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Memory and (Re)making Moral Order in the Aftermath of Violence in a Highland Khmer Village in Cambodia

Eve Monique Zucker

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Department of Anthropology

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Abstract and Declaration

This research is about how moral order is (re)made in the wake of cataclysmic violence and dislocation in a village in Cambodia’s Southwest. The village locale has been a Khmer Rouge base and battlefield for nearly 30 years between 1970 and 1998. The study, based on fieldwork carried out in 2001-2003, draws together the themes of relatedness, morality and memory to examine the consequences of the violence of the past on present day relations and practices. More precisely, I argue that the experiences of the village in the early days of the revolution, when villagers turned on each other, not only had a devastating impact on the social and moral order at the time they occurred but continue to impair the remaking of moral order today and has impacts on responses to other social changes occurring in recent years.

The thesis includes an analysis of both the memory of the violence of the past, including its moral dimensions and relations to other pasts, and an analysis of the means by which relatedness and moral order is re-established through trust, kinship, commensality, shared stories, and village rituals. It also includes a comparison with villages in the neighbouring commune that suffered similar but not identical experiences, arguing that these differing experiences shape present ways of healing and making the future. By addressing these issues, this dissertation will provide a unique case study that contributes to the anthropology of post-violence memory and recovery and the emerging anthropology of morality, as well as make an ethnographic contribution to Cambodian studies.

I declare that the work in this thesis is my own unless otherwise cited in the text.
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An Epilogue as Prelude

Close to the end of my fieldwork my neighbour Pu (Uncle) Thon offered to take me on a tour of the sites of the old village of O'Thmaa as it had stood before, as he put it, 'Pol Pot came and everything was destroyed.' The original village had consisted of four parts, each with its own place name and located at a distance from the other parts. Each contained a group of households whose members were related to one another by birth or marriage. Unlike today, where the houses line the main road, the four parts formed a loose arc that together made up O'Thmaa village.

We set off on the oxcart road behind my house, passing the Thmâ Khmaoch or ghost/spirit rock on our right. The base of this boulder is littered with old bottles and ancient ceramic jugs and bowls that had been used as receptacles for the ash remains of ancestors who the villagers say lived perhaps a century ago. Turning westward, we continued until we reached a stretch of rice paddy where the first of the homes once stood. Pu Thon explained:

This place was called Bung Srae. There were four houses here. Ta [Grandfather] Sok’s had 10 people originally; six of his children out of the eight are left today. They are Ta Chan in Prei Thnout, two daughters in Trâpaing Slaa, a daughter in Bung, and another in Stung Ampou. The two children who were killed were Khmer Rouge soldiers. Another daughter, Yeay [Grandmother] Ngim, also Khmer Rouge, died of illness. Ta Sok also died during the war.

In the house of Yeay Chriep there were four people originally; now no one is left. Her two children, both Khmer Rouge soldiers from 1970-1972, were accused by someone from the village, not a Khmer Rouge, of being Khmer Sâr [White Khmer] and killed. One of these sons was married to Yeay Ngim, the daughter of Ta Sok.

The next is the house of Yeay Ngim and no one is left. She was the daughter of Ta Sok. Her husband, who was the son of Yeay Chriep, was a Khmer Rouge soldier but was killed after being accused by a villager of being Khmer Sâr.
Prelude

The fourth house is that of Yeay Khieu and Ta Mom. There were 16 of them originally and now seven remain. Ta Mom was accused of being Khmer Sâr and killed. Out of 16 children eight survived, the others dying as babies or young children.

Pu Thon indicated we should move on and so we continued westward toward the O’Thmaa creek and came to Ta En’s garden near the giant mango trees and small stream.

This place is O’Ta Rom and is named after the neak ta [ancestor guardian spirit] called Rom. We believed in these spirits before the war. There were three houses here. The first was the house of Vin. His wife is Yeay Oak. Lon Nol’s soldiers cut off Vin’s head and sent it to their commander. It was the custom at that time. Vin was a Khmer Rouge soldier who had gone to the ‘Struggle in the Forest’ with the Khmer Rouge in the late 1960s. When Lon Nol later went into the forest they found him and killed him. He was the first cousin of Cheun. All of his family is dead outside of Yeay Oak and her son Seun.

Next is the house of Ta Cheun. He was the village chief under Sihanouk and first cousin of Ta Vin. Cheun’s daughter married Ta En. Cheun worked with Ta Kam who was the Deputy Village Chief. Both were Village Chiefs for a long time. Cheun was killed by Lon Nol. The soldiers told him to go with them to shoot monkeys. Everyone in his family is now dead except two daughters; one here in the village is married to Ta En, and the other in Sre Ambel. His wife died of illness.

Then there was the house of Ta Bin. Actually, there were three houses in all – one belonging to him and the two others belonging to his children. There were originally 10 people and now only three remain. The first of these houses belonged to Ta Bin. Three of his children died: one through illness and the other two while they were Khmer Rouge soldiers. The second house was that of his daughter who died of illness. The third house belonged to his son who also died as Khmer Rouge soldier during the war.
Leaving this spot, we crossed the large paddy lined with sugar palms and stepped onto the dirt road that runs down the middle of contemporary O’Thmaa. Gesturing toward O’Thmaa’s northern slope, Pu Thon continued:

This place where Ta Kam’s and Ta Mahn’s is now is called Phnom Voir. There were four houses here. The first is the house of Ta Yin. There were originally 10 persons. Ta Yin was the father of Ta Mahn, who is the only remaining survivor of this household along with his children.

The next was the house of Ta Je and Yeay Ow. There were originally 11 people but only two remain out of this household and live elsewhere now. Of the eleven, a few died of illness and all of the rest of them died as soldiers for Lon Nol and the Khmer Rouge.

Then there was the house of Ta Kam that originally had seven persons. Ta Kam was the deputy village chief who later became the village chief. Only three remain in his family: Yeay Phiep, a daughter in Pich Nil, and Ta Kam himself.

The fourth house belonged to Yeay Lam and originally had seven people. No one remains here from this household. The husband was caught and killed here during the war. I don’t know what happened to the children. Yeay Lam herself is now in Phum Damrei in Doung Srae Commune.

We turned westward down the road toward the O’Thmaa creek, stopping near to where another group of giant mango trees stand and where the house of Bith, a recently defected Khmer Rouge commander, stands today. As we walked there I could not help but hear the voice of a woman I had recently interviewed:

My family, and my uncles were all killed during that time. My uncles and my grandfather. Only my mother survived. Three of my aunts, my uncles and my grandmother too. And my other uncle was also killed. And my grandmother’s father was also killed. They all died. They tied people with their arms behind their backs and took them to kill them. They blindfolded them also. They killed them near the O’Thmaa creek near brother Bith’s house under the mango trees there.
Pu Thon spoke again:

This place is called O’Svay and had nine houses in total. The first was that of Ta Thon, my grandfather. There were five people originally and now none are left. Next to their house was that of my parents. Four people lived in this house and now only I am left.

The third house was Ta Sai and Yeay Noi. Of the six originally, only Yeay Noi now is left and lives in this village.

The fourth house was Ta Put and had nine people originally. All but two died. Then the fifth belonged to Yeay So. Out of the nine people there only two are left – Yeay So and her daughter. All seven of her sons were Khmer Rouge soldiers and all were killed in the war.

The next house belonged to Yeay Sok and of the original seven people only three remain. Three of her children were Khmer Rouge soldiers, joining in 1968 and 1970. They were killed consecutively in 1970, '73, and '75. Two of the three remaining children settled elsewhere and the other is your neighbour [in O’Thmaa village].

Finally we reached the end of the row of giant mango trees and nothing but wilderness lay ahead. Pu Thon told us we had reached the last destination.

Here were three houses in total. The first belonged to Ta Doung. Out of eight people only three are left. One of the sons, a Khmer Rouge soldier, was hung by the neck by the Khmer Rouge, who accused him of having the wrong moral philosophy [silethoa]. The others in his family were either killed or died of illness.

The next house belonged to Ta Sim. There were seven persons originally and only one is left – San in Stung Ampou is the only survivor of this household. The others were all Khmer Rouge soldiers and all were killed eventually.
Finally the last was the house of Ta Mai. Out of the original five only one survived and that is his grandson, Nang who was a soldier for Lon Nol.

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This chilling tour of the old village of O'Thmaa took place on the final days of my fieldwork. It was clear that Pu Thon felt that I should not leave without this image of the old village – this filling in of the past.

Being taken to the old village also said to me that Pu Thon had found that I was worthy of his trust. Early on in my fieldwork he had told my assistant that he and the others did not trust me. It did not make sense to them why I was there and what I was doing. But, by watching me over time and getting to know me, he had come to trust me. This tour was perhaps the biggest statement of that trust. What had been invisible was now made visible – he ‘allowed me to see’.
Chapter 1

Introduction

The calamitous events narrated in the preceding pages occurred in the village of O'Thmaa in Southwestern Kompong Speu, Cambodia in the early 1970s during the time of the Khmer Rouge revolution and civil war. O'Thmaa is located in a mountainous region that was known from early 1970 until late 1998 as 'The Forest of the Struggle' (Préi Brûyut). The Khmer Rouge used these mountains as a base, both prior to installing their regime nationally, Democratic Kampuchea (DK) (1975–1979) and after its downfall during the protracted civil war that followed. The Khmer Rouge were in fact following a tradition set by the Issarak (independence) movement that had waged attacks against the French colonial government from these same mountains in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The communities living in this area suffered innumerable hardships through these periods of terror, violence and dislocation. During the Issarak period, most of the villagers had been able to move to safer locales. However, they were not so fortunate later during the Khmer Rouge revolution that had devastating consequences for them — as suggested in the prelude of this dissertation.

This thesis is, broadly, about the impacts of the Khmer Rouge on this village. O'Thmaa village and its surrounding communities were ‘base areas’ (moulâdthan) for the Khmer Rouge, that is, places that the Khmer Rouge ‘liberated’ early on in their revolution, at least from the early 1970s. These ‘base areas’ provided them with the human and material support crucial to their success in seizing control of the nation in 1975 and establishing DK. To the best of my knowledge, there is no other ethnographic study of the impacts of the revolution on the ‘base people’, whether in terms of the impact of the revolution itself or its after effects in the present. While there are numerous accounts of the ‘new people’, that is, the people who were ‘liberated’ late in the revolution, the voice of ‘old people’ or ‘base people’ (neak moulâdthan) is not heard. Many of the ‘new people’ who, as refugees, have moved to France, Australia and the United States, and a number of those who remained in Cambodia, later wrote about their experience during the Khmer Rouge period (e.g., Oeur 1998; Pin and Man 2000; Someth and Fenton 1986). Those in the areas like O'Thmaa, however, have not had the means to tell
their story in this way. Most of the adult population from that time are illiterate, as is a significant portion of the younger adult population today.

James Fernandez has observed that it ‘is the unsettlement and uncertainty of any moral order that is the constant challenge to the moral imagination’ (2002: 38). For Cambodians who lived through the total upheaval of the moral order as it existed prior to the Khmer Rouge revolution, this statement takes on new meanings and proportions. When some of the villagers I spoke with tried to imagine what their future would be like, they expressed this uncertainty with statements such as: ‘Society changed before when the Khmer Rouge came and it may change again.’ One of the aims of this thesis is to show how this kind of outwardly commonsense observation in fact implies a deeper practical wisdom that enables people to live with dignity and virtue in a world that is subject to ambiguity.

Having survived 30 years of war, terror, genocide and displacement, O’Thmaa’s villagers had only begun to return to their village three years prior to the time I came to live with them in September 2002. Along with their clothes, dishes, tools, pots and pans they also brought back with them their memories of village’s past, the knowledge of other places and ideas, and their hopes and aspirations for the future. With these possessions, the villagers set about ‘remaking their world’ (Das et al. 2001). But what was this world composed of and what conceptual models were villagers engaging with to construct it? What were their ideas on how people should live with one another and how do they create and sustain these relations?

When I arrived in O’Thmaa, I was unaware of the village’s particular history, but it was immediately clear to me that there was something tragic and peculiar about the place. The overall mood of the village was sombre and distrustful. The atmosphere might have been attributable to the extreme poverty endured by these people and the constant plagues of malaria and other illnesses. But hardship did not entirely explain it. There was no apparent correlation between dourness and distrust, and poverty and disease. Some of the most socially engaging of the villagers were extremely poor and suffered substantially. I soon became aware, too, that there was little social intercourse between a number of the families, and sometimes even hostility. However, this was not the image of the village that the villagers themselves wished to convey to me. From the
earliest days of my fieldwork I was repeatedly told that the people of O’Thmaa ‘loved one another’ (srolanh knea), and it was beyond doubt that the individuals who said this to me clearly wanted me to believe this. The point was frequently underlined by the commune chief, the village chief and others, by saying that the majority of O’Thmaa’s families were related to one another. The force of this insistence on fraternal love led me to wonder why the villagers seemed to find it so important that I have this impression. Clearly, there seemed to be some disunion between relatedness as an ideal and relatedness in practice, as I had encountered it. I wanted to learn more about these two forms of relatedness, what they implied, and how they were articulated and performed.

The peculiar disjunction between what villagers said about their relations with one-another and what I observed was not the only feature that made this village seem different from other Cambodian communities. The majority of O’Thmaa villagers also claimed to have little knowledge of the traditional practices that were not only practised in the neighbouring commune but, some people said, used to be practised in O’Thmaa itself before the Khmer Rouge revolution. What were the reasons for this disjunction, and how did villagers explain the difference? Have villager’s ‘forgotten’ this knowledge or do they simply no longer care? And was there any relationship between the professed lack of traditional knowledge and the aura of suspicion and uncertainty, and the lack of sociality, amongst villagers?

I knew that the area as a whole was widely considered to be former Khmer Rouge territory, and so I wondered what impact that history might be having on the present and why there was such evident variation in social climate between the communities that shared this area. It seemed to me that a closer look at the village’s past was needed in order to illuminate the discrepancies I was observing between this village and other villages in the area. I knew that all of them would have suffered under the experience of the Khmer Rouge era, as elsewhere in Cambodia, and that the long duration of civil war in the region would have brought additional hardships. But was there more?

Thon’s stories about the terror and violence that occurred in the old village – recounted here in the prelude – give some hint of the terrible events that took place in O’Thmaa in the 1970s. Villagers had joined different sides but, more detrimentally, a rash of
accusations between the villagers at the time led to a significant number of executions. Amongst those who survived, these events seem to be where the most painful memories of the Khmer Rouge past lie. The accusations and betrayals that occurred have produced tensions for the villagers who must contend with the ‘wrong doings’ of the past generation, while re-establishing relatedness in the present in a manner that allows them to build a future together.

This thesis is then concerned with how communities negotiate the memories associated with difficult pasts and come together again to rebuild their lives. The explanatory themes that I bring to the questions arising out of these concerns come from the subject areas of morality and ‘social memory’. Neither of these framing devices is without its drawbacks, which I will outline briefly below, but they are effective in weaving together the concepts of difficult pasts, relatedness, and making the future. Of course, O’Thmaa is only one instance where these issues are played out. Making it the focus of the study raises the question of whether it is a unique case or whether it shares some features with other communities with similar, if not identical, pasts. Within the scope of this study, for comparative purposes I have included the wider commune that O’Thmaa is part of (Prei Phnom) as well the neighbouring commune (Doung Srae). While there are certainly differences between the communities, I believe that it is precisely within these differences that wider lessons can be learned because they demonstrate variations within a much broader cultural framework.

There is of course a vast literature on the topics of memory and morality. Rather than discussing it in the abstract here, I will instead discuss these theoretical themes concretely in the body of the dissertation in the context of specific ethnographic examples, and then attempt to draw these themes together in the conclusion. Nonetheless, a few words need to be said at the outset regarding what I mean by ‘moral’ and ‘memory’. Beginning with ‘moral’, it first needs to be said that there appears to be an emerging ‘anthropology of morality’. Heralded by Jennifer Cole (2003), Michael Lambek (1996; 2000), Signe Howell (1997) and evident in other recent scholarship (e.g., Robbins 2004; Bayly 2004; Fernandez 2002; Jing 1996), these works all seek to bring into focus the moral in ethnographic gaze and practice. But what is meant by moral and how is it used? Cole presents us with the term ‘moral projects’ that she says means ‘local visions of what makes a good, just community, and the ways in
which these conceptions of community reciprocally engage people’s notions of what constitutes a good life, and their efforts to attain that life’ (2003: 99). Not dissimilarly Lambek uses the term ‘moral practice’ in a sense associated with the Aristotelian concept of phronesis to refer to the reasoned actions taken by people to achieve particular moral ends (1996; 2000). As will be clear later on in this thesis, this interplay between the ideal and what people really do resonates strongly with much of the ethnography, as was already hinted at in the example concerning relatedness at the beginning of this chapter. Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity allow me to make as clear as possible what I mean by ‘moral’.

Beginning with ‘moral’ in the theoretical sense, ‘moral’ can mean two things. The first meaning implies that something can carry the value of being good or bad. The second meaning is also what is good but in the sense of an ideal; that is, the way things should be or ought to be, as that is culturally and historically determined by a given community. This second meaning, is in fact then value-laden. This dual meaning of ‘moral’ is rather unfortunate and I do not have a solution to the problem; however, I will briefly outline some parameters as to how the term is used in this thesis. When speaking of ‘moral order’, ‘moral ends’, or ‘moral motivations’, I mean ‘moral’ in the ideal sense. That is the way the order should and ought to be. I also use the terms ‘moral’, ‘immoral’ and ‘amoral’ in talking about some of the categories that villagers use themselves. It is clear, however, that the dual meanings of the word ‘moral’ is a problem of studies of morality that will have to be sorted out in the future but in the meantime I apologise to the reader for any confusion that may stem from this.

