

PAUL CHRISTENSEN

“WE WILL NEVER GET RICH IF WE FOLLOW BUDDHISM”

THE RISE OF BRAHMANISM IN CAMBODIA

GISCA Occasional Paper Series



Number 24, 2019, ISSN: 2363-894X



GEORG-AUGUST-UNIVERSITÄT
GÖTTINGEN

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This working paper is an early version of a chapter from the forthcoming edited volume:
“A World Ever More Enchanted: Efflorescing Spirit Cults in Buddhist Southeast Asia”,
Peter A. Jackson, Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière (eds.), Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

It is published in advance with the permission of the editors. After the publication of the printed volume, the working paper will be withdrawn and no longer available online.

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ISSN: 2363-894X

DOI: 10.3249/2363-894X-gisca-24

Title page image: © 2012 Christensen; Offering to local spirits (*anak tā*) in front of the Sen Nih Mull temple in Takeo Province, Southwest Cambodia.

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Paul Christensen

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THE RISE OF BRAHMANISM IN CAMBODIA

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the growing demand for spirit rituals in Cambodia over the last two decades. Beginning with the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, the author focuses on the revitalisation of “Brahmanism” (*brahmanya-sāsanā*), a term that in Cambodia describes religious practices involving spirits. Brahmanist practices have grown in popularity in parallel with the rapid revitalisation of Buddhism that has taken place since the end of the post-Khmer Rouge Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in 1989. The author argues that the influence of ideas of *pāramī*, or spiritual power, is a significant reason for the popularity of Brahmanist rituals. In contrast to Buddhist practice which places emphasis on the accumulation of merit (*punya*), spirits and their human mediums may provide immediate cures, or help in the accumulation of power and money. Hence Brahmanism is appealing to many Cambodians – as the title of the paper suggests – because their offerings are traded for more immediate benefits than Buddhist merit-making. Because of their flexibility, Brahmanist rituals have been easily adapted to the new capitalist market, which was ‘liberalized’ in the 1990s. Unlike the well-documented development of Buddhism, the revitalization of Brahmanism has gone rather unnoticed by scholars of Cambodia. Nonetheless, it has become a modern phenomenon that provides revealing insights into a society that finds itself in politically troubled times.

Introduction¹

Cambodia is still afflicted by its troubled past. After Independence in 1953, armed battle started with American bombings on Eastern Cambodian territory in 1968, eventually engulfing the entire country from 1973 to 1975. The situation for Cambodians worsened significantly during the Khmer Rouge's brutal four-year regime, which was followed by the occupation by the Vietnamese, and ongoing fights with remnants of the Khmer Rouge. Following the Khmer Rouge's capitulation in 1998, the country soon opened up for international investment and tourism, becoming one of the fastest growing economies in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the majority of the population has seen little benefit from this growth, and Cambodia remains the least developed ASEAN partner state today.

When I started my research in Cambodia in 2012, I was interested in understanding how and what role spirit mediums played in the processes of local reconciliation after decades of conflict and turmoil. Through my research, I came to understand how the contemporary social and religious positioning of spirit mediums had developed historically in Cambodia. Today, most Cambodians stress that Brahmanism (*brahmanya sāsana*) and Buddhism (*brah buddha sāsana*) belong to one religious system that they call 'Cambodian Buddhism' (*brah buddha khmer*). As it is advanced by key representatives of the Ministry of Cult and Religion, this can be even regarded as the 'official' definition of the religion.

Nevertheless, a differentiation between the two is generally made in terms of the effects of the rituals. Buddhist rituals focus on merit-making (*dhvœ punya*) that has a karmic effect in this or the next life, while 'Brahmanist practices' focus on providing and distributing spiritual power (*pāramī*) that can be used to influence the here and now. As described by Guillou (2017a), Cambodians differentiate clearly between Brahmanism and Buddhism in specific contexts such as spirit rituals. From this perspective, Brahmanism forms a loose category for everything religious considered non- or pre-Buddhist, referring to the era of Indian religious thought when the Khmer Empire was at its most powerful.² While Buddhism is regarded as the national religion and superior in terms of morality, Brahmanism and *pāramī*³ are regarded as potent, even dangerous, forces. During my research, some spirit mediums made it clear to me that they saw themselves as Brahmanists rather than Buddhists. These mediums placed statues of spirits and of the Buddha on the same level in their shrine (*pāy sī*), and they even dared condemn the 'corrupt' ritual practices of Buddhist monks, who they regarded as lacking any spiritual power (*pāramī*).

