escape to neighboring countries. Most were sent to work, and if they resisted, they were executed just like everyone else The so-called “base monks” had a different fate and seem to have been initially tolerated, since many of them had been supportive of the Khmer Rouge in the civil war. After the end of the 1975 *vassa* [September/October], we find isolated examples of an “inverted” *kathen* [*kathina*] ceremony . . . when selected monks were presented with revolutionary garb—black trousers, black shirt, and a traditional Khmer scarf [*krama*]—by communist officials, after which they were “invited”²⁹ to leave the monastic order. Doubtless, few refused. (brackets mine)

29) The use of the term “invited” here is doubly significant insofar as it also refers to the meaning of the *pavarana* monastic rite usually held in Cambodia during the night before the celebration of *kathina*. In the context of *pavarana* (which literally means “invitation”) all monks are *invited* to critically examine the behavior of their fellow monks, an invitation that, in turn, leads to a confession of shortcomings that have occurred during the *vassa* rain-retreat season. At the conclusion of the rite, the *sangha*’s collective *parisuddhi*, or “complete purity” is declared. This status is what renders the *sangha* especially worthy receivers of gifts, particularly robes, from the laity during the *kathina* rite on the following day.

There is no doubt that ultimately the leadership of the Khmer Rouge decidedly adamantly and thoroughly directed its cadres to the effect that the *sangha* should be totally decimated. Many temples were converted into interrogation centers and storage facilities. In temple spaces normally associated with the purity of moral behavior, as sanctuaries from the troubles of the routine world, indescribable atrocities occurred as thousands were tortured during the interrogation process. This fact graphically illustrates why Bizot understood the conduct of the Khmer Rouge as a “moral inversion.” By the time the Khmer Rouge finished with institutional Buddhism, “it was estimated that five out of every eight monks were executed during Pol Pot’s regime Images of the Buddha were often decapitated or desecrated in other ways; copies of the Buddhist scriptures were burned or thrown into rivers” (Keyes 1994, 56).³⁰ During the advent of Khmer Rouge hegemony, the *sangha* had already become a weakened, tottering institution during the civil war between 1970 and 1975. In those five years alone, about one-third of the *sangha*’s temples had been destroyed. Thus, the *sangha* was already a crippled and distorted social institution by the time the Khmer Rouge seized power and completely finished it off. In summing up, Charles Keyes has provided perhaps the most apt depiction of the impact of the Khmer Rouge on Theravada Buddhist religious culture in Cambodia during the malignant years of Democratic Kampuchea.

Without the *sangha*, the Buddhist ritual life of the population had been almost totally eradicated; in its stead, the people were supposed to dedicate themselves to work. In no other Communist society, including even Tibet, was a materialist ideology so radically imposed at the expense of a spiritual tradition. The attack on Cambodian Buddhism went well beyond the Marxist notion that religion serves to disguise class relations. The Khmer Rouge sought, by eliminating the institution that had for so long served as the basic source of Khmer identity, to create a new order with few roots in the past. (*ibid.*, 58)

Ritual and Socio-moral Regeneration

After the Vietnamese armies entered Cambodia and wrested control of the country away from the Khmer Rouge, they gradually relaxed restrictions on the public practice of Buddhism, though it cannot be said that they actually encouraged its practice. Initially, the Vietnamese promulgated a prohibition on the ordination of monks who were under the age of 50 years old, and established a quota for the total number of men who could be in robes at one time. Monks from the Khmer-dominant region of the Mekong delta

30) Ledgerwood (2008b: 204) has noted that “the devastation was so effective that an estimated ninety per cent of Cambodia’s Buddhist literary heritage was lost in that span of less than four years.”

in Vietnam were brought to Phnom Penh to reconstitute the ordination process, but the reformed-minded and disciplinary-conscious Thammayut order, “because of its connections to Thai royalty,” was not allowed to return. “It was not until after they [the Vietnamese] left and [the Khmer] royalty was re-established in Thailand that the Thommayut was again re-introduced” (Osborne 2008, 185; brackets mine).

Descriptions of life in Cambodia in 1979 and 1980 paint a very grim picture. There are many lurid descriptions composed during the past 30 years about the almost complete devastation of Khmer society, but those offered by Osborne (*ibid.*) and Chandler (2008) are among the most informative and vivid. Osborne wrote:

We now know that upwards of two million people had died while the Khmer rouge ruled Cambodia. The country was shattered physically and the number of those who remained alive and who possessed the skills required to make the country work had been drastically reduced. Only a tenth of the doctors who had been in the country in 1975 were still alive in 1979. There were even fewer teachers, proportionately, who had survived. Malnutrition was endemic among children, and within six months of the Vietnamese invasion the whole country was on the brink of starvation. (2008, 180)

Osborne (*ibid.*, 182) also says that no more than 15 per cent of the entire Khmer middle class survived, including the country’s civil servants, its technically qualified people and the business or commercial class. This meant that restarting the economy, the government and the educational system was almost a matter of complete reinvention that would require perhaps a generation of training. The situation was further complicated by the fact that as the post-Khmer Rouge years wore on, the Vietnamese were increasingly hard-pressed to devote the resources necessary to revive the beleaguered economy and battered social structures, owing in part to the decreasing amounts of assistance that they, in turn, were receiving from the Soviet Union, itself on a course of decline that would lead to its implosion in 1989.³¹ Assistance from Western countries was not forthcoming during the years of Vietnamese occupation in the 1980s owing to the fact that the United States, under the administration of Ronald Reagan, together with its allies, actually supported continuing Khmer Rouge claims in the United Nations to be the legitimate legal representative of the Cambodian people. This resulted in both government and private assistance from the West to Cambodia being largely precluded, though the sorry

31) Osborne says (2008, 189) that during the Vietnamese occupation life in Phnom Penh was mostly a matter of survival tactics, very difficult indeed. Usually one partner of the marriage engaged in some form of petty commerce. “Supplies of all kinds were limited, with aid from the socialist bloc, and in particular the Soviet Union, insufficient to overcome the constant shortages that hindered a full economic recovery. Rubber plantations were only slowly being brought back into production, and in Phnom Penh those factories that were operating had to contend with frequent power outages” with most factories only being able to operate three days a week owing to electricity shortages.

events of what had transpired in Cambodia in the 1970s, originally precipitated by the American military campaign, became increasingly known throughout the world in the early 1980s. Moreover, models for the government and economy that were initially launched by the Vietnamese and their Khmer collaborationists were models that were eventually jettisoned in the early 1990s. Suffice it to say that life in the 1980s was exceedingly grim, though without the immediate threats of terror, forced labor, torture and violence that were the hallmarks of the Khmer Rouge.

Chandler's description complements the statistics provided by Osborne by giving us a more intimate view of the conditions of social process that were then in play. I have selected Chandler's description because he emphasizes the broken condition of the nuclear family in the aftermath of Khmer Rouge rule and the context in which the celebration of the *pchum ben* ritual season was restarted after a hiatus of about five years.

Throughout 1979, and for most of 1980, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians crisscrossed the country looking for relatives returning to their homes As the PRK struggled to its feet, many prerevolutionary institutions, including markets, Buddhism and family farming, came back to life. Buddhists *wats* and schools opened soon afterward Villages had been abandoned or torn down, tools, seed, and fertilizer were nonexistent; hundreds of thousands of people had emigrated or been killed; and in most areas the survivors suffered from malaria, shock, or malnutrition. So many men died or disappeared in DK that in some districts more than 60 per cent of the families were headed by widows. Thousands of widows raised their families alone and with difficulty. (2008, 278–279)

As families were reunited and the violence of life under the Khmer Rouge became a painful memory of recent history, the extent of which only became more clear with the passage of time, many traditional ritual practices of Khmer Buddhist religious culture began to resurface, including weddings, funerals and other annual rites in addition to *pchum ben*. Hayashi (2002, 208) notes that “[t]he repairing of temples preceded all other activities in restoring Buddhism around Phnom Penh . . . [because] . . . [T]emples were urgently required as the ‘stages’ to hold annual collective rites, e.g. *pachum bon*, the biggest and longest [15 days] merit transference ritual for the dead among the Khmer.” Hayashi also reports (*ibid.*, 214) that it was the fall of 1980 before *pchum ben*, which he refers to as “the most important . . . among the annual rites,” was performed again.

It is extraordinarily difficult, well nigh impossible, to measure the degree of human suffering of a mental, physical or social nature experienced by the Cambodian people for nearly 20 years, from 1970 until 1990. Indeed, the legacy of those 20 years is still being played out by the both older and younger generations today. Back in 1990, while problems of restarting the economy and the government were problematic, the problem of reinventing the family was even more acute.

Pchum ben is a ritual process that regenerates family cohesion among the living

through pilgrimage, and family reunion through compassion and thus merit-transfer for the dead. In establishing ritual links to the dead, a kind of moral order is re-established unconsciously. While moral order may be in part re-established through a linking or re-union with the dead, the possible cases of dealing with immorality on the part of some ancestors can also be confronted within this ritual context as well. This is an especially difficult issue for those families with members who were active members of the Khmer Rouge or who publicly collaborated with them extensively. Zucker (2008) insightfully reflects on this issue:

The loss of elders creates an obstacle to the restoration of moral order by impeding the transmission of traditional knowledge and practice and therefore creating a disjunction with the past and the ancestors. This limits the resources that may be excavated from the past to create society anew and curtails access to the ancestors' generative power [A]lthough villagers are restoring order by turning either towards tradition or towards what they consider "modern" ideologies and practices,³²⁾ there is [also] the problem of the perceived immorality of the actions of elders and ancestors in the past. I suggest that this perception contributes to the sense of disorder and obstructs the remaking of order because these immoral elders and ancestors then present the negation of the narrative of the moral past, and they undermine people's vision of the original moral order as a whole. (*ibid.*, 197)

Yet, it is precisely because the moral condition of so many ancestors from the recent violent past is simply unknown that surviving kin feel compelled to undertake ritual actions specifically on their behalf. The fact that the dead are envisaged as *pretas* by those who attend the *pchum ben* rites means that the ritual is being undertaken by some as a kind of insurance policy against the possible deleterious fate of their kin. Zucker (*ibid.*, 196) seems to understand this clearly herself. She states: "Order, then, is restored by honoring ancestors and then maintained through the predictable transmission of stories, rituals and customs that are drawn from the ancestral past." That is, moral order is affirmed by the family, re-established within the context of ancestor veneration. Troubled ancestors may be rehabilitated by the righteous actions of their living kin. This reassertion of a moral order through the rehabilitation of ancestors makes it possible for living kin to abide in a lineage whose past symbolizes the ideals of moral order. In the semiotics of ritual theory that was articulated so clearly by Mircea Eliade in his many works, ances-

32) Chandler and Kent (2008, 2) are stressing the same point: "the regeneration of the ritual life of a community may also offer a way for people to formulate and relate to their collective stories through a symbolism that recalls a shared cultural origins . . . [and that] it is therefore important to explore the processes by which a community like Cambodia is attempting to recover moral order after violent conflict both in relation to indigenous values and experience, as embedded in social relations and history."

tors ideally represent the qualities of *in illo tempore*, a past or origins that was ideal or normative before the problematic nature of the present existence was introduced.³³⁾ In this vein, ancestors are regarded as paradigmatic forces of the primordial past who establish fundamental patterns of being to be emulated by the living in the present. Venerating what ancestors stand for, or what they symbolize, is a way of simultaneously recovering the qualities of that past, of transcending a problematic present, and overcoming the condition of alienation by re-establishing the link between past and present. As we shall see, the engine driving this process of recovery is karma and its transfer.

It is within this purview that we can find Skidmore's (1996) comments about the power of ritual. In focusing her study on the *dhammayietra*, an annual public pilgrimage articulating a progressive agenda of social engagement led by the activist monk Mahaghosananda,³⁴⁾ she emphasizes

the potential healing abilities of the performance of ritual and its possible function as a resistance strategy to terror and violence. The total field of Khmer religion includes belief in ancestor spirits, pagan demons, and the spirits that inhabit the heavens and hells of Buddhist cosmology, as well as the Buddha Himself. This worldview also allows Cambodians access to different levels of reality such as the world of dreams, the world of ancestors, and the world of spirits. Cambodians draw upon this worldview to both comprehend violence and to provide an idiom for their experience of a culture of terror and the space of death. Psychiatrists have documented Cambodian attempts to express distress and rework their life-world epistemologies from within this cultural frame. Some respondents reported having dreamed of relatives, some alive, some dead, only to have the relatives step out of the dream and appear to the dreamer in waking life. Other refugees suffering from extreme emotional distress reported being visited by ancestors' disembodied female skulls with entrails dangling behind, sorcerers, and vengeful spirits. (*ibid.*, 11–12)

Indeed, dreams have been an important venue for the communication of the dead with the living within Buddhist religious culture since the early centuries of Buddhist tradition in ancient India. The stories comprising the Pali *Tipitaka's* *Petavatthu* almost always include an episode wherein the dead appear to speak with the living within a dream to inform the living of their current condition of suffering. Many of the people I interviewed at *pchum ben* rites in Cambodia in 2010 reported communications with their dead ancestors within the context of dreams. Ritual, then, becomes a means of acting upon the sense of imperative that derives from a dream of this kind.

33) See especially Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954).

