

**The Khmer Rouge and the Re-Visioning of the Khmer Empire:
Buddhism encounters Political Religion**

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ABSTRACT *In this paper I revisit and ultimately reexamine one of the most intriguing totalitarian movements of the 20th century. By employing the seminal thoughts of Eric Voegelin, I assert that the Democratic Kampuchean regime of the Khmer Rouge, in modern day Cambodia, from 1975 to 1979, can and should be examined as a 'political religion'. Although atheist and anti-religious in its official rhetoric, Democratic Kampuchea contained at its core an all-encompassing spiritual-religious experience that drove the totalitarian movement. For the Communist Party of Kampuchea's leaders, or Angkar, this revolution embodied a Voegelinian "re-divinization of man and society," or more broadly speaking, a re-visioning of the Khmer Empire. I first relate a brief history of the Khmer religious meta-narrative over successive kingdoms and empires, and then point out that the Khmer Rouge politico-religious experience starts with the 'death of god', or the destruction of the previous faith including the Sangha, wats, and monks. Total physical, social, and emotional transformation follows with the influence of Theravada Buddhist understanding at its roots, and subsequently climaxing with the birth of a counter-religion, with the substitution of Angkar as its new "god".*

Buddhism, manifested in one form or another, has been weaved intrinsically into the fabric of the Khmer cultural narrative schema for nearly two millennia, over a number of successive kingdoms and empires. It conceives of the social orders and explains the knowledge and experience in which the Khmer live "as manifestations of a cosmological system based on the principle of *kamma* (*karma* in Sanskrit)" (Keyes 1994: 44).

The initial forms of Buddhist cult activity came by way of Hindu merchants into the earliest known settlement and first significant polity in Cambodia generally known as Funan (Harris 2005). It is impossible to be certain about when Buddhism first arrived, however, according to the evidence, which is "at best sketchy" (Skilling 1997: 93), we can assume it penetrated Funan's influence due to the discovery of "around forty carved Buddha images from the Mekong Delta region and from areas of Thailand associated with Funan" which "have been found in a variety of materials, including stone, wood, glass, clay, bone, and metal" (Harris 2005: 4). Although dating must be tentative, "other significant discoveries include a fine standing Buddha in *varamudra*, probably dating

from the seventh century, discovered at Tuol Tahoy, Kampong Speu Province; two images of buddhas in *parinirvana*, dating from the fifth-sixth centuries, one from Oc Eo and the other from Angkor Borei” (Harris 2005: 4). The second wave of Buddhism made its way into the Khmer land during the height of the Angkor period. “Epigraphical, archaeological, and associated sources tend to point to the direction of the Mahayana” as the main influence at specific points in the history of Angkor (802-1431) (Harris 2005: 225). Nevertheless, Mahayana Buddhism should be “regarded as the poor relation of a variety of more dominant Brahmanical cults during most of the Angkorian period” (Harris 2005: 225). At some points in time it left little or no impact on the historical record. Life was largely dictated through the lively presence of Hindu-Buddhist syncretisms.

A considerable exception to this rule can be found during the reign of the last great emperor of Angkor, Jayavarman VII (r. c. 1181-1220). A Khmer inscription of Preah Khan, Angkor, dated at approximately 1191 suggests that the great king Jayavarman VII had inherited a strong attachment to Buddhism from his father, Dharanindravarman II (r. c. 1150-1160), who “found his satisfaction in this nectar that is the religion of Sakyamuni” (Coedes 1968: 173). And according to professor of Buddhist studies at the University of Cumbria, U.K., Ian Harris, in his 2005 work *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*, “Under his patronage, tantric Mahayana concepts permeated the ritual life of the state, while the ancient Indian notion of righteous Buddhist kingship appears to have given shape to some aspects of the polity that Jayavarman used to govern his empire” (226). Although Jayavarman VII’s cult of state Buddhism may have been the high-water mark for the Mahayana, the symbiosis of

religion with the ritual of the empire did not survive the changing economic and political circumstances. Brahmanism as well followed in its wake. But the Theravada influence began to increase, perhaps due to some of its esoteric elements being present in neighboring geographical areas before becoming established in Cambodia, or due to other members of Jayavarman VII's immediate household having a strong attraction to the teachings of the Buddha. "One of his wives, Indradevi, was an important Buddhist patroness, described as having 'surpassed in her knowledge the knowledge of philosophers'" (Harris 2005: 23). This new religious dispensation was less oriented to the demands of the state and the requirement of large-scale temple construction and the territorial expansion that made it possible. "Despite the shift in religious regime", articulates Ian Harris, "Theravada cult activity, for instance, owes a significant debt to quite archaic ways of understanding reality, while basic structural and sociological features of the tradition largely persisted down to the present" (2005: 226). In other words, the kingship cult was preserved from the earlier period, "but somewhat shorn of its Brahmanical and tantric garb" (Harris 2005: 226). The king no longer had to be associated with the future Buddha, Maitreya. He was no longer to regard himself as the Dharma-king, or the bodhisattva. Jayavarman VII's role became "primarily the protector of the monastic order, the visible and institutional expression of the Buddha's powerful insight into the true nature of reality. Theravada doctrine considers protection of Buddhism to be the indispensable prerequisite for any properly functioning state" (Harris 2005: 227). A righteous king, ruling in accordance to these insights, ensures "the moral order (*dhamma*)—indeed, of the entire cosmos" (Harris 2005: 227).

At the end of Jayavarman VII's reign a shift away from the concept of the god-king to the *Sangha* (monastic assembly of ordained Buddhist monks) occurred, redirecting resources that would have constructed temples to building monastic dwellings, and public works projects that would have a direct effect on the common people. This clearly marked a break in the imperial Khmer politico-religious dialectic. The physical layout and the iconography of the successor capitals replicated these important elements of the late Angkorian period. Contrary to the idea that the elaborate Hindu-Buddhist temples were abandoned after the fall of Angkor, many of the important sites remained in use, however appropriated to the new Theravada cult. According to Ian Harris, "Angkor Wat, for example, was remodeled so that it could serve as a beacon of a new faith" (2005: 227).