In this paper, rather than adopting the local/official definitions of 'Cambodian Buddhism', I deliberately adopt the categories used by spirit mediums to stress how they delineate between the two practices. In so doing, I attempt to illustrate how the differentiation between Buddhism and Brahmanism is not only highly situational, but has also become increasingly important today, especially for Brahmanist actors themselves, in order to meet the expectations of their clients. Unlike the comparatively well-documented development of Buddhism in Cambodia (Marston and Guthrie 2004; Harris 2005; Kent and Chandler 2008; Harris 2012; Davis 2015), the revitalization of Brahmanism, which can be observed throughout the country, was paid less attention by contemporary scholars of the country.

Before providing explanations for these interpretations, using the emic categories throughout, the paper examines the development of Buddhism and of Brahmanism in

¹ In this article, I transliterate Khmer words using the ALA-LC system. Exceptions are made when no written account is available, such as for names of specific spirits

² While the term 'Brahmanism' refers locally to a pre-Buddhist period, it was imposed during the 1910s as a category comprising spirits and magical practices to 'purify' the Buddhist *sangha* from such influences (see below).

³ Guillou (2017b) differentiates between two similar concepts of spiritual power: *pāramī*, a potency closely connected to kings and their rule over the Buddhist *sangha*, and *paramī*, a powerful energy dwelling at places which manifests itself as a personified entity (e.g. in bodies of mediums). While this differentiation is not necessary in this article, the study of different conceptions of power in Cambodia, which is still at its outset, is insightful (Kent 2007; Pasuk and Baker 2008; Davis 2015).

particular. As Brahmanism's increasing popularity is attributable to its (near) immediate economic benefits, I illustrate how it can also be understood as a 'prosperity religion' (Jackson 1999). In an ethnographic account of a medium's 'optimized' ceremony to increase the output of spiritual power of the ritual's patron, I illustrate how Brahmanist practice has re-emerged from the shadows. I conclude that, despite attempts by successive rulers of Cambodia— notably the French, the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese – to undermine, or even eradicate 'irrational' religious practices, modern religiosity in Cambodia has become increasingly 'enchanted'.

The Differentiation of Religions until 1979

Historical records suggest that there was relative harmony between the different religious trends of pre-existing spirit cults, Indian religions and the ongoing impact of Buddhist ideas in the Khmer Empire from the 8th to the 15th centuries (Pou 1987-1988:340). From the start of the subsequent 'Middle Period', kings firmly established Buddhism, and the Hindu gods were substituted by high deities in the Buddhist cosmology (Pou 1987-1988:341; Ang 1993; Edwards 2007:98). This Middle Period ended when Cambodia, desperate to escape Vietnamese and Siamese rule, was subordinated to the French and became a Protectorate of France in 1863 (Chandler 1972).

The vital role of spirits in the practice of Cambodian Buddhism (Leclère 1899) was first contested at the beginning of the 20th century, when Buddhist leaders, inspired by the Western imaginary of 'world religions', began to promote rationalist reform to modernise Buddhism (Guillou 2017a:71). The distinction between 'modern' (*samāya*) and ancient (*purāṇa*⁴) became crucial in a process that Guillou (2017a) called 'religionisation'. Members of the modernist movement, which was mainly in urban areas⁵, sought to purify Cambodian Buddhism of 'superstition' (*jaṃnya chveñ*, 'faith on the left'), which included all spirit practices (Hansen 2004:58f). In the process, the concept of *sāsanā* was transformed from a loosely defined reference to common origins, customs, and language to the Khmer equivalent of 'religion', which was mainly referred to as *buddha-sāsanā* (Guillou 2017a). At the same time, the notion of Brahmanism, or *brahmaṇya-sāsanā*, was used to describe all parts of Cambodian Buddhism that did not correspond to this purified definition of religion.

In the course of the dispute between largely rural Traditionalists and largely urban Reformists, the latter were more effective in interacting with the French, who supported their vision of a 'pure' Buddhism; a vision which they directly connected to the Dharma from texts as the Pāli Canon. In contrast, *purāṇa* became a countermovement to what the French constructed as modernity, and its leaders viewed themselves as neo-traditionalists who were able to fuse the new with the old (Marston 2008a). The majority of Cambodians adhered to this form of Buddhism, since it was well integrated in local village society (Kalab 1968; Keyes 1994; Bertrand 2004; Kent 2008). To a great extent, *purāṇa* Buddhism laid the foundation for what Brahmanism would later become for the spirit mediums I refer to here: a neo-traditional movement opposed not only to reformist Buddhists but to Buddhism itself.

