

## SPIRITS IN CAMBODIAN POLITICS

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### Introduction

Spirits are everywhere in Cambodia. During my research in 2012-13 I was confronted with wild spirits of the forests like *arak*, dangerous female spirits such as *beisaat* or *aab*, Hindu gods worshiped as protecting spectres, and spirits of the dead (*pret* or *khmaoch*).<sup>1</sup> The most popular spirits that Cambodians worship are spirits or guardians of a specific region, called *neak ta*. The majority of *neak ta* were celebrated defenders of the Khmer community against an (imagined) danger from outside, having become national heroes after defeating Siamese or Vietnamese troops in the Middle Period (15<sup>th</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century), or as founders of villages who had tamed the wild and evil forces of the forest. Far from being mere symbols, spirits are in fact social beings, capable of engaging with the human world. Offerings are primarily made to the *neak ta* to ask for blessings and/or magical help. Spirits manifest themselves in dreams or visions, by manipulating natural phenomena like the weather, and of course, by possessing humans. Most of the spirit mediums (*kru boramey*) I met were possessed or advised by *neak ta*. In my fieldwork, I met *kru* and clients from all classes and backgrounds, including the political and economic elite, all interacting with spirits for advice, to receive prophecies, to be healed, and to gain magical power.



The statues of Sdech Khan (like this one at the port in Kep) have facial features similar to that of premier minister Hun Sen.

### Spiritual legitimacy: the 'chosen' leader of the country

In Cambodian political discourse, leaders commonly draw on spirits for political legitimacy. As the legitimacy of the Cambodian territory was historically and inextricably linked to royal claims to power (Thompson 2004), Hun Sen has focused on reinterpreting these claims in terms compatible with his own more humble background. Since becoming prime minister in 1985, Hun Sen has consistently worked on legitimizing his position by positioning himself as the *logical* successor to Cambodian kingship.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are not as many ghosts of the dead as we might expect if we combine the conception of 'restless' spirits of the dead (for example in Vietnam see Kwon 2008) and the approximately 1.7 million victims of the Khmer Rouge era (between 1975 and 1979). These ghosts are not disturbing the living because in the Theravadin tradition of Cambodian Buddhism they are considered to have already been reborn.

After ousting his royalist co-premier minister Prince Ranariddh in a coup d'état in 1997, Hun Sen claimed to be the reincarnation of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century ruler Sdech Kan, who was known as the popular usurper of kingship. Whereas Sdech Kan's actions were generally condemned by kings in Cambodian history, Hun Sen cast him as a freedom-fighter who introduced class struggle and democracy to the world (Norén-Nilsson 2013). Through an investigation by a state-funded research team, Sdech Kan's home was found in the same province that Hun Sen came from. Hun Sen and some of his influential followers have increasingly stressed his spiritual legitimacy as righteous leader through numerous and diverse links to Sdech Kan. Indeed, for members of the elite, praising and honouring Sdech Kan by commissioning statues, financing films, or other public acts has become a means of acknowledging Hun Sen, and strengthening their ties to him.<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of non-royal legitimacy of power accompanied the strategic degradation of the Royal Party FUNCINPEC<sup>4</sup>, who have not won a single seat in the last three elections (2003, 2008, and 2013). Hun Sen's main political opponent and former minister of FUNCINPEC, Sam Rainsy, has contested the narrative, praising Neak Ta Kleang Moeung for his alleged role in bringing the 16<sup>th</sup>-century king back to power by having "sacrificed his life to help eliminate a usurper"<sup>5</sup>. Although Sam Rainsy has continued to stress his rational approach to politics, he has acknowledged that it is vital, in imagining the political future of the country, to know the spiritual background of a current or

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<sup>2</sup> Parallels to Burmese military leaders are striking; see Schober 2005; Min 2001. Even in communist Laos, the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party claims to be the legitimate heir of selected 'patriotic' kings of the past – even though they left the last king of Laos, Sisavang Vatthana, dying in a re-education camp around 1980 (Evans 2009; Tappe 2013).