34) Mahaghosananda founded more than 30 *wats* for Cambodians in Canada and the United States in the 1980s and has been a major force, along with ex-Jesuits and Japanese Nichiren monks, as well as Christian and ecumenical NGOs, in holding annual *dhammayietra* peace marches designed to "wash away" memories of the Khmer Rouge. (Harris 2005, 208). Mahaghosananda was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Peace in both 1994 and 1996.

While the place of dreams is an important detail, the larger issue here is how the ritual process helps to reconstitute and re-enchant the family. The reconstitution of the family, within the context of Khmer culture, is necessarily the predicate for the reconstitution of society. Wounds may never completely heal, as memories may never be completely erased. But the reinstatement of ritual culture in the immediate aftermath of social devastation, a process that was allowed to accelerate after the exodus of Marxist-inclined Vietnamese ideologues, has abetted the ability to at least cope, and just as importantly, to at least hope. The hope that is expressed within *pchum ben* rites is an especially precious quality insofar as Osborne (2008, 200) notes, there is a very “. . . high rate of mental illness among those who were adults when Pol Pot was in power.”³⁵) Not only is hope a quality cultivated within *pchum ben*, but extensive interviews among hundreds of refugees in camps on the Thai side of the border with Cambodia in 1992, 13 years after the transition to Vietnamese rule, indicated not only high levels of post traumatic stress disorder, but also that “Cambodian survivors wish they would have given deceased family members more of their own food, or speak of feeling badly about taking the clothing of a deceased relative. Many describe guilt feelings for not having been able to perform a proper funeral ceremony for their loved ones” (Savin and Robinson 1997). Concern for a proper funeral is among the basic material and psychological matters addressed within *pchum ben*.

Celebrating *Pchum Ben*

In early October, 2010, the *Cambodia Daily* ran a series of articles on how spending during *pchum ben* seemed to be down that year. Its reporters had interviewed traders in the

35) In Dan Savin and Shalom Robinson, “Holocaust Survivors and Survivors of the Cambodian Tragedy: Similarities and Differences.” *Echoes of the Holocaust* 5 (1997), the results of hundreds of interviews with Khmer survivors have been published as a way of understanding, comparatively, the continuing, long term psychological impact of having witnessed mass murder. Their findings are summarized as follows: “The stories of the interviewees presented here illustrate the terrible suffering of millions of Cambodians during the Khmer Rouge regime, as well as the psychological late effects caused by this suffering The first author has found posttraumatic stress symptoms in hundreds of Cambodians whom he examined during his two-and-a-half-year stay in Cambodia. In a group of 100 Cambodian child survivors interviewed in a refugee camp near the Thai border 13 years after the end of the Pol Pot regime, 46 per cent met full DSMIII-R criteria for PTSD [post traumatic stress disorder], and an additional 40 per cent met the lesser criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD not otherwise specified (NOS). In another group of Cambodian child survivors who made it to the United States and were interviewed around the same time, 28 per cent met full criteria for PTSD, and an additional 20 per cent for PTSD NOS By talking with Cambodian survivors in more detail, however, it becomes clear that guilt is a major issue for them as for Holocaust survivors.”

central market and monks from Wat Langka. But there was a sudden burst of spending in the final days of the season as many Phnom Penh people prepared for their pilgrimages back to home villages and *wats*. The monks at Wat Langka said that perhaps the next phase of building and remodeling would have been put on hold unless donations had recovered, which they did. *Pchum ben* is clearly a major economic moment during the year, not only for the donations made to the temples, but also in the feasts prepared and in the gifts to parents that children provide. It is likely about as important to the fledgling Cambodian economy as Christmas is to the American. Certainly, the transportation industry receives its biggest boost of the year as hundreds of thousands leave Phnom Penh for the provinces, a pilgrimage home to honor parents and ancestors. Thus, *pchum ben* is not only a festival season aimed at establishing the well being of the dead, it is a marker of the well-being of the living as well.

I will rely upon Davis (2009) to introduce the salient cultural and religious issues in play within the rites constitutive of *pchum ben*. His descriptive statements provide for an insightful introductory summary of *pchum ben*'s general religious and socio-economic significance in contemporary Khmer society:

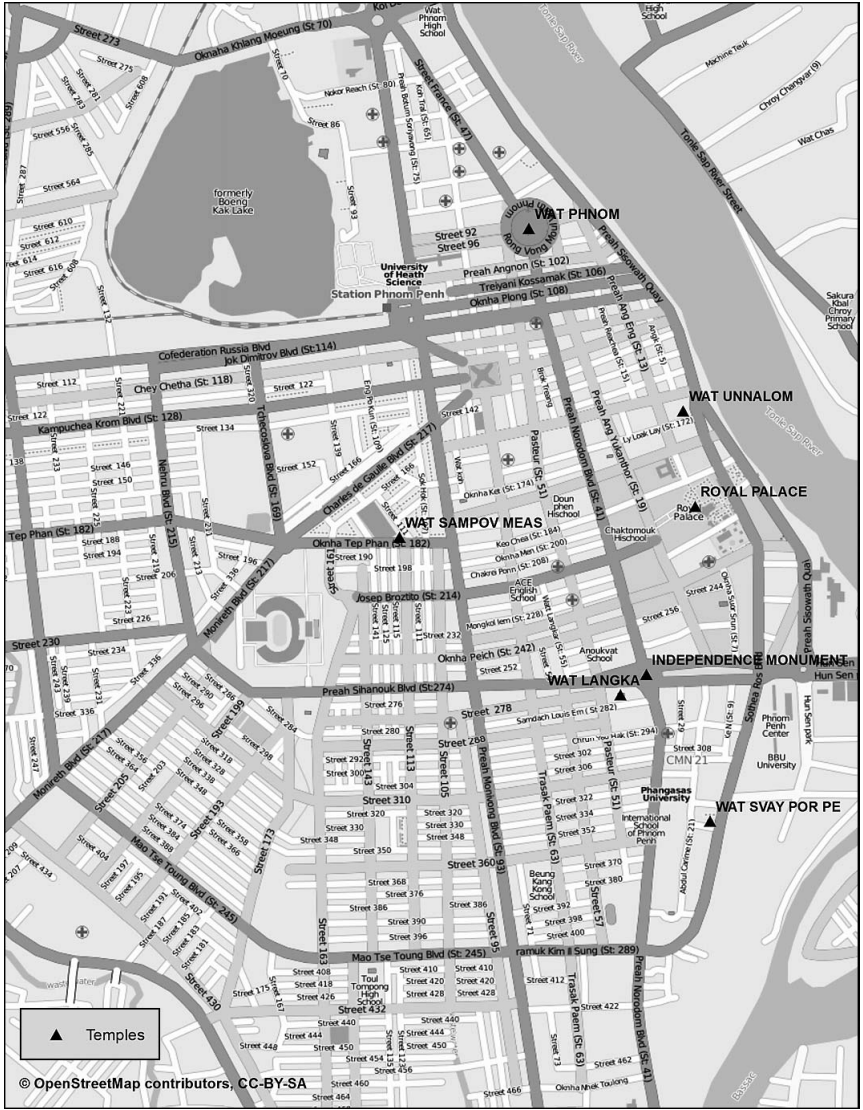
Once a year during the fifteen-day festival of Bhjum Pinda [*pchum ben*], the king of hell, Yamaraja, allows the *preta* to travel back to the villages where they previously lived as humans. During this "dark fortnight" of the waning moon, the *preta* search for gifts of food that their living relatives and descendants are suppose to leave them at Buddhist temples. They are supposed to search in at least seven temples during this period; if they find food, they will give their blessings. If on the other hand, they find nothing and return to hell as hungry when they left, they may choose to curse their descendants, so that they will share in the ghost's hunger and desperation. If they cannot eat together, the ghosts will ensure that they at least starve together . . . (*ibid.*, 175). [While] [p]reta embark on epic journeys during the festival period, from hell to the villages of their relatives . . . , they are not the only ones going on pilgrimages. Khmer assert that they too should return to the villages of their birth for Bhjum Pinda, or at least for the final day of Bhjum, the day of gathering. Since Bhjum should be celebrated in one's home village, the holiday involves massive evacuations of cities to agricultural birth villages. Although the vast majority of Cambodia's monetized wealth is concentrated in the cities, over eighty per cent of the population remains in the countryside. Families from the city make great efforts to give to the limits of their ability when they journey back to the villages. They don't come empty-handed: they bring food, treats, bread and rice. If they are indeed wealthy, they will often arrange for the temple ceremonies, and will hire a tent for a catered meal for themselves and a few of their country relatives on the temple grounds after the ceremony. In return, they occupy the major roles in communally performed rituals, sit in the best places, receive more attention from the high ranking monks, and eat delicious food in catered tents, around which children and hungry adults wait for left overs. These human pilgrimages back and forth between city and village are undertaken in a spirit of generosity, in order to serve one's poor dead relatives and one's home village, but the economic and social distinctions between the city and the villagers are also points of contention. The generous gifts to the countryside's dead from the city are highly symbolic. They return the countryside's wealth without



Map 1 Map of Cambodia

acknowledging it (*ibid.*, 188) . . . Their food and gifts do go a long way to help create a sense of solidarity, familial love, and trust, which might otherwise be strained by the tyranny of distance, the length of absence and the gulf in lifestyles. During the two weeks of Bhjum Pinda, the direction of wealth is reversed. (*ibid.*, 189)

In September/October of 2010, I attended as many ritual occasions during the 15 day season of *pchum ben* as I possibly could. I selected five Buddhist *wats* located within



Map 2 Map of Phnom Penh

the city of Phnom Penh according to profiles of clientele which they served: Wat Langka, Wat Unnalom, Wat Sampov Meas, Wat Svay Por Pe, and Wat Phnom. The first three *wats* belong to the traditional and still dominant Mahanikay order and are arguably the largest and most well known of all of Phnom Penh’s many Buddhist temples. Wat Unnalom (see Photo 1) is the home temple of the *sangharaja* (or *sanghareach*) of the Mahanikay order and is located in close proximity to the royal palace. It is here that the



Photo 1 Wat Unnalom



Photo 2 Independence Monument

Buddhist *sangha* was first regenerated following the dispersal of the Khmer Rouge. It remains an unofficial headquarters of the *sangha* in Cambodia. Wat Langka is probably the second most important *wat* institutionally in Phnom Penh. It has been described by Davis (*ibid.*, 18) in this way: “catholic in its acceptance and performance of rites considered by modernist or reformist monks as brahmanist—such as *poh paya pinda* (the early morning *pinda* offerings during *pchum ben*)—and had a largely middle and upper class congregation on its normal morality day (*thnai sila*) celebrations.” Indeed, it is a very well endowed temple located just opposite Phnom Penh’s Independence Monument (see Photo 2) and the Prime Minister’s official residence. Wat Sampov Meas is a very large *wat* located in more of a working class and traditional business section of Phnom Penh and is also home to some of the most socially and politically progressive monks in Cambodia, including the activist Mahaghosananda who was nominated for a Nobel Prize for Peace in 1994 and 1996. Wat Svay Po Pe is a smaller and rather non-descript *Thammayut* temple located across from the sprawling Russian embassy in a middle class section of town. It enjoys a reputation for having monks of a more intellectual bent who are connected to some of the Buddhist universities in Phnom Penh. Wat Phnom, of course, has become iconic for the city. It is the legendary site of the city’s origins. Despite the fact that it has an elaborate image hall and an adjacent royally endowed *stupa*, there are no monks who live at Wat Phnom, so it doesn’t have a regular congregation, nor does it observe the regular liturgy of Buddhist rites on monthly *sila* days, *pchum ben*, etc. In addition, there are popular Chinese and Vietnamese deity shrines located to one side of the Buddha image hall, and an active cultic site for “Madam Penh” or “Grandma

Penh” on the other.³⁶) It is, therefore, not a “normal” Buddhist temple. In repeated visits, the only Buddhist cultic activity I observed were prostrations to the central Buddha image. I also observed a ritual gathering of the royal family sending off their ancestral spirits on the eve of the final day of *pchum ben* at an auspicious ford located along the Tonle Sap River just opposite the royal palace in Phnom Penh. Since *pchum ben* is so robustly celebrated in the countryside, I observed *bay ben* rites at two very important rural *wats*, each located about 40 kilometers outside of Phnom Penh, and I made sure that I was at a rural venue for the final day of *pchum ben*, the day that serves quintessentially as a time for family reunion. The first rural venue, located to the southwest, was Wat Kokoh, a temple that had been turned into an interrogation center and prison by the Khmer Rouge for the duration of their time in power. My visit there was an especially grim reminder of the crimes committed in the late 1970s. The second, Wat Traleaeng Kaeng in Kompong Chhnang, is northwest of Phnom Penh near the old capital of Udong. This particular *wat* is famous for its four-faced Buddha image that in popular lore is believed to be the image of the four-faced king mother, who is also thought to be the reincarnated mother of the Buddha.³⁷) It is also the site of a temple dedicated to Preah

36) The purported beginnings of Phnom Penh as a center for the Khmer are now a matter of mythic articulation and connected directly to Wat Phnom. Osborne (2008, 21–22) retells the story: “As for the city’s more familiar name, there is a romantic legend accounting for its existence. Sometime in the fourteenth century, the legend recounts, and not long before the Cambodian court left the great city of Angkor with its magnificent temples, a woman named Penh lived beside a small hillock close to the river bank and a little above the point where the Mekong and its tributary came together. One day, when the rivers were in flood, she saw a huge *koki* tree—a type traditionally planted only by royalty or Buddhist monks—floating in the current. When she pulled it to the shore, hoping to use it for firewood, she found to her amazement that wedged in the tree’s branches were four statues of the Buddha and one of the Hindu god Vishnu. Penh recognized this as a sign that the gods had decided to leave the holy city of Angkor and to give their blessing to a new Cambodian capital. Like women in contemporary Cambodia, Penh was energetic and determined. Calling on the people who lived nearby to carry the images to her home, she then organized them to pile earth on the hillock close to her home, so transforming it into a feature that could legitimately be called a hill, a *phnom* in Cambodian. When this was done, she built a temple on the top of the hill to house the images of the Buddha and a stupa for other holy relics, while the statue of Vishnu was placed in a separate chapel. In memory of these events, the city took the name as Phnom Penh, the “Hill of lady Penh.” Osborne continues: “. . . charming though the story is, the record is clear that the settlement did not acquire its modern name until after the Cambodian court, led by King Ponhea Yat, left Angkor to settle briefly at the site of modern Phnom Penh. Despite some assertions to the contrary, we do not know exactly when this profoundly important event took place, although it occurred sometime after 1431, possibly in the same decade. It was a final act in a long drawn out drama of the decline of the Angkorian empire’s power in the face of a century of attacks by the emerging Siamese [Thai] principalities on Cambodia’s western frontier.”