Soon after the outbreak of the American war in Vietnam, bombs began to fall across Cambodia from 1965 to 1973 (Kiernan and Owen 2006). Millions of refugees searched for shelter in the cities, from which they would subsequently be expelled shortly after

⁴Rather than terms like "*yogavacara*", "esoteric" or "tantric" (Bizot 1976; Crosby 2000; Harris 2005), I prefer the contemporary and vernacular term "*purāṇa*" to refer to unreformed Buddhism, see for example Marston (2008a).

⁵In these urban contexts, spirit mediums shifted their practice to astrology and fortune-telling, which they could base on 'rational calculation' rather than on the existence of spirits. This separation of mediums possessed by spirits (*grū pāramī* or *grū cūl rūpa*) in the countryside and the astrologers (*grū dāy*) in cities still exists today (see Poonnatree, this volume).

the Khmer Rouge took the capital in 1975. The Khmer Rouge regime was led by *angkār* ('the organisation'). Like the spirits, *angkār* was presented as an all-powerful entity that could observe and overhear, give orders to, and judge people (LeVine 2010:34–35). *Angkār* attempted to eliminate all, and especially Buddhist, religious practices, labelling monks as beggars from an irrational and unproductive institution. However, investigations have only recently been made on the impact the Khmer Rouge had on non-institutionalised religious practices. O'Lemmon (2014:48) and Bennett (2015:98f) describe how Khmer Rouge soldiers consulted *anak tā*,⁶ or tutelary spirits, for protection. My findings also suggest that the Khmer Rouge feared the powers of some spirit mediums and therefore avoided harming them. Indeed, due to her spiritual powers, one medium I talked to was even promoted to the role of Khmer Rouge regional leader. In short, the regime's attacks had a much more significant, indeed devastating, impact on the Buddhist *sangha* than they did on local spirit cults and its practitioners (Gyallay-Pap 2002; O'Lemmon 2014:48).



Img. (1)
Spirit statue of Lok
Ta Eysey (see below)
on the grounds of
Wat Sampov Meas
(Kampong Thom
Province), 2012, © PC.

⁶ *Anak tā*, which denotes the most popular spirits in Cambodia, is a broadly defined category of tutelary spirits. These are the spirits of powerful, deceased individuals (historical figures such as the founders of the village or soldiers), Hindu deities (e.g. Yāy Mao, reminiscent of Kali), and mythological persons or animals. Their shrines can be found in every village and city throughout the country. They are understood to be social beings capable of engaging with humans (Christensen forthcoming; Ang 1986; Guillou 2012).

Religious Revitalisation: From 1979 until Today

“Buddha and ghosts, prayers at the temple and invocations to spirits, monks and mediums are all part of what is essentially a single religious system, different aspects of which are called into play at different, appropriate times.” (Ebihara 1968:364)

The times, it seems, are indeed appropriate for the rise of Brahmanism in Cambodia. I now turn to the reasons for this.

After Vietnamese troops defeated the Khmer Rouge in 1979 and forced them to flee to the northwest of the country, the revitalisation of religion was not considered a priority by the newly established People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). While the new government favoured the reformist branch of Buddhism (Marston 2008a), it restricted the number of re-ordinations, thereby limiting the revitalisation of Buddhism. Indeed, only a few thousand monks had been ordained by the end of the PRK-era in 1989 (Gyallay-Pap 2002).

The revitalisation of spirit practices may have remained rural and local in this period, but it was also unrestricted. With the close connection of the spirits to the land, spirit practice grew in importance during the PRK-era. The *anak tā* were seen as having retreated to the forests during the Khmer Rouge regime, and like the thousands of people who returned to their home regions after working under the command of *angkār* in other districts, the *anak tā* were regarded as having returned to their shrines. Some spirit mediums also started working again. With a lack of Buddhist monks and the haunting presence of the dead who lost their lives under the Khmer Rouge all over the country, people turned to the spirits for their religious concerns. However, it should be noted that the spirits of the dead were not nearly as important as they are in post-conflict Vietnam (Kwon 2006, 2008), since in Cambodia, they are believed to have been reborn some years after their death. Other spirits, such as the *anak tā* with their *pāramī* (spiritual power) soon became a source of moral guidance and help in times of re-settling and survival, especially for those who became seriously ill and could only be healed with the help of the spirits – a typical event in the biographies of most spirit mediums. The mediums of this early period of Brahmanist revitalisation were often called on to heal the sick or to help find a lost (and possibly still living) displaced relative. However, offerings were limited, and due to their ambiguous status, being a medium was typically seen as a burden rather than a privilege.