Despite the shifting influences of neighbors Thailand and Vietnam on Cambodia after the demise of Angkor, Theravada Buddhism subsisted with no major shocks or rifts to the established religious order for several hundred years (Harris 2005). Theravada Buddhism endured in spite of incursions by Islam, the French, the Japanese, and the Americans to name a few. The religion's only genuine struggle for the continuation of its existence occurred during three years, eight months, and twenty days between April 1975 and January 1979. For the duration of that timeframe, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), or as Prince Sihanouk infamously coined them, the "Khmer Rouge", organized one of the most brutal assaults on any religion in modern history. Democratic Kampuchea's minister of Foreign Affairs Ieng Sary, soon after the Khmer Rouge victory, announced to the world that the Communist Party of Kampuchea's government "granted freedom to all religious groups, a freedom which was clearly written into the new

constitution: 'Every citizen of Kampuchea has the right to hold any belief in religion and has as well the right to have neither belief nor religion. Any reactionary religion interfering with Democratic Kampuchea and her people is strictly prohibited' (Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea, chapter XV, article 20). However, as he also asserted that the monasteries were opened throughout the country at that time (Newsweek September 4, 1975)", the Communist Party of Kampuchea actually aimed to exterminate all religious beliefs (Yang Sam 1987: 67).

For philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901-85), some kind of spiritual meaning is at the core of all totalitarian politics. In order to describe the meaning construction of the totalitarian "regimes of the twentieth century that, in their opinion, went beyond the analytical reach of traditional concepts such as despotism and tyranny," Voegelin in his 1938 treatise *Die politischen Religionen* developed the concept of the "political religion" (Vondung 2005: 88). The Voegelinian idea of political religion has been "meant to define the essential meaning of 'totalitarian,' namely the claim of these regimes to dominate and control not only the political and social sphere, but all aspects of human existence, and secondly, to explain the outrageous and unprecedented use of violence against foreign enemies as well as against members of their own societies" (*Ibid*: 88). Germany's National Socialism (see Burleigh 2000) and Italian Fascism (see Gentile 1996) have equally been described as political religions by numerous international scholars. But even "followers of movements that want to be anti-religious and atheistic" can be political religions because they "refuse to concede that religious experiences can be found at the root of their fanatical attitude, only venerating as sacred something else than the religion they fight" (Voegelin 2000: 32).

One such instance of a totalitarian project that described itself as being anti-religious and atheistic yet still operated as a political religion was the Khmer Rouge regime of Democratic Kampuchea from 17 April 1975 to 9 January 1979, under the leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) headed by Saloth Sar or, as he is more notoriously known, Pol Pot. Although our knowledge of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) is still incomplete and perspectives on this period differ amongst historians, anthropologists, and political scientists, information of events and conditions during this time have concluded that the policies of the CPK “aimed at radically reformulating Khmer society and culture into a new revolutionary order” (Ebihara 1994: 22). It is because of the implementation of Marxist-Leninist political theory, Maoism, and other strands of communist revolutionary thought that the CPK leadership formulated the radical agrarian utopianism of Democratic Kampuchea as a political religion. Just as Voegelin understood National Socialism as a genuine religious phenomenon, which means that at its root lay religious experiences that lead to a manifestation of a new faith, Democratic Kampuchea too, can be examined as a political religion in the same way (Vondung 2005). DK’s totalitarian ideological claim can be viewed as an authentic religious phenomenon, which exhibited the trappings of many Khmer Theravada Buddhist religious experiences, yet ultimately led to a construction of an entirely new spiritual identity. The Democratic Kampuchean regime violently implemented a total overthrow and reformation of traditional Buddhist beliefs and substituted a new belief system in its place. A spiritual revolution of this magnitude, to vulgarly employ Voegelinian terminology, “radically de-divinized” the previous religious state, and violently conducted a “re-divinization of man and society” (Voegelin 2000: 174-175). In

other words, the Khmer Rouge political religion effectively re-visioned the Khmer Empire.

For the DK regime to realize their vision of attaining an agrarian based utopian communism, a complete break from the past had to be accomplished. According to historian David Chandler, the DK totalitarian project was unique. “No other regime tried to go so quickly or so far...the revolution was a courageous, doomed attempt by a group of utopian thinkers to break free from the capitalist world system, abandon the past, and rearrange the future” (Chandler 1999: 3).

But “[i]n order for totalitarian politics to be complete, the ‘death of God,’ i.e., the overcoming of all traditional religion, has to precede” (Henningesen 2000: 8-9). And “when God is invisible behind the world, the contents of the world will become new gods; when symbols of transcendent religiosity are banned, new symbols develop from the inner-worldly language of science to take their place” (Voegelin 2000: 60). This ‘death of God’ started in Cambodia on 17 April 1975 when the country had been “reduced to a Hobbesian state in which all moral standards had been destroyed or abandoned. It was in this moral vacuum that the Khmer Rouge set out to create a wholly new social order” (Keyes 1994: 54-55). Communist Party of Kampuchea general secretary Pol Pot, along with CPK Center members Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Son Sen, Khieu Samphan and others from a small group of educated Khmer elites, attempted in a ruthless manner to institute one of the most brutally visionary revolutions of the twentieth century, completely destroying the ‘old’ and continuously pursuing the ‘new.’ It was to have no antecedents; all institutions of the past were to be eliminated (*Ibid*: 55). “Not only were institutions associated with the pro-American government of Lon Nol, the

neutralist government of Prince Sihanouk, and the colonial regime under the French to be rejected, but even bona fide Khmer institutions that could be traced to the precolonial past were to be rooted out and destroyed. Foremost among these was the *sangha*, or the Buddhist order of monks” (*Ibid*: 55). The apex of Khmer Rouge leadership, known throughout Democratic Kampuchea at that time only as the omnipotent *Angkar* [the organization], attempted to destroy any trace of religion and substitute the Party in its place. Buddhism was to be removed from the traditional Cambodian social order, and the Party “was to be substituted for the *sangha* as the ultimate source of moral authority in Khmer society” (*Ibid*: 57).

