Center for Southeast Asian Studies

University of Wisconsin-Madison

INTERPRETIVE ACCOUNTS OF THE KHMER ROUGE YEARS:

Personal Experience in Cambodian Peasant World View

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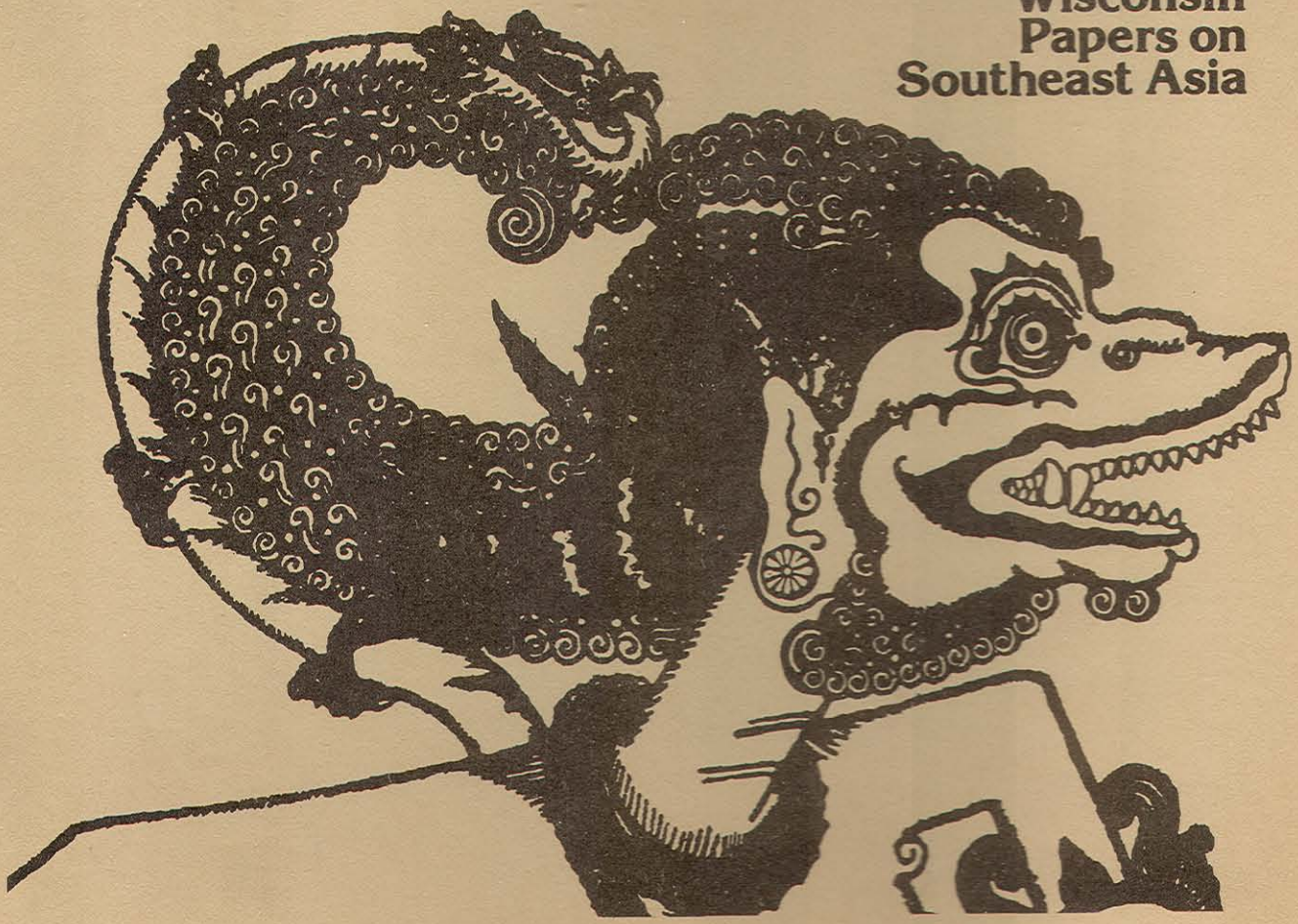
1989

Wisconsin Papers on Southeast Asia



Abstract

The Cambodian civil war of 1975-79 brought tragedy and drastic change to Khmer society. Many writers have tried to explain the genesis and the brutality of those years using a variety of theoretical and substantive approaches. This paper presents some explanations and interpretations of the Khmer revolution and the regime of Pol Pot from an untapped source: the Khmer peasants. My intention is not only to contribute to the historical record of the Khmer Rouge years, but also to investigate the perceptions of certain social actors involved in the events of those years.

My informants are Khmer middle-level peasants now living as refugees in the United States. My analysis of their interpretations and accounts is concerned with the nature of Cambodian peasant world view and the ways in which that world view articulates with Khmer peasant social practice and personal experience.

Khmer peasant world view acts as an interpretive framework through which the peasants make sense of the events of the Khmer Rouge years. As is the case in everyday Khmer peasant social life, interpretations of specific personal experiences during the Khmer Rouge years have played a crucial part in determining which tenets of Khmer world view are internalized and relied upon by individual peasants. I propose that it is through individual social experience or personal involvement in the "cosmic order" that Khmer world view actually exists as a mediating force in peasants' lives.

"Oui, mais quels téméraires oseraient enterrer nos êtres surnaturels?"[1]

-Ang Chouléan (1986:312)

EXPLAINING DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA

In the aftermath of the Cambodian revolution, many attempts have been made by both outside observers and participants to deal with the "how and why" of the revolution and what followed.[2] David Chandler (1979a; 1983a; 1983b) has stressed the role of historical trends, specific Cambodian traditions of social hierarchy, and the perceptions and goals of the major actors in the events of the 1970s in the shaping of the Cambodian revolution. Ben Kiernan (1982a; 1985) has focused on the complex political struggles within the Khmer communist party and on the effects of external forces on the revolution in an attempt to make sense of events in Cambodia. These external forces, especially the U.S. bombing of Cambodia and its effect on the recruitment success of the most extreme factions of the Khmer Rouge, are also described in detail by William Shawcross (1979). Michael Vickery (1984) has concentrated his analyses on Cambodian class relations and the Khmer rural-urban gulf, which helped give rise to peasant revolt. Vickery has also described in detail the unique philosophy of the Khmer Rouge leaders (1984:261-287).

François Ponchaud, who is well-acquainted with pre-revolutionary Cambodian society, concentrated on interviews with survivors of the Khmer Rouge years in his 1978 attempt to explain the turmoil in Cambodia. John Barron and Anthony Paul (1977) compiled interviews with refugees, but their work has been criticized for its questionable generalizations and faulty methodology. Elizabeth Becker's (1986) explanations of the rise of the Khmer Rouge are also based on a wide range of both secondary sources and personal accounts of events in 1970s Cambodia.[3] Finally, personal accounts of life under the Khmer Rouge by elite Khmer refugees published in recent years (May 1986; Szymusiak 1986; Mam 1987; Ngor 1987; Yathay 1987) provide a host of details of personal life in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. Most of these books include the authors' theories about the nature and causes of the Cambodian conflict as well.

Peasant accounts of experiences under the Pol Pot regime are also included in the work of Ponchaud, Kiernan, Vickery, and Becker. However, explanations and interpretations of the Khmer Rouge years by peasant observers/participants are conspicuously absent from published material on the revolution. This is due, in part, to the fact that few peasants are inclined (or able) to write their memoirs--especially in English or French. Also, there is no doubt a perception that an "objective" account of Democratic Kampuchea may be in conflict with the nature of peasant interpretive accounts, which often intersperse Khmer

legends, folk tales, and supernatural beliefs with accounts of personal experiences in the Khmer Rouge years.

In this essay, however, it is these interpretive accounts in which I am most interested. I will discuss first the circumstances of my research and then present my ethnographic data on and analyses of peasant evaluative accounts of the Khmer Rouge years. I hope to detail how the personal experiences of Khmer middle-level peasants who witnessed the events of the 1970s in Cambodia articulate with shared assumptions about the nature of the spiritual and social world in a dialectical fashion. The Khmer peasant world view provides guidelines for the interpretation of life experiences. This world view is also shaped on the individual level by those experiences, which represent middle-level peasants' personal involvement with a cosmic order which is both spiritual and physical.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

The research for this essay was conducted among a group of several hundred Cambodian peasant refugees in Madison, Wisconsin. A total of about 400 Cambodian refugees live in this medium-sized midwestern U.S. city (with a greater metropolitan population of 300,000). The research took place over a period of ten months in 1987-88. This was supplemented by contacts with fifteen to twenty Khmer peasant refugees in Chicago, Illinois, which has a total Cambodian population of approximately 4,500.

The peasant Khmers in Madison are among approximately 140,000 Cambodians, mostly of urban origin, who have come to the U.S. since 1975. The majority of the Madison peasant refugees, all of whom left Cambodia in 1979 or later, were originally settled in Chicago. They moved to Wisconsin because of the lower crime rate and an aesthetically pleasing semi-rural atmosphere, which includes nearby fishing and gardening resources. These two activities, combined with specific economic strategies and cultural practices, allows for the reproduction in the U.S. of many aspects of rural Cambodian life.

My closest contact with Cambodian peasants took place over a period of three-and-one-half months with a group of about fifty refugees. I spent considerable time with my informants (eight to ten hours a day throughout the summer of 1987) engaged in participant-observation and informal interviewing, using the Khmer language. I spent time with the refugees relaxing, eating and talking in their homes, working in their gardens, going on fishing trips, and attending their celebrations.

Originally, I did not try to elicit information about the refugees' experiences under Pol Pot. I was primarily concerned with describing peasant lifeways as they are practiced in the U.S. Nevertheless, the Khmer Rouge years came up in conversation again and again. My interest in the subject of refugee explanations of the Khmer Rouge grew during the course of the research, as the accounts I heard seemed to focus more and more on supernatural belief and interpretation of experience.