By 1989, the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia was complete, and religious restrictions were lifted. Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) reconciled with Buddhist leaders, and religious revitalisation began in earnest: thousands of monks were ordained, existing monasteries were renovated, new ones were built, and Buddhist rituals were re-established⁷ or invented⁸. Even in areas where pockets of Khmer Rouge fighters remained, the re-introduction of Buddhism was relatively smooth. *Purāṇa* Buddhism, the major religious practice before the crisis, quickly re-established itself, providing a common ground for villagers to resume links with the pre-war past (Zucker 2006, 2013).

Like royal rulers up until 1975, the CPP sought to legitimate political power through religious authority in the 1990s. Since staging a coup that ousted his royal Co-Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh in 1998, Hun Sen has continued this strategy: he has maintained strong relationships with the *saṅgharājas* or Supreme Patriarchs from both orders of Buddhism,⁹ and has engaged in the type of religious patron-client relationships

⁷For example *bhjuṃ piṇḍa*, the ‘ceremony of the dead’, was re-established. See Holt (2012) and Davis (2015).

⁸For example, the “Day of Tying Anger” which later became the “National Day of Remembrance” was first held on 20 May 1984 to celebrate the defeat over the Khmer Rouge. See Hughes (2006) and Bennett (2015:218).

⁹As in Thailand and Laos, the Cambodian Buddhist monkhood consists of two orders. The majority of Cambodians belong to the *Mahānikāy*, while the *Dhammayut* order has only a few monasteries under its control. Nonetheless, each order has its own *saṅgharāja* or Supreme Patriarch.

common throughout the long tradition of *purāṇa*-Buddhism in Cambodia.¹⁰ In this system of personal patronage, money is passed ‘upward’ in exchange for protection (Zucker 2013:101): Cambodian elites patronise monasteries, which they support not only to receive support from monks but also to secure their worldly positions, and to make merit to counteract the karmic consequences of their bad deeds in this or former lives (Keyes 1973).

On the grounds of the new monasteries, places for *anak tā* are generally included. By 2002, more than 50,000 monks were living in monasteries again (Gyallay-Pap 2002:111). The demand for spirit practices also increased. However, Bertrand reports that in the late 1990s, people in rural areas complained about a shortage of mediums embodying spirits (2004:158–59). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Brahmanism and Buddhism underwent multiple processes of both approximation toward, and differentiation from, one another. For instance, some Buddhist monks were willing to be the ‘body’ (*rūpa*) for spirits to enter and to perform magic rituals (*dhvœ vedamant*). At the same time, some tutelary spirits, *anak tā*, transformed from chthonic to more visually iconic forms: with their former manifestation in stones, termite mounds, trees and mountains becoming reformed into human-shaped statues. This adaptation of Buddhist ideas is described as Buddhicisation by scholars of Cambodian Buddhism (Ang 1986; Forest 1992; Guillou 2017a) and other regions in Southeast Asia (Ladwig 2016; Brac de la Perrière 2017). Here I argue that Cambodian Buddhism is also defined by processes of ‘Brahmanisation’. In order to stress the mutual influence of Buddhism and Brahmanism, I prefer the term ‘hybridisation’ (Pattana 2005).

Economic growth began to take off in Cambodia in the late 1990s with an orientation away from the export of agricultural products to the supply of cheap labour for new industries, mainly provided by women in the textile and garment industries. The economy was ‘liberalised’,¹¹ leading to both increased social inequality, as well as growing hopes and expectations for the future, something I witnessed in (competitive) rituals of spirit possession. In this context, at the beginning of the 2000s, a new spirit of optimism emerged among members of the private sector, where the number of small and medium-sized enterprises or start-ups increased constantly.

My data suggests that the number of spirit mediums began to rise in parallel with the developments toward a ‘liberalised’ form of capitalism, and the hopes and expectations for the future that came with it. The lack of mediumship that Bertrand reported from the late 1990s was soon remedied. It is fair to say that in the 2000s, both religions had been fully reconstituted. Under the premise that different parts of one religious system – Cambodian Buddhism – come into play at appropriate times, I will now look at how Brahmanism can be defined today, and what its key components are.