37) Though the king mother is currently living in hell, it is believed that she comes to this *wat* to respond to those who call upon her for help.

Ko Preah Keo, whose well-known myth reflects late medieval tensions with the invading Thai in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Now I will simply indicate that the spirits of these two mythic figures, who represent important aspects of Khmer culture, are thought to reside in this *wat*. Wat Traleaeng Kaeng, therefore, is a site of considerable nationalistic sentiments.

In my observations at these venues, I was ably assisted and supported by two outstanding Khmer graduate students, one male and one female, both of whom are Buddhist by background and fully fluent in English and Khmer. They readily handled all translation issues that arose and interviewed many individuals on each occasion at my behest. My notes indicate that collectively, we interviewed scores of people from all age brackets and both genders. In addition, we participated and observed for the duration of ritual activities as these were held at these locations on each of several early mornings.³⁸⁾ As such, we were able to assemble, by means of comparison, a somewhat typical liturgy by noting which elements appeared as constants and which elements proved to be idiosyncratic or variables.

What follows is an analytical account that is based upon our efforts to understand what occurred at each *wat*. The knowledge we gained about *pchum ben* was cumulative, and that is how I shall proceed with my discussion. That is, the discussion will be guided by the sequence of our observations. My descriptions and analysis will begin with the first venue we visited, Wat Langka, and proceed serially through to the last occasion on *pchum ben* day itself at Wat Traleaeng Kaeng in Kompong Chnang. The discussions occurring in relation to each *wat* will become progressively focused as we continue. We learned more that was new to us, of course, at the first sites. The information we gained as we proceeded day to day from *wat* to *wat* became increasingly redundant, although it often confirmed and sometimes contradicted what we had learned earlier. In any case, I discuss the many issues in what follows as they surfaced. Progressively, the picture that is painted is completed.

The *Kan Ben* Liturgy at Wat Langka

The first 14 days of the *pchum ben* season are known as *kan ben*. *Kan* in Khmer means “to hold or to adhere” while *ben* is Khmer for Pali and Sanskrit *pinda*, referring to the ball of sticky rice offered ritually to ancestors to appease their hungry conditions. Deter-

38) Given the fact that our usual meeting time ranged between 2:30 and 3:30 a.m. in the mornings, we developed something of a healthy, albeit ascetic *esprit de corps*.



Photo 3 Spirit Flag

mining the symbolic significance of *pinda* figures heavily in ascertaining the cardinal religious meaning of this entire ritual season. *Pchum* means “collection” and so *pchum ben* is the “gathering or collecting/making of *pinda*.” During *kan ben*, the ritual of *bay ben*, or “tossing” the *pinda*, is performed every morning between 4 and 6 a.m., depending on the ritual schedule of each of the *wats*.

At 3:45 a.m. on the first day of the *pchum ben* season, laity began to arrive at Wat Langka with trays filled with *pindas*, incense, candy, water, and small white spirit flags known in Khmer as *tung proleung* (literally “spirit flag”; see Photo 3).³⁹ These flags, of course, are symbols of their deceased kin, their ancestors to whom the laity will be offering their trays of food. Some of the trays that have been sold by hawkers on site just beyond the gates of the temple compound contain *pindas* that have been shaped into the form of a cone by means of a banana leaf wrap (see Photo 5). This form is the traditional way of offering *pindas* to one’s ancestors. That rice is the primary offering to the ancestors, as it is the primary offering to the Buddhist monks when they go on their morning alms rounds (*pindapata* in Pali), reflects the vital centrality of this food as the byproduct of agricultural labor, the predominant form of “value-producing activity” (Davis 2009, 31)

39) These simple paper “cut outs” seem to be inspired by the elaborate hand sewn cloth hangings one finds decorating some village temples during the *pchum ben* season, the making of which is regarded as highly meritorious. See Photos 4a–4c from Wat Traleaeng Kaeng.



a



b



c

Photo 4 Temple Hangings



Photo 5 Banana Leaf Wrap

in Khmer culture and society. That is, “Cambodian society, so thoroughly agricultural, finds its dominant image of value and value-creation, in the production, distribution and consumption of food” (*ibid.*, 110). The giving of rice, therefore, is symbolic of the giving of life, its nurturance, its sustenance. Rice is life’s vital principle and so the giving of rice to ancestors, which is precisely what occurs during the *bay ben* of *kan ben*, is not only symbolic of regenerating the life of the lineage or family, but it also a fundamental mark

of respect.⁴⁰⁾ With regard to previous discussions about the creation of moral order as a byproduct of ancestor veneration, what should be stressed, then, is that the gift of rice to one's ancestors seems to generate a sentiment of reverence for life in the disposition of the donor. Thus, the gift is emblematic of sacrifice to what has been deemed worthy. It is a ritual act of worship indicating the "worthship" of the enduring family. It is also an act of thanksgiving and, to be more clearly seen in the pages that follow, an act of compassion. Finally, I would add that the generation of a sentiment that gives rise to acts of compassion, acts that reflect an ethical intention, signal the manner in which ritual is often the context in which ethical consciousness is forged.

When the central image hall at Wat Langka finally opened, approximately 500 laity entered first,⁴¹⁾ before about 100 monks entered in stately, composed fashion to sit quietly and observantly in neat rows of about 10 each behind the chief monk and his most senior fellow monks.⁴²⁾ A rather distinguished family of high rank, as it turns out the family of an air force officer who serves as the chief bodyguard of the current prime minister, were designated as the primary lay patrons of the occasion.⁴³⁾ The ritual then began with the family patrons offering lit incense and making prostrations before the main Buddha image in the sermon hall. Following the prostrations, the chief monk led all monks in chanting the *Namassaka* in Pali, followed by a Khmer translation of the same. The text is simply an homage, a praise of the virtues of the *triratna*: Buddha, the *dhamma* and *sangha*. During this monastic chanting, laity, in turn, lit their incense and candles and some poured a little water on to their trays. Following the invocation, the chief monk told everyone to concentrate on the next *dhamma* which consisted of the recitation of the *pancasila*,

40) On this point Davis has quoted Maria Heim: "When the recipient is someone whom one can esteem, the feelings of *sraddha*, respect, and joy, naturally arise. These are among the most noble feelings one can have, and thus it is perfectly appropriate to value these gifts above others" (Heim 2004, 81–82).

41) The majority of people coming to the early morning ritual were women. They were mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters, nieces, wives, and teenagers. Perhaps a third of those in attendance were males. In terms of age, virtually all age groups were equally represented, but the preponderance seemed youthful. At Wat Langka, a decidedly upper middle class clientele predominated.

42) The opening scene of parading monks, at the time, made me recall the description of *pchum ben* offered 100 years ago by Adhemard Leclere (1916, 116).

43) As in the countryside, each night of *kan ben* requires a different chief sponsor or lay patron for the ritual whose responsibility is to pay for all expenses incurred, including not only the cost of providing breakfast to all of the monks, but also the payment of musicians (*pin peat*) and any other costs associated with the ritual performance. The cost, by local standards, can be very considerable. At major *wats* in Phnom Penh, only the very well-to-do may be able to afford playing this role. At most rural *wats*, families take turns meeting the responsibility and earning the merit that accrues. Often, the chief patron is a person of some means who has returned from the city.

the five basic moral precepts of not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to lie, and not to take intoxicants. This taking and avowal established the conditions of moral purity, or at least the moral intentions driving the performance of the rite. The chanting of the five precepts was followed by the head temple *achar* (lay ritual specialist) leading the chanting in Pali of the *Namotassa*, again basically a respectful invocation of the Buddha's name.

To this point in the ritual, the elements of the liturgy had been generic and not unique to the *pchum ben* season or to *kan ben*. But after the *Namotassa*, the chief monk chanted the *Tirokudda Sutta*, an ancient Pali text found in the *Petavatthu* that actually forms a song or chant originally attributed to the Buddha within the mythic story he tells that establishes the basis for the rite of *bay ben*, the giving of *pindas* to ancestors. Davis (2009, 167) has aptly translated the short text of the *Tirokudda Sutta* as follows:

They stand at crossroads and outside the walls
 Returning to their old homes, they wait at thresholds
 Because of karma, no one remembers them
 When an abundant feast of food and water is served.

Those who feel pity, therefore, at the right time
 Give truly pure food and drink to their relatives, rejoicing
 "This is for you; may our relatives be happy."

Spectral relations gather and assemble.
 Thoroughly pleased with the food and water, they reply
 "May our relatives who provide for us have long lives.
 We are honored; giving is not without benefits."

There is no plowing in that place, and cow-herding is unknown;
 No trading, no buying, no selling with gold;
 Dead preta survive there on what is given from here.

Just as water poured on a hill
 flows down and around it, sustaining the land all around,
 so a gift from here benefits ghosts in precisely the same way.

"He gave to me, he worked for me,
 he was my friend, relative and companion."
 Give properly to the ghosts, remembering past deeds.

The weeping, mourning, and laments of relatives are useless
 To those who remain in such a way.
 But proper gifts dedicated to the sangha become useful to them
 Immediately and for a long time.

The duties toward relatives have thus been shown:
 Veneration for the ghosts,
 Strength for the monks
 And no small merit for you.

The *Tirokudda Sutta* is recited on virtually every *kan ben* occasion during the 15 day *pchum ben* season. Along with the *Parabhava Sutta* (see below), it is one of the two primary texts consistently invoked or recited within *pchum ben* ritual liturgies that I observed wherever I went. They are texts that are unique to the observance of *pchum ben*. According to Gombrich (1971b, 218), the *Tirokudda Sutta* forms one of the most ancient strands of the *Petavatthu*, a Pali text itself that is likely to be at least more than 2,000 years old.⁴⁴ Within this text, we find the beginnings of a rationalization for the practice of merit transfer, especially in the third to the last verse that emphasizes what departed kin have provided on behalf of the living. In fact, this *sutta* is none other than a notice of the Buddhist observance of *dharma* in relation to honoring ancestors. Though regarded as *Buddhavacana* (words of the Buddha), it signals how the early Buddhist community initially understood and transformed the ancient Indian *brahmanical* practice of venerating the familial dead.⁴⁵ In *brahmanical* traditions, paying one's debt to one's family ancestors, including one's parents, is one dimension of the triple debt that all devout people owe; the other two being one's teachers and the gods.

In the *Petavatthu* story entitled "The Petas Outside the Wall,"⁴⁶ the Buddha recites the *Tirokudda Sutta* verses to explain to King Bimbisara why the duty of honoring one's familial dead is an act that is morally incumbent upon all. Since this particular story is also very often referred to in sermons preached by Khmer monks on *bay ben* occasions, and since it is therefore known by most Khmer laity as the authorized beginnings of *pchum ben* traditions, I will summarize it here.

Ninety-two cycles ago, a king by the name of Jayasena ruled over Kasipura (Benares). His queen, Sirima, gave birth to a prince who became a Buddha. The king resolved to keep the Buddha, *dhamma* and *sangha* only for his sole edification and gave no one else the opportunity to take refuge. The Buddha's three younger brothers, born to a different mother, knew that *buddhas* are awakened for the benefit of the whole world, and not for

44) Winternitz (1927, vol. 2, 99) assigned the *Petavatthu* to the latest strata of literature assembled in the *Tipitaka*. In the fifth century CE *Mahavamsa's* account (*ibid.*, XIV, 58, 96–96) of the transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, it is referred to as the second text preached by Asoka's monastic missionary son, Mahinda, who establishes the *sangha* and then converts the court and Lankan king who is then re-coronated as Devanampiya Tissa.

45) I have traced the roots of the early Buddhist transformation of ancestor veneration in my article "Assisting the Dead by Venerating the Living" (Holt 1981).