The eradication of Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge destroyed more than just the religion sanctioned and supported by the previous regime; it destroyed something that was integral to the traditional Khmer way of life. Although not completely immune to the secularizing tendencies of modernization, Cambodians were a highly religious people (Hawk 1990: 131). “Like Roman Catholicism in Poland, Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia embodied and represented Cambodia’s tradition, culture, and identity. For centuries it was the main source of learning and education” (*Ibid*: 131). According to missionary Francois Ponchaud who lived in Cambodia from 1965 until he was forced to flee Phnom Penh ten years later: “until April 1975 the word for ‘race’ and ‘religion’ in Cambodia were the same, and in everyday language ‘Khmer’ implied ‘Buddhist’” (Ponchaud 1978: 126). Keyes believes, “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 a basic source of Khmer identity, to create a new order with few roots in the past” (Keyes 1994: 58).

Similar to the principle of ‘normative inversion,’ employed by Jan Assmann to portray ancient Egypt, used to describe the “inverting of abominations of the other culture into obligations and vice versa” (Assmann 1997: 31), the “Khmer Rouge sought to create a world that was the *moral inversion* of that of Buddhism”(my *emphasis*) (Keyes 1994: 57). It would be a re-visioning of the Khmer Empire. Pol Pot and the CPK “conceived of a new order in which evil and good were fused in the Angkar and cadres were both subhuman beings with immense magical powers and morally superior beings equivalent to Buddhist monks” (*Ibid*: 58). Buddhism was abolished and supplanted by secular ‘revolutionary’ norms and behavior implemented by *Angkar* (Ebihara 1994: 23). The changes were “geared toward the dissolution of certain basic institutions—the family, village, and the *wat*—that would have competed with the state for people’s loyalties and labor” (*Ibid*: 23). DK rhetoric and sometimes Draconian measures were used to ensure compliance with these new behaviors.

From the first day of their total victory the “Khmer Rouge imposed an iron grip in order to control the population and began the implementation of drastic changes” (Yang Sam 1987: 67). After the takeover of Phnom Penh and other important cities and towns, the Communist Party of Kampuchea evacuated its inhabitants and forced them to trek for miles to unspecified locations in remote rural areas. “Monks also took part in this evacuation. Fearing for their lives, all monks left their monasteries and traveled from one monastery to another, seeking asylum. Some elderly monks, however, decided to remain in their quarters. The Superior of the Mohanikay, Huot That, and a few elderly monks of his entourage, who from the start had decided to stay, were all taken away” (Yang Sam 1987: 67).

Monk evacuees were treated not unlike any other ordinary Khmer individual. All those forcibly removed from the cities, later to be dubbed 'New People' by the *Angkar*, including monks, were subject to starvation, random beatings, arbitrary arrest, and execution along the route to the countryside. Once there, young monks "were grouped for reeducation...forced to disrobe and were sent to the youth mobile unit where they were moved from one labor field to another. Elderly monks who seemed to be able to keep their saffron robe a little longer were repeatedly asked to leave their monastic life" (Yang Sam 1987: 68). Charles F. Keyes, from his essay "Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia," explains the destruction of Buddhism in more detail:

In 1969/1970, the last time a count was made, there was some 65,000 monks and novices in Cambodia's 3,369 *wats*. Of these, 2,385 monks and 139 *wats* were affiliated with the Thommayut order. During the war between 1970 and 1975 more than one-third of the *wats* were destroyed; many monks and novices were killed, left the order, or became refugees...In the immediate aftermath of its takeover in 1975, the Khmer Rouge did not immediately move to ban Buddhism but by the end of the year it had been declared to be a "reactionary religion." Monks and novices, even those in the base areas that Khmer Rouge had controlled before April 1975, were compelled to disrobe...In 1980 it was estimated that five out of every eight monks were executed during the Pol Pot regime. Major temple-monasteries were destroyed and lesser ones were converted into storage centers, prisons, or extermination camps. The former cremation grounds at Choeung Ek *wat* on the edge of Phnom Penh became one of the major sites for mass executions. 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: 55-56).

The eradication of Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge destroyed more than just the religion sanctioned and supported by the previous regime; it destroyed something that was integral to the traditional Cambodian way of life. There is the story of the Venerable Chea Tong who survived the Pol Pot period that sheds light on the typical treatment of many of those who chose the monastic life. In 1975 this monk was forced with around a hundred of his fellow monks and novices to leave their *wat* in Phnom Penh and walk to a community some fifty kilometers north. Here they were forced to disrobe and were informed that religion was feudal and oppressive and monks were useless parasites,

leeches living on the blood of the people. During the existence of Democratic Kampuchea, Chea Tong's monastic companions disappeared; some, he heard were executed. The temple monastery in the community he lived and labored was "turned into a food storehouse and pigs were kept in front of the temple." Khmer Rouge cadre, in an act of moral inversion, even "shot the giant cement statue of the Buddha inside the temple between the eyes" (Richardson 1981: 104).

The *Sangha* was viewed as a real threat to the dominance of *Angkar*. So much so that the CPK leadership included the monks as a target for a number of sayings that permeated the fabric of Democratic Kampuchean life. For example in Henri Locard's collection of the sayings of *Angkar*, titled *Pol Pot's Little Red Book*, "Religion is the opiate [of the people]", "Monks are parasites", "Monks are tapeworms gnawing at the bowels of society", and "Joining hands to greet monks is like joining hands to greet the country children" (2004: 171-172).

Not only were the newly displaced monks disrobed, and in some cases executed, they were forced to labor in the fields. This is by no means the biggest inconvenience to the lives of monks, or for non-monks for that matter, but if we look at the forced labor through the tradition of Theravada Buddhism we see that its effect may have been more demoralizing than at first glance. The requirement that Buddhist monks be expected to work for their living should not be regarded as an imposition. For the most part, the practice is far from uncommon in cultures where the Mahayana form of Buddhism dominates, such as China. However, "in the Theravada, fully ordained monks are prevented from engaging in many types of activity by virtue of their rules of discipline

(*vinaya*). The digging of the ground, for example, is a monastic offence on the grounds that it inevitably causes the death and injury of small creatures” (Harris 2007: 114).

In the traditional setting this did not lead to the charge that monks were lazy. Looked at from a purely economic perspective, the removal of significant numbers of potentially active young men from an over-populated labour market can be seen in a positive light. But from the religious perspective the custom makes more sense. The path to enlightenment is regarded as a difficult road that can only be trodden by a minority. Admittedly, only a very few monks can be said to have achieved this goal but all *sangha* members, almost regardless of the spiritual capabilities, are symbols of the possibility. Lay people, by contrast, do not possess the ‘spiritual capital’ of the monks (Harris 2007: 114).