Following the reformist critique that it does not belong to Buddhism, most Cambodians call spirit practice ‘Brahmanist’. Nevertheless, these same actors also stress that it does belong to ‘Cambodian’ or *purāṇa* Buddhism. Indeed, the revitalisation of Buddhism and the broad acceptance of *purāṇa* have weakened the reformist critique that was strong in the first half of the 20th century, and along with the absence of official critique, have allowed these practices to flourish. Today, only few monks actively reject ‘superstitious’ practices to ‘purify’ the Dharma (Guillou 2017a). Without a textual basis, (Cambodian) Brahmanism is, even more than Buddhism, a category of negotiation and context. It is not at all in opposition to Buddhism, but is rather intertwined with it. Indeed, most official Buddhist ceremonies contain rituals dedicated to spirits, such as *Kruñ Bālī*, a ritual for the Goddess of the Earth that begins most Buddhist ceremonies (Guthrie 2004). All forms

¹⁰Hun Sen has sought to represent himself as being ‘destined’ to be the righteous ruler over the country; as the reincarnation of King Jayavarman VII (Ledgerwood 2008:219), the legitimate successor of the kings from Oudong (Guthrie 2002), more precisely the reincarnation of King Sdech Khan (Norén-Nilsson 2013) or of the late King Sihanouk. After King Sihanouk’s death in 2012, Hun Sen claimed that he been ‘chosen’ by the king to protect the royal family (Strangio 2014:126).

¹¹ Here, liberalisation describes a process of internationalisation and privatisation rather than an ‘open’ market economy, because investments and share purchases remain highly regulated by the ruling elite.

of non-Buddhist practices, such as spirit mediumship and (morally ambiguous) magic (*vedamant*) are labelled 'Brahmanist', while Cambodians constantly debate whether magic should be considered a part of Cambodian Buddhism.

The elites' open use of, and absence of critique of, spirit mediums is an increasing phenomena comparable to similar developments in Thailand (Jackson 2016), Burma (La Brac de Perrière, Rozenberg, and Turner 2014) and Laos (Evans 2002). The Cambodian media is controlled by members of the ruling party, who themselves use spiritual practices to legitimate their power as the kings had done (Norén-Nilsson 2013), and to ask mediums or fortune-tellers to provide them with protection or predictions about the future (Christensen 2016). It is an open secret that members of the elite also pay spirit mediums to work exclusively for them. Hun Sen's wife, Bun Rany, is known as the main sponsor of a medium in Kampong Thom Province who holds sway over a huge complex of boat-shaped monastery (*Wat Sompov Meas*) with ordained Buddhist monks. In countries such as Vietnam or Indonesia, elites' use of mediums would be seen as undermining their credibility (Endres and Lauser 2011; Sorrentino 2013; Bubandt 2014; Christensen 2014).

Despite being understood as non-Buddhist, Brahmanist practices are popular across society; mediums today have urban and rural clients from across the entire social spectrum in every province of the country. Depending on client demands, mediums may position themselves as more 'Brahmanist' – to speak the language of the spirits (*bhāsā khmoc*), become possessed or offer immediate results after the ritual; or as servants of devout Buddhist spirits – to stress the importance of virtue and merit-making.

This flexibility is a key factor in the increasing popularity of Brahmanist rituals today. Although *purāṇa*-Buddhism allows for a broad range of rituals, including the blessing of vehicles, soldiers or spirit shrines (see below) and even though there are still monks performing spirit possession rituals,¹² their practice remains oriented toward merit-making and moral guidance, and they emphasize that their rituals cannot harm or disturb others. In contrast, Brahmanist rituals promise this-worldly rewards, and can blur the moral codes which Buddhist monks are bound to uphold.¹³ Whereas in Buddhist thought, wealth is a reward for good deeds that must be collected during various life cycles, the spirit mediums define their practice as individual, flexible, and immediate. Rather than seeking salvation through merit-making, clients typically ask for assistance with personal requests such as help passing an exam, getting a job or a promotion, finding a partner, becoming pregnant, or reconciling between parties at odds. This help is delivered through the use of *pāramī*, which is granted by the spirits (*anak tā*). However, the most common requests are for a better life, primarily in financial terms. In this paper, I therefore focus on Brahmanist practice for competition, profit, and prosperity.