46) *Petavatthu*: pp. 7–11.

the selfish ambitions of society's elite. As a strategy, they created a disturbance in one of the kingdom's borderlands and were sent by the king to quell the problem. When they returned, the king offered them a boon to which they replied that they wished to venerate the Buddha. The king denied them. The brothers then approached the Buddha directly and the Buddha agreed to spend the rain retreat season with his brothers in his attendance offering them the chance to make great merit. During the rain retreat season, the local provincial ruler and the royal treasurer also took refuge in the *triratna*, along with the three brothers. The provincial ruler and treasurer then made magnificent gifts to the Buddha and *sangha*, but other people in the province became jealous of their charity, consumed their gifts of food and set fire to the refectory of the monastery that they had built for the Buddha and his *sangha*. In time, all the major players in this episode died and were reborn: the brothers, the provincial ruler and the treasurer were reborn in splendid heavens while those who had been jealous and had burnt the monastery were reborn in hell. After 92 cycles of rebirths in heavens and hells, during the time of the Buddha Kassapa, those reborn in hell were finally reborn as *petas* who noticed how some surviving kin folk provided gifts on behalf of their deceased relations to help assuage their suffering conditions. They asked Kassapa when this might happen for them. Kassapa told them that they had to await the appearance of the future Buddha, Gotama, and the rebirth of the provincial ruler as King Bimbisara. Bimbisara would provide relief through dedicating the merit of his benevolence to Gotama to them. Eventually, Gotama was born, set the *dhamma* wheel rolling, converted thousands and made his way to Rajagaha where he established King Bimbisara on the path of *dhamma*. The *petas* waited, but Bimbisara did not assign credit for his gifts to the Buddha and his *sangha* to them. One night, now without hope, the *petas* howled dreadful cries heard throughout the palace. In the morning, an alarmed Bimbisara expressed his fears to the Buddha that something sinister might happen to him soon. Then the Buddha told him the story and how the *petas*, his ancestral kinsmen, were waiting for a transfer of merit. Bimbisara then prepared a generous bounty while the *petas* waited outside the walls. When the merit for Bimbisara's generosity was transferred to them, they found themselves newly ensconced in lotus ponds, their thirsts slaked with sweet nectars, eating delicious soft food, wearing beautiful divine clothes, living in grand mansions, sleeping on comfortable couches, being adorned with jewel-studded ornaments, etc. All of this remarkable scene was made manifest by the Buddha for a delighted Bimbisara to see the benefits of his merit transference. In conclusion, the Buddha then recited the verses of the *Tirokudda Sutta*.

After the chanting of the *Tirokudda Sutta*, the *achar* in Wat Langka recited a Pali *gatha* or verse indicating *anumodana*, the moment when all beings, alive and dead, are invited to share in the joy of what is now to be given. Both Gombrich (1971b, 206–207)

and Malalasekera (1967, 85–86) argue that it is precisely this ability to rejoice in the action of another’s good actions, or the quality of “empathy in joy” that signals how the change in disposition in the *petas* is what allows them to benefit from the transferred merit. Their *cetana*, or intentions, have been transformed. I was genuinely surprised that this somewhat sophisticated aspect of Buddhist philosophy was known to several of the older laity that we interviewed during *pchum ben*. *Cetana* is actually how the Buddha defined *karma* within the early Buddhist Pali texts. In other words, the *karma* of the *petas* had been changed, as evidenced by the fact that they could now rejoice in the good works of others. They now enjoyed an awareness of what constitutes morally wholesome action. As such, they could share in the merit generated.

Following the *anumodana* invitation, everyone inside the temple responded with “Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu.” Then the temple bell rang three times signaling that the moment had come for everyone to go outside into the dark and to begin circumambulating the image hall clockwise three times, in the process distributing *pinda* to their deceased kin, their departed ancestors. Solemnly, all the laity joined in this procession and began to quietly distribute the contents of their “*pinda* plates” into metal pails or buckets that had been placed at intervals around the temple. Younger monks were stationed at various intervals to supervise outside the sermon hall.

In popular Khmer lore about *pretas*, it is important that each lay person recite the name of his or her deceased relation while making their donations. As Davis noted in the introductory comments to this section, it is believed that the deceased will frequent up to seven temples searching for donations made by their descendants on their behalf. At the same time, it is believed that seven generations of ancestors can benefit from the donations provided by their descendants. What is interesting about the *Petavatthu* story of the *petas* “outside the walls” is that not only do they benefit from the *karma* of merit transfer, but that they physically receive the benefits from material offerings. That is why, for many Khmer traditional laity, it is important to actually make physical gifts and why the gift of rice itself is so significant. Moreover, in the *Petavatthu* stories, the types of punishments suffered by *petas* are physically reflective of the nature of the moral offence that they committed as human beings. For instance, liars are born with worms in their mouths. Bullies are reborn with severe bruises or broken limbs. The greedy are continuously hungry.

Yet, the physical act of giving *pindas* has recently become a popular controversy in Cambodia. Buth Savong, a famous Khmer Buddhist *dhamma* preacher has mounted a vigorous campaign against the practice of *bay ben* by arguing that “*pinda* throwing” is not sanctioned in the *Tipitaka* and not prescribed by the Buddha. Other monks have complained about how the practice of *bay ben* dirties the temple environment and attracts

stray animals and vermin. Consequently, some temples have abandoned the practice of *bay ben*. In temples where *bay ben* is observed, I did hear sermons by monks to the laity regarding the importance of keeping the temple neat, along with warnings, especially to the youth, not to throw *pindas* indiscriminately. Other temples, like Wat Langka, try to contain the practice of throwing *pindas* by placing pails or canisters around the temple as receptacles and posting monastic “guards” intermittently to make sure that the fun does not get out of hand.

In any case, one of the questions my assistants and I asked of the laity we met was how one knows for sure whether or not their offerings during *bay ben* made any difference to their ancestors. Several times, we were told that ancestors would appear in dreams, and from those appearances in dreams, it would be clear that they were wearing nice clothes, were no longer hungry or suffering from thirst, etc., and had, therefore, received merit. This is a very curious explanation, because in most of the stories of the *Petavatthu*, the manner through which the dead communicate with the living is through dreams. Consistently in our interviews with Buddhist laity during *bay ben*, we were told about how the dead appeared to their surviving kin in dreams. Later, I will argue that dreaming is one of the conditions of liminality that is so characteristic of *pchum ben*.

During the ritual circumambulation of the temple and the ritual distribution of *pinda*, the second ritual text of primary importance to the *pchum ben* proceedings, the Pali *Parabhava Sutta*, was then intoned by the chief monk over the loudspeaker system. The *sutta* can be translated as follows:

Thus have I heard:

On one occasion the Blessed One was living near Savatthi, at Jetavana, at Anathapindika’s monastery. Now when the night was far advanced, a certain deity, whose surpassing radiance illuminated the whole of Jetavana, came to the presence of the Blessed One, respectfully saluted him, and stood beside him. Standing thus he addressed the Blessed One in verse:

[The Deity:]

About the causes of the fall of men we ask, Gotama, O Blessed One: What is the cause of his fall?

[The Buddha:]

It is easy to know the ascending one, and easy to know the falling one. The lover of the *dhmma* ascends. The despiser of the *dhmma* wanes.

We understand this as the first cause of his decline. Tell us the second, O Blessed One. What is the cause of decline?⁴⁷⁾

The ruthless are kin to him. He despises the worthy; he approves of the teachings of the bad tempered.

The declining include the man who is fond of sleep and the slothful, who is lazy and easy to anger. Whoever is well-to-do and does not support his parents who are old, and past their prime.

47) This verse is repeated after each stanza. Though it adds to the cadence of the chanted during the ritual, I have omitted it here for the sake of brevity.

Whoever deceives a Brahmin or recluse.

Whoever is wealthy, who has much gold, and who has an abundance of food, but enjoys it all by himself.

Whoever is proud of his lineage, of his wealth, and yet despises his relations.

Whoever is addicted to women, alcohol, gambling, and loses his wages because of these vices.

Whoever is not satisfied with only his own wife and seeks others.

Whoever becomes old and yet takes as his wife a girl in her teens.

Whoever delegates authority to a woman given to drink and squandering, or a man of the same sort.

Whoever has few possessions but colossal greed, is born of the *ksatriya* [warrior] lineage birth and aspires selfishly to royalty.

Fully realizing these (twelve) causes of decline in the world, the wise, with *aryan* [worthy or noble] insight, realizes the security of *nibbana*.⁴⁸⁾

The *Parabhava Sutta* is obviously an explanation of how *pretas* become *pretas*. It is a ritual chant that is shorthand for the content of *karma* stories of the *Petavatthu* that illustrate how immoral actions result in a suffering rebirth and how the fruit of meritorious actions, or moral actions, can benefit those who have made mistakes in the past. It is clearly an attempt explain why it is necessary to rehabilitate one's ancestors, to return them to a moral status that symbolizes the continued healthy well being of the family. We asked many laity how they knew whether or not their ancestors had become *pretas* owing to their past actions. Again, some indicated that they knew this through dreams while others said they knew because their relatives were known to have done bad things during the Khmer Rouge period. Others said they simply did not know. The latter were performing *bay ben* just in case their familial ancestors needed them. In this instance, *pchum ben* functions as insurance.

When the *Parabhava Sutta* was concluded, *tumnouy prèt*, or "the moan of the *preta*," was heard dramatically over the microphone in Khmer. It was a heart rendering moaning cry for help and added significantly to the rather the somber ambience of the occasion.

Following the rite, we asked people why they came for *bay ben* at Wat Langka. It was clear that people prioritize some pagodas because of where the relics of their deceased relatives have been deposited or where they were cremated. Some will go to the temple nearest the site where their departed one died, especially if the death was accidental or violent. Others prefer to go where their departed kin preferred to go while they were still living. Living relatives might remember also which sect, Mahanikay or Thammayut, that the deceased preferred when he or she was alive. This sense of honoring the preferences of the dead sometimes carried over to what was included on the "*pinda* plate." Often favorite sweets and fruits were added to the *pinda*.

As we were preparing to leave, one elderly woman reminded us that Cambodian

48) My translation.

people not only bring food to the pagoda for their deceased relatives, but they also bring food, money, or clothes to their living parents or relatives at home. They are well aware that much of the money they give to parents will be used to prepare food for the monks at the pagoda during this season. Food for the monks translates into merit for the family. Therefore, *pchum ben* should be seen as a cycle of family caring: from the children to their living parents and relatives and then to their deceased grandparents and other deceased relatives. These transactions signal a three-fold type of relationality: the living venerate the dead in return for their blessing through support of the *sangha*. In this way, the living, the dead and the *sangha* are entwined. Elsewhere (Holt 1981, 20–21), I have argued that in the transformation of ancient *brahmanical* ancestor rites, it is the Buddhist *sangha* that replaced the ancestors and the *brahmanical* family as the primary social entity of importance in connection with actions performed on behalf of the dead. That is, the *pindas* of *brahmanical* funeral rites, or balls of rice constituting symbolic bodies made for transitions of the dead from this world to the worlds beyond,⁴⁹ became the food given to Buddhist monks. The monks, in turn, on their rounds of *pindapata* every morning, came to represent the new morally virtuous presence that was “dead to the world,” a presence worthy of entering into a mutually beneficial or reciprocal relation.⁵⁰

Consoling the *Pretas* at Wat Sampov Meas

On the third morning of *pchum ben* amidst a drizzle following several hours of thunderous downpour, laity began to arrive at Wat Sampov Meas around 4 a.m., although the *bay ben* rite did not commence until 4:30. Wat Sampov Meas is hardly upscale in comparison to Wat Langka or Wat Unnalom. The smell of rot came from garbage overflowing garbage cans lining one of the lanes leading to the main entrance of the temple. While some of the monks here are quite progressively socially, the temple grounds are much more pedestrian. The ritual service was also decidedly much more informal. There was no

49) For a study of these rites historically, as well as their contemporary observance, see David Knipe (1977).

50) On the efficacy of gifts to the ancestors during *pchum ben* and the intermediary role that is performed by the monks which creates this tri-partite set of relations, Davis (2009, 168–169) notes: “These gifts, furthermore, must be given via a specific ritual of transfer. Merely mourning their loss, mere remembrance—will not help the dead. Nor will giving gifts directly to the dead assist them properly Instead, the dead must be given their gifts by offering them to Buddhist monks ‘at the right time’. And these gifts have the result—the fruit—of benefiting every member of the three-way transaction which creates this gift economy: the monks receive strength from the food they receive and eat, the ghosts receive new bodies and an alleviation of their suffering, and the donors receive blessings from their pleased ancestors and merit from their gifts to the monks.”

grand entry by 100 monks, no traditional orchestra, and no appointed lay patrons for the rite. Indeed, when the laity were summoned to begin the rite, we all assembled in a courtyard opposite the sermon hall while a single monk took up a microphone on the steps to the hall and began to chant first the *Namassakar* and then the *Parabhava Sutta*. This was the one venue where we did not hear the *Tirokudda Sutta* recited. Following the chant, the monk launched into what seemed to be an impromptu sermon, the first part of which was about the proper and improper ways in which to toss the *pinda*. He stressed that *pindas* should not be thrown at someone else's head, or fired around in fun. It was improper to throw *pindas* on to the cement walkways and courtyards as well. Instead, *pindas* should be gently deposited where there is dirt or ground in which bushes grow. In that way, *pretas* can get to them. By not following this method, people could find themselves reborn as *pretas*! This drew some muffled laughter from some of those in attendance.