In any case, ‘moral’ in Khmer is used a number of ways. For example, in the prelude Thon said that one of his neighbours was killed for having the wrong ‘moral philosophy’ (silethoa). The word ‘sil’ here is generally used to mean what is good or right. It can also be translated as holy or sacred as it is used to refer to Buddhist holy days (tngay sil). It also can be used to imply someone has a good or virtuous moral character ‘neak sil’ (virtuous person) which is similar to neak bon which means a good person. Another term for moral or morality is ‘plauv chett’ meaning the path or the way of the heart/mind. This form often appears as ‘tam plauv chett’ meaning according to one’s view of right and wrong. ‘Chett’ (heart/mind) used together with akrok (bad) or laor (good) is used to indicate someone’s moral character. Finally, in the course of my
fieldwork the words used most commonly to convey the morality of acts were the words *thvoe bap* or *thvoe bon*; that is, a ‘good/right act’ or a ‘bad/wrong’ act. For example, villagers in some cases judge someone’s acts to be moral or immoral they generally use *thvoe bap* or *thvoe bon*.

A similar problem of meaning also arises with the word ‘memory’ in theoretical applications, a problem that has been noted by a number of scholars. Partly as a result of the influence of Maurice Halbwachs, a Durkheimian who developed the theory of ‘collective memory’ (1980; 1992), ‘memory’ has become extraordinarily popular in the social sciences and humanities to mean the social narratives people produce about the past. A number of problems stem from Halbwachs’ analysis, including the complete occlusion of individual memory or agency that is borne out of his insistence on making memory an entirely collective phenomenon (Cole 2003: 94-96; Sorabji 2006: 2-3). Maurice Bloch has described the problem as follows:

... perhaps because of the influence of Durkheim and because he fails to make clearly the distinction between recalling and remembering, Halbwachs wants to go so much further in his argument as to deny any epistemological role to the mechanisms of the individual brain. Such a stance leads him to make patently false assertions such as that memories which are not shared are soon forgotten. For him, therefore, there is no such thing between autobiographical memory and collective memory since autobiographical memory is also the product of social contact. (Bloch 1998: 117)

Therefore the confusion over the usage of the term ‘memory’ derives at least partially from Halbwachs, who used the term to refer to the social recall of past events. In any case, here in this thesis I avoid using the term ‘memory’ where possible but where I do use it, I assume that memory is a part of a person’s cognitive processes but that these memories may be shared with others through the social production of narratives and other evocations that may in turn produce a new memory or change an existing one (see Bloch 1998). Moreover, while this thesis is not about how individual’s contend with their personal autobiographic memories, it is nonetheless implicit that social representations of the past are products of individuals’ memories that become to some

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1 For helpful reviews of this problem see the introduction in Antze and Lambek (1996) and Jeffrey White (2006).
extent socially synthesised through shared narratives and experiences but also retain features unique to the individual.

A final point needs to be made here regarding the reconciliation or resolution of violent pasts. Just as there is no simple ‘before and after picture’ in which innocence is lost ‘by a destructive act of violence’ (Antze and Lambek 1996: xiv), so too there is also no simple resolution in its aftermath. Numerous works suggest that it is not clear when or if violent pasts are ever completely ‘repaired’ or ‘reconciled’, and that these pasts may ‘haunt’ the present in unpredictable ways for indeterminate periods of time, even for generations who never lived through the violent episodes themselves (e.g., Bloch 1998; Mueggler 2001; Kidron 2004; Linke 2002). Therefore while focusing on the ways in which people ‘get on’ with their lives, we must also be aware that terrible episodes in the past may continue to impact people’s perceptions and choices in the present.

As indicated above, many of the studies that address the social and cultural issues arising in the aftermath of violence or trauma are bundled under the label of studies in ‘social memory’ (e.g., Jing 1996; Mueggler 2001; White 1998; Antze and Lambek 1996; Zur 1998). Most of them address how the violence and trauma of the past continues to permeate people’s lives as individuals and/or communities or nations and how people re-interpret those memories in efforts to cope with the violence of the past. By bringing such questions into relation with issues of morality and moral order, I seek to broaden the frame of analysis to include not only the persistence of the past in the present but also the promise of the future. Through this effort, I hope to cast some light on ways in which people negotiate the impact of the violence they endured whilst remaking their lives and their communities in ways that a primarily ‘social memory’ based study may overlook. By emphasising the remaking of the moral order, we not only gain a sense of people’s implicit and explicit understandings of what social relations ought to be, but also how these ideals may absorb and help settle the cataclysmic rupture of the past.

I now turn in the next section to discuss the theoretical background relevant to Cambodia. This is the body of work that I draw on most substantially and likewise to which this thesis will mostly contribute.
Cambodian Ethnography on Moral Order and Memory

This thesis is part of an emerging body of ethnographic studies that mostly began in the late 1990s and early 2000s when long-term fieldwork in Cambodia became possible again. Because of the two civil wars (1970–1975 and 1979–1998) and Pol Pot’s genocidal regime (1975–1979), there has been a paucity of ethnography available on contemporary Cambodia. Compounding the absence of scholarship, a considerable amount of the literature that had been available in Cambodian libraries and archives prior to the DK period has been lost or was destroyed in the leadership’s efforts to obliterate the past. Despite these setbacks, however, a new anthropology of Cambodia began to materialise in the late 1990s. Two excellent long-term ethnographic studies were undertaken and published alongside a growing body of edited books and articles written by a number of anthropologists with prior experience in Cambodia before the early 1970s or with Khmer communities abroad and others who were entering the field. The long term studies were John Marston’s PhD dissertation *Cambodia 1991–1994: Hierarchy, Neutrality and Etiquette* (1999) and Alexander Hinton’s PhD Dissertation (1997) and subsequent book *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the shadow of genocide* (2005). The shorter studies (e.g., Ebihara 2002; Chouléan 1986; Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal 1996; Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Ebihara, Mortland, and Ledgerwood 1994; Eisenbruch 1992; Hinton 2002, 1996; Kent 2005; Ledgerwood 1995, 1996, 1997, 2002; Marston 2001, 2002, 2006; Satoru 2005; Wood 2006) address a variety of topics including Khmer Buddhism, gender, the Cambodian genocide, village solidarity, and Khmer Rouge memorial sites. Nevertheless, the only long term ethnographic village studies within the last hundred years are May Ebihara’s classic dissertation *Svay, a Khmer village in Cambodia* (1968) and Gabrielle Martel’s village study *Lovea, village des environs d’Angkor* (1975). These studies provide an excellent overview of many of the social institutions and practices that featured in rural village life as it was in the time and place of their fieldwork. Apart from Ebihara and Martel, there was little substantial ethnographic fieldwork in Cambodia during the decades before the early 1970s, with three notable exceptions. These are François Bizot (1988; 1976; 1981), who worked on

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2 In the interest of brevity, I confine my discussion here to Cambodia rather than Southeast Asia as a whole. However, where relevant and appropriate, studies in the region that relate to particular aspects of social memory and the remaking of moral order are discussed within the chapters of this dissertation.
tantaric Buddhist practices; Marie Martin\(^3\) (1997), who conducted a primarily ethno-botanical study of the indigenous highland Khmers in Cambodia and Thailand; and Éveline Poreé-Maspero (1938; 1962; 1969), who recorded a wide range of data on ritual practice, clothing and livelihoods across several regions of Cambodia.

My study seeks to contribute to the emerging body of ethnographic literature that addresses Khmer culture in general and rural village Cambodia in particular. To the best of my knowledge, at the time of my research I was one of only two people conducting long-term village fieldwork.\(^4\) The opportunity to conduct long-term fieldwork in one place, combined with the lack of available knowledge, led me to pursue the research from a ‘bottom up’ perspective, in the sense that I started by looking at the most basic forms of sociality – kinship, food, commensality, life-cycle and other ritual practices, and stories and myth. This method allowed me to evaluate what I observed within the village with what I had learned earlier about Khmer people through my time spent in Phnom Penh and the visits I made around the country and compare it with the studies I had read. The experience of living in the village also provided me with the opportunity to gain an understanding of how Khmer relatedness is made and maintained, in the particular time and location of my fieldwork, and how that relates to their understandings of how the world ought to be. This ‘classical’ ethnographic’ approach also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which villagers negotiate the past in the present and what their concerns are for the future.

Underlying these immediate questions was the larger research question: what forms and practices constitute moral order within Khmer culture generally? In other words, what are the general ideas held by Khmer people as to how society ought to be structured, how people should relate to one another, what is the proper way to arrange people’s lives and engage in social acts? How is the world morally divided into the good, bad, right and wrong, us and them? When is this order violated and what happens when it is? In Khmer studies this question of what the moral order consists of has been dealt with quite some depth especially by historian David Chandler (1996; 1996; 1973) who

\(^3\) Martin also wrote *A Shattered Society* (1994) where she provides a historical analysis of the Cambodian genocide.

\(^4\) I learned during my fieldwork that another anthropologist, Kobayashi Satoru, was also doing a village study for his PhD dissertation fieldwork in another province. In addition there were a number ethnographic studies being conducted that were not village studies per se (for example, Tyrone Siren was working on gambling on the Thai border and Timothy Wood was working on tourism in Anlong Veng).
focused on the 19th century period of war and chaos, a time he describes as 'the darkest portion of Cambodia’s dark ages before the Armageddon of the 1970s’ (1996: 117). Using archival material from that time, Chandler investigated a wide range of topics that deal with Khmer perceptions of moral order, including notions of the wild and the civil, and the practice of naming both places and persons. In a similar vein, the Catholic theologian François Ponchaud wrote about the categories and social structures that form the basis of Khmer society, focusing on notions of the wild and the civil, kinship and other aspects of the moral order that were reinvented out of the pre-existing order in the Khmer Rouge revolution (1989). More recently, the topic of moral order has been taken up by a number of other scholars of Cambodia (Hansen 2004, 2003; Edwards Forthcoming, 2004; Hansen and Ledgerwood 2005). Anne Hansen’s work on early 20th century Buddhism, is particularly salient to my own project because it explores changes in the ideas of how to live morally to meet the contingencies of modernity (Hansen 2003, 2004). In Cambodian ethnography, the topic of moral order has been mostly explored through studies of Buddhist institutions and practices (Marston 2001; Ledgerwood 2004; Kent 2005; Satoru 2005; Marston 2006) but also has been explored in terms of gender and storytelling (Ledgerwood 1996, 1990). Finally, Alexander Hinton’s (2005) work on the motivations of perpetrators of the Cambodian genocide also deals with some issues of morality that link up to the topic of moral order.

My study builds on but also differs from these studies in a number of ways. Firstly, I focus especially on analyses of moral order through the categories of the wild and civil, kinship, and naming – topics that are fundamental to understanding the usually implicit ways in which the moral basis of society is construed. I not only discuss these topics at some length in Chapter 6, but I also expand the dialogue of making relatedness and alterity by including a discussion of consumption, commensality and food. These latter topics have been given only passing attention in the Cambodian anthropological literature despite their centrality in making sociality (and otherness) (Overing and Passes 2000; Bloch 2005; Carsten 1995).5

A second contribution of my work to Cambodian ethnography will be to the rapidly expanding corpus of work on moral order. My work does not use the approach of

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several of my colleagues who spent substantial time at Buddhist institutions, but it does include descriptions and analysis of a number of religious practices and traditions, their variations across the two communes and an extensive analysis of the harvest festival *Bon Dalien* in Chapter 8. My study also contributes to the existing literature on stories and myth. While those studies tend to draw heavily on moral proverbs, folktales, normative poems and didactic rules for proper behaviour (for example the *chbap srey, chbap proh*), my approach in Chapter 7 connects local stories, history, myth, and landscape to interpretations that see them in terms of ordering the past and present.

**Thirdly,** because of the need to impose some limitations on this study, I do not address in any depth the topic of gender within the village where I worked, although there are instances of this topic as in Chapter 3, which deals with trust and distrust. Likewise, my work discusses power and politics only in a very limited fashion due to the circumstances of my fieldwork as well as a need to keep the study within reasonable boundaries. In Cambodia, politics is a very sensitive topic, especially in national election years that often feature widespread political violence. In order not to raise any further anxiety in the village over my presence there, or put anyone at risk, I opted to remove myself from any direct association with politics. Moreover, my study focuses more on local village practices taking a bottom-up approach.

This leads me to my fourth point, that is my study’s relation to that of Alexander Hinton who researched the Cambodian genocide from a state policy and practice perspective. My work both differs and complements his. Hinton studied the motivations of perpetrators of the Pol Pot genocide using a cultural models theory that focuses on the DK period of Cambodia’s history in the province of Kompong Cham between 1994 and 1995. The central question of his research is, why did the perpetrators of the Cambodian genocide commit the deeds they did? More specifically what made it possible for state actors to enact the torture and killings that are the regime’s hallmark? Focusing on the relationship between Khmer Rouge ideology and Buddhism in particular, he makes a generally convincing argument that Khmer Rouge ideology and policies resonated with pre-existent cultural understandings and knowledge. Hinton suggests that it is this resonance that enabled the triggering of appropriate emotions such as anger and revenge, and allowed concepts like dependence, loyalty, and honour to take on new forms and meanings during the DK era. It was through this redeployment of the familiar, he suggests, that the Khmer Rouge leadership managed to
propel local state actors to behave in ways that would normally have been considered wrong, inappropriate and even inconceivable.

My own work analyses Khmer Rouge ideology and policy only to a limited extent. Instead, I am more concerned with how this past has had a continuing impact on the present, and how villagers are re-establishing relatedness in the light of this past to build a future. My work can then be seen as both different and complementary to Hinton’s, for it addresses different aspects of the genocide and uses different theoretical tools and methodology. Nonetheless, because it is essential to understand what happened to the villagers during the Khmer Rouge period, there are times when my study looks at some of the issues that he deals with. For instance in Chapters 4 and 5 I discuss an elder villager who is held accountable by his neighbours and extended kin for the deaths of their family members. I present and analyse his role within the village history through his own and other villagers’ accounts and draw out some of the implications for remaking moral order today. Through this analysis, (especially in Chapter 5), I draw on a number of themes also discussed by Hinton but to a different end.

The fifth contribution this study makes is to the nascent body of literature on social memory in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. It is perhaps peculiar that there are a number of studies that address moral order in Cambodia and very few that address the topic of social memory per se. To date, there are only a few articles written on the topic. Judy Ledgerwood (1997) has written about the construction of national state narratives around the Khmer Rouge prison and torture centre S-21; May Ebihara (2002) about social memory in a rural village in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge, John Marston (2006) about the facilitation of social memory through mortuary rituals, Timothy Wood (2006) about Khmer Rouge memorial sites and tourism; Rachel Hughes on local level Khmer Rouge memorial sites (Hughes 2004); and my own article (2006) (that corresponds to Chapter 8 of this thesis) about the revival of the village harvest festival. Aside from these, little to date has been published, although papers on the topic have been given at conferences.6 My study contributes to the efforts to understand the

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6 Alexander Hinton and Ashley Thompson both gave talks on social memory and the state in Cambodia at the NIAS Conference ‘Reconstituting Religion, Moral Order and Power in Cambodia’ in October 2005 in Varburg, Sweden, and I gave a talk at the 1999 Northern Illinois University’s Center for Southeast
impacts of the Khmer Rouge violence on collective memory amongst Cambodians today.

Preparation, Fieldwork and Methodology

My first visit to Cambodia was as a tourist, when, in March 1994, I flew from Bangkok to Phnom Penh. It was just six months after the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) had administered the 1993 election that turned power over to the newly elected coalition government. The plane landed, its engines were extinguished, and I and about 10 other passengers disembarked into the heat and silence. Outside the small wooden building that was the international terminal a group of moto-taxi drivers and a couple car taxi drivers eagerly waited. A moment later, I found myself riding on the back of a moped down a quiet country road bordered by vibrant green rice paddies towards the city of Phnom Penh. The city itself appeared gutted and blackened by war. People were everywhere, especially children, but no one seemed to have anything much to do. There were almost no cars on the wide boulevards, just a few moto-taxis and several bikes and pedicabs. The civil war with the Khmer Rouge was still continuing in several parts of the countryside, while in the city life seemed suspended, as though waiting for something to happen. A couple of weeks later this eerie sense of anticipation and dread was articulated when a chemist confided to me, ‘We are afraid that any day the Khmer Rouge may re-enter the city again.’ Life appeared to hang in the balance. On the one hand, there was the possibility of the situation spilling over again into terror and chaos and, on the other hand, there was the possibility that the civil war with the Khmer Rouge might actually finally come to an end and reconstruction move forward. This moment of possibilities arrested me. The horrors of the past were everywhere, from the bombed out buildings, bands of orphaned street children, the uniform-clad amputees to the blood stained floors at the former prison and torture centre, Tuol Sleng, and the twisted bundles of mostly current-less electrical wires. At times the proximity to the horror was terrifying. But there was something else going on as well. There were signs that a better future was being ushered in. The proliferation of English schools, the burgeoning of small businesses –

Asia Students’ Conference on the subject, entitled ‘Memories of the Khmer Rouge, Khmer Rouge Memories: Implications of a Tribunal for Cambodian Social Memory’. 

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chemists, tailors, drink shops, laundry houses, and guesthouses that were sprouting up everywhere – was saying something different. People were also looking forward.