Today, most spirit mediums (*grū pāramī*) are consulted for business reasons. Clients rush to a spirit medium's shrine (*pāy sī*) in the morning to 'donate' a typically fixed sum of money in exchange for hand-painted *yantra*, which should provide magical power to protect against any dangers, or for blessed incense sticks, which should attract customers, before hurrying off to open their own business. Clients told me the cost of these blessed objects was minor compared to their possible effects, effects which are very present in the stories about shops or stalls that did booming business on the days that the spirits decided to help them. Other rituals may be used to make a person more attractive to give them the upper hand over their competitors, for example, in a job interview. This can be done by applying gold foil to the clients' faces. When the face is completely covered, the medium will rub it 'into' the skin, while reciting mantras in spirit language (*bhāsā khmoc*). Donations for such a treatment range from 10,000 to 30,000 Riel (2.50 - 7.50 US dollars),

¹² Often referred to as *brah sangdh ceh sro dyk* ('monks who know how to perform *sro dyk*'). *Sro dyk* is a ritual where monks or mediums sprinkle water on the practitioner's body to purify and bless them.

¹³ "Buddhism can explain transcendental questions such as one's general existence in this life and the next. But the folk religion can give reasons for and means of coping with the more immediate and incidental, yet nonetheless pressing, problems and fortunes of one's present existence" (Ebihara 1968: 442).

which clients view as a rational investment given the possible beneficial outcome. Ang (1986) states that before the war, these rituals (*sneh*¹⁴) were considered *amboe* (literally as ‘acts’ or ‘actions’), which is defined as amoral action or ‘black magic’. Today, rituals to influence others are openly offered by spirit mediums, who nonetheless state that these can only provide morally proper effects, as the spirits cannot harm others for no ‘good’ reason.

This desire to be better off now – without having to ‘wait’ for the consequences of merit-making (which can happen after rebirth as well) – has been sparked by economic growth and the new atmosphere of optimism which has developed with it. This situation corresponds to what Jackson has described as „prosperity religion“ (1999) and reflects the intertwined correspondence between economic liberalisation, societal modernisation and religious re-enchantment, which has been documented in many Southeast Asian contexts recently (Pattana 2008; Endres and Lauser 2011; Foxeus 2017). In the following section, I illustrate the connection between prosperity and re-enchantment by looking at the example of Bun Ly, a spirit medium from Southwest Cambodia.

Contemporary Brahmanist Practice

Few people in Cambodia today would define themselves as Brahmanists rather than Buddhists, but Bun Ly does. He is a self-assured medium and organiser of spirit ceremonies, which involve up to 15 simultaneously possessed mediums (all by different spirits) and attract dozens of visitors. Bun Ly has also inspired others to become mediums, who then feel obliged to follow him to ceremonies throughout Cambodia. In performing new variations of existing rituals, he is not only a practitioner but an inventor of Brahmanist practice. By focusing my anthropological research on him and his work, the logic of how and by which means Brahmanist practice is conducted and perceived in contemporary Cambodia becomes clear.

When I met him in 2012, Bun Ly lived in a small house, which has only two shrines, next to the house of his wife and children. He had lived there since 2005, when she excluded him from their shared living space after he closed down his construction business to become a spirit medium. Recounting this event, Bun Ly stressed his efforts to escape his destiny. He had loved running his own construction company, which had several machines and employed about two dozen workers. Lacking orders and facing financial difficulties, however, Bun Ly became exhausted and desperate. His possessing spirit, Lok Tā Eysey¹⁴, offered him help in both the physical and financial form, if Bun would become his *rūpa* (body). He had remained reluctant for several months, but things continued to get worse, and his company and indeed his



Img. (2)
Bun Ly with blessed cotton cords that can be tied around the hip for protection and luck. He traded them for donations. Takeo Province, 2012, © PC.

¹⁴ The name of *lok tā* (‘honourable grandfather’) is a synonym of *anak tā*, while a female spirit would be addressed as *yāy* (grandmother). *Eysey* is derived from the Khmer name for Siva (*brah Eyzor*) and is mostly presented in his ascetic form – with a long white beard, a kettle and walking stick, vested in tiger fur. Locals do not connect him to the Indian God.

health became seriously endangered. He finally agreed to worship the spirits in a dream, in which he also negotiated an agreement to retain a 20 percent share of the income from the medium work that he did not have to donate to charity or spend on spiritual offerings.

After building his shrine, thereby bringing his spirit to its new home and possessing his body permanently, he used the strategies he had learnt as a business owner and manager in his new career as a medium. That is, he saw himself as self-employed, and tried to win *anak dham* ('big people') as clients. Unlike others, he also made contact with other mediums in the area and set up social networks among the members of his new profession.