The monk then proceeded to tell a story. Once a monk in Sri Lanka was traveling to his temple when he heard the sound of two *preta* children calling him. He asked of their identity and they replied that they were *preta* children and that their mother had gone to the temple in search of food but had not returned. They pleaded with the monk to tell their mother to please return quickly. The monk responded by saying that he could not do this because he did not have the ability to see *pretas*. The *preta* children gave him a black magic root. When he reached the temple, he saw several *pretas* and one of them was the children's mother. He approached her and told her how her children were in her need. Surprised, the mother *preta* wanted to know how she could be seen by the monk. When told, she grabbed the black magic root from the monk and disappeared. Henceforth, *pretas* cannot be seen by human beings. Ironically, just as the monk finished his story, a power cut occurred and the premises were pitched into darkness. A few flashlights eventually broke the darkness and the monk announced that it was now time for *bay ben*.

An elaborate display of the Buddha meditating peacefully above a row 10 *pretas* dominated the courtyard where the monk had chanted and preached. Below the depictions of each suffering *preta*, a summary of their actions that led to their sorry rebirths was written in Khmer (see Photos 6a and 6b). I was able to identify about half of these portrayals with stories in the *Petavatthu*. Not seen in the photo, but present during the early morning festivities, were canisters set up to receive monetary donations.

As we circumambulated the sermon hall three times in the dark, most of the people followed the advice of the monk by depositing their *pindas* gently in the bushes and not on the cement walkways.

It was at Wat Sampov Meas that we were able to chat with many laity with the great-



a



b

Photo 6 *Pretas*

est ease. We met some people who said that they came to Wat Sampov Meas because here *bay ben* was celebrated without a lot of restrictions. One young man said he came because his *wat* did not allow the practice. Here, we also met a 63 year old woman intent on performing *bay ben* at as many *wats* as possible during *kan ben* because it made her happy to know that she could be of help to her deceased kin in this modest way. We met an especially candid 72 year old woman who admitted that she couldn't be sure that her merit transfers would actually benefit her deceased relatives. She said, it all depended upon whether they had developed morally wholesome dispositions, which is the doctrinally correct position, as we have seen, articulated by scholars Gombrich and Malasekera. She mentioned that she had celebrated *pchum ben* religiously after she encountered many ghosts while hiking in the mountains following the Pol Pot era. She had also dreamed about some of her dead relations who had appeared to her with swollen bodies. She says that they have not reappeared since she dedicated merit to them. She said she lost a lot of relatives during the Pol Pot regime. She didn't tell us how or why, but she mentioned that her two children were also dead. She had a lot of motivation for assisting the dead. We also met a middle-aged man who broke down and sobbed uncontrollably when we asked why he came to perform *bay ben*. He stammered that his father had fallen out of a palm tree during the Pol Pot years and had died as a result of his fall. We gathered that he had witnessed this unfortunate event. He said that he had a lot of relatives, including brothers and sisters, who had died during the time of Pol Pot as well. While he is a person of not many resources, during every *pchum ben* season, he performs *bay ben* and merit transfer for the deceased members of his nuclear family. He says he feels closer

to them during this time, although he knows that his life will never be the same without them.

We left Wat Sampov Meas somewhat sobered by our encounters with people who clearly were emotionally affected during the *bay ben* rite. It was clear to us that one of the functions of this rite, at least for many Buddhist laity, is that it provides emotional compensation for the experiences of great family losses that they have endured.

Boran and Samay at Wat Unnalom

On the sixth morning of *kan ben*, we attended the *bay ben* rite at Wat Unnalom which, as I mentioned earlier, is regarded as the leading *wat* or headquarters of the Mahanikay sect. Just opposite the front entrance of the *wat*, in a small garden plot of its own, stands a sculpture of Yama, king of the dead (see Photo 7). In many years of visiting Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka and throughout Southeast Asia, I had never before seen a sculpture of Yama, and certainly not one that was alive in cultic terms. I had to remind myself that *pchum ben* is perhaps the most important ritual time of the year religiously in Cambodia and that Wat Unnalom is arguably one of the most sanctified spaces in the country. Given the important role played by Yama in the mythology of *pchum ben*, and the specter of death that has haunted Cambodia during its recent history, it is not so surprising that we should find Yama's likeness prominently displayed. Sometimes it seems that Buddhism has made a pact with death to insure its popularity. Davis (2009, 132) puts the matter this way:

In the historic spread of Buddhism, it has been in the care of the dead that Buddhism most successfully established itself, and death continues to be a major part of the *sangha's* economic and social reproduction, via temple's income generating funeral rituals, and the donations they receive on behalf of the dead.⁵¹⁾

The laity at the crowded image hall at Wat Unnalom were an extremely interesting

51) On the further significance of death for the function of Buddhism among the laity, Davis argues (2009, 114) “. . . we can see a Buddhist insistence on the control of death as the ongoing reproduction of morally authorized power and value for the living. It is the ancestors who, properly controlled and approached (both, via the agency or technique of Buddhist monks), are the source of worldly blessings, such as ‘health and happiness, wealth, and status’. . . . [D]uring the largest communal celebration for the dead, Bhjum Pinda [*pchum ben*], gifts are given to the dead twice—once directly by the family, and without monks as mediators, and again via the monks. Although monks insist that the former offerings are not efficient . . . , direct offerings are at least as popular during this period as indirect offerings, and laypeople seem to have no doubts about their efficacy.”



Photo 7 Yama

mix. As at Wat Langka, many monks were ceremoniously present, the liturgy was long and full (including all the texts that had been chanted at Wat Langka), *pin peat* complemented the chanting, and the general decorum inspired a palpable ambience of “high church” symbol and rite. Yet, though many of the laity were well heeled indeed, many were clearly drawn from the commercial and entertainment districts of Phnom Penh located just to the north of the temple. I recognized a couple of “tuk tuk” drivers who had harassed me for rides on a daily basis during my stay, as well as some waitresses from the neighborhood restaurants. And it was clear from the skimpy outfits that drew stares from many others present, that some of the young women in attendance had just finished their night shifts as hostesses in some of the local nightclubs. These denizens of the Phnom Penh’s business and tourist culture mixed in with families of obvious upper class backgrounds and reminded us that participation in *pchum ben* canvasses from all classes of people in Cambodia. In a few days, most of these people would temporarily shed their “urbanity” when they return to their native villages and *wats*.

From talking to many of the laity present, it was clear that Wat Unnalom attracted a lot of people who could not otherwise make it to their home temples. In that sense, it was both everyone’s and yet no one’s “home temple.” One young man said he had come to Wat Unnalom because people in his family take turns going to the temples so that every night at least one family member transfers merit at a temple on behalf of the family ancestors. When asked why he came to this temple rather than others, his answer was that some temples were *boran* (traditional) and others *samay* (modern), so the former would provide *bay ben* while the latter might not.

In fact, this middle-aged layman had identified a critically important marker delineating different emphases within monastic Buddhism and lay practice in Cambodia during the twentieth century. The Japanese anthropologist Satoru Kobayashi spent a year and a half conducting field work focusing upon two rural temples in Kompong Say district

located east of Tonle Sap Lake noting how these two temples were sites of “conflicts and compromises in local people’s lives” (2005, 493). More specifically, Kobayashi was concerned with understanding Buddhist practices as these were interpreted as either *samay* (modern) or *boran* (traditional—from the Sanskrit *purana* meaning “of old”). One of the best illustrations of the tension between *boran* and *samay* centers on the question of whether or not to provide one’s deceased kin with rice directly (*ibid.*, 499–502). With reference to *bay ben*, Kobayashi quotes one of the local *achars* as saying:

If one wants to transfer merit to the dead, rice should be offered to a monk as a source of merit. In the Buddha’s sacred words in the *Tripitaka*, we could not find any explanations about *bah baybin*. Such practice is really meaningless, because merit must be transferred through Buddhist monks. Dogs eating rice on the field can’t help anything. (*ibid.*, 501)

Kobayashi goes on to describe other minor differences and ends this section of his article by noting how *samay* and *boran* become differences in attitudes, chiefly between those who stress an understanding of the absolute consequences of *karma* from a more rational perspective. His article concludes by showing how the periods of the civil war, the Khmer Rouge regime and the Vietnamese intervention all disrupted the ways in which younger monks came to understand the practice of the monastic vocation insofar as the more *boran* oriented practices had become somewhat *otiose*. As a result, the previous legacy of these *boran* practices learned through observation had been interrupted in favor of a more doctrinally oriented religion. I think that in this Kobayashi is largely correct, insofar as reconstruction was abetted by conceptions of religion that ultimately informed modern nation state understandings that, in turn, were derived somewhat from westernized understandings of religion.⁵²⁾ Both Penny Edwards (2007) and especially Anne

52) In the introduction to their volume on crises of authority in East and Southeast Asia, Keyes, Kendall and Hardacre (Hardacre *et al.* 1994: 4–5) have detailed the matter this way: “In pursuit of ‘progress’ free from primordial attachments (which is what most experts believed was inhibiting the modernization of Asian nation-states), the rulers of the modern states in East and Southeast Asia all have instituted policies toward religious institutions. These policies have been predicated on the adoption of official definitions of ‘religion’, definitions that again have tended to be derived from the West. Indeed, in most Asian cultures prior to the modern period, there was no indigenous terminology corresponding to ideas of ‘religion’ held by Christians or Jews [and I would add Islam]. Complex dispositions about the nature of religion—the primacy of texts; creeds pledging exclusive allegiance to a single deity, all originating in the theologically unadorned varieties of Protestantism—were brought to Asia by missionaries in the nineteenth century. When these predispositions came to inform official discourse on religion, they were often used to devalue other aspects of religious life such as festival, ritual and communal observances—precisely those aspects that were at the heart of popular religious life in East and Southeast Asia. And as Western notions about religion were incorporated into law and custom, they also came to exercise a great influence on popular religious life in Asia as well . . .” The introduction of modernization, albeit at different times for different Asian states, always accompanied an attack on traditional rites as superstitious.



Photo 8 Chuon Nath

Hansen (2007) have thoroughly sketched out how French conceptions of religion and the reform of Buddhism in the first half of the twentieth century were characterized by an emphasis on rationalism and criticisms of superstition.

Harris (2005, 221–224) provides an effective overview of *boran*-oriented monks and their re-established presence in the 1990s. He notes moments of conflict with *samay* oriented monks over the practice of *parivasa*—the *boran* performing various types of ascetic practices aimed at generating magical power, rather than simply practicing the rite as a form of penitence for wrong doings. More specifically, he telescopes the discussion of *boran* and *samay* rightly on the figure who was perhaps the leading reform-minded monk of the twentieth century, Ven. Chuon Nath (see Photo 8) who

[i]n 1944, . . . became chief monk of Wat Unnalom . . . [I]t is clear that Chuon Nath's views held sway for some time before his official elevation [to *sanghareach* or *sangharaja*] was confirmed. Controversy had, for example, blown up over the use of the *Tirokudda Sutta* as a protective chant [*paritta*] during the ceremony of merit making for dead ancestors [*pchum ben*] in September—modernizers were attempting to rewrite the text to eliminate its non-Buddhist elements. The suppression of the traditional New Year festivities by a royal decree of July 17, 1944, also appears to be related to the dispute over the presence of extraneous and superstitious features in popular ritual. (*ibid.*, 121; brackets mine)

What *boran* and *samay* mean, therefore, in relation to *pchum ben* is a matter of emphasis. The more *boran* oriented disposition focuses upon efficacy of *bay ben* and the provisions of *pinda* for the ancestors while the more *samay*-oriented disposition focuses efficacy on the merit made by providing gifts for the monks and the consequent merit that can be transferred to the dead. Keeping in mind the deep *brahmanical* roots of the *pinda* as symbolic of the corporeal form of the departed in the time of their transition from this world to the next, the *boran* disposition is definitely *brahmanist* in orientation. Its relative popularity in the post-Khmer Rouge period also signals the attempt on the

part of many Khmer to reconnect to the traditions of the past.

Kobayashi's comment about the *samay* orientation of most monks since the 1990s period of re-establishing the *sangha* is accurate and very significant, at least corresponding to my own limited experiences. I interviewed several monks outside the context of *pchum ben* rites and every one of them could have been categorized comfortably as *samay* in disposition and orientation. While this should not be so surprising, given the fact that all of these interviews took place in Phnom Penh or its suburbs with monks who were comparatively young (in their 20s or early 30s), it did drive home a position that has become increasingly popular within the *sangha* as well: that *pchum ben* is more of a Khmer national custom reflecting Khmer identity than it is a Buddhist ritual. I heard this point of view articulated in a few of the sermons as well. It struck me as quite odd that monks would take this position when they continued to ritually envelope *bay ben* rites with unabashedly Buddhist substance, i.e., chanting the moral precepts, the invocations to the *tri-ratna*, the *Tirokudda Sutta*, the *Parabhava Sutta*, etc. It may be that it has now become quite well known that *pchum ben* is a rite that is unique to Cambodia within the Theravada Buddhist world, so its "Khmerness" must be understood as its *raison d'être* rather than the Buddhistic teachings embodied within the ancient *Petavatthu* source. It also occurred to me that this assertion was simply inconceivable in pre-independence or perhaps pre-colonial Cambodia insofar as the separation between religion and ethnic identity was impossible to conceptualize then. The traditional, or *boran* worldview was simply more integrated. There was no distinction, as it were, between the sacred and secular, between religion and custom. To be Khmer *was* to be Buddhist in an integrated socio-cosmos. With the introduction of modern conceptions of the "nation" and "religion," sacred and secular, especially as these had been demarcated by the colonial French and imbibed by the educated elite, such a division was now possible. On the other hand, the consistent description of *pchum ben* as a national custom adds a dimension of discourse about the rite that transcends the focus on the family per se, one that embraces the nation as a whole. Consistently, older people informed us about how the popularity of *pchum ben* had soared since its re-institution following the Khmer Rouge. It may well be that while its rising popularity is primarily about the recovery of the family, it also includes the sense of a nation reasserting itself too.