Later that year I took a job for five and a half months, teaching computer programs to government staff before continuing with my travels and returning home to Southern California. But the image of that precarious moment in 1994 stayed with me, leading me to volunteer as a research intern for the Cambodian Genocide Project at Yale University in 1996, where I worked on the biographical database and familiarised myself with the Khmer community of Southern California. In November 1997, I returned to Cambodia, together with a Khmer American who was leading an effort to establish a university in Phnom Penh. I had been hired to help with a number of aspects of the enterprise. The initial plans to open the university had been squelched by the July 1997 coup led by Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party against the royalist party (FUNCINPEC) led by Prince Ranariddh. I spent the first few months in Phnom Penh living with the Khmer family of my employer. Later on, as the national elections approached, I (together with a partner) travelled to several provinces recording and interviewing farmers, business owners, politicians, military commanders, soldiers, and election officials. The final site I visited was the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng, where the notorious Ta Mok still had forces at the time: on our return flight we shared the helicopter with the victims of Ta Mok’s attack of the previous night, who were being taken to the hospital for their wounds.

Soon after the July 1998 elections, I left Cambodia to begin a PhD program in cultural anthropology in order to pursue the questions that sprang from my experiences in Cambodia and with Cambodians. When I returned in 2001 to pursue fieldwork, this time my plane was nearly full, packed with business people and tourists. Getting into a car taxi, we had to fight the traffic along the newly widened road into Phnom Penh. The sounds and sites of reconstruction were everywhere, as businesses and residents fought for space for houses, business, cars and motorbikes. I arrived at the house belonging to the Center for Khmer Studies, where I would begin my first year of fieldwork in the city of Phnom Penh whilst undertaking an intensive language study program with a tutor who would become one of my closest friends. It would be another year still before I would move out to my fieldsite in a remote village to the southwest.
Preparation

Much of my preparation for this project stemmed from my various experiences of living and working in Cambodia in 1994, and again in 1997–1998, a total of 15 months. Through these experiences, I gained a working knowledge of the country and established many of the contacts that helped me to take the necessary steps for this research.

To gain proficiency in Khmer language I attended three summer sessions of Khmer language courses at the Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute (SEASSI) in 1996, 1999, and 2000. Later I followed this with one year of language study in Phnom Penh as described below.

First Year of Study and Fieldwork in Phnom Penh: Sept 2001–Aug 2002

I began my first year of fieldwork studying Khmer language under a Blakemore fellowship with a private tutor, Dr. Somuny Som, and through courses at the University of Phnom Penh. The tutorials themselves became part of the fieldwork as I worked with my tutor to read and translate archive documents, including Khmer Rouge cadre notebooks and policy documents, interviews of former Khmer Rouge, and Khmer literature and folktales. Together with my Khmer language teacher and also on my own or with other friends Khmer and foreign, I took several field trips in and around Phnom Penh and to other provinces. Some of these trips were aimed at locating a fieldsite. However, others were to see memorial sites, attend religious ritual festivities in the countryside, meet former Khmer Rouge leaders, observe post conflict peace training development programs in the countryside, and generally speak and meet as many people as possible who could teach me more about the topics that interested me. I visited and conducted research and interviews with a wide range of development institutions whose work held some relation to my own, representatives from relevant government ministries, and academics. During this time I also conducted archival and library research at the Buddhist Institute, L’École Française d’Extrême Orient, Documentation Center of Cambodia (DCCAM), the National Archives, and Museum of Genocide (S-21) Archives.
In the midst of these various activities I also found my fieldsite. I had originally planned on choosing an upland site and, thanks to the advice of Judy Ledgerwood, I contacted a number of NGOs who worked in the province of Kompong Chhnang, where she remembered seeing some communities amongst the foothills of Aural Mountain. The Lutheran World Foundation (LWF) generously offered to assist me in my search, so I travelled up to their office in the provincial capital and then spent two days in an extremely remote area of the province, visiting a number of villages that interested me. However, I soon realised that the difficulty of access made it too dangerous, given the lack of medical facilities and high incidence of malaria. I had heard that the LWF also worked in the neighbouring province of Kompong Speu in a similar type of area but more easily accessible. And so, again with their help, I was able to visit a number of villages in three different communes, including Prei Phnom and Doung Srae. The first village I visited was in Prei Phnom commune. It was the last village, located at the point where the road ends, with nothing but the vast Cardamom Mountains and wilderness to the west. This was the village I call O’Thmaa. The village itself, nestled in a cradle of hills, is quite beautiful. But its people had clearly suffered enormously and life was apparently still very difficult for them. Located in one of the poorest villages in the region and Cambodia as a whole, these people’s lives are not easy. I was not met with the gaiety and warm-heartedness I was accustomed to when visiting Cambodian villages and I realised that doing fieldwork in such a place could be difficult. The following day I visited Doung Srae commune. The place was an ethnographic treasure chest. Within an hour there I had rich ethnographic data beyond anything I read. But what I found there made me wonder more about O’Thmaa. Why was it that the two communes were so different? Why did so many of the people I talked with in O’Thmaa claim to know nothing or little about the traditions of the past – or even practices in existence only a few kilometres away in Doung Srae? I decided to take up the challenge: O’Thmaa was the place where I would base myself, with the expectation that I would also be making visits to the other commune. In the end, this proved to be a fruitful strategy.

Before moving to the village, my Khmer language teacher helped me to get the proper letters of permission from the highest echelons of the Ministry of the Interior to present to the Ministry of the Environment and Provincial and District offices. Without these permissions, it is highly unlikely that I would have been able to live in O’Thmaa, for
two important reasons. Firstly, my stay there meant for the local government and police possible interference with the profitable illegal trade in forest goods and, secondly, the villagers themselves did not trust outsiders and few would have been willing to help me to stay there, especially against the will of the police and local authorities. In the end, the letters meant that the local commune administration was compelled to help me to establish residence in the village in what manner they could. But it also meant that they made me their responsibility, which entailed an undue amount of security – a situation that in the beginning threatened my ability to conduct proper fieldwork.


One of the initial problems I faced once I had decided to base myself in O’Thmaa was finding a place to live. No one had room for me in their small, mostly one-room, houses. Eventually, however, it was decided that I could stay temporarily with a young couple and their baby. In September 2002, in the midst of the rainy season, I arrived with my belongings, accompanied by my Khmer language teacher’s niece, who was to join me for the first couple of weeks to help me settle in. The people in this area were not accustomed to foreigners and were generally distrustful and fearful of outsiders. In an effort to familiarise myself with the villagers, and them with me, I began with informal meetings with the local leaders and visits to households, and also started providing English lessons, requested by a number of the young adults in the village. Teaching English provided me with a means of building relationships with some of the villagers and allowed me to contribute in some meaningful way.

However, it soon became evident that there was no available house that I could rent and no one with whom I could live. The one serious offer I had of a house for rent in the neighbouring village turned out to be one man’s attempt to get something out of a house he had built but could not inhabit because ‘it was haunted by a ghost’. Several people warned me not to take the house. They explained that the house was probably haunted because some of the wood used to build the house might have come from a tree that was previously the home of a spirit. It was decided then that the best option was for me to pay to have a house built that would later belong to the village. The house building project afforded me with some insights on what a Khmer house should be like. It also allowed me to learn a bit about the area in general and the difference between the
two communes. Most of this information came from the drivers of the passenger/goods trucks (lan chhnuol) that I rode extensively during the first couple of weeks and then quite regularly throughout my fieldwork. The drivers of these trucks had relatives in all the communes in the area that the trucks passed through on their routes. The drivers had an excellent overview of all the communes and were friendly, open and extremely helpful.

After a certain amount of discussion and negotiations, the building plan was ready and I left the village, to return a couple of weeks later to move into my new house on my own. My then fiancé (now husband) Karl stayed with me the first couple of days while I settled in, but he soon left to return to Phnom Penh. However, I was not alone. As soon as the house was built, the police hut was relocated, moving from the end of the road that led into the wilderness to the west to ... right by my house. No doubt part of the surveillance and protection that the forces of officialdom felt my presence in the village required, this proved to be a blessing and a curse. Initially, the police would not let me go anywhere on my own, including to bathe, for fear that something might happen to me. It seemed that they were trying to interfere with my ability to establish any sort of trust with the villagers. However, over time, they relaxed. In the meantime, I decided to take what opportunities I could to work outside their range, for instance by visiting the neighbouring commune of Doung Srae, but also to learn from them as well. This seemed to work well. Of course, there were some villagers, bolder and perhaps more curious than others, who made a point of interacting with me, which then later helped me establish wider relations.

Over about half of the research year, my fiancé (later husband) Karl would visit every couple of weeks or more, for a day or two. Karl’s presence added new dimensions to my relationships with my neighbours. A number of villagers keen to engage with him in different ways than with me. Also our relationship brought out a number of topics of discussion with villagers: marriage, family, children and relationships.

In the early period of the research, I also received support from a student intern at the local NGO, who offered to help me once every couple of weeks in exchange for my helping him with his English. Accepting this ‘deal’, I decided to learn what I could about the village area from sources outside the village. We began a series of recorded
interviews with the senior Buddhist layman at the commune’s temple. As it turned out, he was originally from O’Thmaa and was able share his knowledge and insights on local traditional customs and practices both generally and also with reference to O’Thmaa in particular.

In order to better understand the history and past traditions of the people I was studying, I began making visits to Doung Srae, where I interviewed community religious and secular leaders and elders about their history and traditions. Through these visits, I gained a better understanding of both the violent historical periods and the pre-war past of Prei Phnom commune where I stayed. People in Doung Srae commune were generally very open about talking about the past, their traditions, religious practices and beliefs, I was invited to attend a wedding and an engagement ceremony and I was provided with numerous guided tours of sacred and historic sites in a number of villages. This, of course, was all immensely helpful in providing me with the background knowledge to ask more precise questions and achieve greater understanding of the people’s lives in Prei Phnom commune in general and O’Thmaa village in particular.

On my own, without a research assistant, I continued to interview people and hold informal conversations in Prei Phnom commune, while observing and participating in the rice harvests, bamboo cutting, and other local activities. My neighbours across the road built a canteen that received steady business from the police, myself, other villagers as well as the stream of outsiders who came to the village in order to profit from the forest’s bounty. Because of this canteen, I was able to learn much about the local affairs of the village and its surrounding communities.

Shortly after the construction of the canteen, preparation for the Bon Dalien harvest festival began, the subject of Chapter 8. I turned my attention to improving my understanding of this festival, which encapsulated so many of the themes that interested me – moral order, social memory and the past in the present. I attended meetings, interviewed the village chief and Buddhist laymen, held discussions with the villagers and generally tried to learn as much as I could about the ceremony’s purpose, history and organisation. I also visited the neighbouring villages to observe their preparations and discuss the festival’s meanings and purposes. When festival season finally arrived, I
attended four events, three in the commune and one in another district. A week or so
after O'Thmaa held their village festival, I hired a friend who is a translator, to help me
for a couple of days with some of the detailed interviews on the ritual’s composition.

In April 2003 I took a one month leave of absence from the field to get married. When I
returned in May I had enough data to begin constructing a lengthy questionnaire that
would be the guide in structured interviews of 10 families in three different villages in
each of the two communes (60 interviews in all). The decision to conduct such a formal
study grew out of a sense of unease with the happenstance of information I had been
gathering up until then. I wanted to get a broader sense of the local cultural practices
and past and felt that I needed a more systematic approach. Within O’Thmaa a handful
of villagers had been very open and helpful but it was hard to situate their stories. I
needed more information. Therefore, with a research assistant employed full time to
help with the logistics, I visited the commune offices and the village leaders to obtain
village statistics. From these lists I did a blind draw of 10 households for the interview
in each village. The interviews included questions on kinship, identity, food, livelihood,
history (before, during and after Pol Pot), religious rituals and practices, perspectives on
social change, conceptualisations of the forest, and a number of other topics. These
questions allowed me to gain a sense of the past as well as the present, through the
varying histories, traditional practices, and so forth. It allowed me to learn what was
important to people and what was not. The findings from this part of the research
helped inform and support much of the ethnography contained within this thesis but
was also especially useful in gaining a broad picture of people’s thoughts on types of
food, kinship relations, and traditional practices. It also led me to meet and talk to a
wide range of people I may have otherwise never met, let alone interviewed.

The interviews themselves lasted between 1.5 to 3.5 hours and were recorded onto
minidisk. Generally the interview followed the questionnaire but it was conducted
loosely enough to allow me to ask further questions when an account was of particular
interest or for clarification purposes. Furthermore, the style of the interview was such
that it encouraged informants to give vivid detailed accounts and express their views,
sometimes even leading to entire stories being told before an audience of people who
were not directly part of the interview. The combination of such ethnographically rich
accounts with the ability to make comparisons across households, villages, and
communes made this rather lengthy methodology extremely useful and enlightening, and provided an abundant harvest of data – far beyond the limits and scope of this dissertation.

The knowledge obtained from this effort filled in many of the gaps in the research and opened the door to many more questions on a much more refined level. For it was during the final month of the project that I was finally able to interview the old man who is held accountable by villagers for the deaths of their kinfolk. I was told during the earlier interviews that he had been a village leader in the early years of the revolution who had betrayed his community by filing complaints with the Khmer Rouge regarding various members of the village, who were then taken to the forest and killed. I was unaware up until very late in the research of this fact. After an initial casual meeting very early on, I had tried to interview him throughout the course of the project because he was one of the only remaining old men in the village. By the time he finally made himself available for interview, I had heard of his past and was therefore able to put questions to him that incorporated this knowledge. The interview and its background is a key component of this thesis and especially Chapters 4 and 5 where it is presented and analysed together with the broader ethnographic findings.

Then, after this interview I was provided with a more complete vision of the horror of the past by another villager. Visiting all the sites of the houses of the pre-war time, as described in the prelude to this thesis, I was given a household-by-household account of the grisly fate of most of the village members. When I had first arrived, the villagers had emphasised that the people of this village did not have any problems between them, and that they all loved one another (srobanh knea). The man I interviewed was their kinsman and part of their community.

Research Ethics

A final word is needed regarding the ethics of this project, given the sensitivity of the topics addressed and the circumstances of the research. The questions raised in this research about the past stirred painful matters for the villagers with whom I worked and therefore I have taken a number of steps to protect their interests. During the fieldwork itself I took several measures to this end. Firstly, I presented myself and my role there
as transparently as possible. I often would ask villagers if they had any questions they wanted to ask me about my research and was as open as possible about all my activities. At the same time, however, I also made it clear that I respected their privacy and confidentially. To this end I have changed the names of villagers in addition to the names of the villages and communes where they live in order to provide sufficient anonymity, a concern that some villagers expressed. In addition I was always careful to respect people’s need for privacy and never pressed anyone to talk about issues they did not wish to talk about. I avoided all talk of politics in order not to endanger anyone or make them feel vulnerable in an election year. Finally, I have also tried to present the people who are subject of this research, several who became my friends, with all the respect and consideration that I would wish to be accorded myself had the roles been reversed.

**Thesis Structure and Chapter Outline**

The thesis is organised broadly in two parts. The first part, Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5, is mostly concerned with explaining the terror that occurred in the past and its negative effects on the village’s efforts to re-establish itself as a moral entity today. In Chapters 6, 7 and 8 I examine the building blocks of moral order and relatedness and how these are being put to use in remaking the village community. A brief description of all the chapters follows.

Chapter 2 provides the context of the fieldwork, exploring the setting both ethnographically and historically. Here I give some of basic ethnographic background on the people of O’Thmaa and their neighbours and what the place where they live is like, as well as outlining their history as it pertains to this study. This section contains elements of what I call the bigger history of Cambodia in general but it also includes the local historicity – that is, the history as the villagers see it and tell it themselves. This latter part is an important ethnographic and historic contribution in and of itself, for there exists only very scant information on this particular area in other sources, especially pertaining to the war of independence, Khmer Rouge revolution and period in power, and the civil war that followed.
Chapter 3 focuses on the concepts of trust and distrust. Beginning with the premise that trust is a necessary feature of sociality and an expression of a given moral order, I look at what constitutes trust and distrust for the people I worked with. I ask how might trust have been conceived before the Khmer Rouge revolution and what happened to it during the revolution. How did the Khmer Rouge build up a pervasive distrust between people and familiar relations in their efforts to secure loyalty for themselves? I also examine the residue of distrust that survives in the present in some of its expressions, in accusations of sorcery, adultery, AIDS, and self-interest. I ask how are villagers forming trusting relations again?

Chapters 4 and 5 are two parts of one story concerning the man who is held accountable by villagers for the deaths of many of their family members during the Khmer Rouge revolution. Understanding his story is essential to understanding O’Thmaa village today for it encapsulates the violation of the moral order within the community. Seeking to understand him, his actions and the consequences of his actions, as seen by the villagers and in terms of his own autobiography, is key to making sense of the village in the present. In Chapter 4 I ask, who is this man? How do villagers see him and how does he represent himself? In asking these questions, I examine how this man was positioned within his village, and what are some of the consequences of his actions for the village’s ability to ‘recover’ from the past. I take a close look at his role as a village elder, given the importance elders to Khmer notions of moral order. I also look at how his actions in the past affect the community’s ability to form a cohesive narrative of the past in terms of victims and perpetrators.