In the set of relations deeply embedded in Theravada Buddhist culture, the exchange of goods and services between these two segments of society, the *Sangha* and the lay people, ensures a final sense of equity (Harris 2007: 114). The layperson toils in the agricultural lands to produce food, a portion of which is offered to the *Sangha*. In doing so the layperson supports the religious order that valorizes such laborious actions as highly meritorious. “The monk, on the other hand, by temporarily or permanently eschewing worldly success, broadcasts the salvific message of the Buddha and, by acting as a recipient of alms, provides the most common means of lay merit-making” (Harris 2007: 114). By forcing monks to work, the Communist Party of Kampuchea dissolved these precarious social relations and, in doing so, immensely shocked a large percentage of Democratic Kampuchea’s population.

Evacuation, disrobement, and forced labor are just some of the many obstacles Theravada Buddhist monks faced during the initial stages of the Khmer Rouge politico-religious re-visioning. Deemed a reactionary religion from the onset, Khmer Buddhism as a legal religious practice was forbidden. The *Sangha* organization itself was prohibited and no longer functioned as an institution. The monasteries were all closed and most were physically desecrated or destroyed. The cultural inclusion of the *Wat* (a monastery

temple, or school) in everyday Khmer lifeworlds' ceased to exist as well. Pagodas under CPK control often served as locations for propaganda, re-education and planning (Harris 2007). *Wats* were transformed into domains of animal husbandry, grain or rice storage, fertilizer housing, ammunition and weapons depots, or makeshift prisons for torture, detention, and execution. Monks were not only forced by *Angkar* to disrobe, "which is the affair of fellow monks, not of the secular power", but they were even under some instances forced to marry (Harris 2007: 122). This practice, unrelated to any need to engineer population growth, had its reasons more likely, on the one hand, in the "desire to humiliate, control and smash and, on the other, an overriding concern for social conformity. This seems also to lie at the basis of the policy to compel Muslims to eat pork" (Harris 2007: 127).

For *Angkar*, since Buddhism was forbidden and thus no longer made sense, the *Sangha* could be used for other purposes. The Khmer Rouge conscripted able-bodied monks into the army. "By forcing monks to be soldiers they built on a traditional fear that the *sangha* had the capability to rise up as a locus of opposition while at the same time this potential power was subverted to service the needs of the revolution" (Harris 2007: 129). Most conscription drives appear to have affected small numbers of individuals, but mass conscriptions happened from time to time. Kenneth M. Quinn, for example, claims that in June 1973 over a thousand monks from Banteay Meas, Kampong Trach and Chhouk districts, Kampot province were collected and formed into battalions. They were immediately sent to the front (Hawk 1986, from Harris 2007: 130).

Death was of course the only way out of the *Angkar's* stranglehold of Khmer Buddhism. And death happened frequently to monks. "Min Khin's estimates were based

on the analysis of reports received from 19 provinces and towns, supplemented by an investigation of ‘all kinds of [unspecified] documents.’ It holds that the total number of monks killed from 1975-1978 is 25,168 out of 3,202 pagodas. That is an average of 7.86 monk deaths per pagoda. (Harris 2007: 222). There were 5,673 monks killed in Takeo province alone. Of the 3,369 active *wats* in 1969, no available information exists of the active *wats* in 1979, probably because none existed. As for the number of monks living within the *wats*, in 1969 the number was 65,062 and in 1979 – 12 (Harris 2007: 225). Although these numbers can only be estimates, we all know that the *Sangha* met the same fate as millions of other Cambodians. The religious and spiritual cosmology that guided the Khmer meta-narrative was crushed and thoroughly dismantled under the fury of *Angkar*’s re-visioning project.

But it was not just the physical annihilation of Buddhist monks that allowed the *Angkar* to successfully destroy and abolish the *Sangha* and the *Wat* from the spiritual belief and daily life of the Khmer people. The Khmer Rouge sought to discredit and criticize Buddhism openly. In community meetings held in monasteries every night in every village attended by hundreds of people, cadre of the Communist Party of Kampuchea at the district level would orate, “warning people that everyone must not have any nostalgia or regret about the disappearance of Buddhism. To his view the conduct of the Communist Party’s members was far more perfect than the practices of the monks” (Yang Sam 1987: 70). In other words, Khmer Rouge cadre more closely observed the tenets of Buddhist teachings. The virtues of the *Angkar* far supersede those of Khmer Buddhism.

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. To the positive, they emphasized being servile and self-sacrificing, being constructively critical, being self-reliant, being always alert and conscious, being the master of one's work and respecting collectivism. These are the virtues of the 'true' revolutionary members who supposedly had far better personalities than monks (Yang Sam 1987: 70).

Mirroring the persecution instigated by Pharaoh Akhenaten (or Amenhotep IV) in Egypt during the fourteenth century BCE specifically against Amun and his divine consort Mut that eradicated the iconography of the previous Egyptian religion; Democratic Kampuchea's radical attempt to eradicate all religion and replace it with a new revolutionary political religion, not only involved rhetorical attacks, but the symbolic and literal destruction and desecration of the two most important elements of Buddhism, the *sangha* and the temples. This crushed the population's moral and spiritual life-world. All aspects of the people's previous lives were drastically turned upside-down. Buddhist temples that had served as moral and ceremonial centers for the populace, were either physically demolished or profaned, and their significance replaced by a revolutionary political ideology upholding new and different values and codes of behavior (Ebihara 1994: 33). "Democratic Kampuchea undertook an active program of indoctrination into their new ideology" (*Ibid*: 33). "[T]hey attempted to instill this revolutionary and socialist consciousness through self- and mutual-criticism sessions, speeches, songs, and the like" (*Ibid*: 33).

First hand accounts of the horrors that clouded this most serene of nations, like that of DK survivors Haing S. Ngor (1987), Pin Yathay (1987) and U Sam Oeur (2005), tell of the harshest of existences. Khmer Rouge soldiers not only destroyed traditional religion and culture, they also evacuated the cities and towns, forced the populace to march to rural areas for agricultural labor, collectivized the modes of production,

communalized living and eating, abolished the monetary system, conducted widespread summary executions, and promoted starvation and disease.