Since Brahmanist practice relies on the wills and desires of spirits, and only the mediums have access to these spirits, it does appear to offer mediums a great deal of interpretive flexibility. Bun Ly's spirit had a striking idea – conduct as many *loeng anak tā* ceremonies as possible. Normally held between harvest and planting season each year, the ceremony is to 'praise' (*loeng*) the *anak tā*. It is not only a thanksgiving ceremony, but also an opportunity to meet as a community after the long months of work in the fields. Working on behalf of his spirit, Bun Ly adapted the ritual frame to now make it more important for wealthy patrons of the ceremony to be blessed by a number of spirits to increase the *pāramī* of the blessing. As a medium with business experience, Bun Ly was careful to calculate the costs and returns before organising meetings: he would consult possible donors, gather information on their requests, and search for spirit mediums who could meet their demands. When he had collected at least 500 US dollars in offerings, he would start the organisation of a new ceremony. A number of decisions had to be made: about the musicians, the craftspeople who would set up a temporary shrine for the ceremony (as is common for *loeng anak tā*), and the spirit mediums to invite.

In 2011, he cured a police officer who worked along the Thai border from an unknown illness. In the process, the officer became possessed by a powerful *anak tā* responsible for his health issues. Bun Ly later convinced the police officer to construct a huge shrine in his own house. With the officer's help, Bun Ly also developed connections with the high-ranked police and military staff (patron-client relationships known as *khsae*), who would spend large sums on offerings in his rituals. During my research in 2012–13, Bun Ly conducted at least seven *loeng anak tā*, four of them in five months at the police officer's home. To illustrate the range of requests Bun Ly accommodated, I recount one of these ceremonies in detail, also showing the economic layers of the ritual practice and the different demands that clients bring to Brahmanist and Buddhist actors.

On the morning of 22 November 2012, I woke up in the house of my host, the border patrol officer/spirit medium. It was my second *loeng anak tā* organised by Bun Ly at the newly built shrine.¹⁵ A politician was one of the major patrons of this ceremony, and he may have also been there because of the first ritual that day – a flag raising ceremony in front of the house to which several of the 20 mediums there for the *loeng anak tā* had invited their spirits and shouted nationalist slogans. Monks from a nearby monastery, who had been invited to receive the *dāna*¹⁶, arrived during the ritual. While this was bad timing for the organizers, as they did not want the monks to actually witness Brahmanist practice, they calmly completed the flag ritual. The participants in the *dāna*, mainly woman from the surrounding area, entered the first floor, which was overlooked by a huge shrine. Most of the mediums did not take part in the Buddhist *dāna*. When I asked Bun Ly, the self-declared Brahmanist, why he invited monks to every ceremony, he answered: "otherwise, people would call me crazy". To avoid any moral ambiguity, Bun Ly understood that even the most Brahmanist public ritual needed Buddhist legitimation. At the *dāna*, the monks were presented expensive offerings in the name of the host family, as well as normal offerings made by the local women, regular visitors to the monastery. After three hours, Bun Ly announced that the ceremony was over, and that the monks wanted to stay on a little to

¹⁵ During the first ceremony, when a politician had asked for protection from the Thai military, he learned that the spirit needed individual worship such as specific music to grant his wish (Christensen 2016).

¹⁶ Monks are treated to a meal and are presented with gifts (mostly utensils for daily use) to gain merit.

rest. Once the donors had left, the mediums re-entered the first floor, and the monks were then asked to bless the shrine. As I had never seen monks bless a shrine of a spirit medium before, and as the blessing was conducted only once the majority of the regular monastery visitors had left, I suspect that the end of the ceremony had been announced so that the blessing could be done without them witnessing it. When it was completed, Bun Ly proudly announced that the power (*pāramī*) of the shrine had been increased by the “*pāramī* of Buddha”. The mediums had refrained from becoming possessed for the four hours that the monks were there, but while they were still getting on a truck to go home, the ‘main’ part of the ceremony began: ancient music (*bleng purāṇa*) started, and the spirits began to dance in the bodies of the mediums.



Img. (3)
Monks bless the shrine
of a spirit medium in
Banteay Meanchey
Province, 2012, © PC.

In the ceremony, the ‘highest’ spirit which Bun Ly identified, a Chinese spirit in the body of a daughter of the host, was exclusively involved in the politician’s matters. As the highest ranked guest, he engaged in several activities which included carrying the host couple on a palanquin around the shrine and donating rice to the villagers, who waited outside the house complex for the whole day until it was given to them. These deeds could be interpreted as *pāramī*-creating (as distinct from merit-making), as they were only conducted when mediums were around, and mediums cannot transfer merit, but rather provide access to *pāramī*.