In Chapter 5 I speculatively examine villager’s explanations as to why this man behaved the way he did, focusing on the concepts of ‘face’ and merit. In analysing villagers’ explanations of his actions this chapter also asks how he may have interpreted his choices through the changing contexts brought about by the Khmer Rouge revolution and its aftermath and to what ends? Moreover I look at how this man ‘gets on’ with his own life by actively engaging with the Buddhist monastery in the present and provide a brief comparison with other former Khmer Rouge cadre in the commune who later converted to Methodist Christianity.
The next three chapters (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) pick up and continue with the theme of (re)making sociality and moral order. They address how sociality is made through moral ordering and relations. In Chapter 6 I address the distinction between the wild and the civil, categories by which the moral world is distinguished from the amoral. What constitutes Khmerness and the social moral person? How do people become affiliated with one another? In particular, I examine the meanings and the role of food in establishing moral categories and creating or expressing relatedness through commensality. I also pay some attention to how these same concepts are invoked in marriage ceremonies.

Chapter 7, entitled ‘Mountains, Morals and Memory’, asks how landscape and local myths and stories become sites for managing social memory and moral order. Several themes emerge here that also appear in other chapters such as the invisible and visible realms and a loss in ability to access the invisible realm through a decline in morality. Moreover, this chapter addresses how 19th century events may in some cases resonate today with the Khmer Rouge period and thereby signify the communities’ relative ability to recover and ‘heal’ from the past.

Finally, in Chapter 8 I provide a detailed ethnographic account of an annual village harvest festival, Bon Dalien. Villagers see this more than any other village event as a signifier of social cohesion within the village and a means of connecting with the ancestral past. In this chapter, I ask how this process is negotiated by different segments of the community, and analyse its relative success. This chapter is especially detailed in part to provide an elaboration on the details that go into producing such an event – only recently revived – but also to provide an ethnographic account of a festival about which little is written elsewhere.
Chapter 2

The Setting: People, Place and History

(Please refer as necessary to the ‘Timeline’ in Appendix A.)

When His Excellency Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey
Invited me to lunch on the battlefield...

On every bottle, Napoleon Bonaparte
Pleded for the authenticity of the spirit.
They called the empties Dead Soldiers
And rejoiced to see them pile up at our feet...

On the left sat the prince;
On my right, his drunken aide...

...I wish I had collared his aide, who was Saloth Sar’s brother...

And well he might boast, Saloth Sar, for instance,
Was Pol Pot’s real name...

It was a family war. Whatever happened...

For the prince was fighting Sihanouk, his nephew.
And Jockey Cap [the aide] was ranged against his brother
Of whom I remember nothing more
Than an obscure reputation for virtue.

I have been told that the prince is still fighting
Somewhere in the Cardamoms or the Elephant Mountains...
Dead Soldiers, James Fenton (1981)

The Place

Geographically, the village of O’Thmaa nestles between the vast Cardamom Mountains to the west and the Elephant Mountains to the southeast. Today the region is accessible by a road built by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), who began the project in 1997 to make it easier for villagers to return to the land they had been evacuated from
in 1987/88 and also for them to sustain contact with the market town on the main highway. There was an earlier ox-cart trail,7 fallen into disuse between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s: the area became overgrown by forest and was also carpeted with land mines.8 Despite the region’s new accessibility, by Cambodian standards it is still ‘remote’, ‘far away’, and ‘in the mountains and forest’. For Cambodians of the plains, this means that the place is uninhabitable and dangerous; for the locals living here, it is simply their milieu.

Figure 1: Map of Cambodia

The people of this region traditionally made a living through a combination of rice cultivation (wet and dry), forest gardens (châmkar), where they grew fruit and vegetables, and traded in forest products such as areca leaves, resin, and hardwood.In

7 Most people I spoke to seemed to think that the road was still an ox cart road in the days of Sihanouk, although one elderly man insisted that the road was for cars and far superior to the one that exists today.
8 However, I did meet a man who had been a logging truck driver during the Pol Pot regime and who said that he used to transport wood from the forests of O’Thmaa for the Khmer Rouge in the later 1970s. Also, an elderly man from the village who was the first to return to O’Thmaa (albeit briefly) in the 1980s said that he used to watch Vietnamese logging trucks coming out of the forest in O’Thmaa on a regular basis.
former times they would transport these goods on elephants to the sea along well
established routes traversing mountains and forest, which connected them to trading
posts – and their relatives – in the southern province. No elephants remain now: the
villagers say that the Khmer Rouge killed them off. Today, people again tend rice
paddies and forest gardens and raise animals but, so far, they have been unable to grow
sufficient rice and food to sustain themselves throughout the year. Therefore they rely
on the, mostly illegal, sale of wood, bamboo, charcoal, and wild game to generate
income to buy food, clothes, and other material goods.

O'Thmaa is the last village at the end of the dusty road, which terminates at a small
stream. Beyond the stream, the road reverts to the ox-cart trail that crosses the
mountains to Koh Kong and passes some of the sites where villages used to exist before
the Pol Pot era. These trails are still used for trade and forest products, only now the
products are wild game, timber, and bamboo mostly earmarked for Phnom Penh. Ox­
carts and sputtering hybrid trucks have replaced the elephants as the means of transport
through the forest. Once out of the forest, the goods are picked up by vans and
passenger/goods trucks. En route to Phnom Penh, they are stopped regularly at police
checkpoints to pay the appropriate bribe collected on transported goods, especially
those that are illegal.

Despite these developments, the forest habitat is still very much as described by Marie
Martin when she conducted her study in the Cardamom Mountains in the 1960s (Martin
1997). She provided an extraordinarily detailed account of the various species of flora
and fauna, an indexical description of the material culture of the people who lived there,
and a detailed survey of the features of the land and forest. Although her fieldsite did
not overlap mine, the area of the Cardamoms that she visited is similar to my fieldsite in
terms of topography, plant and animal life. The only significant difference is the
reduced diversity and abundance in the region where I worked, as a result of war and
the contemporary impacts of logging and poaching.
Figure 2: View of road leading to O'Thmaa village

Figure 3: Cutting bamboo for sale in Prei Phnom commune

Figure 4: Transporting bamboo for sale in Prei Phnom commune
The People

At the time of my research, the population of O'Thmaa village was 175 people. O'Thmaa is located in a commune I call Prei Phnom, with a total of 2,793 residents. In Prei Phnom commune I worked primarily within O'Thmaa village, where I lived, and two neighbouring villages each with similarly sized populations. For purposes of comparison, I also worked in the adjacent commune, which I call Doung Srae, with a population of 5,570 people, where I conducted research within two similarly-sized and one larger-sized village. This comparison was very important in pursuing the question whether, how and why O'Thmaa was different from other places, while also filling in the picture of O'Thmaa’s past and present. In both communes my informants included religious and government leaders, teachers, police, village elders, and ordinary citizens. The vast majority of people in both communes practise Theravada Buddhism. However, there is a minority of Methodist Christians who — all former Khmer Rouge soldiers — had converted either in the early 1980s on the Thai Border or in the late 1990s or early 2000s by a local pastor after their return to the commune. In O'Thmaa village, 10% of the population was Christian, a higher percentage than anywhere else in the two communes. Interlaced with Buddhist and Christian practices are also indigenous animist and Hindu ‘Brahman’ practices that have been embedded in Cambodian culture for hundreds if not thousands of years.

High illiteracy rates, continuous forced displacement since 1970, a shortage of arable land, and an overall lack of resources mean that the people of this study occupy the lowest ranks of Cambodia's socio-economic ladder. Before the civil war of the early 1970s, they were still cultivating small rice paddies and forest gardens, and subsidising their living through trade in forest products. However, from 1970 until the mid-1990s, all the men, and many women, old enough to become soldiers, were conscripted at one time or another by the Khmer Rouge, the Lon Nol government, or both. Today, of those who remain soldiers (now under the government), most, if not all, are former Khmer Rouge. Because of the war and the large number of executions that occurred in Prei

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9 This pastor was a native of Prei Phnom commune, himself a former Khmer Rouge soldier, who had converted on the Thai border together with his wife, who was also a former Khmer Rouge cadre but who was from another province.

10 See also Chapter 5.
Phnom commune in the early 1970s, there is a scarcity of elders in the community, especially men.

*Khmer Highlanders*

Chou Ta-Kuan, a Chinese diplomat who visited Cambodia in 1296, during the high period of Angkor (802-1431 AD) wrote that slaves in the city of Angkor were ‘wild men’ taken from the local mountains (1967: 27), people, he explains, who were a ‘different race’ from the Khmer, who saw themselves as vastly superior to these wild mountain people. In the area where I conducted fieldwork, some 200-300 hundred kilometres south of Angkor (and 800 years later), this topic of ‘race’, now under the banner of ‘ethnicity’—was still an issue. The NGO workers in the upland areas claimed that the local inhabitants were not really Khmer but Suoy, a name usually associated with an ethnic group living in the Aural mountain area to the north. However, every local person I spoke to denied this, insisting that they were Khmer, some even saying that they were ‘pure Khmer’ (*Khmer Sot*). Marie Martin has noted that this identification ‘*Khmer Sot*’ is also used by the ‘*Khmer Doem*’, the ‘original Khmers’, whom she studied (1997: 63). It is reasonable to presume that the people in my study are probably related to the *Khmer Doem*. ‘Suoy’, simply meaning ‘tribute’ (ibid.: 61-62) is a name applied by both Thai (Chuengsatiansup 2001) and Cambodians (Martin 1997) to people considered uncivilised, morally affiliated with the ‘wild’ forests and mountains, and who could thus justifiably be captured as slaves whose labour provided ‘tribute’ to the kingdom.11 Hence, when the NGO workers said that the people in the area of my fieldsite were *Suoy*, they probably meant that they were relatively wild and uncivilised and might have at one time been slaves—rather than being of a distinct racial or ethnic type. (The distinction of civilised versus uncivilised and its association with landscape is explored later in Chapter 6.)

The residents I spoke with considered themselves to be ethnic Khmer and believed themselves to be culturally and ethnically the same as other Cambodians. When

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11 For an interesting comparison, see Katherine Bowie (1988) for an in-depth analysis of the role and perspective of the peasant in a tributary kingdom in 19th century Northern Thailand. Arguing against Geertz, Bowie describes peasant life at the time as precariously subject to the will and the whim of royalty, which ‘consumed’ their labour and its products and often also their daughters who were taken as concubines for the King.
referring to themselves, they use the term ‘Khmer yoeng’, meaning ‘we Khmer’. Khmers make up the dominant ethnic group in Cambodia and identify themselves as such through descent, culture, and history, as well as language (Mabbett and Chandler 1995). For most Khmers, including those I worked with, being Khmer is also synonymous with being Buddhist, with the exception of those who had converted to Christianity. However, these converts do not see their Khmerness as compromised by their conversion, although a slight moral discomfort was hinted at by others in the village over their neighbours’ adoption of Christianity.

While the villagers I worked with expressed a sense of shared identity with Khmers generally, they also distinguished themselves by reference to their mountain habitat and associated livelihoods, referring to themselves as ‘highlanders’ (neak loe) or ‘mountain/forest people’ (neak prei phnom) as well as ‘rice farmers’ (neak srae) and/or ‘garden cultivators’ (neak châmkar). Villagers saw their Khmer identity as fairly fixed but stressed that these additional sources of identity associated with occupation are fluid, within the range of opportunities afforded to them. These occupational identities carry their own moral connotations. While not as fully potent as the morality associated with Khmerness (which correlates with all that is considered to be ‘civilised’), these moral associations with particular occupations are nonetheless acknowledged and manipulated according to context.12

In this way the moral identity attached to, say, being a rice farmer or market trader is not completely binding on the individual. Indeed, the value placed on flexibility was a recurrent theme that I encountered during my fieldwork. Juxtaposed to a deeply ingrained belief in karmic determinism is an equally strong belief in transformation. This theme of flexibility carried over into other actions as well as identity construction. Whether in regard to ritual practices or personal matters, villagers were often quick to remind me that, for many conventions there are exceptions where it is acceptable, and even right, to act in unconventional ways.

12 During the DK period we see such moral ascription of occupation in extremis: the Khmer Rouge characterised all occupations associated with the bourgeoisie as degenerate and those associated with the peasantry as exalted. Individuals whose occupations were considered degenerate were targeted for purification and, if that failed, execution. This can be seen as the Khmer Rouge’s effort to erase what they considered to be the immoral society of the past, a theme that recurs in this dissertation.
Figure 5: Clearing a field in Prei Phnom

Figure 6: Harvesting garden rice

Figure 7: Rice harvest Prei Phnom
**Kinship**

One of the key institutions where moral order finds existence and expression is kinship relations and arrangements. In O’Thmaa and its surrounding communities, kinship is largely organised and expressed similarly to other regions within Cambodia (see Ebihara 1968; Ledgerwood 1995). It is both historically and contemporarily bilateral. There are no clear-cut boundaries of kindred and generally people are not organised into larger kinship groups; residency patterns are not fixed but are, rather, influenced by economic and social factors. The basic socio-economic unit in the village area is the household, as it is in much of Southeast Asia (Waterson 1998; Carsten 1997). Women generally manage the household economy but both men and women oversee the sale of farm and forest products. Married men are the heads of their households, and children generally receive their names from them. The naming practice is slightly peculiar in Prei Phnom commune relative to other parts of Cambodia where, more often than not, the father’s surname is passed on to their children, as also practised by the Chinese and traditionally in the West. By contrast, in Prei Phnom children’s surnames tend to be their grandfather’s first names, meaning that any name will be lost after the third generation. Doung Srae commune practises another version, in which children are generally given their father’s first name, meaning the name will carry forward only a single generation or two in total.\(^3\)

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & \textbf{Prei Phnom Commune} & & \textbf{Doung Srae Commune} \\
\hline
 & \textbf{1\textsuperscript{st} Name} & \textbf{2\textsuperscript{nd} Name} &
 & \textbf{1\textsuperscript{st} Name} & \textbf{2\textsuperscript{nd} Name} \\
\hline
Great & A & B & A & B \\
Grandfather & C & D & C & A \\
Grandfather & & & & \\
Father & E & A & D & C \\
Son/Daughter & F & C & E & D \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Patterns of Naming in Prei Phnom Commune and Doung Srae Commune (Bolded letters highlight the names that are past down generations.)}
\end{table}

\(^3\) It is possible of course that a name may be repeated again but there was no mention of this, partly perhaps because people generally did not trace their ancestry beyond three or four generations.
In both communes, and throughout Cambodia, women keep their names when married and a child may on occasion be given his or her mother’s surname for personal reasons or to honour a relative on that side.

Household arrangements traditionally tended to be uxorial, although this is no longer true today. In this area, men traditionally built a house for their bride but it was always emphasised that the bride’s and groom’s families would contribute equally to the marriage and wedding. Correspondingly, both men and women in the past (and some still today) would work for their prospective in-laws for a period of time before the wedding.

There is no institution of arranged marriages in either commune. However, if a young man and woman are interested in each and the parents approve of the relationship, the wedding will go ahead. While in Phnom Penh and elsewhere it is usual and encouraged that older men, i.e., closer to the age of 30, will marry young women in their very early 20s, this pattern does not occur in O’Thmaa and the surrounding communities (in both Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes). There has been a significantly high proportion of marriages occurring over the past 20 years in which the woman is older, sometimes significantly older, than the man although, in the marriages that I observed, the bride and groom were fairly close in age, the man often being the same age or a year or so older than the woman.

The History

Located in the ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilised’ Cardamom Mountains, this particular highland area has the added association of being a den and refuge for bandits, rebels, enemies, and all species of outlaws and fugitives. During the French colonial period a provincial governor wrote to the Minister of War in 1894 regarding difficulties in tax collection: ‘in this forest region...the majority of the inhabitants are crooks and fugitives ...’14

(rsc9644-1 1894). Even contemporary Western historians reinforce this picture: David Ablin and Marlowe Hood, for example, observe that, in addition to Thailand and Vietnam, ‘threats to Cambodia’s lowland rulers have also emanated from the

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14 ‘...dans cette région de forêt où la plupart des habitants sont malhonnêtes et fugitifs...’
Cardamom Mountains to the west, [which] historically [provided] a sanctuary for foreign enemies and domestic rebels’ (1987: xvi). Yet, outside of the war of independence and the civil war during the Khmer Rouge revolution it is difficult to know what else they may be referring to.

To understand the present from the villagers’ perspective, it is essential to have some understanding of their history both locally and contextualised within the wider history of Cambodia. In the sections that follow I therefore first provide a brief and very general history of Cambodia up through independence in 1953, followed by an account of the local history of the village that draws on villagers’ own accounts and archival sources where available. The general events can be followed by referring to the timeline in Appendix A.

![Figure 8: French colonial archive document](image)

**A General History of Cambodia up to Independence in 1953**

Around the first century AD, Indian traders came to Cambodia, bringing with them many of their cultural practices and beliefs. This marked the beginning of Indianisation in Cambodia. Although the impacts of contact and exchange are never one way, Indian beliefs and practices had a significant impact on Cambodia, seen most vividly in the art and architecture of the Angkorean civilisation from the 9th to the mid 15th century. This period is widely considered to have been the pinnacle of Khmer civilisation in terms of culture and power. The political and social organisation of Angkor was a reproduction
of the Indic cosmos (Tambiah 1976; Wolters 1999; Hansen 2004). One of the models used to depict the political organisation of the ancient Khmer State is the *mandala*, a symmetrical shape symbolising the cosmic order (Wolters, 1982: 590) concretised in early Southeast Asia to create a form of political ordering that Tambiah dubs a ‘galactic polity’ (Tambiah, 1976: 87). States were borderless spheres of power organised as concentric circles with a righteous king at the centre. Echoing the mandala, each of these concentric circles were autonomous replicas of the cosmic centre and the whole. They were not governed by the centre but, rather, reproduced it. The power emanating from these kingdoms alternatively expanded and contracted over time.