Looking further abroad, the whole DK project reflected what the Bolsheviks attempted to accomplish in 1920s Russia. Through the execution and/or disrobement of priests and bishops, they too attempted to eradicate religion and substitute the Party in its place. But what separated the two revolutions' practices was that in its attempt to control all aspects of everyday life and transfer the authority and loyalty from the spiritual world of Buddhism to a new order based on total acquiescence to the omnipotent *Angkar*, DK leaders attacked not only the religion they fought, but the social unit of the family and its spiritual beliefs at the core.

Anthropologist May Ebihara writes: "The village family in the old society was a unit of parents and children (and often other relatives as well) who lived and worked together, shared resources, and were emotionally attached to one another" (1994: 28). Under the DK re-vision this 'village family' was remolded and suppressed. In an effort to substitute itself in the parental role, *Angkar* changed the social unit of the family, first by the physical separation of family members, relocating children away from their parents to different labor camps for purposes of indoctrination. This separation from their parents made it easier for the Party to mold new forms of thought and behavior in the children. Thus while the children were "no longer under the authority of their families but rather of the representatives of the government and party...the customary relationship between the old and young was reversed" (*Ibid*: 29). The parents and elders that were once respected now became viewed as survivors of the reactionary old regime, and the young were the bearers of the new revolutionary culture (*Ibid*: 29). In DK the

young were referred to as “Comrade Child,” “for all children are regarded as the infants of the Angkar” (Ponchaud 1978: 121). Since *Angkar* became the father and mother of the people, it follows that all children belong to it and not to their true parents.

To re-vision the new moral identity of the Khmer Empire, and to show that the CPK cadre and its leadership were to be viewed as morally superior beings equivalent to Buddhist monks, even the realm of the individual body was also subjected to control. From sun-up to sundown the toiling Cambodians were never out of the sight of *Angkar*, they were always in the process of indoctrination and thought reform, not only to become a ‘new socialist man’ but to become an automaton of the Party, to think not in Theravada Buddhist cosmological terms but in the terms set by the politico-religious line. The state, or more specifically *Angkar*, would now hold precedent over the aspects of everyday life that were once the ritual domain of the *Sangha*, the *Wat* and the Buddhist religion in general. Marriage was encouraged and even imposed so *Angkar* could exercise control over sexuality. To Ebihara (1994), the imposed marriages made it likelier that the couples would not have strong emotional ties thus making them direct their loyalties and energies to serving *Angkar*.

An intriguing facet of Democratic Kampuchea’s eradication of Theravada Buddhism and the *Sangha* was its rupturing of people’s participation in cosmic ordering, which depended on their ritual engagement. This, in turn, generated a cosmic betrayal that Peg LeVine, in her volume *Love and Dread in Cambodia*, underscores as *ritualcide* (2010: 14). LeVine’s work focuses more on how *Angkar* destroyed and blocked individuals from protective, predictable ritual, when distressed. And without ritual and access to safe spirit places, there is no protection. Without protection, people fear

unpredictable, vicious forces (LeVine 2010: 14). But what is more fascinating for this discussion is the way in which she details how the traditional Khmer Theravada Buddhist marriage and funeral ceremonies were replaced by new Khmer Rouge politico-religious rituals.

Cadre conducted these important celebrations after the elimination of the *Sangha* instead of monks. Many couples had arranged marriages performed all at one time in one place, presided over not by God, but the omnipotent *Angkar*. Frequently, these ceremonies were organized in a labor field, since everyone was busy in their assignments and were told that there would be no reason to return to the village (Yang Sam 1987: 71). In front of the Khmer Rouge cadre, the sometimes newly met bride and groom proclaimed their promise to live together forever, lock and step with their utmost faithfulness and devotion to the *Angkar*. Parents usually took no part in such ceremonies (Yang Sam 1987).

Cambodia has maintained a long history of family conducted arranged marriages, even while courtship customs have changed over time due to socio-political circumstances. But for most couples during the Democratic Kampuchean regime, *Angkar* arranged the marriages, and in some cases people feared annihilation if they did not comply (LeVine 2010: 16). To date, only two photographs have been archived from this period depicting Khmer Rouge weddings, and no written wedding policy by the Communist Party of Kampuchea has yet been found (Youk Chhang, from LeVine 2010: 21). The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) photographs depict a wedding in Democratic Kampuchea as a somber affair. According to LeVine's inquiry, the men and women rarely sat next to one another during the ceremony and the descriptions of the

events spoke of black garb and folded *kramar* of red, green, violet, or blue. There were “rows of swollen eyes in dark holes or sockets”. And “three people who wed in Takeo said that there was a flower placed on a table, and various people mentioned black tyre sandals that they saw on others. Only one woman recalled seeing a flag during her ceremony with 25 couples” (LeVine 2010: 21).

Funeral practices were also ritually disrupted during the period of Democratic Kampuchea. Prior to 1975 funerals were ceremonial events presided over by Buddhist monks in order to look after what will happen next to the soul of the deceased. In this matter correct treatment of the corpse is vital. Buddhists believe that without the proper funeral, the souls of the dead may wander in limbo for eternity (North 2005: 90). To ensure a safe passage to the next life, Buddhism allows transfer of additional merit from loved ones to the deceased during the period between the moment of death and the moment of cremation. This belief provides additional purpose to the Khmer funeral (North 2005: 90). Like most Buddhist activities, this last increment of merit is achieved by appropriate chanting and praying. After several days the body is usually cremated and the ashes are interred in a small shrine somewhere in the local *wat* (North 2005: 91).

