

Hansen, Anne Ruth. *How to Behave: Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia 1860-1930*. 2007. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 254 pages ISBN 978 0 8248 3032 8

# Khmer Buddhists respond to the challenges of modernity

MARTIN STUART-FOX

This scholarly monograph makes use of previously unused sources (the writings of Khmer intellectuals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) in order to discover how Cambodian Buddhists responded to the challenge of modernity posed by French colonialism. The religious modernism they developed took the form of propagating a more authentic, purified ethics, whose implications, given the Theravada Buddhist worldview, went well beyond the monastery to shape the Khmer response to the political and social changes introduced by the French.

The author begins by showing how the traditional Khmer Buddhist worldview envisages the cosmos as a morally constructed stage on which is played out the drama of the human quest for enlightenment. The key texts for this understanding in 19<sup>th</sup> century Cambodia were the *Trai Bhūm* and the *Vessantara Jātaka*, which demonstrated the superiority of religious merit over royal power. Pursuing the path of moral purity, it was believed, would produce just such superior power in the face of French political domination.

## Ambiguities and contradictions

As the French presence became more intrusive and Cambodian royal power declined, however, this Khmer response was perceived by a coterie of younger monks to be inadequate. Millenarian-inspired rebellion had proved unsuccessful in challenging French control. French laws were replacing Cambodian customary law, and challenged the traditional moral order. For example, under French pressure slavery was abolished, but the use of opium was encouraged as a means of raising finance. While the former placed in question the Cambodian social order as reflecting the law of karma, the latter went against Buddhist moral precepts. Such were the ambiguities and contradictions that Khmer Buddhists were forced to confront.

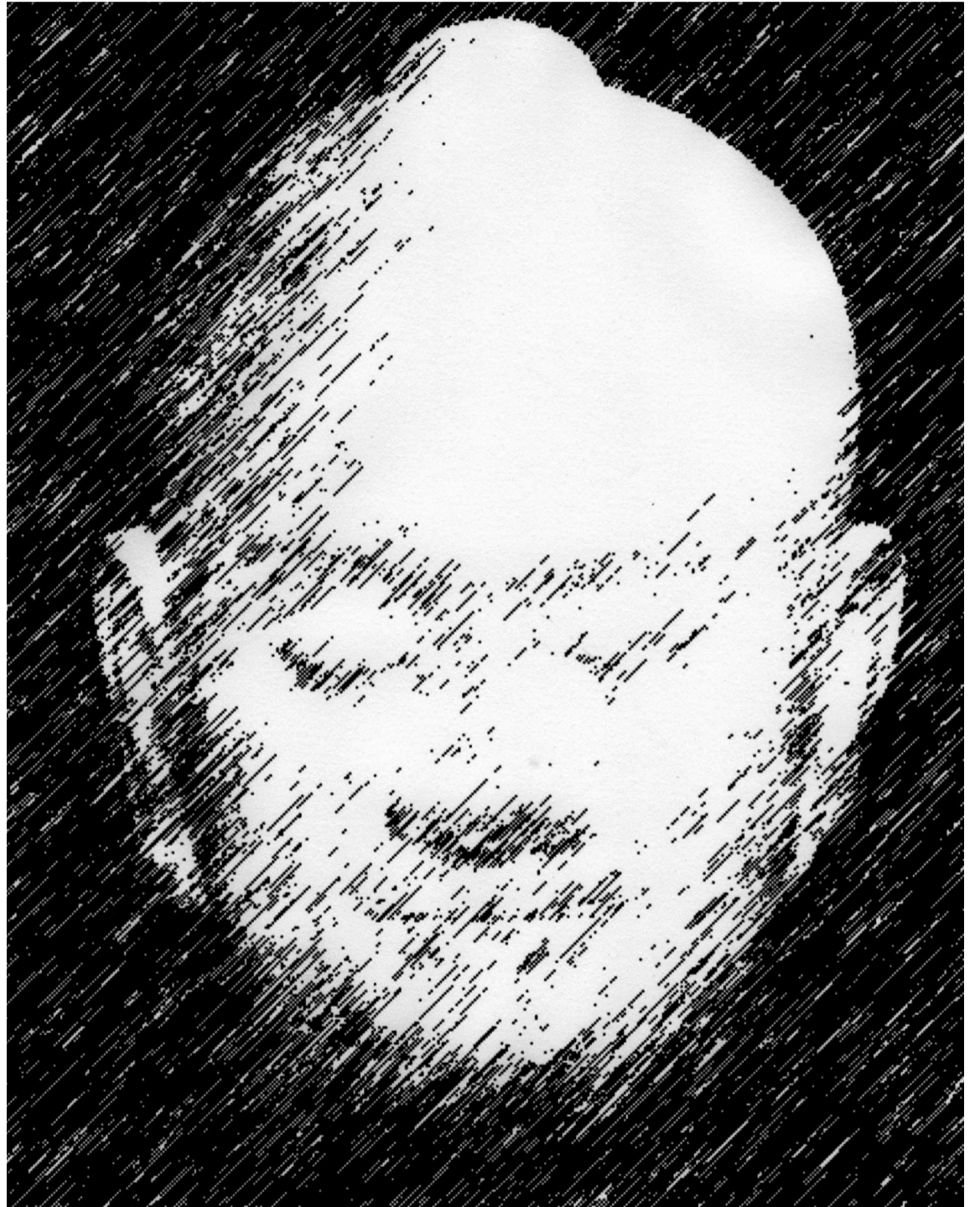
For Cambodians, the French view of them as backward and lazy was particularly demeaning. So too was the historiographical justification for the protectorate assiduously propagated by French authorities, which portrayed France as the protective saviour of a Khmer nation in decline, threatened by its neighbours with cultural annihilation. Though the author does not make much of this point, both attitudes betrayed the influence of social Darwinism, in the face of which Khmer Buddhist modernisers sought a way of behaving (social conduct) that would reinforce their cultural identity and pride, and so strengthen the nation.