Ang Duang and Nationalist Sentiments of *Pchum Ben*

On several occasions, at least three of them during monastic sermons (one of these being at Wat Unnalom), but also in newspaper and magazine articles, I heard how King Ang

Duang (r. 1848–60) was responsible for the establishment of *pchum ben*, that his own practice of the rite had become paradigmatic for Khmer Buddhists today.⁵³ It is said that he condensed the period of venerating ancestors, which previously had been coextensive with the three month rain-retreat season for monks to just 15 days, in effect intensifying the practice. Ang Duang does provide a good fit for explaining the origins of *pchum ben*, especially its identification as a national Khmer custom, for he is widely regarded as a symbol of the regeneration of Khmer national culture. It is worth providing a brief resume of his significance, drawn from a variety of scholarly commentators, in order to see how this figure's association with *pchum ben* aggrandizes the rite in the eyes of many Khmer people, both traditional and modern.

Ang Duang's reign lasted for only 12 years, from 1848–60. He had been groomed in Bangkok by the Thai court for the Khmer throne. In the face of a growing Thai military threat in 1847, the Vietnamese had tactfully returned the Khmer royal regalia that they had hijacked earlier in the century and then released several members of the Khmer royal family before withdrawing their forces from Cambodia. Harris (2005, 46) describes the political and historical context on the advent of Ang Duang's ascension to the throne in this way:

From the Thai perspective, Vietnamese political control of Cambodia meant that Buddhism was without a royal sponsor. But the crowning of a new king was problematic because the royal regalia had been taken off to Saigon in 1812 and was not returned until the end of 1847. Ang Duang's coronation finally took place in Udong on April 8, 1848. When Duang returned to Udong from Bangkok, he found a culture on the brink of extinction. As a contemporary chronicler, Ta Mas, noted "[The novices] and priests suffered because the *viharas* had been plundered. The gold and silver buddhas had been taken from them and the soldiers had set fire to many *viharas*. In many places the *wats* that remained often did not have roofs. The roofs had sunken down and broken apart and the rain came down on the monks. Those who remained in robes were largely ignorant of the Buddha's teachings, and very few sacred writings remained intact." Ta Mas could easily have been describing the situation immediately after the Pol Pot period. Duang refurbished the royal funerary monuments and reinvigorated surrounding monasteries. By recasting Buddha images, encouraging the people to pay respect to the monks once again, and ordering a census of monks and *wats*.

The amelioration of these conditions made Ang Duang something of a national savior, at least in the manner in which history has been remembered in Cambodia. His association with *pchum ben* makes the revival of the ritual also, part and parcel, a piece of national cultural regeneration, especially when Ang Duang is identified with other Buddhist kings

53) Davis (2009, 169) says: "King Ang Duang . . . is supposed to have refounded the festival, by shortening the period of its celebration."

of a paradigmatic nature who are remembered historically as being responsible for moral regeneration:

[the] chronicles tell us that Duang indefatigably encouraged the Buddhist virtues. He forbade his ministers to consume alcohol; toured the country, discouraging drinking and opium smoking; condemned hunting and the ill treatment of animals; and laid down guidelines on the proper size for fishing nets. He personally prepared food for monks, taught them liturgical chanting, and urged them to provide accommodations for the homeless. Acting on a model already established by Asoka and Jayavarman VII, Duang had rest houses built along the principal roads of the kingdom. (Harris 2005, 47)

Complementing this perspective, Chandler (2008, 162–164) adds to the more general social and political significance of Duang’s royal profile in this way:

. . . Duang reenacted the restoration of Thai-sponsored kingship that had been eclipsed for so many years. It would be a mistake to mistake these ceremonial actions as mere protocol because Duang, like most Southeast Asian rulers at the time, did not disentangle what we would call the religious and political strands of his thinking, duties and behavior. Kingly behavior . . . was thought to have political results, and political actions were thought to enhance or diminish a monarch’s fund of merit. Many of these ceremonies had to do with restoration of Theravada Buddhism The chronicles of his reign emphasize its restorative aspects. A wide range of institutions and relationships was involved. The chronicle points to linguistic reforms, public works, sumptuary laws and new sets of royal titles Chroniclers of the 1880s and 1930s, looking back to those few years of Cambodian independence prior to French control, seem to have considered Duang’s reign to be a kind of golden age.

More than half of the chronicle passages dealing with Ang Duang describe the ritual dimension of his reign. Chandler argues that he set into motion a kind of “narrative performance.” Ledgerwood (2008b, 198) specifies the content of this “narrative performance”:

We can see Ang Duang desperately trying to orchestrate a set of relationships with Hindu deities, local spirits, the Buddhist *sangha* and, of course, ancestors. In other words, he was trying to reset the order of the cosmos. This is seen not only in the ritual procedures that he enacted, but in his attempts to recast linguistic etiquette and to rename the titles of people and places.

While it is clear that Ang Duang is now seen in retrospect as a powerful king fulfilling the traditional model of Buddhist kingship, it also needs to be pointed out that “he also acted as a patron of the Thommayut sect . . .” (Osborne 2008, 52). His years in Bangkok with the prince who eventually became Thailand’s “Westernizing” and “modernizing” symbol, the king (Mongkut) who established the reform-minded, disciplinary-conscious, doctrinally-focused, and academically competent *Thammayut Nikaya*,

made him more than simply a “past-conscious” king. In Ang Duang we can see the intriguing figure of a culture hero who was simultaneously also regarded as modernizer. A perfect example of this combination is illustrated by the fact that he imported a coin-minting machine from Birmingham, England, and proceeded to mint coins with the stylized façade of Angkor Wat (*ibid.*). He therefore appealed to Buddhists, lay and monastic, of both the *boran* and *samay* dispositions. He was, and *is*, the perfect historical figure of the Khmer past to associate with the championing of *pchum ben*.

The Thammayut Disposition at Wat Svay Por Pe

Having observed the rites of *bay ben* at three of Phnom Pehn’s largest and well-known pagodas, all of them belonging to the Mahanikay order, we arrived at the closed gates of Wat Svay Por Pe, a Thammayut Nikay pagoda, at a very dark and quiet 3:45 a.m. in the early morning hours of the eighth night of *pchum ben*. Since its founding by King Mongkut in Bangkok in the mid-nineteenth century, the Thammayut nikay has embodied what is now meant by *samay*: it claims to represent the reformed, enlightened, rational, modern, educated, disciplinary conscious, and doctrinally oriented sect of Theravada monasticism. While this self-image is generally accurate, it should not be forgotten that most of the monks of the Mahanikay, as Kobayashi indicated earlier, also could be categorized as *samay*. Historically, however, it has been the Thammayut who have been identified as such. The Thammayut has also been associated, of course, with Thai Buddhism and Thai national interests owing to the origins of its impetus within mid-nineteenth century Thai royalty. For this reason, at various times in the twentieth century, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s with the French colonialists and continuing with the Cambodian and Lao communists of the 1960s through 1980s, those politicians who have worried about the power of Bangkok becoming an encroachment in Cambodia and Laos have cast an especially jaundiced eye on the Thammayut, primarily out of concern that these monks could be used by the Thai to extend their spheres of political influence. Following the departure of the Vietnamese and the holding of U.N. sponsored elections in the early 1990s, the Thammayut had been allowed to return to Cambodia. Indeed, in many quarters, they were encouraged.

I wouldn’t say that I was delighted that early morning to discover that the temple was shut up tight with no signs of life, especially given the effort required to be prepared for field work at 2:30 in the morning, but I was not surprised and actually a little delighted to find that this pagoda did not observe *bay ben*. We found our way to a 24 hour coffee shop located in a nearby hotel and wiled away the time until twilight when we returned

to the temple and found some stirrings afoot. The first lay people that we came across told us that this pagoda does not allow its people to perform *bah baay ben* because it is Thammayut, an answer that we expected precisely. When we subsequently put this matter to the *achar* who had shown up for the regular early morning chanting of *suttas*, he became a little defensive and asserted that it was really not the decision of the pagoda to do the ritual or not. Rather, he argued that it depended on whether or not the laity wanted to hold the ritual. Betraying his *samay* disposition, he asserted that Wat Svay Por Pe's laity simply found no need to perform this rite. I suspected that the *achar* was being a bit disingenuous. My suspicions were deemed correct when, after a rather unsuccessful attempt to interview an elderly woman who was preoccupied with cooking the monks' breakfasts in the refectory, we encountered a well-spoken layman who was an ex-monk at this *wat*. He told us that when he was in the monkhood that he and the other monks of the *wat* had agreed to hold *bah baay ben* and provided for the ritual from 1998 until 2002 when they stopped. The reason they had decided to "allow" *bay ben* back then was that they wanted the people to have a ritual in which to express their "solidarity" at the pagoda. Unfortunately, he said, not many people showed up for the ritual because everybody knew that this is a Thammayut pagoda and they simply did not expect *bay ben* to be held there. He went on to add that one of the other reasons that this pagoda no longer allows people to perform *baay ben* is that some youths used this ritual as a time and place where they could be involved in some "love related" activities.

The ex-monk now turned layman seemed to have a lot of opinions about different types of *pretas* and which types could really be helped by *bay ben*. He insisted that *pretas* could receive merit only from living relatives via monks. He said that *bay ben* could physically benefit only those beings who had been reborn as animals. He did not seem to be aware of the philosophically more nuanced view that it is actually only the *vinmana* (consciousness) on whose behalf merit can be transferred. In writing specifically about this very point, Davis (2009, 141–142) says that

[m]erit is never made on behalf of the *bralin* or *khmoc*, but only on behalf of the Buddhist *vinmana*, that which travels through death and takes rebirth. The Abhidhammic perspective that prevails during the funeral rites emphasizes that all conditioned and compounded things . . . must decay and break up again. The *vinmana* will take rebirth as a result of its karma, which can be positively affected by the making of merit. But the *vinmana* is not the whole of the self. The amoral vital spirits must also be channeled and dealt with. Indeed, while death provides an opportunity for merit-making and an improved rebirth in the figure of the *vinmana*, it represents a danger in the release of other vital spirits.

This metaphysical discussion begins to indicate why it is the case that the *pretas* are regarded ambivalently, as figures in need of compassion and generosity on the one hand,

but also figures to be feared for their potential threats on the other if their calls for help are not heeded. Merit transfer is thus not only an attempt to turn *pretas* into proper ancestors and exemplary moral standards, it is also a way to control the potential negative fall out of the disintegration of the dead, that is, when the *vinmana* separates from the rest of the psycho-physical compounded being.

Fortunately, enough laity came to the pagoda that early morning as a matter of course that we were able to garner other opinions about why the non-performance of *bay ben* was not problematic. According to a lay woman, who was about 45 years old and had come to Phnom Penh from Prey Veng province, she had bought some clothes and given some money to her parents at the beginning of *kan ben*. She had gone home in order to make these gifts to her parents and to meet her relatives, but she had not gone to the pagoda in her village. She said that as long as her parents are still alive, they will go to pagoda, make merit and assist the dead family relations; she just offers them some money now to help them make merit but does not feel obligated to go to the pagoda herself. Asked if she was afraid of being cursed by deceased relatives, *pretas* who might be expecting her to transfer merit at the pagoda, she replied that her parents had taken care of the matter by dedicating merit to them already; so her deceased relations would not curse her. When her parents died, then she would assume responsibility. Her comments were very interesting in that they underscored how the making of merit for deceased relations is primarily a family affair. In the same way that some families attempt to send a family member every night during *kan ben* to perform *bay ben*, other families delegate the responsibility to perhaps only the parents. In either case, the process of assisting dead kin remains a collective effort. This woman also reflected a view that we often heard: a confession of agnosticism in relation to whether or not *bay ben* or merit transfer actually directly affects their deceased kin. This agnosticism, however, does not lead to a decision not to perform the rites. The rites are performed anyway. For they foster a degree of moral consciousness.

Finally, we interviewed an elderly woman, one of the assistant cooks in the refectory who added another important perspective. She said that she felt that the question of whether or not that merit reached deceased relatives depends on the moral conditions of the monks at the *wat*. She said that she strongly believed in the moral goodness of the monks at Wat Svay Por Pe and she felt confident that she could transfer merit to her deceased relatives because the monks are so well disciplined. That is, she believed that these monks were most worthy objects of good intentions. What was so significant about her remark was that though the monks of the Thammayut nikay are generally not enthusiastic about rites such as *pchum ben*, their moral integrity, owing to their commitment to the monastic discipline of the *Vinaya*, establishes them as very efficacious objects of

support. They are, ironically, the best catalysts for the power of merit transfer, despite the fact that many are skeptical of the practice and don't necessarily encourage it among their supporters.

