

# Cambodia's religions, in ashes and in ink

The image on the cover of Ian Harris's new history of religion is both familiar and unexpected: in place of the towering stone shrines that adorn so many Cambodian guidebooks, we see instead the fragility of a modern Buddha statue, cast in concrete. It was smashed to pieces and later re-assembled, with its steel structure now exposed, as bones laid bare.

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## Sweeping away errors of old

The monumentality of Cambodia's ancient history and the bewildering brutality of its more recent past have inspired many Western scholars to be highly inductive and imaginative in spinning narratives out of the evidence available to us. Almost any new work in the field can thus earn a degree of praise for sweeping away the errors of the old.

In this new work from Ian Harris, gone are the wild sociological speculations based on the types of hats worn in various Angkorian stela, gone are the imaginary revolutions of an ancient, 'Buddhist Bolshevism'. There is, in short, much to be praised in what this new volume omits from earlier attempts at writing history.

The volume opens by explaining, with explicit humility, that a large part of the material constitutes a re-statement (in English) of findings that are already available in French. I would add that it also presents some major new English-language research that (as yet) languishes in the semi-published state of the PhD thesis; the works of Penny Edwards and Anne Hansen deserve special mention in this respect.

Unfortunately, the subject matter does not lend itself easily to a survey of secondary sources without access to the primary texts. The errors of fact and judgement found throughout the volume left me with deep misgivings as to the viability of 'Buddhist Studies' in the absence of the strictures that define the disciplines of philology, history, and religious studies.

## Gender-bending errors

As an example, there is a gender-bending cluster of errors on p. 68, made more troubling by a misleading citation. We are told a story of a layman who regards a monk (namely, Kaccāyana) with '...a desire to make the monk his wife, upon which the monk turned into a woman.' Anyone acquainted with medieval Sinhalese karma-theory would know immedi-

ately that this can't be right at all: in fact, the layman's desire results in his own transformation into a woman (as a 'karmic punishment' of sorts). Even without recourse to better sources, it could not make sense within the logic of the story for the monk to change gender instead of the prurient layman. The author could have found this folktale readily available in English translation, even on the internet; conversely, if he was misled by a particular source (without checking against others) he does not cite it.

While it seems impossible to believe that this error could have come from the study of primary sources, Harris directly cites the original Pali with the abbreviation 'DhA' (no translation is mentioned on p. 68, nor on p. 239); moreover, we are told that the story is from 'Pali canonical sources.' Even for an astute amateur, it should be self-evident that this is quite wrong: the final '-A' of the citation indicates that the source is not canonical, but commentarial. This distinction entails a difference of a thousand years and the opposite side of a small ocean. While sloppiness of this kind is common in Buddhist Studies, this is not a trivial error; would anyone reviewing the history of a European religion overlook the conflation of Solon with Justinian?

In composing the book, no attempt whatsoever was made to transliterate any of the Asian languages by any logical scheme. This is excused in the preface (p. xiv) as consistently reflecting the inconsistencies of his various forebears in the field, '...in order to avoid confusing readers who may wish to consult these important sources' (p. xv). The ensuing mess of diacritics does much to make us doubt the author's credibility. We are told that the Cambodian word *Bayon* is from 'the Pali *'bejayant'*' (p. 245, n. 70) but if we were to seek the latter in a lexicon it would instead be found under *vejayanta*. I dare say that a few specialists would know to find it there (as Harris or his editors should have done) but for the vast majority of readers this 'approximate spelling' is an insuperable obstacle. Would this be acceptable for Greek, Latin, or Hebrew sources? If not, it is unacceptable here for the same reasons.

Even more disappointing than the indifferent mix of Pali and Sanskrit, the Cambodian names and titles of works are given only with inconsistent and vague Romanisations (neither truly

phonetic nor following any transliteration scheme) making it even more difficult to pursue such sources further. The reader's sole recourse would be to stand before a librarian in Phnom Penh, attempting to guess the pronunciation (to peals of laughter, I must suppose) or else writing out all of the possible vowel combinations in Khmer script before striking on the correct one (to the librarian's exasperation). We are thus left at a scholarly dead-end, and one that was entirely eluctable; the ever-increasing ease of typing in modern Khmer deprives us of the excuse of bygone generations.

## Fine cracks

Such fine cracks along the surface of the work, though they may be small, are many, and may indicate a deeper problem. The fable of *Chao Fa Ngum* is reported as historical fact (p. 25), and an array of traditional Cambodian chronicles are employed with few indications as to just how unreliable these have been proven to be, over several decades of outstanding philology by Michael Vickery. Puzzled by this, I studied the bibliography, finding some crucial omissions. While there are various works listed by Vickery, Olivier de Bernon, and Peter Skilling, many of these authors' most salient arguments seem to have been ignored in the construction of this history. The timeline of Cambodian Buddhism could have been improved (or perhaps challenged) by the archaeological findings discussed by Skilling (1997 & 2002), whereas Harris's theory that 'Vandalism during the Khmer Rouge period as a cause for the disappearance of ancient texts may not... be quite as significant as once thought' (p. 84) would seem to be directly refuted by the hard facts set down by de Bernon (2004), specifying that 'As a result of the devastation of the protracted war... an estimated 98 percent of the manuscripts, have been completely destroyed.' (op. cit. p. 310). Curiously, both Skilling and de Bernon are thanked for their personal 'criticism and wise counsel' in Harris's preface (p. xiv).

The failure to consider some of Vickery's most important contributions to Cambodian history seems equally inexplicable (e.g. Vickery, 1979 & 2004 – many more could be listed); his work has changed many fundamental assumptions of earlier histories (such as the timeline of Thai invasions in the 14th-15th centuries).

While I am tempted to offer criticisms of Harris's approach to more recent history, too, it could be said (reasonably enough) that the book cannot rise to the standards of political science, nor, perhaps, those of social anthropology. The question must be asked: what standards apply? What is 'Buddhist Studies' if it is not based on the study of primary source texts (viz., Pali or vernacular Cambodian) nor adheres to the standards of the other disciplines mentioned? These disciplines exist to prevent precisely such errors as arise from an uncritical survey of secondary sources.

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