References to the Khmer Rouge years occurred on several levels. During the early days of my research, accounts were laced with a broad-based, anti-communist rhetoric common to virtually all Indochinese refugees. These stories were peppered with statements characteristic of what Vickery terms the "Standard Total View" of the Khmer revolution (Vickery 1984:36-63): "The Khmer Rouge killed all doctors and anyone with glasses;" "The Khmer Rouge killed two million Cambodians, and then the Vietnamese killed another one million," etc.

The second level of conversation about the 1970s consisted of the refugees' attempts to educate me about specific conditions in Cambodia under Pol Pot, based on their personal experiences.[4] These included descriptions of work done under supervision from sunrise to sunset, a system detestable to nearly all Khmers. This distaste was certainly present among my informants who, prior to 1975, were not among the poorest of Cambodia's peasants. These landholders from Cambodia's rice-bowl province of Battambang were accustomed to modest rice surpluses and a lifestyle which did not necessitate unceasing labor:

> Before, in Cambodia, we worked very hard for a short time, and then we had plenty of food for the rest of the year. We weren't lazy, but we didn't have to <u>always</u> work [as we must here in the U.S.]. During the Pol Pot era, we had to work very, very hard--even the old people--from morning to evening. If we stopped to rest, they beat us!

Other perceived hardships of life instituted by Khmer Rouge cadre from 1975-79 were forced short haircuts for women, prohibitions against religion, the defrocking of monks, sexual

prudishness, and abolition of free time. Almost every time I sat down to a meal with peasant refugees, I heard tales of the severely disliked Khmer Rouge practice of the communal eating of rice gruel (bah bah) from a single pot (Boua 1982:59-60):

> This is how Cambodians [are supposed to] eat; three or four different dishes, usually, and rice (bei buon muk). When we lived under the Khmer Rouge, we didn't eat like this . . . ; we didn't have meat at all! Just bah bah [i. e., only one dish, served communally in "assembly-line" fashion]; a lot of water and very little rice. We ate gruel just like pigs . . . ; we lived just like animals.

Apart from the senseless killing, the Khmer peasants I spent time with found these cultural hardships the most disturbing element of life under the Khmer Rouge after 1975. Significantly, the qualitative changes in life described above meant the abolition of a set of life-practices virtually synonymous in the peasant world view with "being Khmer."

Finally, as my command of the Khmer language improved and as I established closer personal relationships with the refugees, I learned more about their own interpretive explanations of their experiences with the Khmer Rouge. To many of my informants, these discussions meant sharing their understanding of the most basic reality of their ordeal in the 1970s. It is this level of peasant accounts of life in Democratic Kampuchea with which I am concerned.

It can be argued that the landless and disenfranchised lower-level peasants who joined the Khmer Rouge had at least at some time and in some ways benefitted from the turning of traditional society on its head. The urban elite--who had an

obvious stake in the ideological tenets and norms of Khmer society discussed in this essay--could easily be charged by the Khmer Rouge as being oppressors, in justification of the revolution's violent actions. The middle-level peasants in my study were from the start, however, victims of the revolution, especially in their own eyes. They were not obvious oppressors of anyone, but perhaps they had the most invested in the cultural institutions laid waste by the revolution.

While I focus here on supernatural explanations of the Khmer Rouge years and invocations by middle-level peasants of norms and precepts which seem to support the traditional hierarchical order in Cambodian society, I should point out that even among my informants, variation in support of traditional hierarchies and the application of the "ideal" in Khmer world view is striking. Tuu, a 45-year-old man, often characterizes the Khmer Rouge as an abomination to the "proper" order. In a discussion of elite Khmer exploitation of peasants (as opposed to Khmer Rouge exploitation), however, he told me that:

> We little people (nek toich taich, nek aapich aapiy) are like the ants (srahmaoich) in the forest. If a "big [rich] person" (nek thum) tramples (choan) the ants, he will kill many of them initially. If he is barefoot or wearing sandals, however, the ants will bite him. If he then comes back wearing boots, a long-sleeved shirt and long pants, to trample them again, the ants will slip out from under the smooth bottoms of his boots. Then they will crawl up his pant legs, and up his arms and into his sleeve--they can do this because they are so small. Once the ants are swarming inside his clothes and begin to bite him, it's all over.[5]

The experiences under the Khmer Rouge analyzed here are "out-of-the-ordinary" personal experiences which occurred during the radical transformation of Khmer society from 1975-79. Just as we outsiders have scrambled to make sense of this seemingly senseless array of hardship and loss of life, so have the Khmer peasants in whose lives those events occurred. In this essay, I present the peasants' own interpretations and evaluations of the Khmer Rouge. I do not endorse here any quantifiable theory to explain the 1970s in Cambodia. Where their statements conflict with the documented historical record, I will point this out.

The most intense discussions with peasant refugees concerning the perceived nature of the Khmer Rouge occurred with a group of nine to ten men from the northwestern Cambodian province of Battambang, but a wide variety of comments were recorded from conversations with over fifty other peasant refugees, both men and women. My primary informants are all literate in Khmer; they each owned from two to five hectares of rice land (srae); and they all fought as soldiers during the Khmer civil war of 1970-1975.

These men and their families fled Cambodia in early to late 1979, after the Vietnamese invasion, for a combination of reasons typical of post-Pol Pot Khmer refugees. First, they had the sense that, having lost their landholdings and many family members, there was nothing to return to (from the Khmer Rouge work areas to which they had been relocated after 1975). Second, they distrusted the Vietnamese military presence in Cambodia; and

third, they feared that the communist PRK government would eventually also adopt the brutal policies of the Khmer Rouge.

Women were not ignored in this research. In fact, in the course of my larger project concerning peasant lifeways in the U.S., I formed closer personal friendships with Khmer peasant women than I did with men. However, while they are represented here in several composite statements of peasant beliefs concerning the Khmer Rouge, peasant women were not as willing as many men to participate in long, reflective discussions on Khmer Rouge nature.

In many ways, Cambodian peasant women see the problem of the Khmer Rouge as one caused by men, just as they see men to be the cause of many of their personal agonies. One woman, Soeun, expressed to me that she wishes Cambodian women could just get back to the important work of raising children, presiding over the farm's finances, and organizing celebrations such as weddings. She told me she is quite fed up with men:

> . . . Khmer Rouge men who killed my relatives, Vietnamese men who invaded my country, and Cambodian men [in the U.S.] who do so much drinking . . . .

This attitude, noticeable in many peasant refugee women, seems to boil down to "Look, I've got important things to do, so will you please stop your foolishness and let me get back to work?" This is obviously not an attitude conducive to lengthy discussions on the location of the Khmer Rouge in the larger, "cosmic" scheme of things. I am convinced, however, that peasant women hold to many of the same supernatural tenets regarding the nature of the Khmer

Rouge as those expressed by the men. The accounts of two women regarding their experiences with an important myth described later in this essay certainly suggest this.

Obtaining peasant views on Pol Pot was not difficult. I was constantly offered information, and, as my interest grew, I initiated some discussions as well. I showed pictures of Khmer Rouge leaders to the refugees, for example, and I asked their opinions on certain aspects of the regime. If the interviews recorded here were "structured" by anyone, though, they were structured by my informants. Indeed, the entire subject of this paper was suggested to me by Khmer peasants, although I have separated out several elements of belief regarding the Khmer Rouge for the sake of analysis.

There are limits to the degree to which my findings may be extended to the Cambodian peasantry at large, due to the relatively small number of my informants and their narrow pattern of geographical origin. I will try to lessen this problem with frequent references to the literature on Khmer world view collected over time from other areas of the country. Further, the Cambodian peasantry was and is far from homogeneous. Depending on individual peasants' economic positions prior to the revolution, their personal stake in the ideological tenets of Buddhism and notions of "Khmer-ness" referred to throughout this essay, and personal experiences during Khmer Rouge rule, a wide range of interpretations of the Khmer Rouge may be expected. These include class-based explanations, explanations rooted in

the supernatural, and combinations of the two. Further research remains to be done with peasants from a wide variety of places in Cambodia. What is important is that the peasants themselves are given a chance to explain the events of the 1970s as they experienced them.

I have divided these peasant evaluative accounts into three categories: those falling into the realm of Buddhist prophecy, legends and folk tales; those dealing with the notion of the Khmer Rouge as "uncivilized" and as participants in a specific Khmer tradition of violence and mythical existence; and accounts which focus on the role of Vietnam in the rise to power and nature of the Khmer Rouge. Lastly, I discuss at length one popular Khmer myth, preah kō preah kaeo, and its specific form and function in the context of the 1970s in Cambodia.

I now turn to a brief outline of some of the principal beliefs which many middle-level Khmer peasants shared about the nature of the world (and the cosmos) at the time of the revolution, and which many continue to share. I also suggest some ways that these beliefs articulate with everyday life-practice. This background is essential to an understanding of the ethnographic accounts of peasant explanations of the Khmer Rouge which follow.

THE CAMBODIAN PEASANT "COSMIC ORDER"

Buddhism

Khmer Theravada Buddhism holds great explanatory power for the Cambodian peasant. As is the case with all religions, "proper" life actions and relationships with one's fellow humans are all prescribed, ordained as natural, and portrayed as contributing to the larger cosmic order (Geertz 1973:127).

The notion of karma (kam) neatly rationalizes those aspects of the natural and social order which one cannot change. The concept of merit (bon) encourages a degree of individualism and striving to improve one's relative social (and economic) position in the next life (Keyes 1983:261-271). This striving does not, however, necessarily require an overwhelming preoccupation with amassing material wealth in this life. The legitimizing moral precepts of Buddhism have historically served a strong political-ideological function as well, by which the Khmer social hierarchy--based on relative "stores" of merit--is preserved and reproduced (Chandler 1979b:415-417).