After the fall of Angkor in 1432, following an invasion by the Thai, the Khmer kingdom moved from Angkor to Phnom Penh, to Udong and Longvek and, later again, to Phnom Penh. The Cambodian state and its monarchs suffered repeated invasions by Thai and Vietnamese forces throughout the 15th to 19th centuries, culminating in the 19th century when Cambodia’s very existence as an independent state was threatened by two large-scale Thai invasions, in the early 1830s and then again in the 1840s that occurred within the time of Vietnamese occupation. The 1840s were particularly harsh. Chandler’s description here is illuminating:

Thousand of its [Cambodia’s] people were killed and uprooted in a series of ruinous wars, carried on inside its territory by the Thai, the Vietnamese and local factions. The Thai burned down Cambodia’s capital three times in the first half of nineteenth century; Vietnamese advisors kept the Cambodian monarch a prisoner for fifteen years; and the chronicles are filled with references to plagues, famines and floods. (Chandler 1973: 1)

The 19th century is remembered and reflected upon by Cambodians (Ablin and Hood 1987: xix) and, as we will see, has special significance for the people of O’Thmaa and the surrounding communities.

The chaos and destruction came to an end when Thailand and Vietnam jointly agreed to place the Khmer King Ang Doung (1841–1860) on the throne, bringing in a decade of peace and relative independence. During his reign, Ang Doung took a number of
measures\textsuperscript{15} to recreate moral order in the wake of the chaos. To ensure the kingdom’s security in 1863 he invited France to serve as Cambodia’s protector. Cambodia would remain a French protectorate until March 1945.\textsuperscript{16} The colonial period brought peace and security and introduced an administrative system organised through villages, communes, districts and provinces. Roads were constructed and taxation introduced.

French influence also brought the concepts of nationalism and modernity,\textsuperscript{17} which were to have far-reaching consequences for Cambodia. A new elite intellectual class was formed; a few of whose members would later travel to Paris to pursue higher education. Amongst this group were several of the future revolutionary leaders. During WWII, a movement for Cambodian independence, had emerged, called the Khmer Issarak\textsuperscript{18}, and the war for independence began,\textsuperscript{19} with support from communist allies in Thailand and especially Vietnam.

The period of the independence movement had many repercussions for the future, well beyond the achievement of independence in 1953. Significantly, during the war of independence here there was also a split within the Issarak movement between those who sided with the Viet Minh, and those who fought against them. Many of the Issarak leaders would later become key actors in the events of the late 1960s and 1970s, when the old Issarak divisions re-formed as the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer Serei\textsuperscript{20} and the lesser known White Khmer (Khmer Săr).\textsuperscript{21} The Issarak leadership, Puth Chay and

\textsuperscript{15} The measures covered the giving of names and titles, the making of lists and other activities that served to reorder the kingdom (see Chandler 1998).

\textsuperscript{16} This is when the Japanese disarmed the French and supported Cambodian independence (Chandler 1996: 170).

\textsuperscript{17} For an extensive study of the impacts French colonialism on nationalism see Penny Edwards (2006).

\textsuperscript{18} For a detailed history of the Khmer Issarak and the development of the Khmer Rouge, see Benedict Kiernan (1985).

\textsuperscript{19} The war of independence is usually dated 1947--1953. The Khmer Issarak was originally founded in Thailand, in 1940 according to Kiernan (1985: 23) or 1945, according to Chandler (1996: 174). Despite this difference over the date of origin, both scholars agree that the Khmer Issarak was integral to the achievement of an independent Cambodian state.

\textsuperscript{20} An anti-Sihanouk, anti-communist force supported by Thailand and South Vietnam (see Chandler 1996: 197).

\textsuperscript{21} Prince Chantaraingsey was anti-Khmer Rouge and anti-Sihanouk. There seems to be little consensus in the literature amongst scholars on the identity of the White Khmer (Khmer Săr). Chandler associates them with Sihanouk (1996: 197), while Kiernan suggests that the White Khmer may have been former Khmer Rumdos, (pro-Sihanouk insurgents seeking Lon Nol’s overthrow) who fought together with the Vietnamese communists (1985: 373). Finally, a document entitled ‘Ten documents illustrating Vietnamese Communist subversion in Cambodia, August 1969 to April 1970’ that is said to have been found on the body of a Northern Vietnamese soldier – and is discussed further below – identifies the White Khmer as the enemy of the North Vietnamese and calls for their complete destruction (1970).
Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey, would later lead the White Khmer (Khmer Sâr) and then the Khmer Serei. Perhaps most significant for the people in this study, the Khmer Issarak, as a guerrilla group, based itself in and operated out of many of the mountainous locations that the Khmer Rouge would later use in their own revolution.

The national events following independence can be followed on the timeline in Appendix A. I now turn to the local history of O'Thmaa village and its surrounding communities. This account is based on what I learned from the people there as they told it to me, with occasional references to other primary and some secondary sources to substantiate parts of these accounts where possible and relevant.

Local History of O'Thmaa and its Surrounding Communities

Early History up to the 19th Century
The long history of the region where O'Thmaa is located was illustrated very vividly to me when Thon, a neighbour of mine, brought me a bag of pottery shards that he had found on a nearby mountain and asked me to take them if I could have them dated. I took the pottery shards to the Angkor Conservation office in Siem Reap where it was determined that they dated from between the 14th and 16th centuries and came from three different sources: Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The abundance of pottery in the area and its mixed origins suggest that this area may well have marked a point along a trading route, at least in the period that followed the fall of Angkor (802 AD–1431 AD). This matches well with what the villagers told me about their far more recent past, when they and their ancestors would trade forest goods by elephant between the village and Koh Kong province (as far as Srae Ambel, from where the goods would then go off to Thailand). It is also possible, however, that the pottery may have been deposited during the Thai invasion in 1594 when the Thai forces were on their way to capture Lovek (Chandler 1996: 84-85). In any case, in addition to the pottery fragments, there are also stories of the remains of statues in the area and other stone relics that are said to be the stone formations of well-known Cambodian folktales although I did not see these myself. In the greater region to the west there is
said to be a number of other significant sites indicating past histories such as caves containing ancient jars of human bones organised by type (i.e., skulls, leg bones, etc.), an ancient and enchanted temple, and even the formations of gigantic bones that are said to be the bones of the original ancestors who the villagers told me were giants. The significance here is that it is clear that the area was not always ‘remote’ or outside of civilisation but, rather, appears to have been a site of social (and material) exchange at least in the ancient period as the pottery suggests.

The 19th Century through to Independence (1953)
For the villagers of O’Thmaa and its surrounding community, the most frequently discussed period of time seems to be the 19th century, although it is never referred to as such. Instead it is referred to this as the time when the Thai invaded during the time of their grandparents. It marks a poignant moment in their history and collective memory, and is evident in the everyday by the road, known as the ‘Thai Road’ (Plauv Siem), that traverses Prey Phnom commune from the South to the North. The villagers say this was the road used by the Thai forces when they invaded. During the occupation, the Thais are said to have captured local people for slaves to be taken to Thailand. In Doung Srae commune, the stories about the Thai invasion include pillaging the temple monastery. These accounts are discussed in depth in Chapter 7.

The harsh conditions of much of the 19th century came to an end following the invitation to France to serve as Cambodia’s protectorate in 1863. In Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes, the degree of French influence, however, was very limited. People, such as the O’Thmaa villagers, who lived more remotely from the colonial administrative offices had little or no contact with the French and they remember very little about them. However, in more accessible regions like Doung Srae the French are remembered more readily. Villagers in Doung Srae say that they heard something about the French burning down some houses but no one seemed certain whether it was true or not. People do, however, recall that the French set in motion a few civil projects in Doung Srae commune, including the construction of some roads and a couple of bridges

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22 For the influence of French colonisation on Khmer nationalism see Penny Edwards (2006).
23 However, one informant from Prei Phnom told me that the French had installed an office in Prei Phnom’s centre near the road leading to Doung Srae. Nonetheless they may have not ventured as far as O’Thmaa which was several kilometres further west.
that still exist today. Some villagers also remember being drafted by the French to work on national projects. One Doung Srae man recalled:

My father used to tell me that during the French period they built Highway 4. At that time there was no national road yet. In Pich Nil there was only the ox-cart road to Sihanoukville. But during the French period they collected the people to build a gravel road.

People also remember a tax on cattle and land imposed by the French and the requirement that people purchased and carried ID cards when they wished to travel and obtained proper permissions from the authorities. I was told that a similar system was in place later under Sihanouk, although, villagers were no long required to pay for their ID cards. By contrast, in O'Thmaa village, the villagers’ trade routes through the mountains would have been out of range of the French administration and so it would seem that the impact of French colonialism in this locale was minimal in terms of everyday life.24.

A French map dated 1943 shows the districts of Kompong Speu province. On the back of the same map there is an indication that the map was re-circulated in 1952 with the label "Zones d'Influences des rebelles KI [Khmer Issarak] et VK [Viet Cong?]".25 The map shows that the district containing Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes was considered the most dangerous (as it is coloured in red) and occupied by the Viet Minh. The map itself, originally created for the purposes of tax collection, was apparently coloured in later to show the relative danger or safety of certain areas of the province and which districts were controlled by which forces.

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24 Villagers in O'Thmaa do not seem to remember much at all about the French. Moreover the archival documents suggest that the French had a very difficult time collecting tax in this area (see rsc9644-1 1894).

The fact that the Vietnamese were in Prei Phnom in the early 1940s is confirmed by what I heard at my fieldsite. Villagers said that the area was a base for the Vietnamese and the Issaraks under Prince Chantaraingsey. The Vietnamese were there to fight the French, as were the Issaraks. But the Issaraks also opposed the Vietnamese. From villagers’ descriptions, the independence period foreshadowed what would happen decades later. They describe it as a time when Khmers were killing Khmers and accusations of espionage were rife. It is for this reason, villagers say, that in the early 1950s most of the people decided to move away from Prei Phnom commune to the North under the protection of Prince Chantaraingsey until peace was restored in the region. However, many of the villagers also joined the Issarak and some the colonial government forces. One man from a village in Doung Srae said that nearly every man in his village joined the Issarak. In Doung Srae, the local people stayed on in their villages, with the Issarak soldiers moving in amongst them throughout the war of

26 Khmers fought for the colonial government but also for the Issarak who fought with and against the Vietnamese.
independence. In Prei Phnom, however, most evacuated to the North to return two to three years later to find their gardens and rice fields overgrown and in need of clearing.

One of the factors influencing the histories was the differing topography of the two communes. While Prei Phnom commune, especially its most western end, is mountainous, making for the easy establishment of bases, Doung Srae, by contrast, is fairly flat and open. This pattern of differences between the two communes repeated itself with the Khmer Rouge revolution and civil wars in the late 1970s and again in the late 1980s and 1990s. It seems that, during the Issarak period, Prei Phnom commune was largely under the direction of the Vietnamese forces whereas Prince Chantaraingsey and his forces stayed on the other side of the river in Doung Srae for at least a period of that time. Later, during the early 1970s, both Chantaraingsey (this time leading a group of former Issarakks who became the White Khmer) and the Viet Cong (formerly Viet Minh) would return to the same area. Chantaraingsey was there to fight both the Khmer Rouge and the Viet Cong, who were allies at that time.

From Independence (1953) to the end of Democratic Kampuchea (1979)
Cambodia achieved independence in 1953 and, for the next 17 years, the country was led by King, later Prince, Norodom Sihanouk until he was ousted in a bloodless coup that ushered in the Lon Nol government (1970-1975). Although the Sihanouk period is generally recalled nostalgically as a time of communal harmony and cooperation by villagers and Cambodians generally, a number of villagers told me that life was actually more difficult than it is today. Today there is transportation to the market towns, no permissions needed for travel, no taxes, and schools are available in the area. Speaking more positively of the Sihanouk years, however, they say that, unlike today, they didn’t have to pay bribes to the police and army while transporting goods they harvested from the forests. O’Thmaa villagers recall that during this period their livelihood consisted in part of trading in kleum, esp. kleum chan Krishna (the core of perhaps the aloewood tree that is used to make perfume in Europe). They would transport their goods by elephant along well-established trade routes that crossing the border deep into Koh Kong meeting up with their relatives along the way.
There is one event during the 1960s that is worth also mentioning here. I was told that, very close to O’Thmaa there had been another village that no longer exists today. This village was the original village of O’Thmaa’s closest neighbouring village (not the old village of O’Thmaa discussed in the prelude). A cholera epidemic occurred there and many people died. The villagers there attributed the sickness and death to the anger of the spirit of the earth (*preah tourany*), believing that they must have committed some wrongdoings (*thvoe bap*) against the spirit. The villagers responded by moving the whole village to another location just east of O’Thmaa and giving it a new name. In the words of one of the people who told me the story: ‘They tried to erase the memory of the old village.’ Today no one talks about this old village. This willed erasure of this village from social memory is significant as we will see later on.

Apart from this, it seems that life was generally fairly undisrupted during the 1960s. One Doung Srae man said that Prince Chantaraingsey and his troops used to visit his village from time to time in the late 1960s, adding that Chantaraingsey himself used to come and stay at in his family home. He described the prince as ‘slight of build, thin, with a receding hairline’. He said that, in 1967–68, the Prince’s troops would come looking for Khmer Rouge who were based nearby. When Chantaraingsey’s men found gardens and rice fields belonging to the Khmer Rouge, they would use their elephants to demolish them. By the early 1970s (some say late 1960s), the Khmer Rouge had entered both Doung Srae and Prei Phnom communes. The Doung Srae resident mentioned above, himself a former Khmer Rouge cadre, described the period as follows:

In 1970, the Khmer Rouge came here. The Lon Nol Government was never here. At that time Lon Nol and Vietnam were fighting at Kirirom and National Highway 4. The Khmer Rouge came here and traded clothing and hammocks for dogs and chickens. They recruited a lot of people here to go and fight in the cities. They made this their base. They were friendly with people and controlled the whole area. They fought for freedom and enough rice. Before that we had to pay tax to Sihanouk for bicycles, motorbikes and kids. During this time they [Khmer Rouge] started building the first dam in 1974. In 1975 they won the war against Lon Nol. They called the grandchildren of the village to come and be soldiers for the Khmer Rouge and conquer the city. We all
went when we became adults. We went to fight Lon Nol. Basically, beyond the National Road, it was all purely Khmer Rouge. All of the people of the forest were controlled by the Khmer Rouge. There were no problems with the Khmer Rouge from 1970 to 1975, but only after 1975 when they conquered the country.

Other residents of Doung Srae remember the American B52 bombers but apparently no bombs landed in Doung Srae and only one in a remote region of Prei Phnom. Residents of both communes however remember napalm being dropped and the fighting in general.

Prei Phnom residents say they were under the leadership of the infamous Ta Mok, an alias for Chhit Choeun, a Khmer Rouge leader notorious for his brutality (who died in 2006). At the same time, the Vietnamese came to occupy the mountain ridge overlooking Prei Phnom commune and were sending weapons to the Khmer Rouge up on a mountaintop just north of O'Thmaa village. Nearly all the villagers fled with the Khmer Rouge up to this mountain, where they met with the likes of Ta Mok, Khieu Samphan, and others they named as Ta Hom, Ta Svay Bra-vat, and Ta Pok. Ta Mok was the leader of this area. The district was called the ‘The District of the Forest/Wilderness of the Struggle/Fight’ (Srok Prei Brāyut) by the Khmer Rouge. As one informant put it:

They [Khmer Rouge leaders] had been living for the struggle there since the time of ‘The Quiet Political Struggle’ [Kartāsou Noryoubay Sngiem Sngat]. It was not normal. These forest and mountains were full of the high commanders. Before, there were many of the people who struggled (neak tāsou) here.

According to Khmer Rouge maps, Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes, both in Region 32, were in what was called the Southwest Zone from 1970–1975. The Khmer

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27 In an interview conducted by Ben Kieman, a man from Kompong Cham described Ta Mok as a ‘forest resistance person’ who was ‘fierce’ and ‘a killer’ (Kieman 1996: 376). For an account of Ta Mok’s role in the perpetration of the Cambodian genocide, see Stephen Heder and Brian Tittemore (2001). Ta Mok was a member of the Khmer Rouge party leadership and was the commander of the Southwest Zone from 1968, when this zone still included Region 32 of which O’Thmaa and its surrounding communities were a part.

28 Led the revolution.

Rouge had divided the countryside into administrative units made up of zones \((\text{phumipheak})\) and regions \((\text{damban})\). After 1975, the Khmer Rouge altered the original divisions and Region 32 became part of what was considered the Western Zone.

By villagers’ accounts, however, it seems that, before 1972 or 1973, control had not been fully established by the Khmer Rouge within the villages of Prei Phnom commune. Despite being sandwiched between the Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge forces, the Lon Nol government (1970-1975) had a continued if diminishing presence in the region. When the villagers fled to the mountain in the early 1970s with the Khmer Rouge – they say out of fear of being mistaken for the enemy by Lon Nol’s army – the Vietnamese were fighting Lon Nol’s forces, with Khmer Rouge support. One woman recalled that as a teenager, she and others in her age group would be sent down the mountain by the Khmer Rouge to collect arms from the Vietnamese. Another person recalled during the same period there being Vietnamese soldiers everywhere all along the river that runs through parts of Prei Phnom and Doung Srei communes. This man explained:

They [the Vietnamese] came here in 1970 to help the Khmer. Lon Nol fought with Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge. The Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge were truly together ... The Vietnamese had one big division that controlled this area along with Ta Mok. There were not just a few but tens of thousands!