This response was again ethical, and not confined to debate. What Khmer Buddhists sought was a way of responding to the changing world that they encountered that would influence political developments by strengthening the moral status of Cambodians vis-à-vis the French. Part of this response was to demythologise Khmer Buddhism by setting aside the magic rituals of popular religion and going back to the intellectual and spiritual roots of Buddhism as found in the texts of the *Pali Tipiṭaka*, shorn of all commentaries and accretions. The model for their movement was taken from the monastic reforms introduced in Siam by Prince Mongkut before he became King Rama IV.

The Buddhist Renovation movement in Cambodia sought to improve monastic education and conduct, so that monks could provide better role models and teachers for the lay community. French influence was to be countered by renewed emphasis on Khmer language, history and culture. Similar responses took place in Burma, but interestingly the author compares the Cambodian Buddhist response to that of Indonesian Muslims faced with similar challenges. The effect in both cases was a return to the fundamentals of faith as expressed in original texts which goes to confirm Karen Armstrong's contention that fundamentalisms are essentially modernist and modernising responses to the West.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of the reformers was particularly on the *Vinaya*, the text defining monastic discipline. The reformers believed that only by thoroughly understanding the relevant texts could they be properly applied. This explains why the trope of 'purification' was so persistent, in relation to both texts and the behaviour based upon them. Resistance was strong within the Sangha, however, from those monks who feared that reforms would distance the order from lay followers, and so weaken rather than strengthen its social influence.

Illustration by Chinkata Nwachukwu.2007.



## Triumph of the modernisers

The irony is that the 'modern Dhamma movement' in Cambodia was successful largely because of the support it received from French patronage. Cambodian (and Lao) monks used to travel to Bangkok to undertake higher monastic studies, and French colonial officials were eager to sever this relationship between Cambodian Buddhism and the Siamese Sangha. They were far more comfortable with a reformed national Khmer Buddhism, free from both the 'superstition' that encouraged millenarianism and from the equally suspect influence of Siam. French authorities therefore backed the reform movement, though their political motives took little account of what animated Khmer reformers. Monasteries were given a significant role in state-supported education. Pali studies were encouraged, museums and libraries were established in the name of Khmer Buddhist culture, and books on proper Buddhist conduct were printed and distributed, all with French support. The climactic symbol of this cooperation was the establishment in 1930 of the Buddhist Institute, an occasion that marked the triumph of the modernisers, and marks the conclusion of this study.

A particular strength of this study lies in the way the author has illuminated the Cambodian Buddhist response to the challenges posed by French colonialism, by focusing on the thought and teachings of a leading group of highly influential monks. This was just as much an intellectual response as was the path followed by those who took advantage of French education to construct secular Khmer nationalism. But it was a dimension that

has been largely ignored by scholars, but for reference to the Buddhist Institute. Another strength is the way this Buddhist dimension has been placed within the social and political context of the times.

Anne Ruth Hansen is one of a third generation of scholars now writing on Cambodia, following the French colonial initiators (Aymerie, Coedès, Finot, Leclère) and the illustrious second generation of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chandler, Vickery, Osborne, Kiernan, Bizot, et al.). This third generation (represented, among others, in addition to Hansen, by Penny Edwards, John Marston and Trudy Jacobsen,) is marked by their use of Khmer language sources to arrive at an understanding of Cambodian history that takes seriously Cambodian views of the world. Judging by the high level of scholarship and the revealing insights provided by this book, Cambodian studies are in good hands.

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## Notes

- 1 Karen Armstrong, 2000. *The Battle for God*. New York: Alfred A Knopf.