Finally, the complexity and flexibility of Buddhist concepts which allows their use as a framework for rebellion against the established order, located in the "here and now," should not be ignored (Keyes 1977). This is evidenced in Cambodia and elsewhere by monks' participation in and leadership of rebellions (Chandler 1983a:168-169).

Buddhism is also tied in peasants' minds to the ecological conditions necessary for sufficient crop production. Food and

monetary contributions to temples, attendance at the many Buddhist festivals, and individual "right behavior" are seen as essential for maintaining a proper natural/social order. Such personal involvement in proper action is seen as helping to bring about a good harvest, "proper" hierarchical social relations, and, in general, a continuation of the cyclical flow of the cosmic order (Ebihara 1971:421-422; Thierry 1985:96). Just how essential the maintenance of this order is becomes apparent when one considers the perceived consequences of a break in that order--such as Khmer Rouge rule and the subsequent desecration of Buddhist temples and defrocking of monks. Bol, a 52-year old man:

> Because [Pol Pot's soldiers] did such inhuman things; because they tried to destroy [Buddhist] religion (rumliay saasnaa), an angel cursed the land, so that to this day there is no rain in Cambodia, and no crops grow.

Yann, a man in his forties:

> I hear that there's still a drought in Cambodia . . . that they can't grow any rice . . . . Cambodians have to suffer now, because of what the atheistic enemies of Buddhism [tmil] did.

Rao, a 37-year-old woman:

> There was a small lake near the village where I worked [under the Khmer Rouge], and the Khmer Rouge threw all of the Buddha images that they took from the local temples into the lake . . . . They threw them in head first, you know? After they did that, in the whole district, it didn't rain for two years! When all the water had dried up in the lake, all you could see were the dozens of Buddha statues, sticking out of the mud, upside down.

Animism

The "great tradition" of Khmer Buddhism is inextricably linked to a rich and complex animism. Spirits, both benign and malevolent, are believed by most Khmer peasants to be literally everywhere (Delvert 1961:140-141; Ebihara 1971:442; Martel 1975:236-254; Thierry 1985:50-51; Chouléan 1986:14).

Day-to-day peasant life may be characterized as an endless set of appeasements, avoidances, supplications, and negotiations in interaction with the spirit world (Thierry 1985:96). Spirits guard the home, inhabit the forest, and lie in wait in times of sickness or birth (Chouléan 1986:118-123; 285-296, 300). Spirit possession is common and almost always requires some sort of payment (Chouléan 1986:31-76). Many types of "spirit specialists" exist in Cambodia, including the thmup, black magicians whose reputations reach far into Thailand and Vietnam (Golumb 1985:205, 209). The world of spirits even stretches into the confines of the Buddhist temple, where local evil spirits live in concert with the icons of Buddhist cosmology (Chouléan 1988:37-38).

Khmer religion is a syncretistic and practical entity (Martel 1975;236-254; Chouléan 1986:312). While outside observers may conceptually separate Khmer spiritual beliefs into philosophical, ethical, and protective (as well as social) spheres, to the Khmer peasant, religion is all of these things. There is no "animist" or "Buddhist" sphere; there are only unified explanations for and prescriptions relating to the

ecological, social, and spiritual world. The contours of the spirit world are made familiar to Khmer peasants on a very personal level, just as Buddhist precepts are. Every peasant can relate eyewitness accounts of apparitions, possessions, or the supernatural powers of Khmer healers (kruu) or sorcerers (tmup) (Chouléan 1986:71-76; 105-114). These encounters do not always occur in a formal ritual setting--although they often do, particularly in the case of exorcisms. Apparitions and what one might call "suspensions of the laws of nature" occur quite frequently in everyday life.

Notions of "Wild" and "Civilized"

Related to the religious categories of Cambodian peasant world view is the distinction between "wild" and "civilized" (Chandler 1983a:91). This opposition is quite evident in Khmer linguistics and social cosmology (Martel 1975:36; Chandler 1982:53-54; Thierry 1985:36; Chouléan 1986:115-116). The dichotomy of nature vs. society, civilized vs. uncivilized, and cultivated vs. overgrown (priy vs. srok, wiel vs. phnum) is taught to all Khmers through didactic folklore and theater (Chandler 1983a:91, 105), as well as through formal teaching. Belief in this dichotomy is, however, flexible and far from uniform across Khmer society. There is likewise no constant and universal use of the wild vs. civilized dichotomy as a legitimation of the established social order. Even in the beliefs and actions of any given individual, there is an ideal

and an actual level of acceptance of this and other world view tenets (See also endnote 4). For instance, Bol has often told me that a certain Khmer verb meaning "to eat" (sii) should be used only when talking about animals. He was very concerned that I, in my elementary stage of Khmer language study, would misuse this highly intimate (and potentially vulgar) verb form and offend someone. Five minutes after one of Bol's stern warnings, he called his children to eat, using the verb (ōn! sii baay!)--as is fitting in the social situation of a father speaking to his child. The point here is that an ideal and an actual meaning of such dichotomies exist simultaneously for Khmer peasants--as they do for all of us.[6] Such oppositions between nature and culture nevertheless form important and easily identifiable classificatory systems and guiding principles in Khmer social hierarchy (Chandler 1979b:415).

"Civilized," in its ideal form, refers to what it means to "be Khmer"--an important function in a society conspicuously free of formal social organizations and institutions (Delvert 1961:218-220; Ebihara 1971:421-422; Kiernan 1982a:33; Thierry 1985:62). Chandler proposes that:

> We think of society at war with itself, or at peace . . . [but Cambodians] preferred to think of themselves in terms of a king and his subjects; in terms of a spectrum of relative merit; or as people, scattered over time and space, sharing recognizable ideals that sprang, in turn, from being farmers, being lowly, being Buddhists, and speaking Khmer (Chandler 1983a:89).[7]

These notions of "relative merit" and "being Khmer" are fundamental to Khmer peasants' notions of themselves. The

aesthetic trappings of Khmer culture--dress, food, music, home decorations--are all seen as outward indicators of these inner notions. Aesthetic symbols of "Khmer-ness" are conceptually tied by Khmer peasant discourse to deeper spiritual, social and biological ideas of what a Khmer is. Such discourse is often in the form of folk tales and legends concerning Khmer identity. But just as often, these references to what is/isn't "Khmer" occur in the informal sharing of individual experiences of everyday social practice. Through such discourse, Cambodian peasants constantly remind each other (and outsiders) of the boundaries of Khmer-ness.

Another important medium for this discursive elaboration and reinforcement of world view is Khmer popular theater: yike and lkhaon, as well as the sung male-female performance art of ayaiy. These performances are complex in their vast array of characters and story lines, and in their subtle reference to and weaving together of shared experience and the contours of the cosmic order. Wild vs. civilized distinctions are particularly important here. Not surprisingly, all Cambodian villagers are also quite conscious of the physical dangers of the forest (priy). The forest is the domain of the wild: animals, bandits (nek khoich), cannibalistic ogres (yeak) and spirits, as peasants are constantly reminded in the Cambodian version of the Ramayana (reamkei) (Jacob 1987), in humorous moral tales, and by their personal experiences.

The above-mentioned performance media, an essential part of pre-1975 village life (Pou 1983) were hastily reconstructed in the post-1979 People's Republic of Kampuchea (Kiernan 1982c:365-368) and are experienced at least aurally, by means of cassette tapes, by Khmer peasant refugees in the U.S. Through such media and the performance of story-telling in casual conversation, the tenets of Khmer world view are instilled in many Khmer peasants from an early age onward.

Traditionally, Khmer peasants have been ideologically and economically subordinated by an urban elite. They have had someone over them in a socio-religious hierarchy based on definitions of culture and civilization which many Khmers, at least superficially, have accepted. The middle-level peasants have also, in another application of the wild/civilized dichotomy, had someone under them: the religion-less, the "savage," the humans (and spirits) devoid of Buddhist legitimation. This idea will prove crucial in understanding the extension and adaptation of the traditional cosmic order of Khmer world view by peasants to explain the ascendancy and nature of the Khmer Rouge.

PEASANT MODELS OF KHMER ROUGE ORIGIN AND NATURE

Buddhist Predictions and Folk Tales

All who spent time in Phnom Penh, the capitol of Cambodia, during the civil war of 1970-75 became well-acquainted with predictions concerning the downfall of Cambodia and the ushering

in of a "dark period" of Khmer history. This period was to be characterized, according to the predictions, by the suppression of Buddhism and much killing (Shanberg 1972a; Becker 1986:204; Yathay 1987: 105-106). Another wartime phenomenon was the widespread reporting in Phnom Penh of specific supernatural signs related to the country's imminent downfall: the rusting of the preah khan, or sacred royal sword, the ominous appearance of a comet, and the sighting of a white crocodile, a well-known symbol of doom in Cambodian cosmology (Shanberg 1972a; Shawcross 1979:127; Hickey 1982:219; Becker 1986:129, 131).