Another villager from O’Thmaa said:

There were two different factions: the one inside [closer to the capital/seat of state power] was Lon Nol, the one here was Khmer Rouge. At that time there was no Pol Pot, only the Khmer Rouge. There was a lot of turmoil. They [Khmer Rouge] came here to the village and only asked for rice. There was no robbery. Then the Lon Nol side said if they see someone’s house giving rice to the Khmer Rouge, they would accuse those people. A lot of turmoil. Only turmoil, it kept getting worse, so much worse. But in 1970 we were torn apart, some joined the Khmer Rouge and others joined Lon Nol. There was fighting then. At that time there were people who joined the Khmer Rouge near the mountain. There were no people left here. They were all with the Khmer Rouge.... We stayed up on the mountain [where the Khmer Rouge were based].
There was no food to eat, we had to eat the leaves and the roots from the trees. Some died of starvation. Some died and some survived. They [Khmer Rouge] were fighting to capture the people from the other side. We had to go, we had no choice. So we could not stay in the village, we had to go with them.

Sometime between 1970 and 1972 most of O’Thmaa’s villagers spent about a year (varying depending on the family) up in the mountain where the Khmer Rouge were based. Everyone I spoke to described this period as a time of hardship and misery: shelter and food were lacking, malaria was rampant and winter nights could be very cold.

As difficult as living up on the mountain may have been, surviving the slaughter that began in 1970 and continued throughout the DK regime was extraordinarily precarious. The Lon Nol forces were convinced that all the people living in areas bordering the forest must be Khmer Rouge – while the Khmer Rouge were certain that many of the same people must be White Khmer (Khmer Sâr). In fact, there seems to have been only a small number of people in a couple of villages to the west who were in fact Khmer Sâr; most Khmer Sâr were deeper within the forest or in Doung Srae commune, which, surprisingly, seemed to suffer far less. I was told that there was some fighting between the Khmer Sâr and Khmer Rouge but I did not hear stories of rampant accusations, as reported in O’Thmaa and its neighbouring villages. One Doung Srae villager mentioned that initially the Khmer Rouge didn’t trust the people in his commune because they were only ‘liberated’, that is under Khmer Rouge power, in 1970, whereas in another district they had been liberated already in 1969. But I heard no reports of continuous killings like those in Prei Phnom commune – and especially O’Thmaa village – where most adult males were eventually killed: a few by Lon Nol’s forces and many more by the Khmer Rouge. Families were split, with some joining the government and others joining the Khmer Rouge. Villagers informed on other villagers, accusing them of being unfaithful to the revolutionary movement. Those accused would be taken away by the Khmer Rouge to be killed. The most notorious of these informers became the village chief at that time (and I tell his story in Chapters 4 and 5).

It is reasonable to suggest that the brutality of the executions of perceived traitors may be attributable in part to Ta Mok, who was not only leader of the region but was
apparently also there at least part of the time in the early years; several villagers remember him and some went to work for him later. Ta Mok is well known for his severity and ruthlessness in seeking out and executing traitors in his area of command (Heder and Tittemore 2001) and he probably began this practice long before 1975. As one man told Benedict Kieman in an interview, ‘Mok was cruel ever since 1971–72. Unlike Chau Chet and Pouk Chhay, he was fierce, a killer. The killing began in 1973 as the bombs were falling’ (Kieman 1996: 376). Kieman also writes: ‘According to a sub-district cadre in Kampong Speu, Mok rounded up hundreds of dissidents ‘from all over the Southwest’ in 1973; they were allegedly forced to perform hard labour before being executed’ (1996: 357).

The principal accusation leading to most of the executions in O’Thmaa and in the neighbouring villages was the charge of being a ‘White Khmer’ (*Khmer Sâr*). As mentioned earlier, there is some confusion as to the identity of the *Khmer Sâr* in the scholarly literature but, according to villagers, the *Khmer Sâr* were under the leadership of Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey. People said they were a renegade movement and were not quite sure what they were about except that they were not with the Lon Nol government, the Vietnamese, or the Khmer Rouge.

An interesting set of documents sheds light on the matter. They are bundled into a group entitled ‘Ten documents illustrating Vietnamese Communist subversion in Cambodia, August 1969 to April 1970’ released from the US Mission to Saigon in 1970 (Saigon 1970). These documents are basically translations of notebooks found on captured or dead North Vietnamese military personnel. But what is remarkable is the Vietnamese stated mission vis à vis the Khmer Rouge in their fight against Lon Nol. These documents contain a plan to support the Khmer Rouge and set up a government with the Khmer Rouge in power but under Vietnamese direction. The stated aim of the North Vietnamese here was to install their own local leaders, whom they planned to intimidate in order that they (along with other members of the community) would flush out potential enemies/traitors. These traitors would be tried at a public trial by the local Khmers. Special emphasis was placed on the importance of the Vietnamese role being hidden throughout these processes: the documents state that the plan should be initiated in areas with forest and mountains that provided concealment and were strategically situated for offensive action.
This description of the ideal locale could not be closer to the circumstances of Prei Phnom. However the uncanniness continues: the documents also describe at some length a plan specifically to target the Khmer Sâr whom they felt must be made an example of. It is fairly clear that they were not confusing the Khmer Sâr with the Lon Nol army. In fact, throughout this document, Lon Nol seems to be a lesser concern than this other more troublesome group of guerrilla fighters.

In any case, the Vietnamese presence did not last long. Villagers say that they were gone after a year or two. Following the peace agreements reached in Paris at the end of 1972, all Vietnamese forces were withdrawn from Cambodia. According to Kieman, Ta Mok organised the withdrawal of the Vietnamese from Region 32 in 1973 (1996: 358). One informant in Prei Phnom described the withdrawal quite graphically: ‘The Vietnamese pulled out to O’Ka Viek, but they didn’t go back to their country. And then, the Khmer Rouge had a change of heart and killed the Vietnamese.’ Kieman’s date for the Vietnamese withdrawal would have coincided approximately with the evacuation of the villagers from O’Thmaa and its neighbouring villages in 1973 to the commune centre and then to a cooperative housing project (sâhâkâr) called ‘Boun Chuor’ or ‘Four Rows’, where they stayed until 1975 when they were sent to Doung Srae commune. During this time, the people of O’Thmaa village continued to suffer killings. Those to be killed were taken away to a notorious tamarind tree in one village or drowned in a nearby well. By all reports, large numbers of villagers from Prei Phnom commune were killed. While most people say it was Khmer Rouge from other areas who did the killing, they also attribute the deaths to the generation of villagers in O’Thmaa or Prei Phnom as a whole. They say, ‘people here did some very bad things.’

In all accounts, however, the hellish depictions of the years of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) (1975–1979) also characterised the late revolutionary years (1973-1975) prior to the regime itself.

Khmer Rouge policies were not limited to forced labour, evacuation and living in cooperatives. As mentioned earlier, all traditional forms and practices of kinship were specifically targeted for eradication (see also Mam 1998; Ebihara 1987). This central feature of Khmer sociality was uprooted by the Khmer Rouge in numerous ways and directed at O’Thmaa villagers and their neighbours. When villagers were moved to the
cooperative (sāhākār) in 1973, the Khmer Rouge separated parents from children and sent the youth away to separate work groups (kāng chālet) or to serve as soldiers in the army. The move to cooperatives itself changed the traditional patterns of commensality (see Chapter 6). In traditional society, and today, households tend to cook and eat together. A household may consist of only a married couple and their children but may also include parents or other siblings living with the married couple and their family. The production, preparation and sharing of food is as integral to defining, sustaining and making kin relations, as it is in other places (see for instance Carsten 1995, 1997; Gow 1991, 1995). The Khmer Rouge dismantled this integral form of relatedness by collectivising all stages of food production in the cooperatives. 30 Later during DK marriage too came to be controlled by the Khmer Rouge, who arranged the matches and orchestrated collective wedding ceremonies, marrying several couples at a time. One informant from a village close to the provincial capital said he remembered the ceremony as consisting of making a pledge to Ángkar (literally 'the organisation'), meaning the Khmer Rouge leadership). 31

Another traditional practice targeted for abolition was all forms of ancestor worship. In O'Thmaa in the early 1970s the Khmer Rouge burned down traditional phnom yong funerary monuments 32 that were standing at the time. Their intention, as one villager commented, was to erase the towers completely – and by extension the ancestors themselves and the ancestral past they and the towers signify – from social memory.

The DK years (1975-1979) saw much population dispersion. Of the people who had survived the revolution, many Prei Phnom residents were sent to work in the neighbouring commune of Doung Srae. In Doung Srae on the other hand most people stayed although some were sent as leaders or as part of village family exchanges to other areas in the country. Those Prei Phnom villagers who did not go to Doung Srae were mostly adolescents who were conscripted to the army or to mobile work brigades

30 For more on DK policies regarding food production and consumption, see Benedict Kiernan (1996), Elizabeth Becker (1998), May Ebihara (1987) and David Chandler et al. (1988).

31 I also heard the term Ángkar used to mean other governments that were in power suggesting that the word is widely used to mean 'the leadership'. Today it is also used to refer to NGOs.

32 These funerary monuments, usually constructed as temporary structures, are small houses built on stilts and located in areas considered to be wilderness. The houses are for the spirits of the dead. The practice has been abandoned in O'Thmaa since the Khmer Rouge came to the area, apart from one brief ceremony in 1980. The practice, however, has been revitalised in the neighbouring commune of Doung Srae.
and sent elsewhere. Conditions in Doung Srae were difficult for people from both communes, although not as harsh as for the urbanites who were sent there from other regions. One elderly woman, Yeay Khieu, described her experience during the Pol Pot years:

I went to work in different cooperatives in different areas. I dug canals in Doung Srae, built a dike, moved dirt, and worked on the dam with the water gates. They forced me to work and gave me rice porridge. I worked day and night sleeping for only two or three hours. Then I was ordered to make fertilizer. My sons and daughters were all not with me, as they were taken away to work on the mobile work brigades...I would cut rice until the gong sounded and Pol Pot [the Khmer Rouge leaders] would let me get lunch and a minute of rest before returning to work. I ate rice with many people. I had no plate so I used a sugar palm leaf instead, but then the rice porridge would pour out. It was difficult. I don't want to say.

All villagers also recall the executions that occurred during this period. They said that people quite regularly – with no apparent cause or over minor indiscretions – were taken away 'into the forest' or sent to prisons,\footnote{Prison 99' was specifically mentioned although villagers said that people were sent to other prisons as well.} never to return.

A number of large-scale agricultural projects that had been initiated by the Khmer Rouge had been underway in Doung Srae for some time, including an enormous earthen dam 'more than 1000 meters long' built between 1973 and 1975 to provide irrigation throughout the commune. I was told that about 100 people from each of nine villages in Doung Srae worked on this project. Later, from 1977–78, another dam project was inaugurated, this time on an even larger scale and with much greater cost of human life.
Remembering this dam project, a former Khmer Rouge soldier recalled that many people died building this dam, especially people from the cities and elsewhere who were unaccustomed to hard labour. A woman from O'Thmaa, however, remembers the project as rather more treacherous. She said that she was sent to Doung Srae to work on the dam and that the Khmer Rouge killed many people there, burying their bodies under the dam. Most horrifically, she said that, among the bodies placed underneath the dam structure, there was a large number of bodies of pregnant women: the Khmer Rouge sought to harness the potency contained within the premature death of the woman and her unborn foetus to prevent the dam from breaking. ‘They killed many pregnant women and buried them beneath the dam to stop the dam from breaking. They had a lot of trouble with this.’ When I asked why they did this, she said: ‘It has to do with the belief about the power that comes from the death of the foetus and the pregnant
woman.' The idea of harnessing the power of transformation that occurs with the death of a pregnant woman or unborn foetus is familiar to Cambodians.\textsuperscript{34}

The plight of the Buddhist temples (\textit{vat}) provides further evidence of the Khmer Rouge drive to destroy the pre-existing moral order. In Prei Phnom commune, villagers say that many of the monks were killed and the temple itself became a Khmer Rouge headquarters and detention centre (\textit{montikhum}). Before 1970 the temple had housed 50–60 monks. At the time of my fieldwork there were only 24 monks and only 14 in residence. The temple in Doung Srae was initially converted into the commune headquarters under the Khmer Rouge, and was later used as a pig sty. While many monks from both communes were killed under the Khmer Rouge, it seems that more from Prei Phnom commune died, leaving a vacuum of religious authority in this commune that continues to the present day. There are only a few elders left who were monks before 1970 in Prei Phnom commune (see Chapter 4).

\textbf{1979–Present}

The year 1979 marked the end of DK and ushered in a new era for the residents of Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes, as it did for Cambodians throughout the country. Those who had joined the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s now followed their leaders in their flight and subsequent sojourn on the Thai border. Other people in the two communes mostly relocated, initially to market towns along the main highway, while the communes were being secured from any remaining Khmer Rouge soldiers that were still occupying the forests. After about a year, however, villagers began to return to their communes. For O’Thmaa residents and those of the adjacent villages, this meant moving to the centre of Prei Phnom commune, given the continued insecurity of village locales further to the west. They lived together in this protected area for nearly another decade until, in the late 1980s, the Khmer Rouge returned to the region. The villagers were once again forced back to the main highway camps. The same was true for Doung

\textsuperscript{34} This is perhaps best exemplified in \textit{kone krock}, which it is said is the dried human foetus taken from the mother’s womb (usually by the father) on her permission which provides the father with knowledge and protection that comes from the violent death within the phases of transformation which is a period of potency and danger. Moreover the death of a pregnant woman may also allow for the harnessing of the power of a type of ghost called a ‘\textit{priet}’. These ghosts are usually women who died in childbirth or as a virgin. See also Ang Choutean (1986; 1988: 37-38).
Srae residents; however, they were able to return to their villages in the early 1990s whereas Prei Phnom residents were required to wait until the late 1990s.

Overall, the residents of Prei Phnom commune were dislocated from their villages for a greater time than the residents in Doung Srae, which was easier to secure. Thus the residents of Prei Phnom, who had already been forced to move from their villages in the early 1970s during civil war, and then again during the DK period when most were relocated to Doung Srae, were in the 1980s and 1990s finally again displaced when they were moved to the refugee camps along the main highway for extensive periods of time. Doung Srae residents, on the other hand, mostly stayed within their commune except for brief periods during the 1980s and 1990s, unless they were soldiers, part of mobile work brigades during DK, or part of the group of villagers who did a people exchange during the DK years with villages elsewhere.

One of the net effects of this greater period of dislocation of people from Prei Phnom commune is the diminished and/or delayed re-establishment of village customs and traditions that had been severely damaged from the early 1970s onwards. Two examples of this can be seen in the abandonment of the practice of building phnom yong funerary towers and the only recent revival of the annual village harvest festival, Bon Dalien (discussed in chapter 8). But the years of dislocation have also had other effects. During the time they spent living in the market towns along the highway they came into much more contact than previous with the market economy and urban centres. These experiences undoubtedly influenced their viewpoints today.

Thus the war ended much later for the people in these communes than it did for most Cambodians. Resettlement back in their villages came fairly late compared to much of greater Cambodia, where people were able to return home soon after the fall of DK in 1979. Doung Srae residents did not return home until the early to mid-1990s but Prei Phnom residents returned even later, towards the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, after mine clearance and the building of the new road by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). On their return, O’Thmaa residents, like most villagers in both communes, settled along the new roads rather than returning to the old village configuration that had consisted of small clusters of two or three houses often at a considerable distance from neighbouring clusters but together forming an arch.
Conclusion

It would be difficult to overstate the treachery and hardship the people of O'Thmaa and their neighbours lived through. Of course other places in Cambodia have had similar histories but few communities have suffered the same kind of disruption from the Khmer Rouge for such a long period. The villagers use the word 'difficult' (pibak/lombak) to describe this past and also sometimes to describe villagers' relations with one another then and also today. In the next chapter we will look more closely at what happened to people's relations throughout these periods and some of the ways in which the 'difficult' past is expressed and overcome today.
Chapter 3

Trust and Distrust

The law in the highland region...states that if someone knows sorcery and witchcraft for invoking spirits, and if someone else goes and makes an accusation [against him] to the chieftain, this chieftain must, with his authority, seize the accused to come for a deliberation of the decision. If at the deliberation it is decided that the words of the accuser are true, then according to Law, the entire family [of the accused], to seven lines [santan], must be killed.

From the smallest newborn baby at a mother's breast, they must all be killed.

Furthermore, if anyone in another family threatens either to be a traitor or obstinately refuses to go along with the judgement ordered by the ruler, according to law, that entire family must be executed and their relatives must enter into hereditary slavery as slaves for the military, ....This is sealed for all time. All the beings born into this family are known as slaves and numbered as a tribute, no matter how many there are...

'The Story of Bhikkhu Sok', Gatilok (Ways of the World), Suttanataprija Ind [1921]

We have to distrust each other. It is our only defense against betrayal.

Tennessee Williams

This chapter introduces a key theme of this thesis. It is about the concept of trust, and attempts to recover trust after the installation of radical mistrust in O’Thmaa and its neighbouring communities from the early 1970s up until the present. Following a period of distrust that lasted from the civil war years through the period of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and the second civil war following the regime’s defeat by Vietnam, villagers today are taking steps to rebuild trust both in the moral/social order itself and interpersonally with each other. This process sees villagers contending with the residue of distrust that is the legacy of Khmer Rouge ideological policies and practice and the 30 years of war, while at the same time seeking to rebuild their lives together in the present in a radically changing social and economic context.