<sup>3</sup> For background information on Sdech Khan statues which have facial features similar to Hun Sen see Norén-Nilsson (2013): to read more about the production of the most expensive film ever made in Cambodia, which was funded by Ly Yong Phat, a tycoon from Hun Sen's privileged circle, see <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/hun-sen-and-man-who-would-be-king>

<sup>4</sup> Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rainsy.sam.5/posts/1008203205903079>

potential leader. For his part, Hun Sen's efforts at spiritual legitimization appear to have paid off: many spirit mediums told me the prime minister cannot be defeated, even by spiritual attack, thereby undermining any subversive potential in their practice. The importance of spiritual legitimacy in Hun Sen's grip on power in Cambodia is exemplified by an incident at the funeral of Norodom Sihanouk (Cambodia's last powerful king) in 2012. Hun Sen told reporters that whereas members of the royal family could not light a candle next to the king's body, he had succeeded. The prime minister interpreted this as spiritual confirmation that he was chosen by the royal spirit of King Sihanouk to be the righteous leader of the country.

### **Cambodian discourses on magical supremacy**

Khmer national identity is constructed through a complex set of discourses, an important one of which is the eminent connection to a glorious past in which temples like Prasat Angkor Wat and Prasat Bayon were built. Many Cambodians understand these as national symbols which define 'Khmer ancient heritage', not only as emblematic of former architecture and handicraft, but as the physical manifestations of magical power that enabled kings and their brahmans (*baku*) to construct them. Influenced by the colonial mission and its narratives, Cambodia's neighbours often describe the country as 'backward' and 'superstitious'. In Cambodia itself, the increasing numbers of spirit mediums have begun to take up this ascription themselves, thereby stressing their traditional knowledge and use of ancient magic. In maintaining these links to the past, Cambodians possess supremacy in magic, one of the only areas in which the country is apparently superior to its neighbours, especially Vietnam and Thailand. Today this discourse is reproduced in a number of popular narratives: bees and snakes bite only foreign soldiers; spirits make invading troops weak or sick, and the Cambodian soldiers and their (outdated) weapons stronger. Among soldiers near the Thai border, who are known as regular visitors to spirit mediums, this discourse explained why the well-equipped Thai troops, with their up-to-date weapons, had not simply invaded Cambodia and taken the contested

temples of Prasat Ta Moen and Prasat Preah Vihear. Politicians like Hun Sen draw upon and reinforce the discourse of magical supremacy as part of Khmer national identity through various public acts.



People engage in a *larn neak ta* ritual. This picture was taken in the end of the ceremony, where the spirit mediums and their clients show their gratitude to the spirits of the hosting couple.

### A public ritual for peace and/or magical supremacy

Bun Rany, the wife of Hun Sen and head of the Red Cross in Cambodia, performed a *krung pali* ritual at Prasat Preah Vihear on 1 August 2008, shortly after UNESCO declared it a World Heritage Site. With both Thailand and Cambodia claiming Prasat Preah Vihear within their national territory, political and military tensions had been high throughout the application process, and had escalated after the declaration and the ritual. Although *krung pali* is commonly held in rural areas to praise the spirits of the earth<sup>6</sup> and of the place (*neak ta*), the difference between this and a regular *krung pali* was clear to local observers: 1 August 2008 was an inauspicious date, with a partial solar eclipse – a source of bad luck – expected on that day. Moreover, holding the *krung pali* next to the contested temple, and with hundreds of soldiers present, could easily be interpreted as a form of magical defence, or even magical attack. In response, the nationalist-driven Thai media

<sup>6</sup> There are at least three overlapping concepts of the spirit of the earth such as *preah thorani* (or *neang kongheng*), *krong bali*, and *preah phum*, see Guthrie 2004; Leclère 1898.