Many of the wartime prophecies and "signs" no doubt reflected the violence and turmoil of the civil war as it unfolded. Most of the predictions, however, had their basis in the put tumniay, or "Buddhist Predictions." These translations of Pali scriptures are well-known to educated elite and peasant Khmers alike. In a variety of forms, they have been repeatedly published as books and recited locally by monks and learned men at temples. Specific put tumniay predictions often cited by both elite and peasant Cambodians include the rising to power of the uneducated, the emptying of houses and streets in the wake of a social and ecological catastrophe, and the persecution of Buddhists by the tmil, the traditional Theravada term for the atheistic "enemies of the religion." Some examples of published put tumniay follow:

> A ferocious, bloodthirsty spirit, the king of the demons, will come from [a distant province] and enter into the hearts of the people, to create disorder in every city,

> . . . to cause the people to think that wrong is right, that black is white, that good is bad (Put Tumniay 1970:5).
>
> At that time, a catastrophe will occur; there will be no food, and the people will have a burning thirst for water. Both the laity and the monkhood will die in great numbers (Put Tumniay 1970:6).
>
> In that time, the tmil will ascend the throne and destroy the religion of Buddha thus come. They will change the holy principles of the religion, and destroy images of the Buddha (Put Tumniay 1970:8).
>
> As for the wise men, the Brahman priests, they will not be allowed to meditate, to direct the truth; they will not be allowed to exercise their wisdom, to lead, nor to sit in judgement. Then only the hooligans, the worthless drunkards, will be allowed to lead, to sit in judgement of others (Put Tumniay 1952:6).
>
> They will take the bribes of others, until no more of them remain. They will then flee to live in a foreign country, in the rural areas, by way of the forest, and their health will return. At that time, they will depend on the assistance of foreigners; they will exist with the help of others [instead of by their own efforts] (Put Tumniay 1952:6).

Predictions of the downfall of Buddhism have a long history in the Buddhist traditions of many Asian countries; many such predictions are chronologically centered on the Buddhist year 2500 (which coincides with A. D. 1957) (Coedès 1956:96-97). Periodic reports of supernatural portents of doom, involving the magical transformation of animals and inanimate objects and the appearance of flesh-eating ogres, are well-known features of the Buddhist-animist pantheons of Southeast Asian societies (Ishii 1976:68; Keyes 1977:295-296). The Cambodian put tumniay, as well as their function in Khmer social practice, fit these general contours.

The precise content of the prophecies is not as important as their social use. Neither is it important (least of all to Cambodians) that many inconsistencies and contradictions can be found in the predictions when an attempt is made to apply them, event for event in chronological order, to the events of the 1970s in Cambodia. It is widely accepted by Khmers familiar with the put tumniay that the prophecies did in fact come to pass from 1970-79.

One means of spreading the prophecies was the speeches, writings, radio broadcasts and "instructions to the troops" of Lon Nol during the Khmer civil war. Lon Nol's reliance on prophecies, as well as on Khmer astrology, racist beliefs, magic spells, and amulets was well-known (Meyer 1971:270; Shanberg 1972b; Summers 1972:260; Hickey 1982:115; Kiernan 1982a:305). In Lon Nol's 1970 pamphlet Chambang Saasnaa ("The Religious War"), he writes:

> This war that has arisen must follow the predictions, which have said that it will be a religious war (Lon 1970:1).
>
> The predictions for the religious war which takes place at the mid-point [of the 5,000 year existence] of the religion are "gold and silver sacred edifices will arise at the site of the Four Rivers [Phnom Penh]"; "There will be a vicious civil war at the Four Rivers"; "The tmil will attack and destroy the holy Buddhist religion"; "The wicked king will escape [from the city]"; and "A comet will appear"' (Lon 1970:3).[8]

The only mention in the literature of peasants' uses of the put tumniay to explain the rise of the Khmer Rouge are found in May (1986) and Szymusiak (1986). May, an outside observer (though a native Khmer) in the villages where he was relocated by

the Khmer Rouge when they evacuated Phnom Penh, speaks of local interpretations of events involving the Khmer Rouge which were related to prophecies. Szymusiak (1986:35) tells of her family's visit, as they made the journey from Phnom Penh to her family's birth village, to an uncle, a hermit with mystical powers. She writes that this uncle gave interpretations of the events unfolding in Cambodia and advice to her family on how to survive what would follow. These were consistent with the put tumniay.

In pre-war Cambodia, I am told by my informants, village men would often gather to hear interpretations of prophetic Pali scriptures by local monks, or by other individuals who specialized in such recitations. Sarin, age 42, also told me that:

> In 1974, two women found some coconuts which had washed ashore on the beach in [the southwestern Cambodian province of] Kampot. Inside the coconuts were some writings, which foretold terrible things that would happen to Cambodia in the near future. They printed the predictions, and with the help of monks, circulated them all over the country. I don't know if the writings were really the put tumniay, or even if the women just made them up. Anyway, a lot of people believed in them.

One of my informants, Yann, when presented with a printed version of the put tumniay, reported that he had never read it, but:

> I know everything about this already. I have heard it many times in Cambodia, and especially in the refugee camps in Thailand. It's about the Pol Pot era (chumnoan aa pot) . . . ; it's about the tmil who destroyed our religion (rumliay saasnaa).

Peasant refugees have also lent me tapes of long, chanting recitations of the prophecies, recorded in the refugee camps in Thailand. Theap, age 20, was unfamiliar with the predictions

when he lived in Cambodia. However,

> When I heard those predictions [in the camp] and then I compared them with the Khmer Rouge era, I was amazed . . . everything was predicted exactly; it wasn't just "close." "The roads will be emptied of travellers, the houses will be emptied of people;" . . . "the blood will flow in the streets as high as an elephant's stomach;" . . . "the worthless drunkards (nek puk sii) will rise up to be great." . . . I saw all this happen myself, with my own eyes!

The retelling and reinterpretation of the prophecies is a clear attempt to insert the experience of the Khmer Rouge years into a traditional mode of explaining reality. Prophecies in any context are broad, flexible and adaptable, and the put tumniay are no exception; it is easy to connect a wide variety of events to any given prophecy. Contemporary events such as the Khmer Rouge evacuation of cities, the destruction of Buddhist temples, and brutal executions seem horrendous, senseless and unexplainable when taken by themselves. However, once conceptually related to ageless prophecies, these events seem inevitable in the cyclic flow of Buddhist history. Order is thus given to otherwise disordered phenomena.[9]

Another example of the relation made by Cambodian middle-level peasants between current events and specific existing literatures can be found in the realm of folk tales. In a discussion of the Khmer Rouge years, Bol told me the well-known folk tale (roeung prēng) of the gōn lōk bird. The story involves a "non-virtuous" mother's abandonment of her children to starve

in the jungle. At the conclusion of the tale, the children are changed into gōn lōk birds by a sympathetic angel.

Chandler has translated this tale and discusses its place in Khmer wild vs. civilized discourse (Chandler 1982:58-59), a notion which will be dealt with more fully in the next section. Here I am concerned with how, in Bol's version of the story, the childrens' plight is explicitly compared to that of Cambodians under the Khmer Rouge. Bol told me that the children of the story eat small crabs and snails in order to keep from starving. (This agrees with other versions of the tale that I have heard.) He further expanded on the physical condition of the abandoned children; they grew weak and thin and came down with severe diarrhea and fever. The period of Khmer Rouge rule is often characterized in survivors' accounts as a time of rampant malnutrition, malaria, and gastrointestinal disease. The symptoms of these ailments were used to great narrative effect by Bol in his telling of the gōn lōk tale, as were moving evocations of the humiliation of foraging for insects as food--"just like animals." Lest there be any mistake, after telling the story, Bol explained how it was, in fact, about Cambodians' experiences during the Khmer Rouge years.[10]

This connection of Bol's tale of life under the Khmer Rouge with a folk tale gives literary justification to the practice of foraging for and eating raw food. More importantly, the contemporary, non-sensical "tale of Pol Pot"--in particular,

Bol's personal experience as he lived that "tale"--is made sense of by embedding it in a larger historical and cosmic order.

The Yeak, Liver-Eating, and the "Black People"

In casual discussions of the nature of the Khmer Rouge, peasants usually do not focus on the specific literatures cited above. Instead, discussion relates to general notions of "what it is to be Cambodian"--how the Khmer Rouge were the antithesis of and an attack on all that is "Khmer." Here, the wild vs. civilized dichotomy mentioned earlier is important. In this mode of explanation, characterizations of the Khmer Rouge as inhuman (ahmanuh), both figurative and literal, are common.

Bol:

> The Khmer Rouge had no morality or principals (khmian silathoa); they had no religion . . . . They weren't like humans at all; they were just like animals (doich sat).

Em, a man in his early fifties:

> They weren't humans like you or me . . . ; they were tmil, inhuman, ogres (yeak).

The Lon Nol government, which ruled Cambodia from 1970 to 1975, went to great lengths to portray the Vietnamese communists in Cambodia as tmil, the mythical atheistic "barbarian" enemies of Buddhism. The Khmer Republic's war against the communists was characterized in propaganda broadcasts and publications as a holy battle to save the Khmer religion from extinction (Lon 1970; Summers 1972:260). By extension, the "communist threat" was the extinction of the Khmer way of life itself, the overturning of

morality. It was primarily the actions of the Khmer Rouge that constituted what Lon Nol called "Vietnamese atrocities." The nationality of these forces was, of course, well-known to the Khmer peasants who had daily contact with them.

A barrage of supernaturalist rhetoric emanated from Phnom Penh and was intentionally spread by Lon Nol throughout the ranks of the Khmer Republic's armed forces. This campaign undoubtedly had an influence on the perceptions of Khmer peasant men, many of whom served as soldiers, concerning the nature of the Khmer communists.

Many of the attitudes exhibited by Lon Nol and other elite toward the Khmer Rouge--such as the belief that the "immoral communists" had tapped into a potent form of Khmer black magic and had thus been made invincible (Becker 1986:139)--are consistent with long-standing shared beliefs regarding spirits, evil, and the nature of distinct moral paths in Khmer rural society. In many ways, the Khmer Rouge cadre brought characterizations such as those listed below on themselves by their ideological position toward and actions against Buddhism (and thus against Khmer morality) and by the specific nature of their violence (Kirk 1975:215 and 225):

> The Khmer Rouge ate human livers--did you know that? They were just like ogres (yeak).
>
> The Khmer Rouge had no morals . . . ; they drank wine and ate human liver (puk sraa sii thlaehm), so an angel made them kill each other [in 1977-78].
>
> The Khmer Rouge knew tremendous magic; they had an evil spirit.