These ritual practices of course did not take place under the re-visioning Khmer Rouge regime. When a person died, his or her body was immediately buried under the close watch of the cadre. And according to Yang Sam, “Neither procession, nor gathering of relatives, nor prayer was needed since these rituals only wasted time” (1987: 71). These deaths were also those witnessed by certain friends or family members. We are most certainly not taking into account the thousands of executed individuals who were either mutilated beyond recognition and left for the dogs, tossed into mass grave sites that

held hundreds to thousands of victims, or those forced into the forest never to be seen again. These unfortunate souls never received the chance to allow for the transfer of additional merit. As Pin Yathay articulated in his brilliant memoir *Stay Alive, My Son*

‘What sort of a revolution is this?’ Sarun shouted again, to no one in particular, wielding his machete like a madman. ‘Hard work! Hunger! Nothing else!’
The two guards came up to him. ‘What did you say, comrade?’ asked one.
Sarun stopped cutting, turned to him and looked him in the eye. ‘I said: What sort of revolution is this?’
We have to work too hard and we don’t get enough to eat! There! That’s what I said!’
My heart sank.
‘Very well. If that’s what you say, follow me.’
The guards led him off into the forest.
Silence.
I waited, my heart racing.
Nothing.
Not willing to take any risks, I returned to my work, hoping against hope that Sarun would reappear.
An hour passed, two hours.
Eventually, I could not deceive myself any longer. I knew I would never see Sarun again.
(Pin Yathay 1987: 99)

What is so extraordinary about the DK’s traditional ritualcide, is that it effectively erased all that was left of the religious power of the *Sangha*. Not only were monks being executed or conscripted for battle, the ones that remained, although “legally” defrocked, had no use any longer in Democratic Kampuchea. The monks’ traditional roles as community and spiritual leaders, even presiding over marriage rituals and funeral processions, had been usurped by the *Angkar*. “A significant number of people described *Angkar* as a mysterious-other or an invisible power that could take many forms in many places. Mostly, *Angkar* defied nature” (LeVine 2010: 154).

DK also exercised a “puritanical streak: men and women were strictly segregated in various spheres of life such as work teams, associations, and dining halls; illicit affairs were punished; and there were rules of conduct such as women having to keep their shirts buttoned to the neck” (Ebihara 1994: 30). Men and women were also made to dress

alike. The Party's strict dress code maintained that men and women wear the same loosely fitting black cotton pants and shirt, red *krama* [checkered scarf], and rubber slippers made from discarded automobile tires. These 'puritanical' codes also controlled other aspects of life. For example, womanizing, liquor, and gambling were viewed as aspects of delinquency.

Reflecting other communist systems, the Democratic Kampuchean regime was analogous to a spiritual movement by virtue of its ambition to create a wholly New Man. And in order to do so *Angkar* imposed the highest degree of regimentation and discipline to their new political religion. Khmer Rouge base camps had 'life style meetings' that imposed the proper modes of 'drinking, sleeping, walking, and talking' as part of molding individuals to become 'robot(s)' in the service of *Angkar* (Ebihara 1994: 34). Deviation from or infraction of rules in DK, similar to the Christian 'sin,' were dealt with by 'critical sessions,' one-on-one censure by a Party official similar to Catholicism's 'confession;' or more severely by punishments that could include labor, beatings, imprisonment, torture, and execution (*Ibid*: 34). Individuals in Democratic Kampuchea were not allowed to make mistakes, "because the party does not make mistakes" (*Ibid*: 34). "Laziness, resistance, even verbal, to policy or instructions, and boasting or pretension' were considered 'crimes' punishable by death" (*Ibid*: 34).

This regimentality made the codes and behaviors of previous religious institutions insignificant. Yet despite the fact that the CPK banned religion and executed monks, DK political models may have preyed upon Khmer Buddhist themes. If we are to examine further through use of this lens, *Angkar* became the center of the new spiritual movement and its members became the high monks, with the Khmer Rouge soldiers its lesser

monks. Frank D. Smith (1989) has recorded observations of Khmer refugees who viewed the CPK cadre in Buddhist cosmological terms as belonging to another realm—as animals, *yeak*, or spirits. To Father Ponchaud, these beings, belonging to the forest, outside of society, were seen as having ‘black powers.’ Thus the Khmer Rouge policy of evacuating the cities and towns and forcing the population back to the countryside and forests represented a spiritual journey back to the roots of Khmer Buddhist culture, away from Western influences. Echoing kindred themes of traditional Khmer literature, “the forests represent the ‘non-domesticated’ in contrast to the ‘domesticated,’ the ‘wild’ in opposition to the ‘civilized.’ It is also the home of hermits and a place of regeneration” (Ponchaud 1989: 161). In this rural society, “it was not to the literate that veneration was due, but rather to the ‘saintly’: to the hermits, central characters in Cambodian folktales, to the monks and the ex-monks who were ‘knowing’ [*bandet*], the *achars* [laymen in charge of the pagodas], and, more generally, to the ‘old ripe ones’ [*chas-toum*] who were held to be rich in human and spiritual experience” (*Ibid*: 154). Driving DK’s population into the countryside and forests was aimed at ‘regenerating’ the people. Forcing the citizens to forget about their previous lives in the cities and pushing them to do backbreaking labor in the forests, to *Angkar*, substituted for a Buddhist religious retreat of meditation in order to find oneself and one’s culture. It was a forced rejuvenation of spirituality. Former urban dwellers had to transform themselves into ‘people of the forest,’ as they referred to the revolutionaries.

Ponchaud’s discussion of the ‘return to the forest’ is echoed by Pol Pot biographer Philip Short. Short writes, that to Pol Pot the city-dwellers had to be rejuvenated by the physical labor of the countryside. For Pol Pot, “Only when they had been subjected to

the regenerative power of manual labour and the rude battering of peasant life would the survivors emerge from purgatory, just as the Khmers Rouges themselves had emerged, toughened and purified, from their own years in the maquis” (Short 2004: 284). Thus the emptying of the cities’ inhabitants to the forests and countryside became a spiritual ‘exodus.’

This return to the forest and countryside, leaving your material life and individualism behind, reveals many similarities to the life of a monk. As Ponchaud explains:

Cadres espousing radical egalitarianism were wont to recall in their pre-1975 propaganda that Buddha had said, “All men are equal, princes and the powerful must purify themselves like each and all.” The essence of being a monk, a *bikkhu*, is being a wandering beggar with minimal possessions whose collected donations of food are shared equally among monks of the same monastery or temple. Buddha instructed his followers to take their robes from the charnel fields, to dress alike, to live from donations, and to have few, if any, possessions. Certainly the egalitarianism and asceticism of Buddhist monastic life found echoes in the abandonment of home, family, and all possessions practiced by the mobile work brigades of Pol Pot’s Cambodia (Ponchaud 1989: 173-174).