Memorializing the Dead at Wat Kokos

Forty kilometers southwest of Phnom Penh, Wat Kokos was an interrogation center and prison where the bones of approximately 8,000 Cambodians were discovered after the Khmer Rouge had been dislodged. We arrived a little after 3 a.m. on the eleventh day of *pchum ben* to a completely empty and darkened temple, except for a solitary man standing in front of what is normally the refectory for the 14 monks of residence. He told us that he would be the patron for the morning rite and that villagers would begin to arrive around 4 a.m. Our arrival had awakened his wife and two old women who were sleeping under mosquito netted tents on the floor. One of the old women came to peer at us out of curiosity. We gradually found a verandah away from the others who had been sleeping and the old woman joined us and the chief lay patron for a chat. She told us that she had come to Wat Kokos for seven nights and so it seemed that the practice of visiting pagodas seven times has been concentrated here at this one place. We soon learned why: her husband and one of her sons were murdered here, her husband, she said, for simply complaining that he was hungry, interpreted as a sign of resistance to the *angkar*. The merit she earns each year for her annual pilgrimage to Wat Kokos she hopes will alleviate the suffering of her husband and son in the other world, though she is not sure about their rebirth destinies. Soon she was interrupted by the boisterous *achar* who seemed to crave attention, and yet at the same time offered us only evasive answers to our questions except one: he agreed that the social disaster inflicted by the Pol Pot regime has definitely had an effect on the rising popularity of *pchum ben*.

At 5 a.m., rather than 4 a.m., some villagers arrived, perhaps 40 to 50, who joined the other 20 or so others who had been sleeping and who were now moving about. Incense was lit and about 75–80 people moved over to the *vihara* and began to circumambulate the building in proper clockwise *pradaksina* fashion. This group of laity was a younger set than usual, and, of course, entirely rural. During their circumambulation, they stopped at the spirit shrines located at the four points (NE, SE, SW, and NW) on the platform where they briefly sat in quiet meditation, remembering the names of those to whom they offered *pindas* (see Photo 9). Their *pinda* plates were almost entirely rice balls, though some had wrapped candy. None had the white paper spirit effigies we had come to see at each *wat* in Phnom Penh. Moreover, there were no receptacles that had



Photo 9 To Spirits



Photo 10 Wat Kokos Votive Stupas

been put into place to receive the *pinda*. Instead, they were gently placed at either the base of the six spirit shrines lining the platform, or tossed over the three feet high decorative railing surrounding the *vihara*'s platform. Following the three circumambulations, the liturgical service began inside the sermon hall, a service that lasted roughly half an hour and included the chanting of the *Namassaka*, the *Namotassa*, the *pancasila* (five moral precepts), the *Parabhava Sutta*, the *Tirokudda Sutta* and the *anumodana*. What was done differently at this temple was that the *bay ben pradakshina* was performed first, and the liturgical chanting followed.

Following the monks' liturgical chanting, we met with one of the *wat*'s lay patrons who was instrumental in re-establishing the *wat* back in 1981, about a year and a half after the Vietnamese had chased the Khmer Rouge to the northwest. He told us that over the years, many people had come to the *wat* knowing that their relatives had been taken here and that this was the last place in which they had breathed. He spoke of the practice of grabbing a handful of dirt from the temple grounds to become a surrogate for their relations' ash to be interred into a family *stupa*. Indeed, an inordinate number of votive *stupas* seem to have built on the temple's premises, many, we learned, by Khmer-American refugees returning to memorialize their dead (see Photo 10). This pattern was rather spectacularly illustrated by a *stupa* erected by a surviving wife who had built a shrine containing hundreds of skulls placed within a glass enclosed room (see Photo 11). The room measured about five meters by five meters and the pile of skulls was about four to five feet in height, the legacy of 3 years, 8 months and 20 days.

We learned that the temple would be thronged on the final day of *pchum ben* as hundreds would make their ways from Phnom Penh to this shrine in order to express their care and affection for the dead. We also learned about the cultic activities of a Sino-Khmer lay woman whose father had been killed at this center. She also built a *stupa* filled with bones of those exhumed for commemoration. She not only transferred merit during *pchum ben*, but she also performed the *cheng meng* Chinese rite as well.



Photo 11 Skulls

Chinese Influence on *Pchum Ben*?

There are some *samay* oriented intellectuals in Phnom Penh who argue that the practice of *pchum ben* owes its origins to Chinese influence and that this explains why the rite is not found in any other Theravada country. It is worth exploring briefly this possibility if, for nothing else, we can arrive at a comparative understanding of ancestor rites on the one hand, and concomitantly an understanding about what is unique about Khmer ritual practice. In what follows, it is undeniable that, in general, the medieval Chinese ghost festival functioned somewhat analogously to *pchum ben*. It was likely the most important festival for Chinese Buddhists during the liturgical year. Moreover, it was through proving its relevance to the family that Buddhism was able to gain a foothold in China. This was not altogether easily done, since the story of the Gotama Buddha's quest for enlightenment included his renunciation of family and society. Another Buddhistic logic had to be invented or introduced in the Chinese context, and it is this logic that bears a fundamental similarity to the logic of *pchum ben*.

The Chinese ghost festival was held on the 15th day of the seventh month in medieval China (Teiser 1996, xii). Teiser begins his masterful study of the medieval ghost festival in China by introducing the Buddhist religious logic of this rite in this way:

Offerings to monks were especially efficacious on the full moon of the seventh month, since this was the day when the Sangha ended its three-month summer retreat. During this period monks abstained from contact with lay society and pursued an intensified regimen of meditation completed with monastic ritual [that] Ennin refers to as "releasing themselves," confession and repentance of their transgressions in front of other monks. Having accumulated ascetic energy in retreat, monks released it in communion with householders. Moreover, the festival was held just at the time of the autumn harvest. Thus, the ghost festival not only marked the symbolic passage of monks and ancestors to new forms of existence, it also ushered in the completion of a cycle of plant

life. Coming at the juncture of the full moon, the new season, the fall harvest, the peak of monastic asceticism, the rebirth of ancestors, and the assembly of the local community, the ghost festival was celebrated on a broad scale by all classes of people throughout medieval Chinese society. (*ibid.*, 4)

While the timing of *pchum ben* in Cambodia is not literally at the same time as the performance of the “ghost festival” in medieval China, it does come within 15 days of the end of *vassa*, the rain retreat season celebrated by Theravada monks. The power of the *sangha*, or better, the purity of the *sangha* reaches its apogee at the conclusion of the rain-retreat. That is precisely why the monks are regarded as such efficient conduits for merit transfer during *pchum ben*: their conditions of purity render the charitable acts of which they function as objects all the more efficacious.⁵⁴ If, for a moment, we shift this discussion from time to space, we gain insights into how the pagoda has become an intensified pure space during the *vassa* rain retreat season, owing to the monks’ ascetic religious pursuits and, as such, becoming the most auspicious venue for interactions between the living and the dead.⁵⁵ The monastery is precisely the place where the dead, who in the form of *pretas*, represent a suffering yet potentially dangerous presence for the living, may be safely encountered. The *pretas*, condemned as they are to suffering in the abode of *pretaloka*, or in hell as a result of their immoral behavior while among the living, are here offered a chance for rehabilitation in the space that has been morally sanctified/purified. They must come to temples to gain some relief from their conditions of suffering. They can search for help in seven different temples, but it is only within temple space that any transformations in their plights may occur. Moreover, the sanctified space of the temple provides the laity with a safe space to interact with the potentially dangerous dead.

Like the medieval ghost festival in China, *pchum ben* occurs temporally amidst a liminality of various conditions, in times of transition. *Bay ben* must be performed in the

54) Teiser points out that in the *Yu-lan-p'en Sutra*, “[t]he Buddha instructs Mu-lien and all other devoted sons to make offerings to the assembly of monks as they emerge from their summer retreat. Rather than sending gifts directly to their ancestors, people should henceforth use the Sangha as a medium: benefits will pass through monks to the inhabitants of the other world. In fact, monks possess the distinctive ability to multiply the blessings that reach the ancestors in hell. Having renounced the bonds of kinship, Buddhist ascetics generated a store of power made even greater over the course of the summer meditation retreat. For the price of a small offering during the ghost festival families may tap that power, directing its benefits to their less fortunate members.”

55) In explaining how the power of monks reached its zenith after the *pavarana* and *kathina* rites, Teiser (1996, 205) explains: “Themes of renewal and regeneration are evident in this culminating ritual” Monks “released themselves: in several ways: they loosened the rules of discipline, they unleashed ascetic energies built up during the retreat, they submitted to criticism from other monks, and through their repentance they let loose the positive forces of purification and renewal.”

early morning hours just before or during the breaking of the day in twilight. *Pchum ben* season is celebrated during the end of the raining season, at the end of *vassa*, just before a new season of planting occurs. *Pretas* almost always make their presence known to their surviving kin, as in the *Petavatthu* stories, in dreams, a condition of consciousness that is neither fully awake nor fully unconscious. *Pretas* are, themselves, constitutive of a form of “betweenness,” waiting and aspiring to be reborn as humans or as *devatas* in the heavens.

What Teiser has described in the Chinese context is also ever so the case among the Khmer in terms of the presence of liminality and how the merit transfer rites of *pchum ben* are thought to affect the dead. He points out that the rituals of the medieval Chinese ghost festival helped

. . . to effect the passage of the dead from the status of a recently deceased threatening ghost to that of a stable, pure and venerated ancestor. Although it is observed on a yearly schedule not synchronized with the death of a single person, the ghost festival marks an important transition in the life of the family, which is composed of members both living and dead. Like mortuary rites performed in many other cultures, the festival subsumes the potentially shattering consequences of the death of individuals under the perpetually regenerating forces of the community and the cosmos. (Teiser 1996, 13–14)

This seems to be precisely the function of *pchum ben* among the Khmer.

Returning to these themes in the conclusion of his study, Teiser further unpacks the significance of liminality as a condition that the recently deceased must negotiate and argues that this liminality serves as the primary reason for why dispositions toward the dead among the living are necessarily ambivalent. What he writes about the medieval Chinese context resonates again vibrantly with the Khmer in this instance as well: how ancestors of the past seven generations can be positively affected by these rites.

The celebration of the seventh moon marks the passage of the dead from the liminal stage, where they are troublesome, threatening, and feared as ghosts, to the stage of incorporation, in which they assume a place of honor within the family. In this liminal phase the dead lack clothes, they have subhuman bodies, they have difficulty eating, they are constantly in motion. Ghosts are a species in transition Ghost festival offerings are frequently dedicated to this dangerously shifting “all sinners in the six paths of rebirth.” But offerings are also made to the dead in the phase of incorporation, after they have joined the group of ancestors stretching back seven generations. As ancestors they have successfully completed the journey from life, through death, to rebirth. They are welcomed back into the family as its immortal progenitors, creators and maintainers of the values necessary to sustain the life of the kinship group.

Far from indicating a confusion of categories or an accident of history, the coupling of apprehension about ghosts with the propitiation of kin represents a necessary ambivalence about the dead. The ghost festival articulates the fear that the dead have not been resettled and might con-

tinue to haunt the community as strangers, at the same time that it expresses the hope that the dead be reincorporated at the head of the family line. (*ibid.*, 220–221)

Finally, what Teiser has to say about the centrality of the ghost festival to the ethos of family religion, and how the centrality of the Buddhist monks' role in the ghost festival made them indispensable to the family-oriented religion of the Chinese, also resounds loudly within the Khmer Buddhist social and religious world too.

While it did mark an important event in the yearly cycle of life for monks, [the ghost festival] was even more firmly anchored in the dominant social institution of China, the family. Its rituals became part of the system of observances that united living and ancestral members of the family, reinforcing their reciprocal obligations and harmonizing the rhythms of family and monastic life with agricultural schedule . . . (*ibid.*, 17)

While the ghost festival articulated the heart of family religion, it also became the means by which Buddhism secured its place within Chinese society.

The spread of the ghost festival in medieval China signals the movement of the Buddhist monkhood into the very heart of family religion, monks were not simply accessories to the continued health of the kinship group; their role was nothing less than essential for the well-being of the family. [How] Buddhism was domesticated in China [is] particularly clear in the ghost festival—through the inclusion of monks as an essential party in the cycle of exchange linking ancestors and descendants. (*ibid.*, 196–197; brackets mine)

It is quite clear from Teiser's considerations that the general social function of the ghost festival and *pchum ben* is that both rites unite the family and the *sangha* as the principal players of these respective (Chinese and Khmer) religious cultures. That is precisely why this particular ritual has become so functionally important in the post-Khmer Rouge era in Cambodia during a time of recovery and rehabilitation. *Pchum ben* functions as a primary means of effecting the recovery and prosperity of the family. It also emphasizes how the *sangha* has become a necessity for a family-dominated Khmer religious culture.

Having been impressed by striking parallels in the respective functions of the Chinese ghost festival and *pchum ben*, it is more than simply interesting to note that during Ang Duang's reign, the very time when *pchum ben* was purportedly established in Khmer culture by this ritually-minded Buddhist king, that “[a]t a rough estimate, it seems we should envisage Phnom Penh's population in the late 1860s as being upwards of half composed of Chinese, with Cambodians at most a quarter of the total and the remainder made up of . . . diverse ethnic groups” (Osborne 2008, 57). This demographic fact would seem to constitute circumstantial evidence supporting the thesis that *pchum ben* owes its recent existence among the Khmer to the influence of Chinese culture.