> The Pol Pot soldiers had evil powers . . . ; some of them had gōn krahk [roasted fetuses] which gave them power.
>
> I saw the Khmer Rouge throw babies up in the air, and impale them on knives . . . ; they cut the livers out of the children they killed . . . ; oh god, they were so evil.

Apparently, local spirits often worked against the Khmer Rouge as well. Ang Chouléan's informants report instances of spirits either defying Khmer Rouge cadre (1986:54-55) or aiding Khmers in their survival during Pol Pot's rule (1986:123-124). Likewise, Rao told me a story about a pregnant Khmer Rouge woman who underwent a painful two-week labor because her family had cut down a po tree inhabited by a spirit. Rao also said that a Khmer Rouge soldier (yothea) told her, "the forest [and its animal and spirit inhabitants] doesn't approve of the revolution." Rao said the yothea and another Khmer Rouge cadre had shot a wild pig, but when they went to cut out its liver, they saw it running off into the woods, as if it had never been shot. However, "a few days later, the yothea found the pig, rotting, right where it had been shot!" Rao also told me that:

> In one village, the wild animals came out of the forest and chased the Khmer Rouge away; sometimes they helped the people (prahchiachuon) escape. That's why the yothea said that "the forest doesn't approve of the revolution."

Cannibalism, Liver-eating, and the consumption of human bile are well-recorded historical phenomena in Cambodia, though these practices were never shared by a majority of Khmers (Landon 1949:97-98; Imbert 1961:123 and 144; Audric 1972:63, 85, 94; Vickery 1984:4). These specific modes of violence are also associated with the yeak, or mythical ogres of Khmer mythology,

and their description occupies a prominent dramatic (as well as humorous) place in didactic folk tales, songs, and performance tradition. In Khmer "liver-eating cosmology," a victim's courage is transferred to her/his murderer when the victim's liver is eaten. That the liver is the "seat of courage" is evident in terms used in everyday discourse: "to have [a lot of] liver" (mian thlaehm) is to be courageous or bold; "big liver" (thlaehm thum) is an epithet used to describe an overly presumptuous or arrogant person; to have a "black liver" (thlaehm khmau) is to have a bad character, to be untrustworthy. In explanations of the Khmer Rouge which include liver-eating stories, the basic concept of eating liver to obtain courage is sometimes altered. Bol's comment about Khmer Rouge liver-eating is consistent with traditional cosmology:

> The Khmer Rouge had to eat liver and drink wine to be able to kill.

According to Yann, however, they killed first, and then were forced to eat liver.

> The Khmer Rouge tried to destroy religion, so an angel made them eat liver [and thereby caused them to debase themselves].

The fact that liver-eating was widely observed as a Khmer Rouge form of violence (Debre 1976:185; Hamel 1977:157-158, 202-208, 243, 267; Ponchaud 1978;2, 65; Kiernan 1982a:314; Mam 1986:160-161, 177, 187; Gough 1987:156; Ngor 1987:223, 248)--and despite the fact that liver-eating was also practiced by Lon Nol soldiers (Ponchaud 1978:140; Kiernan 1985:275; Becker 1986:21;

Coleman 1987:358)--gives Khmers baffled by the violence of the Khmer Rouge another way to describe Khmer Rouge nature using familiar explanatory concepts.

Another means used by peasants to identify the Khmer Rouge as qualitatively different from Cambodians of good character (chet l'ah) is the concept of skin color. Dark skin has long been associated in Cambodia with poverty and manual labor, light skin color with prosperity and the cities (Mam 1987:57). By association, dark skin is also seen as indicative of a low moral character, since economic prosperity is in many ways indicative of a higher degree of stored Buddhist merit (Steinberg 1959:44-45; Becker 1986:85; Mam 1987). This perception is shared by many rural as well as urban Khmers.

This skin-color prejudice has obvious uses for the urban elite in the legitimation of their economic status relative to the "dark country people." Some dark-skinned peasants use this notion as a means of self-degradation and as a means of degrading those even darker-skinned than they.

> We are just stupid farmers (nek srae lnguang) . . . ; we are dumb, dark laborers . . . ; people like us don't know anything. Look, my skin is dark and rough; I do nothing but work all day.

Many of my informants regularly refer in conversation to the Khmer Rouge as aa khmau, which loosely translates as "those black bastards." A high percentage of the Khmer Rouge rank and file were apparently from the poorest rural areas of Cambodia (Kiernan 1982b:250-251; Vickery 1984:1-8; Ngor 1987:81), where Khmers tend

to have very dark skin. Here, then, is a physical distinction that middle-level peasants economically and geographically separated from such marginal areas could use to separate themselves from the people "from the forest":

> . . . those black people just came out of the forest; they couldn't read; they had no manners; they were just like animals.
>
> The Khmer rouge were really stupid people; they were dark, crude creatures.

One of the most important concepts in Khmer world view is that good and evil in the cosmic order are held in perpetual balance. Each must exist, so neither ever completely and conclusively triumphs over the other. Existence is above all ordered (Chandler 1982:53-54; Chandler 1983a:91). In the Khmer Rouge years, evil did indeed seem to triumph. The yeak, tmil, or aa khmau that were always defeated in folklore emerged from the jungle, and from folklore itself, right into peasants' personal experiences, and triumphed in the form of the crude, "uncivilized" Khmer Rouge soldiers. Khmer peasants can comfort themselves, however, with the knowledge that these events were, in truth, a special case of the eternal battle between good and evil. It was an extraordinary case of evil gaining more of an upper hand than usual, but nonetheless a case in which the traditional evil characters all acted out their prescribed roles.

Peasant Views of History and the Role of the Vietnamese

Peasant perceptions of the role of the Vietnamese (yuan) in the events of the 1970s in Cambodia seem to be based on two overlapping sources. One is a folk history of the nature of the Vietnamese and their relationship to Cambodians, shared by peasant Khmers by means of everyday discourse as well as by a set of specific myths. This folk history is given varying degrees of conceptual prominence by individual peasants in their attempts to explain the Khmer Rouge years. The second source is primarily an urban Khmer source, but it has had an influence on some educated peasant men as well. This is a fairly vehement anti-Vietnamese sentiment based on a knowledge and interpretation of specific developments in Vietnamese communism, events which occurred during the Indochina Wars and the 1979 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia.

Several scholars have noted an strong distaste for the Vietnamese among Cambodians (Steinberg 1959:40-42; Delvert 1961:25; Ebihara 1971:580). Others have downplayed the existence of anti-Vietnamese sentiment among the Khmer peasantry and have rightly identified the most active and specific Khmer dislike for the Vietnamese as an urban, elite phenomenon (Kiernan 1982c:374; Chandler 1983b:50-51). However, my experiences with Khmer peasants in the context of intimate, everyday discourse and the ethnographic sources cited above point to long-standing traditions of, if not hatred, at least distaste for and distrust of the Vietnamese. There is undoubtedly a range of dislike for

the Vietnamese among Cambodians, both in pre-1970s Cambodia and in the many present-day Khmer peasant settlements scattered throughout Southeast Asia and the West.

In agreement with Eibhara's (1971:581) observations in rural Cambodia, every peasant family I met has at least one personal tale of an unpleasant encounter with the Vietnamese. Common stereotypes of the Vietnamese in these accounts portray them as overly aggressive, crude and loud in their social behavior, and calculating, dishonest, and shamelessly "money-grubbing" in their financial dealings. These stereotypes are similar to those held about the Chinese elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Skinner 1957:164-165).

An oral tradition in Cambodian folk history interacts with these experiences to create an overall picture of Vietnamese hatred for and violence towards Cambodians, their designs on Cambodian soil, and their disrespect for Khmer culture. Most peasant Khmers and urbanites can relate some version of Vietnam's 17th and 18th-century rule of Cambodia, especially the tale of Vietnamese accession of the Mekong Delta from the Khmers. Southern Vietnam is still called <u>kampuchia kraom</u> ("lower Cambodia") by virtually all Khmers, and even Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) is referred to by its former Khmer name, <u>priy nokoa</u> (<u>prey nokor</u>).

Specific stories of Vietnamese atrocities against Cambodians are well-known to rural Khmers. These include a story of the 19th-century Vietnamese forcing Khmer residents of southern

Vietnam to dig an irrigation canal and then letting water into the canal to drown the laborers (Mam 1986:26-27). Even more popular is the story of torture and degradation of Khmers by Vietnamese known as the tale of the "Master's Tea" (Kiernan 1982c:376-377; Mouly 1986:39). In this story, Vietnamese soldiers bury three Cambodians up to their necks and use their heads, positioned to form a triangle, as a stand for their teapot. As a fire burns between the men's heads, they are cautioned by the Vietnamese to curb their screaming and writhing, so as not to "spill the master's tea."

Given this historical and aesthetic perception of the nature of the Vietnamese among Khmers, it is not surprising that such perceptions would influence attempts to explain 1970s Cambodian history, a history in which the Vietnamese played a highly visible role. Many middle-level peasants agree that:

> The Vietnamese communists taught the Khmer Rouge everything they knew . . . ; they taught them to torture, to kill, and to hate and destroy religion.

Some peasants go so far as to claim that:

> The leaders of the Khmer Rouge were really Vietnamese, and a lot of them were Khmer-Vietnamese.

Although this is certainly a minority view, one man told me that:

> Originally, the Khmer Rouge were nationalists, and just wanted to protect Cambodia from Vietnamese domination. Then, the Vietnamese communists infiltrated them and taught them to kill monks and to destroy Buddhism . . . ; they made them vicious.[11]

This man also blames the 1969-73 bombing of Cambodia on the Vietnamese communists and claims (as Khmer Rouge supporters do

today) that the 1979 Vietnamese invasion killed almost as many Khmers as Pol Pot did.