Another sponsor of the ceremony was a high-rank police officer who arrived with his family in the late afternoon. He wanted to consult Bun Ly on a personal matter, as well as asking for help to get promoted to police chief in the province. He also asked for physical protection, since there were other candidates for the lucrative position. The officer had donated a lot of money to Bun Ly before the ceremony and agreed to triple the donation if promoted. A few weeks later, the officer died in an accident, an event that Bun Ly ascribed to the spirit mediums of other candidates who had provided more powerful *pāramī* than he had been able to.

The organisation of the *loeng anak tā* was always tied with the concerns of patrons, who ‘donated’ money in return for spiritual help from the *anak tā*. The costs were not always covered by the donations, but if *anak dham* (‘big people’) were involved, there was an opportunity to make a good profit. Bun Ly was always taking a financial risk. By acting as manager and medium, he collected the clients’ demands and connected them to matching spirits/mediums, and, in the process, all of them became part of his *khsae*. Of course, this was not the only reason for such an event. After the patrons had been blessed,

local villagers were invited to come. In making donations to the poor villagers, the patrons could also gain merit. At the same time, the villagers also asked the mediums for blessings, healing and charms, which they were provided with immediately.

After the fourth *loeng anak tā* at the Thai border, Bun Ly and the border patrol officer/spirit medium argued over money and stopped working together. At one of my last meetings before I left Cambodia in 2013, and before I gave him one of my regular donations which were obligatory to ask questions of the spirit, Bun Ly informed me that he had renegotiated his share of the profits with his main spirit Lok Tā Eysey, and that he could now keep 50 percent. He proudly told me that this was much more than one can get in Buddhist practice, stating, “we will never get rich if we follow Buddhism”.



Img. (4)
Spirit-Mediums bless patrons, mediums and other visitors at the end of a *loeng anak tā* in Banteay Meanchey Province, 2012, © PC.

Conclusion

The example of the *loeng anak tā* illustrates how Buddhism and Brahmanism can work together in practice, and the role that Brahmanism has for practitioners today. An aspect of Cambodian religious practice which has turned out to be particularly appropriate for these times, Brahmanism has undergone a ‘quiet’ revitalisation. The difference between *purāṇa* (‘ancient’) and *samāya* (‘modern’) is essential to understanding how Cambodian religious practice has developed and operates today. The ancient *purāṇa* turns out to be more appropriate for economic development and other ‘modern’ concerns than the text-based *samāya* movement which is, in contrast, based on the study of the Pāli Canon. While the rewards of merit-making are mostly related to the next life, and are therefore significantly less explicit or immediate, today Brahmanist practices promise the individual (near) immediate, this-worldly reward. This difference, I argue, is the primary factor in their revitalisation today. This becomes clear when looking at the requests of the clients in the example of the *loeng anak tā*. It is not only considered a powerful form of assistance when seeking a promotion or, as in the case of the border patrol guard or the politicians, against possible Thai attacks (Christensen 2016), it is also morally questionable, since it involves potential harm to others. On the basis of *pāramī* – the morally ambiguous power of spirits – clients could negotiate and demand things that would not be otherwise possible. In this

respect, *pāramī* becomes a catalyst for negotiating politics, finances, safety, and worldly power (*aṃṇāca*) (Gyallay-Pap 2007; Kent 2007; Marston 2008b), and the mediums, clients and actors interested in *pāramī* clearly differentiate it and its effects from Buddhism, which is considered less suitable for practical, this-worldly assistance.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that Brahmanist practice can be understood as a prosperity religion, at least to some extent, as its effects are suitable in the aspirations for prosperity. However, clients also adopt Brahmanist practices for a range of other issues: to be healed, for advice on difficult issues, and for help with personal relationships, finding a partner, or passing exams. Nevertheless, most clients consult the spirits, through the mediums of course, to ask for financial help. Tracing Cambodia's ancient and recent history, the rationalisation of Buddhism, and the Khmer Rouge's later attempts to eliminate it, as well as the needs, hopes and demands that Cambodians have today and for the future which emerged with liberalization, it becomes clearer how and why Brahmanist practices have gained such prominence. I argue that this forms a re-enchantment of Cambodian society, in which the relation between Cambodian Buddhism and spirit practices have been, and indeed are being, constantly renegotiated.

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