asked followers to pray against the spiritual attack by “Khmer wizards”, and to wear “yellow color clothes [sic] – the color of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej – in order to stop the Cambodian magic spell”.<sup>7</sup> Accusing Bun Rany of carrying out a spiritual attack is not significant so much for its ontological matter, but rather because Khmer spiritual practice is generally understood as a form of malevolent, black magic in the popular Thai imagination (Baumann 2015; Pasuk und Baker 2008). In performing the ritual, Bun Rany reinforced this ascription, without closing off the possibility of other, benign explanations. Playing with this ambiguity, Cambodian Minister of Tourism Thong Khon stressed that the ritual was an opportunity to “pray to the souls of our ancestors asking for peace”, before adding that “we also pray for success in our defence of our territory”.<sup>8</sup> With troops from both countries clashing again during the following weeks, Cambodian officials stressed the ‘peaceful’ interpretation, while soldiers from both sides understood the ritual as a form of magical defence and/or attack.



This picture shows a private ritual by a member of the elite to ask for defensive power against the Thai troops.

### A private ritual for magical supremacy

I witnessed a telling incident in Poipet, near the Thai-Cambodian border, in September 2012. It was the night before a *larn neak ta*, a ritual to

<sup>7</sup> See <http://khmerconnection.com/topic/cambodia-use-black-magic-on-thais-981752>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://erikwdavis.wordpress.com/2008/08/01/what-is-the-krung-palii-ceremony-and-why-is-bun-rany-performing-it-at-preah-vihear/>

praise a *neak ta*, at the house of a border policeman and his wife. The couple, who were both also influential spirit mediums in the region, had high-ranking police and military officials as clients. That evening, spirit mediums arrived and gathered around a huge spirit shrine (*bey si*) in the first floor of the house. Some had fallen asleep by about 11pm, when the vice-president of a province, a military official just promoted to the position, arrived.<sup>9</sup> He appeared impatient to speak to the spirit of Neak Ta Kleang Moeung, the *neak ta* mentioned above who reputedly gave his life to restore the rightful king. The spirit medium, a middle-aged woman, seemed intimidated by the request of the *neak thom* (big person, member of the elite) request that she become possessed. All the mediums still awake gathered before the *bey si*, and urged the spirit to enter the woman's body. However, the spirit declined the invitation for about 30 minutes. When he finally did enter the medium's body, he remained silent. Apparently unfamiliar with having his requests denied, the *neak thom's* mood changed from one second to another. He tried to convince the spirit with charm, then anger, then submissive begging, and at last by offering the spirit large amounts of money in exchange for help. To convince the spirit of the urgency of the situation, the politician begged: "the Thai troops plan a major attack on our land in the next month, *neak ta*; please, they have modern weapons, *neak ta*; please help us to defend our country!" With the spirit still refusing to talk for the next hour, the other mediums asked their spirits to explain why he remained silent. Around 1am, a spirit revealed that Neak Ta Kleang Moeung likes a certain type of 'ancient music' (*pleeng boran*), that would encourage him to communicate with the client. The *neak thom* called his staff, instructing them to find out what kind of music this might be. He then promised to fund further *larn neak ta* rituals to please the spirit, and to try out different kinds of music. He kept his promise. In the following three months, I attended another three *larn neak ta* at the house, an unusual number for a typically annual ritual. I saw the politician engage in many different parts of the ritual, including carrying the hosting couple on a palanquin around

the *bey si*, and donating rice to the village inhabitants. After four rituals, and a major investment of money and time by the *neak thom*, the spirits (still reluctant to talk) seemed pleased, with the mediums convinced that they had magically prevented a new outburst of fighting between Cambodia and Thailand at the end of 2012.

## Conclusion

These examples of 'spirited politics' (Lauser und Endres 2011; Willford und George 2005) in Cambodia illustrate how spirits are not merely vague or symbolic. Rather, people from the political elite to ordinary citizens, negotiate every kind of political process with them, and make their decisions based on the spirits' reactions. I have provided examples of the agency of spirits, and how spirits who can be made to act in a variety of events; such as public debate about the prime minister's political legitimacy, or in reproducing the narrative of Cambodia's magical supremacy. In my forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation, I analyze the agency of spirits, how they emerge and their conditions of existence, as well as the lives of spirit mediums and their connections to politics in present day Cambodia.

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<sup>9</sup> To protect his identity, he remains anonymous.

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