Such ideas are extreme and atypical of those held by the majority of peasants with whom I spoke. This type of causation theory, however, is part of a tendency for peasants to explain the extent of Khmer violence against Khmer by denying that this violence was committed by Khmers (See also Ponchaud 1978:136 and Mouly 1986:59). For example, a number of my informants, upon seeing Pol Pot's picture for the first time, insist that, "He's not Khmer! He looks Chinese to me!"

Other peasant men highlight what they see as Mao Zedong's contribution to Khmer Rouge communism.[12] The violence of some periods of Chinese communism, well-known from the stories of peasants' Chinese relatives (who had immigrated to Cambodia), is seen as an influence on Khmer Rouge practices. In a variation on this theme, Huot (age 38) insisted that:

> All that rice we worked to grow under the Khmer Rouge was taken off to China, while we starved . . . . China was the master of the Khmer Rouge.

The 1979 Vietnamese invasion and the present-day Vietnamese troop presence in Cambodia only convinces many peasants that they were right all along, that it was Vietnamese domination of Cambodia that was the real goal of communism in Cambodia from the beginning. For many peasants, especially women who have little tolerance for discussions of political history, the violence and massive social disruption of 1970-75, 1975-79, and now 1979 to the present blur together in one chaotic, dreadful mess. In this

quagmire, Vietnamese "hatred" for and "designs" on Cambodia makes up just one, familiar element.

Others, particularly peasant men who served as Lon Nol soldiers, hold to a more "sophisticated," urban-influenced analysis of the nature of Khmer communism. The Vietnamese are given a central role in this view, as they were by Lon Nol's civil war propaganda (The Republic 1971; Khmer Republic 1973), and as they are in present-day elite refugee writing (Soubert 1986:20-22). Important in these views is the notion of Cambodia as a "diminished nation." The "historical" descriptions of and desire to redress this situation was an important part of both Lon Nol and Pol Pot's political agendas. Here, the Vietnamese were portrayed as representative of all that is evil, and as the antithesis of what is "Khmer" (Chandler 1979b:411-413).

Bol, whose detailed knowledge of Khmer communist history is otherwise quite accurate, claims specific knowledge of a number of Vietnamese aims in the conflicts of the 1970s, such as:

> In 1965, Mr. Ho Chi Minh said [in a speech in Hanoi] that all Cambodians must be killed.

Another interpretation of Vietnamese actions, consistent with elite views and echoed in the theories of many peasant men, is that:

> The Vietnamese have many people, and no good land on which to grow rice. Cambodian land is very rich and fertile, so the Vietnamese want to kill most Cambodians, teach the rest to speak only Vietnamese, and move their people onto Cambodian soil. See--every Cambodian [in the People's Republic of Kampuchea] has to learn Vietnamese now, and two million Vietnamese have settled in Cambodia already.

This attention to and knowledge of specific details of present-day and 1970s history is influenced by "news" from sources such as Sihanouk's taped speeches, contact with elite Khmer allied with Son Sann, and Lon Nol's propaganda.

MYTH AND HOPE: PREAH KŌ PREAH KAEO

Lastly, I will discuss a Khmer myth which does not directly explain the Khmer Rouge years. This myth, however, has been used to both explain certain aspects of Cambodian "decline" (Chandler 1983b), and to provide a ray of hope in the present-day Cambodian situation. The myth of preah kō preah kaeo (PK/PK) is also a good example of what Chandler (1791a:56) terms "folk memories." I further argue that the oral version of the story of PK/PK, used to underscore (and embellish) events in Cambodian history, is also enmeshed in peasants' personal experiences. By means of these experiences, individual peasants themselves are inserted into the PK/PK myth.

According to the accounts of the PK/PK myth in the literature (Janneu 1876:87-88; Chandler 1983a:84-85), a jewelled statue of the Buddha (preah kaeo) and the sacred image of a cow (preah kō) were stolen from the Cambodian fortress of Lovek by the Thais. Chandler convincingly argues that preah kaeo, like its counterpart in Thai and Lao legend (Reynolds 1978:187-188), is a symbol of legitimation of Southeast Asian Buddhist kingship. Chandler further suggests that preah kō, apparently unique to Cambodia, stands for the Hindu heritage in Cambodian

political/religious tradition (Chandler 1983a:84-85).[13] The capture of these two icons by Thailand is also a symbol of the process of the

> transfer of Cambodia's regalia, documents, customs and learned men from Angkor to Ayudha [a Thai kingdom] in the period between [Cambodian king] Jayavarman's death and the Thai invasion [of Cambodia] of 1431 (Chandler 1983:84-85).

In other words, the Thais appropriated the symbols of the legitimacy of divine rule from the Khmers. This move was accompanied by rising Thai military and political hegemony in the region.

The means by which the Thais are said to have captured PK/PK from the Khmers--shooting coins from their canon so the Khmers would cut down the bamboo hedge around the fortress to collect them, thus removing their most effective defense of the fortress--is significant. It shows blatant greed for material goods directly leading to a fall from grace, as it should in a Buddhist tale. Thus the transfer of the legitimation of rule is pictured as somewhat deserved, consistent with Thailand and Laos' preah kaeo tales (Tambiah 1984:217).[14]

In Khmer peasant oral versions of the tale, PK/PK assume a decidedly supernatural character. The most popular version of the myth follows:

> A pregnant woman [sometimes a peasant; in other versions a princess] climbed a tree to pick an unripe mango (swaay khchei) which she craved. The day before, a fortune teller (kruu tiay) had told her that her children would bring her merit and fortune enough to "cover the earth." The woman fell out of the tree, her belly burst open as she hit the ground, and a small child [apparently already able to walk and a few feet tall] and a small white cow emerged: preah kaeo and preah kō, respectively. These beings had great

> powers, including the ability to make the skin of Cambodian soldiers impervious to arrows, knives and bullets.[15] They led the Cambodian army in many victorious battles, until the Thais captured them [sometimes by the "shooting coins" method described above, sometimes not]. They were taken to Thailand and immediately turned themselves into stone statues; they remain in that form, under heavy guard, to this day.

Poree-Maspero (1962:111) relates several supernatural versions of PK/PK-related stories which stress preah kō's importance, based on her encounters with peasants. These include the tale of:

> a bronze ox, in which were found many writings in Pali. Someone had rubbed it with mercury, and after seven hours, it was able to walk, to low, and to eat like a living animal.

Poree-Maspero was also told of:

> a bronze water buffalo which was filled with small water buffaloes and would escape ["take flight"], at the approach of the Siamese, into a pond from which it came out only rarely.

The PK/PK tales are numerous. There are also ancillary adventures which take place before PK/PK's capture. In some of these, the two fly through the air, preah kaeo holding onto preah kō's tail. Some of the stories are humorous and highlight the mischievous nature of the two, who are considered to be gōn phluah (twins), highly cherished in Cambodia. Sok (a 46-year old man), told me that the adventures of PK/PK were also portrayed in the reamkei, a Cambodian epic tale, and performed in villages by troupes of actors and hand puppets.[16]

The reported time setting of the myth is variable. While most peasants agree that the two deities first appeared hundreds

of years ago, one 45-year-old woman, Lai, told me that PK/PK's exploits were contemporary with the Khmer Issarak, the Cambodian nationalist guerrilla movement of the late 1940s/early 1950s.

In the U.S., PK/PK has been adapted in an interesting manner to fit a new context. Indian Hindu posters of the popular gods Krishna and Radha, which portray Krishna as a small blue child, and which feature Krishna and Radha cavorting with a bejewelled cow, are quite easily obtained by Cambodian refugees in Asian food markets and shops. These posters are believed by the refugees to be representations of PK/PK, drawn by the Thais. They were featured in almost every peasant refugee apartment that I visited in Madison and Chicago.

The current state of PK/PK is subject to some dispute. Some Cambodians report having seen PK/PK in Thailand, but many of my informants agree that they are being held in Bangkok under guard, with special care taken that no Khmers come close to the statues. According to Sarin (and others):

> If a Cambodian can splash vinegar (tuk khmeh) [or soy sauce (tuk s'iew)] on the statues of preah kō preah kaeo, many people believe that they will come back to life, and make Cambodia great and powerful again . . . like in the days of Angkor.

This is an agreeable prospect for the Khmers, whose country now sits at the depths of political, economic, and social despair.

The millenarian aspects of PK/PK are also apparently alive and well inside the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) today. In 1984, two women were reportedly arrested by the Heng Samrin government "for circulating leaflets describing the appearance of

an 'ox god,'" and charged with "invoking Cambodian mythology to suggest that the government would change" (Hiebert 1987:36). Awaiting PK/PK's re-animation is not, however, solely a recent phenomenon. In 1899, the French reported a Khmer bandit's belief that PK/PK would return to Cambodia from Thailand (Archives d'outremer 1899).

The myth of PK/PK has some fairly obvious functions. First of all, at least some hope can be seen--hope drawing on age-old legends of supernatural power and the sacred legitimation of Buddhist rule--in the seemingly hopeless situation in which the Khmers are currently entangled. Second, the role of the Thai in these myths is related not only to the battle for legitimate Buddhist rule so obvious in the non-supernatural PK/PK tale, but also to the present state of power relations between the Khmers and the Thais existing on the border between the two countries. These relations include the present-day, often brutal mistreatment of Khmer refugees by Thai soldiers and bandits, and, in general, the Thais' absolute political control over the refugees. Through hope in the supernatural (a supernatural realm in whose symbols the Thais strongly believe as well), Khmers are able to envision an end to these present relations.