Just as “Mussolini and Hitler explicitly, and repeatedly, identified themselves as agents of Providence, dispatched to lead their respective chosen peoples from helotry and ignominy” (Burleigh 2000: 8). Pol Pot and his *Angkar* believed themselves to be visionaries and the carriers of the new faith that would lead the Khmer people from slavery to liberation. Michael Burleigh, when describing patterns of fascist and Nazi faiths, identified a form of “political eschatology: from perdition to redemption, abject misery to glory, from tiny sect to mighty mass movement, from fractiousness to harmony” (*Ibid*: 9). This portrayal exemplified *Angkar*’s sentiment as well. By the use of violence the Khmer Rouge not only re-visioned, they *forced* a new eschatological belief system.

Democratic Kampuchea was akin to a religious movement by imposing its radical utopian egalitarianism on its citizens as if it were a spiritual journey from the ‘old world’ of reality into the ‘dream world’ of *Angkar*. The CPK’s policies and practices were the attempt to construct their ‘dream world’ into reality. As Voegelin elucidates in *The New Science of Politics*,

With radical immanentization the dream world has blended into the real world terminologically; the obsession of replacing the world of reality with the transfigured dream world has become the obsession of the one world in which the dreamers adopt the vocabulary of reality, while changing its meaning, as if the dream were reality (2000: 226).

And *The Political Religions*,

Instead the state takes over the reality and makes itself into the only true reality, from which a stream of reality is allowed to flow back to the people, providing them with new stimulus in their role as parts of the suprahuman reality. We are caught in the innermost heart of a religious experience, and our words describe a mystical process (2000: 30).

As described above, the political religion of Democratic Kampuchea possessed many similarities to the very Buddhist roots it wanted to eradicate. Mirroring Mao’s China, the re-visioning of the DK movement into a political religion, “which is inherent in the ideological dogmatism and political monopoly of the Communist Party,” resulted from an initiative from above, but not the spontaneous participation of the masses from below (Gentile 2006: 124). In Democratic Kampuchea what occurred was a *violently forced* participation of the masses. This produced what Emilio Gentile illustrated as a “politico-religious syncretism,” in which totalitarian ideology mixes with characteristics of popular religiosity (*Ibid*: 124). For some, it is precisely those similarities that allowed *Angkar* to rule its citizens. To Father Ponchoud, “some (but by no means all) Buddhist beliefs facilitated the rise and dominance of the Khmer Rouge” (1989: 152). For example, the egalitarianism of the *sangha*, or Buddhist order of monks, was used to justify the radical egalitarianism imposed by *Angkar*. Also the mystical ‘regeneration’ of

the countryside and forest, mirrored the wondering and contemplation of a monk. So too the loss of material possessions and money is part of Buddhist monkhood. In other words, while the transition from the 'old world' to the 'new world' was radically different, it was not a completely new understanding of reality. Whether or not *Angkar* actively implemented the connections, the Kampuchean Revolution maintained a few of its roots in the Buddhism of pre-1975 Cambodia.

Alexander Laban Hinton in his work *Why Did They Kill?* (2005) further explores the relationships that connect traditional Khmer culture to its totalitarian project. In a sense, it is an exploration into the connections between the pre-revolutionary 'old world' and the post-revolutionary 'new world'. Hinton's book is an anthropological study into the origins of how and why perpetrators commit murderous acts in situations of totalitarian control. This phenomenon is known as the paradox of perpetration. His "project builds on the invaluable work of historians and political scientists who have provided crucial insights about the many ways in which political dynamics, international affairs, socioeconomic conditions, and historical processes ('macrolevel' analysis) contributed to the Khmer Rouge genocide," however "they have paid less attention to the local, experimental, and motivational aspects ('micolevel' analysis) of the genocide" (Hinton 2005: 22). The work focuses explicitly on the cultural dimensions that led to the CPK operation of annihilation. Hinton agrees with other scholars that DK ideologies were introduced through the global flows of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideas, however, these bodies of knowledge are always localized. They are "dependant on their ability to play upon a variety of emotional laden local understandings" (*Ibid*: 22). The study's implicit line of thought shows "how cultural models are strategically manipulated by or

more tacitly motivate genocidal regimes” (*Ibid*: 22). Hinton writes that the “Khmer Rouge attempted to motivate its minions – who were differentially constrained in various contexts – to kill by invoking ideological discourses that played upon Cambodian cultural models related to revenge, power, patronage, status, face, and honor” (*Ibid*: 23). It is a fusing of worldly ideologies with local preexisting emotional and cultural models.

Although Hinton’s work is brilliantly written, the use of “Cambodian cultural models” cannot explain why killers kill. In Hinton’s analysis one can find ideas that suggest that the genocidal totalitarianism of the Khmer Rouge happened, and millions human lives were eliminated, because of the cultural and spiritual makeup of the Khmer people. It is as if a genocidal regime was predetermined to exist in the nation because of the religion and culture of its populace. Hinton fails to take in account the overwhelming political and spiritual omnipotence *Angkar* had over all aspects of the population’s social and cultural lives. The forced migration to the forests and countryside may have been similar to the spiritual journeys of monks, but the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea did not manipulate aspects of Khmer Buddhist spirituality for the maintenance of their regime – they instead constructed a new. *Angkar* destroyed the traditional Khmer Buddhist cultural reality and replaced it with an alternate one. Just as the Buddhist teachings restrained the animal in man, the DK ideology freed it.

But statements of the sort do not prevent us from showing the similarities that existed between traditional Khmer Buddhist spirituality and the CPK’s political religion. To the Buddhist, the greatest ‘demerit’ stems from killing either animals or humans, the karmic doctrine and the belief in reincarnation, which both underlie the Khmer Buddhist vision of the world, can shed some light on the enigma of the massive executions and

violence carried out in Democratic Kampuchea (Hinton 2005: 25). Not unlike any other totalitarian regime, violence is an essential part of its existence. But the difference between Western examples and the DK example is that its widespread belief in reincarnation gives rise to a relationship to death less tragic than that prevailing in the West since the end of the Middle Ages (*Ibid*: 31). To Ponchaud, “If life is precious to Westerners, it is because it is conceived as being unique, beginning with conception and ending with death. In contrast to such a linear conception of life, the Buddhist cyclical concept, stemming from the doctrine of reincarnation, tends to dilute the absolute nature of existence” (1989: 174). Thus the fear of dying, or for the DK cadre, killing, for that matter, was not viewed as that tragic. After listening to numerous accounts provided by refugees who escaped massacres, Ponchaud proclaims that “one cannot fail to note a certain complicity between the executioners and their victims, each accepting the tragic rules of the game governing them” (*Ibid*: 174). And to Thierry, “the act of murder, furthermore, is not conceived as an evil and uniquely reprehensible act: it assumed a revelatory function, either in the sense that it was a prelude to a rebirth, or in that it triggered acts of salvation, exemplifying the divine or Buddhist cosmic order” (1978: 457).