While this discussion about the Chinese ghost festival yields fundamental insights into the parallel function of these rites for the well-being and maintenance of the family in China as well as in Cambodia, it is another question to attribute the sole existence of *pchum ben* in Cambodia to a matter of Chinese influence, demographics notwithstanding. Davis has noted the great functional similarities that exist between the Chinese ghost festival and *pchum ben*, yet he stakes out a position in juxtaposition to the thesis that *pchum ben* derives from Chinese influence. He refers (2009, 160) to *pchum ben* as

... the most important ritual within the Buddhist calendar. It is uncommon in the Theravada Buddhist world: while Chinese Buddhists perform a well known similar ritual on behalf of hungry ghost ancestors, the rituals appear to possess divergent textual warrants and histories.

Davis' point is correct insofar as the Buddhist textual warrants for *pchum ben* are clearly Pali sources, especially the *Petavatthu*. But this does not dislodge the similar chartering importance of the Buddhist *sangha* in the ritual transactions concerned with advancing the dead to ancestor status in both contexts. What may be at some variance, however, is the relative historical importance of rites for the ancestral dead in establishing a legitimate presence for the *sangha* in both societies. One of the great strengths of Teiser's study is that it brilliantly supports the thesis that the way Buddhism became assimilated and anchored in Chinese culture was through its adaptation to the centrality of Chinese familial religion. While Theravada Buddhism's presence in Khmer culture was no doubt assisted by its relevance to the overriding importance attached to the family, there may have been other compelling reasons for its grassroots adoption in fourteenth and fifteenth century Cambodia.

It is well known how the legacy of Angkor's high cultural achievements lived on for centuries among the Thai.⁵⁶ It was not just the legacy of Angkor that inspired royalty within the river civilizations of mainland Southeast Asia. It was also the Theravada ideology of kingship found within the Pali *Tiṭṭaka* centering on the figures of the *cakkavattin* and the paradigmatic figure of Asoka, as these had been embodied in Sinhala forms of kingship, especially during the reigns of the Polonnaruva kings, Parakramabahu I being the best example. Forest (2008, 18) has suggested that "Thai princes found in reformed Theravada a powerful means of making the societies over which they gained control cohere around their own person." He goes on to suggest that, in addition, perhaps a good measure of dynamism existed in the relations between monastic communities in neighboring *mandalas* (Lanna, Sukhotai, Ayutthaya and Lang Xang) and that perhaps

56) See, for example, the fact that into the late nineteenth century Pali texts in central Thai monasteries were still being written in the *khom* (Khmer) script.

Cambodia, owing to the fact that Jayavarman VII's son was one of those monks who travelled to Polonnaruva in the thirteenth century to receive ordination in the newly reformed *sangha*, might indicate intimate monastic relations between Theravada Khmer and Thai monk communities. He further notes that the involvement of Khmer monks in the fifteenth century *sangha* delegation who went to Lanka to be re-ordained before returning to Chiang Mai to take up residence. In any case, he speculates (*ibid.*, 19) that “[s]uccessive defeats by the Siamese together with enormous demographic losses suffered by the Angkorean empire prompted the last Angkorean kings to adopt the religious system that seemed to have provided so much power to the Thai princes.” While such an argument leaves room for identifying other reasons for Theravada’s wholesale adoption at the level of Khmer villages and Khmer families, it does underscore the intimate relations that obtained between kingship and political rule that solidified Theravada’s position as the ideological umbrella providing legitimation of power within Khmer religious culture in the post-Angkor era.

Beyond this concern, there remains the fact that there is some archeological evidence to suggest that *pchum ben* existed far earlier than either Ang Duang’s nineteenth century reign or during the time of Theravada’s introduction to grassroots Khmer village culture in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The earliest reference we possess to Bjum Pinda [*pchum ben*] is an inscription on the East Bray, the enormous, now dry reservoir to the east of the ancient city now called Angkor Dham, in which the East Mebon temple was later constructed. King Yasovarman built the East Baray around 900 CE, and inscribed the wall with references to Bjum Pinda. The ritual described differs from the contemporary celebration as it was oriented to dead soldiers rather than familial ancestors . . . (Davis 2009, 162)

If this inscriptional evidence from material culture is taken into account, then it would seem to be the case the origins of the *pchum ben* are to be found in Angkor, or even possibly among the more ancient strands of Mon culture, and that it transcended the family in its object of concern.

In a conversation about the possibility of Chinese influence on *pchum ben*, Ang Choulean stressed the major differences, in his view, that separate the Chinese practice of venerating ancestors from the Khmer and therefore render it unlikely that a Chinese source is responsible for *pchum ben*. He notes that Chinese do not seek to keep their ancestors at bay for 50 out of 52 weeks a year.⁵⁷ Moreover, their festival is clearly to transform and liberate for the purpose of ancestors ultimately gaining nirvana, as in the famous story of Mu-lien traversing the hells in search of rescuing his suffering mother.

57) Personal communication, October 13, 2010, Reyum Institute, Phnom Penh.

That story, which became so central to the ethos of Chinese Buddhism, clearly reflects the Mahayana *bodhisattva* ethic.

We may never resolve this issue entirely. What complicates it is that both the Chinese and Khmer traditions of familial religion have been impacted by Buddhist thought and practice. It may be this shared history of Buddhism, especially as it relates to how the *sangha* functioned in both social contexts, is what accounts for such remarkable parallels. That the traditions were inflected by different textual sources is obvious, and no doubt further inflected by antecedent cultural histories that include Taoist and Confucian trajectories on the Chinese side, and the legacy of Mon culture for the Khmer.

***Pchum Ben* Proper and *Bangsukol* at Wat Tralaeng Kaeng**

On the final *Pchum Ben* day proper, Phnom Penh, except for its colorful pagodas brimming with people dressed in their best finery, carrying their sumptuous festival foods to be offered to the monks for breakfast or lunch on behalf of their departed kin, is, indeed, something of a genuine ghost town. The evening before on the 14th night, the royal family has briefly processed from their palace grounds across Sisowath Quay to the Tonle Sap River bank accompanying a festooned, *naga*-shaped boat with its *wat*-shaped canopy for the protection of its passengers, seven generations of royal ancestors. The boat is laden with food—ripening bananas, rice-cakes in banana leaves, fruits, and vegetables—to ease their ancestors' return to the abode of the dead. The boat is carried by 12 ceremonial clad *brahmans*, preceded by a flute-playing orchestra of four and protected by an honor guard of eight. About 30 relatives of the royal family clad in white finery, while mostly men, comprise the procession that follows, a procession led by four pairs of pre-pubescent girls and boys. The boat is lowered from a canopied platform on to a bamboo raft that is waiting in the river, and then towed to a rented yacht, "Paris One." Some of the family members board the rented yacht and accompany their ancestors down river into the night. While this marks the official close of interaction with the ancestors, the rite of sending the ancestors home is carried out in the afternoon or evening at pagodas throughout Phnom Penh and in the rural provinces on the final *pchum ben* day in the afternoon. It is one of two primary rites observed on the final festive day and officially marks the conclusion of the *pchum ben* season (see Photo 12). The ancestors and *pretas* are sent back to their proper abodes.

At the same time that Phnom Penh is a shell of its normal bustling self, the countryside has come alive with family reunions, the hallmark of which is a family visit to the family pagoda on *pchum ben* day. I wanted to make sure that I spent *pchum ben* day at a



Photo 12 Temple Boat



Photo 13 Monks Feast

village pagoda, so we decided to spend the morning at Wat Tralaeng Kaeng in Kompong Chhnang just north of the old capital of Udong.

The centrifugal force of *pchum ben* in calling the family home was also a matter of methodological concern for me, owing to the fact that my research assistants were often telephoned during that morning by their family members who were asking why they were not where they needed to be. We had decided on Wat Tralaeng Kaeng for several reasons, one of which was its proximity to the native home of one of my research assistants. Trying to do fieldwork on *pchum ben* day was a bit like trying to work on Thanksgiving or Christmas in the United States. The compelling call of the family needed to be heeded, so our work involved only an early to mid-morning stint. But it proved well worth the effort.

In addition to sending one's ancestors back to their proper places and feasting the monks at their two morning meals (see Photo 13), the other important rite to observe on the final day of *pchum ben* is *bangsukol*.⁵⁸ *Bangsukol* is a simple rite of merit transfer normally solicited by an extended family for its departed kin. It is probably the most important Buddhist ritual for the laity regularly performed during the year, with the exception of a funeral or a monastic ordination of a family member. Special gifts for monastic comfort and care are presented to monks who then chant Pali *gathas* on behalf of the family dead of the past seven generations, and also for the benefit of surviving parents as well. *Bangsukol*, in effect, is a ritual that is designed to promote the health and longevity of the lineage. The rite is often held in front of a votive *stupa* containing the ashes of the family dead.

58) *Bangsukol* is the Khmer rendering of Sanskrit and Pali *pamsakula* which has two primary meanings within the Buddhist context: 1) it refers to the robes made out of rags worn by the ascetic *dhutanga* wandering monks; and 2) at least in Sri Lanka, it refers to the Buddhist funeral ceremony in which the body is cremated and turned to ashes. In both instances, there is a clear association with what is "dead to the world."

Since the construction of votive *stupas* is a costly affair well beyond the means of most villagers or even many in the middle class, some of the *stupas* in the *wat* are accessible to any Buddhist family for their use in making merit transfer offerings. Reciting the specific names of the dead for meritorious benefit of the departed is a *sine qua non*. There seems to be some variation with regard to which Pali *suttas* are chanted for the family by the monks. The monk who chanted at Wat Trolaeng Kaeng and another monk from a suburban Phnom Penh *wat* both mentioned portions of the *Dhammapada* as essential. What was also essential, the Wat Trolaeng Kaeng *achar* insisted, was that the texts articulate the fact of *anicca*, the transitoriness of existence. From the *achar*, we also learned that the *Vessantara Jataka* used to be chanted at this *wat* each day during the 15 day observance before the time of the Khmer Rouge. Now, the monks no longer do this because they do not have the knowledge of the text, according to the *achar*. The interruption of this tradition seemed another example of what Kobayashi had pointed out: that the civil war, the Khmer Rouge era, and the Vietnamese occupation had resulted in the elimination of many so-called *boran* or traditional practices. In any case, the fact that the *Vessantara* used to be chanted in conjunction with *pchum ben* reflects the fact that, like *bun phravet* in Lao religious culture, *pchum ben* is the primary merit-making rite of the year.

Conclusion

Observing *kan ben* and *pchum ben* in the rural areas of Cambodia provides something of a contrast with the manner in which it is observed in Phnom Penh's Buddhist *wats*. The social religious experience in the countryside is far more intimate in nature for most of the participants, owing to the fact that it is shared primarily with family members. It is a family homecoming affair as members of the family, both the living and the dead, are reconnected through solemn observance within a village context. One might say that villages also reassemble in a unified revivification. At the large and major temples of Phnom Penh, the experience is considerably more anonymous in nature, given the large throngs in attendance and despite the attempts of monastic and temple officials to foster a type of congregational social experience. While those who attend in Phnom Penh certainly retain a motivation to assist the familial dead, they come from a broad cross-section of socio-economic backgrounds and are united only by a common ritual purpose, and not the shared intimacy of village life and history. Not surprisingly, overt ties to the interests of the state were clearly in evidence in Phnom Penh, especially at Wat Langka and Wat Unnalom. In these instances, a sense of celebrating the nation certainly did not eclipse the importance of the familial orientation, but its presence could not be denied either.

It remains, in conclusion, to specify the Buddhistic logic of *pchum ben*, to underscore its religious significance in addition to its profound associations with familial ancestor veneration and family solidarity. That is, while there is an intrinsic religious conceptual-ity to ancestor veneration, there is also an accompanying spirit of Buddhist rationality to *pchum ben*. What makes the ritual performances of *bay ben* and *bangsukol* specifically Buddhist in the religious sense is that they both foster the fundamental act of taking refuge in the Buddha, the *dhamma* and the *sangha*. Or, to put the matter in even more specific terms, these rites stress the importance of recognizing the Buddha's *dhamma* as preserved by the *sangha*, a recognition clearly articulated in the ancient chartering stories of the rite found within the *Petavatthu*. Merit produced is merit produced not because it is simply a mechanical transference of karmic power from one family member to another. Merit is merit because it is morally generated, and therefore has the power to morally regenerate in turn. Merit is morally generated because it comes from essentially *self-less* actions, actions generated by intentions that are not self-centered. Gifts made by the refuge-seeking laity to virtuous monks are basically sacrifices with "no strings attached." That is, gifts are not given to generate merit for oneself. They are given for the benefit of others, be it the monks who need gifts practically or the ancestors who may need the consequent merit because of their previous absence of moral consciousness. Thus, it is this ability to give, and the ability to rejoice (*anumodana*) in the intrinsic moral goodness of these ritual acts, that constitutes the Buddhistic religious quality of *pchum ben*. Far from being simply a mechanistic ritual of maintenance, *pchum ben* rites foster a moral awareness that transcends concern for the self, a moral awareness that seems to be the realization of *anatta*. It is precisely this realization in the mode of merit transfer that was parlayed in Mahayana schools where it became the means by which *bodhisattvas* such as *Ksitigarbha* (Japanese: *Jizo*) and Amitabha were thought to rescue suffering sentient beings from the rounds of *samsara*. In the Theravada contexts, merit transfer remains the chief means of articulating an individual altruism that finds its object in the care and compassion one feels for the familial dead. In Cambodia, it has become the ritual venue for restoring the vitality of family and nation.

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