The extent of PK/PK's function in the refugees' struggle for survival and symbolic power on the border was expressed in a conversation with 37-year-old Rao and her daughter Somaly, age 17. Somaly:

> In the refugee camp, a lot of people talked about preah kō flying around the camp--you know, preah kō preah kaeo?

> Preah kō would come to the edges of the camp and tell people where the bandits and soldiers were [so the refugees could sneak out of the camp to trade gold].

Rao:

> I didn't believe that preah kō and preah kaeo could fly until I saw it myself. They would come to people who wanted to leave the camp and tell them, "This is when the soldiers sleep, this is when they wake up; this is when the robbers will be out, and this is where they will hide."

Somaly:

> When [PK/PK] talked to people, they spoke in . . . um . . . king and monk language.

Rao:

> Often, they [PK/PK] would ask for diamonds from the people. I saw several people give them diamonds, and they took them right out of their hands.

Somaly:

> I don't know very much about preah kō preah kaeo . . . ; I'd like to learn more about the history of Cambodia. In the refugee camp, the Thais won't let Cambodians teach their children history. If they get caught teaching Khmer history, the Thais beat them. And the story of preah kō preah kaeo--oh, the Thais would never let them teach us that!

Other tales also circulate in the refugee camps concerning hope for liberation from the Khmers' plight as refugees in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge years. According to Sarin:

> The Thais had a prophecy that in the reign of Rama IX, an orphan would come from the northeast and take over the Thai throne. The prophecy said that he will have a special circular mark on his hand, called kahng chak, which will give him special powers. For instance, if he wanted, he could wave his hand and 1,000 soldiers would appear . . . . In 1980, the Thais got worried and took all the Khmer orphans out of the camps for several days. Every day, they would place their palms in ink and them stamp them on paper, to see if anyone had the kahng chak.

Sokhun, age 35:

> The king of Thailand had every Khmer orphan brought before him, so he could look at their hands . . . . This was because the Thai prophets told the king that an orphan would take over the throne in the reign of the tenth Thai king--do you know what king rules now? Number nine! The prophecy said the orphan would have a special mark on his hand . . . . If the king had found that orphan, he would have killed him right away.

This is part of a group of prophetic beliefs (put tumniay) said by Khmer peasants to be shared by the Thais.[17] Theap:

> The prophecies say that first Phnom Penh will fall, then Bangkok in the same fashion . . . . The Thais know this, and they're very concerned about the future. Their put tumniay is not different from ours at all.

CONCLUSIONS

Cambodian peasants do not base all of their interpretations of historical events such as those of the Khmer Rouge years on visions of "flying cows," but neither do they necessarily conceptualize such events according to analytical categories created by outside observers. Rather, the supernatural and moral beliefs of Khmer peasant world view articulate with everyday social experience and political and economic context in general, and Khmer social experience in the tumultuous 1970s in particular.

In the accounts of the Khmer Rouge years represented in this essay, novel experiences are interpreted using traditional explanatory frameworks. We are able to see this clearly in the present case because, as I have argued, "evil" in the 1970s in Cambodia stepped out from its normal position in the cosmic

order. It became necessary for Cambodian peasants to reassure themselves that this evil is still firmly grounded in that order--hence, the "story of Pol Pot," with all its antecedents, descriptions and, to an extent, solutions, is firmly embedded in familiar "reality."

It is common for humans to attempt to make sense of novel, traumatic experiences using familiar, comfortable interpretive concepts. Certainly, the concept of utilizing traditional myths and folk tales to account for contemporary experiences is well-documented in the anthropological literature (Maranda 1978; Bauman 1986:2; Hutchins 1987; Kracke 1987). Here, I have been interested in exploring the ways that, through interpretations of their experiences under the Pol Pot regime, Khmer middle-level peasant refugees in the U.S. actually insert themselves into a world (or world view) that is both physical and spiritual. "Reality" in the mechanisms by which these Cambodian peasants attempt to make sense of their experiences under the Khmer Rouge is a fluid and flexible concept indeed. That is, "reality" and "fiction" in Cambodian peasant theory concerning the Khmer Rouge are often not distinguished in a "Western positivist sense" (Levine 1984:78).

Chandler writes that, to Cambodians in the 17th century, "the king [and the cosmic order in which monarchic rule is embedded] is at once as real (or as unreal) as the lord Buddha" (1983a:106). Bol, in a summary of his attempts to relate the gōn lōk story and other myths to his experiences under the Khmer

Rouge told me:

> Yes, the stories (roeung) of Cambodia are many . . . ; the story of the gōn lōk, the story of Pol Pot, the story of preah kō preah kaeo . . . . We have an ancient culture and many stories.

The association made by Bol between "myth" and social reality is no accident. It is not that the "story of Pol Pot" is seen as a myth, for it is all too real to Bol. Rather, the "story of Pol Pot" is "at once as real (or as unreal)" to Bol as the stories of gōn lōk or preah kō preah kaeo: they are all part of the same reality in Bol's mind. These stories are freely related to each other, by Bol, according to their existence as both historical facts and elements in a cosmic order (White 1987:x).

This cosmic order is the Khmer peasant world view. The basic concepts of this view were believed by Bol before the 1970s and provided a ready-made set of explanatory concepts by which he could interpret his traumatic experiences. However, because of Bol's specific experiences, certain elements of the cosmic order or world view became even more real to him. In other words, his investment in Khmer cosmic order, as that order relates to the Khmer Rouge years, existed through his personal experiences.

The everyday encounters of peasants with spirits and with the material reality described by Buddhist doctrine are culturally defined as real, so that they may "occur" in the first place, and they reinforce the tenets of the Khmer cosmic order by personally involving individuals in that order. Most importantly

to the social actors involved, an enormous social and personal disaster has also in some ways been made sense of.

Next, we must ask to what extent are these elements of the cosmic order believed to be "real" by all Khmer middle-level peasants? Based on my observations of and interviews with Khmer peasant refugees in the U.S., I would stress the variability in the individual perception of reality in any given so-called Khmer "world view tenet." This variability in perception is shaped in part by the nature of individual experiences.

Theap stressed the fact that he witnessed the events predicted by the put tumniay "with [his] own eyes;" Bol also stressed his "eyewitness" role in confirming the validity of the prophecies. Theap has had little first-hand contact with possession and other spirit phenomena; he seldom speaks of spirits in connection with the Khmer Rouge. Bol, on the other hand, has a veritable wealth of Khmer Rouge-era spirit stories to tell; he is much older than Theap and had many more pre-1970s personal encounters with spirits. Bol has witnessed specific instances of Khmer Rouge liver-eating and other violence. In addition, since the Khmer Rouge years, Bol's wife has been regularly afflicted by malevolent ghosts. This gives Bol and his wife a daily reminder of the spiritual nature of the Khmer Rouge years.

Sarin, a man of some education, laughs at peasants who claim to have seen PK/PK. He believes that the statues of PK/PK are symbolically significant and are, indeed, being held by the

Thais. However, he has never seen the supernatural incarnations of PK/PK personally, and he considers himself above the fantastic visions of peasants less educated than himself. On the other hand, Sarin swears by the story of the "Thai orphan prophecy," right down to the magical abilities of the mythical child. He has offered me detailed reports of the Thai king's supposed search for the boy, one of which I quoted earlier.

Similarly, Rao does not put much faith in characterizations of the Khmer Rouge cadre as yeak, or as the possessors of evil spirits:

> I've heard [that the Khmer Rouge got powers from gōn krahk], but I don't believe any gōn krahk would help the Khmer Rouge, because they took them by force. You have to have the mother's permission [to take her dead fetus] for it to be of any use, and the Khmer Rouge certainly didn't do that.

Neither does Rao believe that the Khmer Rouge had been infiltrated and led by the Vietnamese:

> The hardest thing for me to explain, and the one thing that has broken my heart and troubled my spirit so, is that Pol Pot is a Khmer, just like me! Those [Khmer Rouge] soldiers were all Khmers, and they killed so many other Khmers. I don't know why . . .

At the same time, Rao has given me the most vivid descriptions of PK/PK that I have heard, based on her personal encounters with the deities in the refugee camps. She sees no contradiction between these latter beliefs and her "rational," non-supernaturally-based attempts to explain Pol Pot.

"Proper" modes of social interaction, the legitimacy of political rule, the explanation of the nature of good and evil, and notions of the nature of a human's place in the physical

world are all part of a continuous reality to many Khmer peasants. These ideal norms are inextricably bound up in many peasants' minds to what "life" and "reality" are. They are highly personalized concepts to individual peasants resulting from the personal experiences and everyday practice during which they are internalized.

These norms exist on a continuum--one pole is represented here by my example of middle-level peasants from Battambang, who emphasize the spiritual nature of the events of the 1970s and the "uncivilized" nature of the Khmer Rouge. The other pole of the continuum is represented by those lower-level (poor) peasants who had little or no stake in the Buddhist and other normative precepts referred to here and for many of whom the Khmer Rouge seemed, at least at some point in time, a viable alternative to the prevailing order. Individual variation in ways of explaining the phenomenon of the Khmer Rouge is significant within groups such as the middle-level peasants with whom I had contact. Any given individual could be expected to cite the "cosmic truths" outlined here or to refute them, depending on the circumstances.

Those interested in aiding the Cambodian people in an escape from the clearly disadvantaged material and social state in which most of them now exist must put an understanding and then a utilization of the contours of Khmer world view--in all its variations and complexities--at the forefront of our attempts to understand the Cambodian tragedy and in our attempts to aid the Khmers. Those of us who seek to understand the Khmer peasantry

must first become students of the peasantry. We must fit our research, our educational programs, and our material aid efforts to a context-dependent and flexible analysis of a very context-dependent and flexible Khmer peasant world view. Such a world view is at once "larger than life" and social life itself.