Exploring these issues of trust and distrust brings together what might seem rather dissonant registers. On the one hand, there are major conceptual issues associated with the question of how communities deeply ruptured by violence and betrayal are able – or
perhaps not entirely able in the case of O’Thmaa village – to reconstitute social norms of trust and relatedness. On the other hand, there is the much smaller research moment that actually first drew the topic of trust to my attention: the numerous exclamations of ‘distrust’ articulated as ‘at tuk chett’ – ‘I don’t trust’ – during the course of my fieldwork. Why was it that I heard these words so often uttered?

In seeking to draw these two registers closer together, I have found a formulation by Ernest Gellner particularly helpful. In *Trust, Cohesion and the Social Order* (1988) he distinguishes between two modes of trust. The first type of trust is more akin to faith and, in Gellner’s words, is ‘coextensive with the very existence of a social order’ (1988: 42). The second type of trust takes place within society (ibid.) and would therefore include communal and personal relationships. Elaborating on this distinction, on a most basic level trust is fundamental to moral order and sociality itself – it is this underlying trust that allows people to form the continuing social relationships that in turn ground practical actions with the reliable expectation of particular results. Trust makes action situated in the present meaningful for the future because it allows us to anticipate possible outcomes. In turn, when individuals are willing to risk actions that imply trust in others, these could be seen as acts of trust analogous to speech acts (in the linguistic-philosophical sense), that is, performatives that, in a sense, *make trust happen* simply by being undertaken. It was perhaps precisely because of the intrinsic interconnections between trust and moral and social order that the Khmer Rouge made trust the object of vehement attack, not only by installing a general climate of betrayal and suspicion but in seeking to dislodge even and especially the most intimate expressions of trust, in the sphere of family and kinship relations. What could re-infuse trust into interpersonal transactions after such corrosion?

More akin to the everyday, the Headley Cambodian English Dictionary also provides some insights into the significance that reiterated statement ‘at tuk chett’. ‘Tuk chett’ means ‘to trust’ and/or ‘to have confidence in’ (Headley 1977: 391). The word *tuk* literally means ‘to keep (in reserve)’ or ‘to put’ (ibid.) and the word *chett* means ‘feeling, heart (as in seat of emotion)’, ‘thoughts’ and also ‘mind’ (ibid: 178). Later we shall also see that these dictionary terms touch on some key cultural distinctions.

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35 See also Bernard Barber (1983) regarding the relationship of trust to expectations about the future.
inflected around visibility/invisibility. The notion of trust is tied to ideas of clarity or transparency of persons and pasts, not only what can be seen and what is hidden but who can see and who is opaque. This thematics of visibility, explored in this chapter and also later, is an extremely important mode of articulating core moral values constituting the ‘background’ moral structure of the community. Discussion here includes Khmer Rouge adoption of this thematic and, later in the chapter, stories of the past and moral tales, where we shall also see how particular names or categories are bestowed to elicit distrust or trust, leading to social expulsion or the making of relatedness.

More immediately, it can be said that, broadly speaking, the sentiments expressed as ‘āt tuk chett’ could be directed towards both people and situations. The people who were the object of this sentiment were often strangers to the local area but also were frequently local leaders, the police and, at times, other villagers. In respect to situations, the expression was used to convey a general sense of uncertainty, as when the police stopped a man from another village who was smuggling wild game and a confrontation occurred. My neighbour softly said, ‘āt tuk chett’, meaning here ‘I am apprehensive about this situation.’ It was also spoken frequently when talking about the influx of foreign researchers and development people to the area and also in relation to the political uncertainty accompanying the national elections.

Listening to these sentiments of uncertainty, I recalled May Ebihara’s observation that in the late 1950s the rural Khmer villagers she worked with held a general mistrust of strangers and strange places (1968: 561-563, 625-626). The distrust she characterised is reminiscent of the insularity and suspicion of foreignness often associated with rural villages and small towns, both within and outside Cambodia.

However, the distrust expressed in the village of O’Thmaa and surrounding communities seemed to go beyond this everyday suspicion and fear of strangers and strangeness to take on another dimension that went beyond this everyday uncertainty over strangers and strangeness. Was there something unusual, some underlying condition of anxiety, expressed in the sheer frequency of utterance: ‘I don’t trust’, ‘āt tuk chett’. Or was the statement simply a habit of speech, more form than substance, a strong word used to convey only a vague apprehension? But would this itself not
indicate a kind of generalised uncertainty as such a significant part of the fabric of villagers’ everyday existence that it has embedded itself within the banality of every day conversation? If so, when did this manner of speech emerge – was it during or after the recent wars and genocide or had it been part of a much longer historical past? Indeed, what is it that constitutes the ‘trust’ that the phrase ‘I don’t trust’ counters? Clearly, I needed to find out more about notions of honesty, reliability and predictability and how the villagers relate them to the present and the past – and the future. Thus, finally, how is trust (re)formed in the aftermath of violence and by whom? Such was the range of questions that I set out to answer, having noticed the extraordinary frequency of utterance of ‘at tuk chett’.

In this chapter I will be exploring the notion of trust and distrust through everyday events and conversations as they occurred in O’Thmaa village and the surrounding communities in Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes during my fieldwork, concentrating especially on people’s accounts of the past. My intention is, firstly, to present a picture of how sentiments of distrust and trust are understood and mobilised by people in response to sweeping social changes, not only those incurred through war and genocide but also ‘modern’ and global ideologies, practices and ‘products’. Secondly, I seek to examine some of the outcomes of these responses as they illuminate the melding or dismantling or rebuilding of trust as an integral component of the moral ordering and inter-relatedness, both in the larger sense that Gellner says is co-extensive with the social order as such and as in the ‘performativity’ intra-social sphere.

Historically, this chapter moves from the war period and the inculcation of distrust – with the entrance of the Khmer Rouge into the village, through the Pol Pot regime and the civil war that followed, and the legacy of distrust left in its aftermath – and ends with the rebuilding of trust in the present period. This might suggest that I see societal distrust as being associated purely with war and violence and, conversely, trust with peace. However it would be wrong to assume that there is a simple formula where trust in peacetime replaces distrust in war and genocide, or vice versa. Rather, trust and distrust are expressed and employed differentially through periods of social change.

Throughout these periods of violence, trust still played a role, especially between family members but also in relation to other individuals whom people trusted with their lives to
help them. Equally, when I go on to discuss the remaking of trust in the aftermath of violence, here too it should not be assumed that distrust has no role in the re-establishment of social and moral order, in that it articulates everyday categories between us and them that may lend social cohesion. For example, distrust of strangers and places outside of the village community, as Ebihara has noted, is a part of everyday Khmer society in times of peace. When villagers tell each other that they do not trust a strange person, place or situation they are negotiating their own relationship as a social entity to another. While it would be hard to overestimate the impact of the Khmer Rouge, modes of distrust both pre-date and post-date the violence and political and civil disruption, sorcery, AIDS and adultery being important targets.

Theoretical Background

In the field of sociology, the topic of 'trust' has become a burgeoning field of study over the past two decades, focused especially on the emergent interest in the impacts of globalisation on societies (e.g., Giddens 1990; Fukuyama 1995; Giddens 1991; Misztal 1996). In anthropology, 'trust' and 'distrust' have long been implicitly analysed in theories of exchange (Sahlins 1972; Mauss 1967), sorcery and witchcraft (Geschiere 1997; Wikan 1990; Geschiere 1999), as well as uncertainty in modern, globalised and violent contexts (Hinton 1997, 2005; Appadurai 1996; Taylor 1999), egalitarian ethics (Overing 2003), or conspiracy (West and Sanders 2003). One of the few explicit accounts is the essay by Ernest Gellner (1988) that I referred to earlier. Otherwise, within anthropology, trust or distrust has rarely been taken as a distinct object of analysis. This may be because trust is 'tenuous, even illusive [sic]' (West and Sanders 2003: 11). Yet despite this elusiveness, trust is also clearly a pervasive feature of human relations and the societies they constitute as the studies above suggest – indeed, as Gellner argues, it a vital part of social and moral ordering.

Moving again beyond the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology we find many echoes of Gellner. We have learned from psychology that trust forms one of the most basic foundations for human social interaction beginning from the time of infancy (Erikson 1995), providing us with 'ontological security', which the sociologist Giddens describes as the 'confidence that most humans [sic] beings have in the continuity of their self-
identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action’ (1990: 92). Giddens’ focus on constancy of environment in turn echoes sociologist Bernard Barber, who sees trust as constituted of three types of expectations, the first of which is ‘the expectation of the persistence and fulfilment of the natural and the moral social order’ (Barber in Misztal 1996: 23). Barbara Misztal, a sociologist, tells us that trust underpins cooperation (but not the reverse) thereby underlining that trust is not merely a by-product of social processes but, rather, a prerequisite of social acts like cooperation (1996: 17). (She cautions, however, that a lack of cooperation is not always indicative of a lack of trust because it could stem from other sources.) Misztal makes an important conjecture that to trust is not only to believe, but to believe despite uncertainty:

What makes trust so puzzling is that to trust involves more than believing; in fact to trust is to believe despite uncertainty. Trust always involves an element of risk resulting from our inability to monitor others’ behaviour, from our inability to have a complete knowledge about other people’s motivations and, generally, from the contingency of social reality. (1996: 18)

This may make trust something more akin to faith, as suggested by Giddens (1990: 27).

I will be returning to some of these ideas about trust later in the chapter, but now I would like to focus on some of the Southeast Asian ethnographical studies that address the topic of trust – or rather as the case be it, distrust.

The Ethnography of Trust and Distrust in Southeast Asia

Melford Spiro accounts for what he considers to be the distrustful nature of the Burmese, by seeing it partly as a by-product of childhood experience, when parents shifted attention from the elder sibling to the younger, and partly due to a conceptual reality where dangerous and harmful supernatural beings – such as witches, demons and ghosts – share the world with ordinary people (1967: 71-76). ‘The Burmese say that no one can be trusted because, in the expression that came to me as a constant refrain,

36 Ebihara also noted the enormous impact of this shift in attention but does not link it to distrust (1968: 453).
"How can anyone know what is in the mind of another human being?" (ibid.: 73). Similarly, Unni Wikan (1990) describes how Balinese live in a perpetual state of anxiety over the hidden sentiments and intentions of others. Beneath the veneer of their ‘smooth bright faces’ lurk ‘hidden hearts’ that at any time may be aroused by jealousy or anger. A heart thus aroused may spur someone to invoke black magic to bring misfortune upon their hapless victim (Wikan 1990). Moving away from interpersonal relations to address relations with state and religious institutions, Albert Schrauwers (2003) found deep suspicions (in Indonesia) amongst Central Sulawesi Christians towards the apparently transparent Indonesian democratic state and church bureaucracy. Firstly, the hidden machinations of power by corrupt officials led these people to produce a number of conspiracy theories. And, secondly, in a move that challenges Weber’s account of the demise of enchantment in the modern rationalised world, Sulawesi Christians are turning towards tradition, employing ‘an indigenous set of magic and witchcraft beliefs’ (ibid.: 144) to make sense of the Protestant church’s failures. Hence, while Spiro and Wikan see people distrusting the generally hidden realms of people’s minds and hearts, Schrauwers finds distrust attached to the hidden power structures of bureaucracies. In these cases we see that a ‘clear bright face’ (Wikan) or a ‘transparent rational [enlightened] bureaucracy’ (Schrauwers) is a face or veneer that hides potentially malicious intentions and power. Indeed, as Spiro’s ethnography tells us, the more dangerous the person or supernatural being is, the more benign they will appear (1967: 74).

Cambodia

In her ethnography of the Cambodian village Svay in the late 1950s May Ebihara observed villagers’ wariness of strangers and strange situations, as already noted above. Such distrust, Ebihara tells us, was instrumental in bringing about the institution of fictive kinship (thoa) that would allow Cambodians to leave their villages and stay with pseudo-relations in other villages (1968: 177-180). This arrangement offered security and protection to people whilst away from home in a manner reminiscent of the security and protection once offered by kula exchange partners in the Trobriand studied by Malinowski (1922). Ebihara’s dissertation suggests that villagers generally trusted each other, the government and the Buddhist temple. However, in a recent study in contemporary Svay, Judy Ledgerwood (2005) has noted a rise in distrust of the moral
integrity of Buddhist monastic institutions. Finally, in Alexander Hinton’s study of the executioners of Pol Pot’s genocide, we see distrust in the form of suspicion towards potential rivals for power (2005: 116 - 125). This suspicion, Hinton tells us, is informed by a Buddhist ontology that emphasises the notion of impermanence and a hierarchical patronage system. Those who have power occupy the upper rungs of the hierarchy and yet that power is an entity that is unfixed and finite and fundamentally impermanent in any particular form. Hence a person’s power may at any time be lost to another, particularly those who are ready to seize it from below. It is therefore the acute awareness of this impermanence of relations involving power that leads people to be on their guard and suspicious of others whose intentions are often hidden (ibid.).\textsuperscript{37}

Distrust: Inculcation, Expressions and Persistence

\textit{Distrust during the First Civil War (1970–75) and the DK Period (1975–79)}

\textbf{Background: Distrust and the Khmer Rouge Ideology}

At the start of the DK period, the residents of Prei Phnom commune were largely moved to Doung Srae to work on the large agrarian projects that had been in place since 1973. These projects were part of a socialist leap towards modernisation aimed at creating a utopian future that would allow the state of Cambodia to be completely self-reliant. As dictated in ‘The Revolutionary Principles of Marxism-Leninism’, as written out in a 1976 Khmer Rouge cadre notebook, the aim of the revolution was also to create a ‘national democracy and revolution that provides rice fields for the masses’ and rid the nation of all forms of feudalism, capitalism and imperialism (D2183 - Srei Ha 1976). The revolutionary programme dictated that individuals should be ever vigilant against enemies of the revolution and thus employed villagers to spy on one another. Such was the case in O’Thmaa and the neighbouring communities. This programme of surveillance operated in part around ideas of clarity and transparency. The populace as a whole needed to be ‘clear’ of any forms of potential dissent. This meant that individual life histories needed to be transparent to the leadership and be ‘cleared’ of any conflicting elements. But while transparency and the demand to be ‘clear’ was placed

\textsuperscript{37} Hinton (like Spiro) also brings childhood socialisation practices into the equation but suggests it is an area where trust in one’s superiors (i.e., the parents) is developed. This is very different from the argument asserted by Spiro who suggests that children learn to distrust their parents’ benevolence.
on ordinary people, the revolutionary organisation itself (Angkar) was administered by a different policy. Described as a ‘tactic’ (yutsas) to achieve the revolutionary aim cited above, it is elaborated as follows: ‘The image that the struggle must project is one that is half hidden and half out in the open’ (D2183 - Srei Ha 1976). Therefore while Angkar required total transparency of its people, it masked its own ambitions. This ‘tactic’ echoed everyday social interactions where people may ‘protect themselves against malicious actions of others by presenting ‘a clear bright face’ and ‘keeping a hidden heart’ (Wikan 1990).

From the early days of the revolution in the early 1970s, and throughout DK and the second civil war during the 1980s and 1990s, a discourse of spies (kenh39, kong chhlop39, ronuk knong40), traitors (chon kbot), enemies (khmang, sutrouv) and ‘bad elements’41 permeated the everyday social relations of Prei Phnom and Doung Srae villagers. Although the Cambodian genocide was not exclusively an ethnic war like Rwanda or Bosnia,42 Arjun Appadurai’s observation that ethnic violence is articulated in a vocabulary of (internal) spies and traitors is relevant here:

The primary literature closest to the most brutal episodes of contemporary ethnic violence is shot through with the language of the impostor, the secret agent, and the counterfeit person. This discourse brings together the uncertainty about categories and intimacy among persons.... (1996: 155).

Of course, the spies, traitors and enemies were not always just talk – the Khmer Rouge did employ spies and so did their enemies. The point is, however, that the distrust and uncertainty that fuelled these accusations and searches also substantiated them in a circular fashion. As Diego Gambetta has noted, ‘distrust ‘may become the source of its

38 Term used by the Khmer Rouge and Lon Nol.
39 Pol Pot term.
40 Lon Nol term.
41 In a manner reminiscent of the Chinese during the nationalist period (see Wakeman 1996), Pol Pot and his cohort used the metaphor of illness and microbes multiplying and infecting the body of state (see Chandler et al. 1988: 336) for an excerpt of one of Pol Pot’s narratives on microbes; see also Kiernan (1996). A ‘bad element’ was any idea, act or person deemed to be counter-revolutionary. People were accused and killed for having the ‘wrong philosophy’, the wrong life history, the wrong associations, or simply the wrong attitude (such as wanting an extra portion of food).
42 Although ethnic minorities such as the Cham Muslims and Vietnamese were especially targeted by the regime (see Kiernan 1996), the overall nature of the genocide was less ethnically specific than that between the Hutus and Tutsis or between the Bosnian Serbs and Croats.
own evidence' (1988: 234) and, in Cambodia in general and O'Thmaa in particular, we see this in *extremis*.

Khmer Rouge methods of surveillance that enlisted local villagers to spy and report on their fellow villagers and family members are familiar to dictatorial and totalitarian regimes and has been used in situations like Stalin’s Russia, the Nazi concentration camps, and other political backdrops. One of its immediate effects is to atomise individuals and families by breaking the bonds of trust that normally exist between families and groups, thus destabilising potential pockets of resistance. Appadurai’s phrase ‘uncertainty about categories and intimacy among persons’ is highly apposite. Enlisting the locals and encouraging them to report on one another created a confusion of categories: even the closest neighbours and family who would normally be trusted might be ‘one of them’ rather than ‘one of us’. Later, during the second civil war, this same confusion of categories recurred in the region when government soldiers and the Khmer Rouge would continually accuse villagers of working for one side or the other.

