

Khmer identity: a religious perspective

- Marston, John and Guthrie, Elisabeth, eds. 2004. *History, Buddhism and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 260 pp., ISBN 0-8248-2868-2 (paperback)

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Although Cambodia is conventionally described as a Theravada Buddhist country, scholars trying to define the boundaries of its religious life more accurately see it as a syncretism of animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism. *History, Buddhism and New Religious Movements in Cambodia* offers an overview of the country's religious life, using a wide range of perspectives to address the question: 'What is particularly Cambodian about Cambodian religion?'

Chapters explore national identity, the present religiousness of the Cambodian diaspora, 19th century architecture and individual contemporary religious identities. The thematic variety and the authors' knowledge makes this book an important asset to Khmer studies, religious studies and the study of contemporary Buddhism; it is a valuable contribution to the anthropological study of religious phenomena within the larger context of human interaction and the division of social prestige.

Most of the studies compiled in this volume address the multiple ways in which Cambodian religious ideas and practices relate to concepts and institutions that have given and give shape to Cambodia as a social and political body. The editors assume that Buddhism is not only a part of the changing society but the matrix of change itself, a dynamic identity-forming force that triggers social interaction and alteration. While the book is about various aspects of religious practice, it also presents Cambodian society in its cultural and social complexity, focusing on historical aspects of religion, iconography and current political and social traits reflecting or influenced by religious imprints. Rich

in information on symbolic aspects of religious life, the text offers a well-documented account of current tendencies and local trends, and introduces some of the personal cults of power.

The chapter 'Making a religion of the nation and its language: the French protectorate (1863-1954) and the Dhammakay' by Penny Edwards evaluates French colonial influence over Cambodian institutions and religion's role in the gradual creation of a nation from the 1900s to the 1930s. The object of pure belief became the Khmer nation and its symbol, the Khmer language. The process of shaping Khmer identity around a distinct language, ethos, culture, nation and a 'distinctive way of being a Buddhist' (p.41) was, Edwards concludes, a product of 19th century cultural politics.

While Khmer language became the nation's symbol in the discourse of cultural and political spheres of influence, the statue of the Leper King became, symbolically, the nation's body (see Ashley Thompson). Just like the Buddha's body corresponds to the samsaric world, the king's body stands metonymically for the physical territory of his kingdom. National and social identity, in material form, can be worshipped, taken care of, forgotten and then remembered, displaced, mutilated. Symbols work most effectively – fulfil their meaning – in rituals, and rituals bond individual members of the community, giving shape and common experience to their group identity.

Once national identity is formed, its expression can be found in the religious rituals of the spirit cult of Khleang Moeung, described by Teri Yamada from her encounter in Long Beach, California. The reconstruction of traditional culture is vital to

diaspora, which they achieve by practicing, through their religion and public cultural events, the traditional rituals that serve as culturally unifying symbolic systems. Satisfying the individual's need to know and actualise his own roots satisfies the nation's need for a stable foundation on which its own identity can be constructed.

Personal identity, social belonging and national pride all mingle with religious symbols and rituals to convey stable layers of meaning. In order to build new structures the old ones must first be transformed, whether in their outer material expression or in their inner layers of meaning. A stable balance between the old tradition and the need for change can serve as a base on which to build national or personal identity. Continuity, being in touch with one's own cultural roots and a sense of belonging to a community are human needs met through cultural and social interaction and in the layered symbolism of rituals. Religion, such as Buddhism in Cambodia, plays an important role in preserving the fragile continuity between the past and the present's need for change. ◀

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