ENDNOTES

I wish to thank Maria Lepowsky, John Smail, Katherine Bowie, and especially David Chandler for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay. Many thanks are also due to Joyce Flueckiger for her countless contributions to the style and substance of this essay. I accept full responsibility, of course, for the final product. I owe a great deal to Pom Tam and Ses Chreb for many patient hours of instruction in the Khmer language, and to Pom Tem for first making me aware that the Khmer Rouge were more than just "flesh and blood." This research owes its very existence to the hours of personal revelations and theorizing shared with me by Mr. Pom and countless other Khmer peasant refugees. Thanks also to John Badgley, Lawrence Ashmun and the staff at the Echols collection at Cornell University for their hospitality and aid. I also thank Laurie Sears of the University of Wisconsin Center of Southeast Asian Studies Publications for her advice and encouragement. All translations from Khmer and French sources were done by the author.

1. "Yes, but who would dare to be bold enough to bury our supernatural beings?"

2. The 1970-75 Cambodian civil war was fought between government troops and a communist movement which filled its ranks with poor peasants, but which was led by educated urban Khmer. The fighting caused the deaths of approximately 600,000 Cambodians, ten percent of the nation's population (Finnish Inquiry Commission 1982:32). The war seems to have been precipitated by growing social tensions between Cambodia's urban elite and rural producers (Vickery 1982). This internal conflict was fueled by the spread of the Vietnam War into Cambodia, which included massive U.S. bombing and a U.S./ARVN (South Vietnamese troops) invasion of Cambodia (Shawcross 1979). In the three-and-one-half years that followed the 1975 victory of the Khmer communists, Cambodia was known as Democratic Kampuchea and was the stage for an attempt at a communist agrarian utopia. Virtually all Cambodians were put to work in agricultural and construction projects. Due to the inefficient nature of these, and a strict food-control policy, many Cambodians died of starvation. Strict controls were placed on nearly all aspects of social, cultural and economic life in some areas of the country from 1975 (or earlier) on. As the most radical (Pol Pot) faction of the Khmer Rouge ("Red Khmers") gained total control in 1977-78, these conditions took hold country-wide. Large numbers of urban elite and non-elite were murdered for their role in the "old society," and monks were defrocked and sometimes killed. As time went on, vicious Khmer Rouge internal struggles led to the murder of large numbers of Khmer Rouge cadre as well. At least one million

Khmers had died of starvation or murder by late 1978, when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam invaded Cambodia and put an end to Khmer Rouge rule. Today, Cambodia remains caught in the middle of regional and international politics. Warfare between remnants of the Khmer Rouge and troops of the Vietnamese-backed present Cambodian government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, continues. Approximately 250,000 Khmer refugees remain on the Thai border; another 230,000 have been resettled in the West. For a concise, thorough summary of recent Cambodian history that goes beyond my sketch here, see Ablin and Hood (1987).

3. Becker's writing about her personal experiences in Cambodia in the 1970s (and 1980s) are extensive and valuable. Her explanation for the rise and brutality of the Khmer Rouge, however, is troubling. It is an explanation rooted in the notion of Khmer traditions of violence and "superstition," and illustrated with violent Khmer folk tales (Becker 1986:82-85). It is dangerous to characterize an entire nation or race as violent. It is also easy to ignore the fact that throughout history virtually every group of humans has shown the capacity, at some time or another, to cruelly, sadistically murder their fellow humans. Certain aspects of Khmer Rouge violence can certainly be located in Khmer tradition (Vickery 1984:1-8), as I argue later in this essay. However, to construe this violence as a Khmer "cultural trait" and causal factor in the revolution is to ignore the complexity of the revolution. It is also sensational and potentially racist.

4. These levels of explanation about the perceived nature of the Khmer Rouge is typical of refugee interaction with Americans. This should be a caution to Americans who think they are getting the "whole story" of the Khmer Rouge years through Khmer translators or by casual conversation with Khmers with low-level English proficiency. It should also be an encouragement to study the Khmer language. I was horrified enough to read of Khmer Rouge atrocities before learning Khmer; now I am able to hear refugees' personal tales with all the fluidity of expression and dramatic effect that come naturally when one tells a story in one's native language. It is an important experience for those who care for Cambodians to realize the utter horror of the events of 1970s Cambodia in this intimate way.

5. Here, interestingly, the "wild" is celebrated against the "civilized" (in contrast to the uses of these two concepts described later in this essay): the more the "big person" resorts to the comforts (boots and protective clothing) afforded him by his elite status, the more drastic (and easily accomplished) is the ants' revenge.

Tuu, Sarin, and countless other peasant refugees also speak with awe and admiration of a Khmer outlaw in California--who in

certain contexts would just as likely be condemned as a religionless "savage":

> You know, a lot of Cambodians in the United States--especially in California and in Massachusetts--have formed gangs (tweu gaing). A lot of these people are Khmer Rouge who were able to come here by lying [to screening personnel in the Thai refugee camps]. Americans have no idea of the power of Khmer bandits . . . . There is one famous man in California . . . the police surrounded him, about five or seven of them . . . , and just by raising his hands, he forced them all to clasp their hands together and bow down to him (sompeah). They tried to shoot him, too, but the bullets just bounced off . . . . Now, the American police don't even dare to chase him when he commits a crime . . . . He goes anywhere he wants. Oh, Frank, you don't know the power of Khmer magic!

After one incident in which several Khmers in Madison were attacked by some Americans, Tuu spoke of hiring this man (or others like him) to come to Wisconsin to avenge the Khmers. Tuu sees no contradiction in what an outsider might call his shifting allegiances between supporting an established order and supporting a form of rebellion.

6. Bol's actions here serve to remind us that Levi-Straussian "wild/civilized" categories are never rigid and are always subject to individual, context-based interpretation in any given society.

7. Chandler is speaking here of 17th-century Cambodia, but all familiar with Khmer peasants in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s will recognize these contours of Khmer world view.

8. It should be noted that almost all of these specific predictions cited by Lon Nol were present in put tumniay published long before the 1970s civil war. This made their fulfillment all the more real to Cambodians. The apparent specificity of some of the prophecies is indeed uncanny at times when they are considered in light of 1970s events. For instance:

> Oh, Ananda! When the thunder booms in the north, and fire ignites the water; when fire ignites the trees and the foliage of the forest, then the sun will weaken and sink low. When the tiger departs to put out the fire in the forest, this is called "The War of the New Era". In the month of boh, one will hear words. In the month of miak, one will hear thunder. In the month of phalkun, trouble and confusion will arise. In the month of jēt, our master will have merit. This is the riddle within the religion of 2,500 years (Put Tumniay 1970:16).

Many Khmers will be quick to point out that the lunar month following jēt is pisak, the month in which the Khmer Rouge triumphed in 1975.

9. This application of the prophecies to account for present-day occurrences is encouraged in the introduction to a put tumniay published in 1970:

> We may observe in the put tumniay that the wise men have inscribed riddles for us to consider on our own and to compare with our [present] circumstances, which have sprung from deeper causes and origins (Put Tumniay 1970:n.p.).

10. For many of Cambodia's poorest peasants, who were well-represented in the Khmer Rouge, eating small crustaceans and insects was a way of life before 1975, a necessity of survival on marginal lands (Vickery 1984:1-8).

11. For a quite different (and probably more historically accurate) description of Vietnamese communist behavior, political goals, and interaction with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the 1960s and early 1970s, see Kiernan (1982a:257-264).

12. Mao was a fairly familiar figure to Khmers, due to his friendship with Sihanouk in the 1960s and Sihanouk's mention of him in his speeches. China is one of the few foreign countries about which a good deal is known to Khmer peasants. This is due to Khmer-Chinese intermarriage, and to generally friendly relations between Chinese and Cambodians in pre-1970s Cambodia. Inter-marriage and mixed origins seem to be common phenomena and, therefore, do not make this an unrepresentative group of informants.

13. Many peasant men conceptually separate Hindu and Buddhist elements in Khmer religion. Hinduism (or at least the peasants' conception of it) is associated with ancient magic formulae and inscriptions, and with extraordinary--often evil--powers. These powers are often considered to exist outside the spiritual realm of Buddhism.

14. Similar Lao and Thai tales abound concerning repeated captures and "liberations" of a jewelled Buddha which travelled back and forth between Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos and Cambodia (Reynolds 1978:176-178). The "real" preah kaeo (or at least a real one) has a documentable history and today indeed resides in Bangkok (Reynolds 1978:1976-178). Today, this preah kaeo remains a legitimator of Buddhist rule in Thailand and ensurer of Thai prosperity. Its powers have also been called upon to fight a cholera epidemic (Reynolds:1980) and to ensure the growth of the yearly crops (Reynolds 1978:187-188).

15. The attainment of invincibility to bullets and knives has long been a primary concern of Khmer magic and is often discussed with reverence by Khmer peasant men in the U.S. To achieve this goal, tatoos of magical Pali formulae (yoen) are most common. It is not surprising that renewed interest in the magical abilities of PK/PK to confer such invincibility would occur, given the proliferation of violence and firearms in Cambodia in the 1970s.

16. I have not heard elsewhere of PK/PK's inclusion in the reamkei. It is true, however, that local versions and performances of Khmer theater have been poorly recorded and described, so such a representation of PK/PK is possible.

17. The extent to which Thais actually believe these put tumniay-type prophecies, "orphan stories" and PK/PK tales fascinates me. It is well-known that many Thais revere Khmer magic as being especially powerful (Golumb 1985:205, 209). It is also noteworthy that Khmer script is used in the inscriptions on Thai protective amulets (Tambiah 1968:90-91). The beliefs of Thai villagers and soldiers in interaction with Khmer refugees on the border remains a fertile area for research.

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