“The Khmer Rouge devotion to violence...righteousness, and literalism derive their peculiar psychological force from the dictates of sectarianism” (Jackson 1989: 7). Thus all the murder and loss of life that exemplified the DK regime, to *Angkar*, was just an unfortunate part of the spiritual re-visioning of a selfless egalitarian utopia. Philip Short describes the DK years:

Drear and joyless it was, certainly. But that was what its leaders intended. Theravada Buddhism taught that *nirvana*, the realm of selflessness, could be attained only when the ‘thirst for existence,’ made up of worldly and emotional attachments, had been totally

extinguished. Under Pol's rule, love, sorrow, anger, passion and all the other feelings that made up everyday life were seen as emanations of individualism to be banished for the collective good. In some parts of the country, it was forbidden even to laugh or sing. In pursuit of illumination, the people had to suffer (Short 2004: 328).

And suffer they did. As mentioned above, estimates place the death toll during the forty-four months of continuous revolution in Democratic Kampuchea at 1.7 to 2 million lives. Those three years, eight months, and twenty days "may have witnessed the greatest per capita loss of life in a single nation in the twentieth century" (Jackson 1989: 37). But to *Angkar* it was justified. Suffering and death were an essential part of the re-visioning process. Short describes that "Mey Mak's commanding officer told him: 'If we worry about that sort of stuff, we are no longer revolutionaries.' Soldiers were urged to 'cut off their hearts' towards potential enemies, a category which included all urban deportees. It might be argued that such behaviour comes more naturally to Cambodians than to other nations because their culture regards forgiveness as a form of weakness" (Short 2004: 284).

Thus, life in Democratic Kampuchea could only be sustained by the blind following of the new regime's political religion. This was true of all the citizens of DK. In order for the Party members and the population to bow down to *Angkar*, the destruction of 'material and spiritual private property' had to take place. Unlike the destruction of the cultural and social institutions mentioned above, this was described as 'changing your mentality' (Short 2004: 316). According to Short, "The destruction of 'material and spiritual private property' was Buddhist detachment in revolutionary clothes; the demolition of the personality was the achievement of non-being. 'The only true freedom,' a study document proclaimed, 'lies in following what Angkar says, what it writes and what it does'" (*Ibid*: 318-319).

In one's mind there is always 'spiritual private property' and in Pol Pot's DK even your right to your thoughts was denied. This 'changing your mentality' was made clear at a month-long seminar conducted by Khieu Samphan at the former Khmer-Soviet Technical Institute in Phnom Penh:

The first thing you have to do is destroy private property. But private property exists on both material and the mental plane...To destroy material private property, the appropriate method was the evacuation of the towns...But spiritual private property is more dangerous, it comprises everything that you think is 'yours', everything that you think exists in relation to yourself – your parents, your family, your wife. Everything of which you say, 'It's mine...' is spiritual private property. Thinking in terms of 'me' and 'my' is forbidden. If you say, 'my wife', that's wrong. You should say, 'our family'. The Cambodian nation is our big family...That's why you have been separated: the men with the men, the women with the women, the children with children. All of you are under the protection of Angkar. Each of us, man, woman, and child, is an element of the nation...We are the child of Angkar, the man of Angkar, the woman of Angkar (Short 2004: 316).

The ideological and brutal control *Angkar* sought during the DK regime, along with its total destruction of the traditional religious institutions the citizens of Cambodia ever knew, exhibits all the characteristic features of a counter-religion. From 1975 to 1979 *Angkar* represented a new radical religion counter to the traditional Theravada Buddhism that had shaped Cambodian society for centuries. The Khmer Rouge's brutal implementation of this political religion may be mirrored only by the monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten in Egypt during the fourteenth century B.C.E. In its radical rejection of tradition and its violent intolerance, the revolution of Akhenaten exemplified the counter-religion. Just as Pol Pot tried some thousands of years later in a tiny country in South-East Asia, "Pharaoh Amenophis IV changed the whole cultural system of Egypt with a revolution from above in a more radical way than it ever was changed by mere historical evolution" (Assmann 1997: 24).

The temples were closed, the images of the gods were destroyed, their names were erased, and their cults were discontinued. What a terrible shock such an experience must have dealt to a mentality that sees a very close interdependence between cult and nature,

and social and individual prosperity! The nonobservance of ritual interrupts the maintenance of cosmic and social order (Assmann 1997: 25).

As discussed above, *Angkar* too changed the whole cultural system of Cambodia in its implementation of a new political religion and its complete destruction of the previous one. From this view Pol Pot's counter-religious revolution reflected several aspects of Akhenaten's. The Khmer Rouge radically rejected tradition and displayed violent intolerance. It also closed temples, or *wats*, destroyed images of the Buddha, erased Buddhist scriptures, and discontinued religious observance. This nonobservance of religion, and the subservience to *Angkar*, also interrupted the maintenance of cosmic and social order in Cambodia as well. And just Assmann articulates of Akhenaten's revolution, during Pol Pot's re-visioning, the "catastrophic and irreparable crime must have been quite widespread" (*Ibid*: 25).

The complete overthrow of traditional polytheistic Egyptian society and the replacement of the sun god Aten as the only god during Akhenaten's reign was similarly implemented in Cambodia starting in 1975 when the traditional Buddhist society of the Khmers was overthrown and replaced by the political religion of *Angkar*. And even though the Khmer Rouge regime has not been banned from official and historical memory as Akhenaten's had, it too has survived in the form of traumatic memory (Assmann 1997). A traumatic memory Cambodia will not soon forget.

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