Thus it is not difficult to see how the discourse of spies, traitors and enemies became self-perpetuating, both propelled by and generating distrust by making people increasingly uncertain about whom they could trust not to turn them in for real or alleged activities. In a broader sense, the degree of distrust was also increased as more traitors were found and their real or alleged associates named in forced confessions. As enemies were arrested and tortured into producing records of their traitorous activities, they were also required to supply lists of names of people they were associated with and who together formed part of their ‘network’. In the manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the distrust was sustained, rationalised and reproduced, creating a warped logic whose logical conclusion could only be total annihilation.

**Distrust during the First Civil War Years of the Khmer Rouge Revolution (1970–75)**

Distrust had already been inculcated from the earliest years of the revolution when the Khmer Rouge entered Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes, and the civil war also

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43 Many of these confessions remain in the archives at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Cambodia. The translated confession of Hu Nim, the Minister of Information under Pol Pot and, who was killed in 1977 after confessing to a variety of traitorous activities, can be found in Chandler, Boua and Kieman’s *Pol Pot Plans the Future* (1988). For a rigorous and compelling analysis of the torture and confessions at Tuol Sleng, see Chandler (1999).
began here. Distrust went through a number of phases. In the beginning of the civil war, many villagers concluded that, since they were already distrusted by Lon Nol, they would be better off placing their trust in the Khmer Rouge. Ta Chan, a 64-year old Buddhist layman and original resident of O’Thmaa explained:

Lon Nol did not trust us. We also were very scared! Even if we didn’t join the Khmer Rouge they might accuse us anyway. If we didn’t run away Lon Nol wouldn’t have believed us, so we had to run. … We trusted the Khmer Rouge, that’s why we went with them.

Villagers told me that the state government always distrusted them regardless of who was in power, due to (as described in Chapter 2) the village’s mountainous locale and its reputation as the lair of fugitives, bandits, criminals and insurgents. In any case, it seems that many of the villagers were sufficiently wary of the government soldiers to take their chances with the Khmer Rouge and follow them up into the mountains; however, a few remained and joined Lon Nol’s forces. Some others say that they were not really following the Khmer Rouge but just running to the mountains to escape the fighting. But it is clear that most villagers initially trusted the Khmer Rouge over the government.

Following the villagers’ subsequent descent from the mountain, however, circumstances were to change rapidly. It was clear that the Khmer Rouge became increasingly distrustful of the villagers. This would have been partly due to the discovery that some villagers’ relations in two interior villages were working for the renegade guerrilla group the Khmer Sār (White Khmer). This led the Khmer Rouge to begin spying on the local villagers both directly and by employing certain members of the village to spy on the others. The aim here was to locate and destroy real and potential enemies of the revolution. Sau, a man in his early forties who was the acting village leader at the time of my fieldwork explained to me how this happened to his father in the early 1970s.
My father... He died in 1972... They accused him of being a Khmer Sâr [White Khmer]. It is very hard/difficult/complicated [lombak]. I don’t really know all of it. There were spies [kong chalop]. They would go to people’s houses to listen to what people were saying about the situation. If we said things that were considered good then it didn’t matter, we were okay. But if we said something about them that could be taken as a criticism they would catch us and take us saying that we are spies/enemies [kin]. They just tied him up and forced him to go but I don’t know to this day where it was that they killed him... In O’Thmaa here, there was a group of spies [kong chalop] and they used to go to each house to listen and investigate what people were talking about. Because he wasn’t very clear. He wasn’t afraid of their power... If we were to express any criticism of them they would be afraid that we knew what their plans were. So when they would hear people [make criticisms], they would catch them and take them away... He [his father] wasn’t working for the Khmer Sâr but he was just talking; just complaining about one thing or another. And so they thought he was a member of the Khmer Sâr... The Khmer Sâr were the people who stood up against the Khmer Rouge. They wanted to help the people to escape from Pol Pot, but during that time they had no support and so their group was completely smashed [back sombuk]. So the Khmer Rouge were afraid that other people may come to know the full story and so they caught him and took him away... He just talked about whether or not there were any people who could come and help him to escape from having to eat as a group. He would just say things like that and they accused him of being the ‘arms and legs’ of the Khmer Sâr.

Sau’s narration of the death of his father is not unusual: similar stories are told about the revolution and the DK regime itself. The story conveys the distrust the Khmer Rouge had for the villagers as well as the distrust the villagers learned to have for the Khmer Rouge. It also indicates the emergent distrust between villagers themselves when he says ‘in O’Thmaa here there was a group of spies...’. Another illuminating point is Sau’s assertion that his father was distrusted and considered a risk by the Khmer Rouge because he could potentially tell others about the real nature of the Khmer Rouge and

44 Term for spy for used by Khmer Rouge.
45 Term for enemy or spy for Lon Nol, and Khmer Rouge.
46 Term for spy used by Khmer Rouge.
47 My research assistant explained that ‘clear’ here simply means he was ignorant but it is important to note that the same word was used during the Pol Pot regime to refer to mean ‘transparent’ and ‘without fault’ when applied to people’s life histories.
their plans: 'If we criticised them they would be afraid that we know what their plans are' and 'the Khmer Rouge were afraid that other people may come to know the full story.' Looking back at the Khmer Rouge tactic of remaining half hidden, we can see that Sau’s story depicts his father as able to see into the ‘heart/mind’ of the Khmer Rouge and this made him dangerous. The Khmer Rouge in general distrusted people with knowledge. It was important that people remain ‘clear’, which, as used above, means ignorant. Sau’s father thus was perceived as a traitor or an enemy on a number of levels, condensed in the convenient label of ‘White Khmer’, which in turn justified his execution.

Being ‘clear’, however, was also the terminology employed by Khmer Rouge later on during the DK years to denote a favourable life history, devoid of contradictions and without fault. The Khmer Rouge made a point of collecting life histories and confessions. In the Party Center document of December 20th 1976, the Khmer Rouge leadership discuss their success in the people’s ‘political awakening’ to the socialist revolution and the need for politics to be ‘nourished by the socialist revolution, which must seep in even more.’ The report affirms that the ‘Party is more unified than ever before in terms of tasks, policies, and consciousness’ and ‘is no longer confused by bad elements’ and – thus having been ‘purified’ – needs to expand by recruiting new members. This was where ‘the method of life histories’ became so vital, screening people’s pasts in search of a ‘clear’ history in line with the revolution and ready to be further ‘built’ through study and training, as projected in the following Khmer Rouge policy document:

In each subdistrict, we will seek out from four to 10 people. We will examine them to see if they have clearly followed the revolutionary line of the masses and to examine their activities. ... the life history will then be forwarded to the Party Nomination Branch for approval. Those people would be summoned to study. When they have studied, they would all produce new life histories. We would see that some are not clear, while others were clear. ... The life histories that aren’t clear will be sent back for further scrutiny. ... they will be examined further. ... Life histories are what’s important now – life histories from birth to death that relate subsequent events. (Chandler et al. 1988: 203)

While this production of ‘clear’ life histories involved investigating people’s backgrounds and re-educating them into ‘right’ moral thought, it also meant the extraction of forced confessions from perceived traitors to the revolution, a practice that was also taking place in O’Thmaa in the early 1970s. More often than not, following someone’s arrest, they would be tortured into a confession that would include a register of names of alleged associates. These persons would then be arrested, questioned and later killed. So there was not only the constant fear of being arrested but also the fear that others might, under duress, claim that you were part of his traitorous string (khsae) or network. Further, it was not only Khmer Rouge spies whom the locals had to fear but – rather in a manner reminiscent of Primo Levi’s ‘Gray Zone’ (1988) – the locals themselves were given the task of reporting their neighbours and family members, making the ‘us’ and ‘them’ indecipherable. Villagers who were given leadership positions (see Chapters 4 and 5) were probably expected to be especially vigilant in reporting potential enemies of the revolution.

Hence in O’Thmaa, the first civil war years (1970–75), betrayed by the Khmer Rouge and then by each other, villagers’ trust was rapidly eroded and replaced with a growing culture of distrust. Khmer Rouge propaganda made a further contribution by stressing self-reliance over dependence on others, including close family members (see Hinton 2005; Kiernan 1985, 1996; Mam 1998). Self-reliance meant that honesty and integrity were only found within, a theme that was extended to the level of the nation-state itself, which sought to cut any form of dependency on other foreign powers (Becker 1998; Chandler et al. 1988; Kiernan 1985). It is possible that in O’Thmaa there were betrayals even within nuclear families as well as between extended kin relations. Yet, there was no mention of this by any villager, nor any other evidence to support this possibility. From villagers’ accounts it appears that trust within the immediate (nuclear) family did remain intact despite the distrust between the extended families of the village. Nonetheless, O’Thmaa people’s sense of trust in the institutions that composed their community prior to the revolution was first disrupted by the war and then systematically assaulted by the Khmer Rouge. Fostering distrust between familiairs, the

49 For an anthropological analysis of aspects of the indoctrination process see Alexander Hinton (2005).
50 For an extensive analysis of the process of extracting confessions from inmates at Tuol Sleng see Chandler (1999).
Khmer Rouge agenda sought to establish a new moral order where trust and faith lay solely with its leadership, Angkar, which cast itself as the ‘parents’ of the people upon whom they depend (Hinton 2005: 130; Ponchaud 1989).

Distrust in Democratic Kampuchea
In 1975, when Pol Pot effectively seized the nation and the majority of the villagers in Prei Phnom commune moved into the neighbouring commune of Doung Srae, the search for enemies and traitors continued. Within Doung Srae and Prei Phnom communes, any male old enough to serve as a soldier worked in mobile work brigades and were dispersed to various locations around the country. Most of the other villagers were sent to different villages in Doung Srae and put to work on the dam and other large scale agricultural projects taking shape there. The accusations of working for the White Khmer (Khmer Sâr) seem to have slowed or halted at this point but the Khmer Rouge search for traitors continued. At this point, it appears that the experience of O’Thmaa villagers becomes similar to that of other people from the general region, whereas previously it differed in that the transitional period during the revolution was far more violent in Prei Phnom (and particularly O’Thmaa village) than it was for the inhabitants of Doung Phnom. So in this section and the next I include the accounts of Doung Srae villagers in the analysis.

The stories I was told are generally similar to many of the accounts of life under the DK in other regions in Cambodia. Villagers described how their family members, relatives and associates were reported for having the wrong attitude, stealing food, or asking for more food, or accused of being spies and taken away to be killed. In most cases the accused were never seen again. One Doung Srae woman, Ti, now well into her fifties, survived. She narrowly escaped execution when she returned to her home in Doung Srae in the final days before the Khmer Rouge government was defeated by Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge, she explains, distrusted her because the area she had just come from had been captured by the Vietnamese:

Numerous autobiographical accounts in (Him 2000; Ngor and Warner 1987; Pin and Man 2000; Someth and Fenton 1986; Ung 2000) and scholarly texts (Chandler 1999; Chandler et al. 1988; Chandler, Kieman, and Lim 1996; Hinton 2002, 2005; Kiernan 1996) detail the Pol Pot state’s efforts at locating, digging out and dispensing with the alleged feudalists, capitalists, CIA and KGB agents, imperialists, and other traitorous elements who were charged with infecting and sabotaging the pure destiny of DK. Many of these accounts provide vivid pictures of the fear and trauma experienced by people on a daily basis, as they were spied on and scrutinised for traitorous activities.
After I came back, I was nearly killed because they accused me of having the head of a *Yuan* [derogatory term for Vietnamese] and the body of a Khmer... The *Yuans* hadn’t entered this area yet so when I arrived back the Khmer Rouge saw me as someone who was coming from a place controlled by the *Yuans*, so they considered me to be someone with a *kbal Yuan kloung Khmer*, meaning that they saw us as having a relation to the Vietnamese that entered early on [in the war] in order to cause whatever. That is why on this side, Pol Pot, didn’t trust us.

The timing of events probably saved her. Had she returned earlier, she would almost certainly have been executed. As Sau’s story also suggested, because it was impossible for the Khmer Rouge to identify enemies simply by their appearance, all people were by definition seen as potential enemies and not to be trusted. In the context of the war, the population was coming into contact with opposing military forces though troop movements as well as the mass mobilisation of Cambodia’s population. In a context where there was such a degree of flux and potential for people to choose different sides (or be forcibly drafted) there would inevitably be uncertainty and distrust. Ti’s story tellingly demonstrates the notion of how exterior surfaces may not only conceal but also betray inner truths – people had Khmer bodies and yet their heads, or minds, were Vietnamese. The Khmer Rouge did not trust who people really were. Or, put another way, they were not confident that people were who they said they were or who they appeared to be. Killing off such liminal identities relieves the anxiety of wondering whether someone is a White Khmer, a Vietnamese or government soldier by securing their identities as the enemy. By the magic of backwards logic, by definition of having been executed, they must have been an enemy, and in turn warrants the perpetuation of distrust, for ‘underneath the surface’ they were essentially a traitor all along.  

A final aspect of the DK legacy is the existential distrust arising from the terror and betrayal that occurred during the Pol Pot era. Violence permeates, mars or destroys...
one’s sense of trust in one’s fellow humans, oneself, and society as a whole. This process has been well documented (e.g., Améry 1980; Rittner and Roth 1993; Robben and Suárez-Orozco 2000; Becker, Beyene, and Ken 2000). Among the people I worked with, it was clear that trust in the durability of the social and moral order had been severely shaken, as had the more intimate trust between people. In everyday discourse in Doung Srae and Prei Phnom, people would talk about how society has changed and how it may change again at any time, just as it did when ‘Pol Pot’ came to the area. In O’Thmaa, where members of the community had other people’s relations killed, there is a diminished trust between neighbours, many of whom are extended kin. People say that, although people may now act in a friendly manner it is unclear what lurks in their hearts (nov knong chett) because, as they have seen in the past, people within the community have killed one another or been responsible for their deaths. More broadly, the violence and terror made the morally unfathomable fathomable in the everyday, and implanted the cancer of negation into people’s minds. Society itself was shown to be impermanent and capable of being contorted into visions of hell previously unimaginable and, as the institutions and foundations of society were turned on their head or destroyed, so too was the trust in their power, authority and longevity. The ancestral spirits, elders, and Buddhist monastery were disrobed of their power and sanctity, and likewise ordinary men or women were stripped of their humanity. Moreover, those who survived were forced to live with these memories of the roles that they and others had taken in the carnage of the revolution, knowledge that under more everyday circumstances would never have had to know.

*The Second Khmer Rouge Civil War (1979–99), its Aftermath, and Social Change: New and Old Sources of Distrust*

While the mass extermination of perceived enemies and traitors ended with the collapse of Pol Pot’s regime, the killing of people named as enemies, traitors, spies – and, later, sorcerers – continued to some degree up through the very recent past. These more recent events have tended to be mostly enacted locally between individuals rather than as part of an overarching state policy as before.

Following the collapse of DK in 1979, most of the Khmer Rouge forces fled to the Thai border where they re-gathered and began a prolonged war with the Vietnamese-
controlled Cambodian government. During this period, the Khmer Rouge returned to the region and members of both Prei Phnom and Doung Srae commune were evacuated periodically to stay along the main highway for their protection and to prevent the possibility of collaboration. Nonetheless, there were significant periods where villagers lived within the battleground of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese-led forces. At this time there were still many Prei Phnom residents living in Doung Srae.

Although in the early 1970s, Doung Srae villages had been seemingly slightly more trusted than villages in Prei Phnom, and O’Thmaa village in particular, they had nonetheless been subject to the same Khmer Rouge policies that were aimed at instilling distrust and destroying the previous moral order. In the post DK period in the 1980s and 1990s, but in a manner similar to the civil war in the early 1970s, villagers of both communes were distrusted by both sides of the conflict as well as by each other. As Ta En, a musician in his seventies and Doung Srae resident, explained:

This was the tension zone... When the Khmer Rouge would retreat, the government soldiers moved in. When the government moved out, the Khmer Rouge would move in again ... When there was war, the government soldiers would come and have lunch at my house, and then the Khmer Rouge would accuse me of being a spy for the government. And after the Khmer Rouge moved out from here, the government would then accuse me of being a spy for the Khmer Rouge! ... Anyone who lived in this frontline (sămărăphoum mukh) area was also accused of being a spy.

Because Doung Srae commune, like Prei Phnom commune, was a ‘tension zone,’ its residents were continually suspected by both sides of collaborating with the opposing force. However, during this time, being accused by the government or the Khmer Rouge of working for the enemy was no longer the automatic guarantee of execution it had been in the first civil war or during DK. Many were nonetheless killed on that charge but these accusations and killings were now not always motivated by politics. As villagers tell it, the charges often had little substance and were simply a cover for soldiers (and possibly civilians) to kill, or have people killed, for personal reasons.53

53 These ‘grudge killings’ may be similar to those discussed by Hinton (2001; 2005) in the DK period.
It was during this period as well that a new form of accusation surfaced: sorcery. Those accused as sorcerers (*tmuap, ap*) were usually executed.

**Sorcery, Adultery, and AIDS**

In early 2002, I was invited to a tall wooden house in Doung Srae where a young man was hosting a *Bon Da* ceremony 'to send prayers and offerings to the Buddha and the Brahman spirits.' The man had been accused of being a sorcerer (*tmuap*) three years earlier and, as a result, had been shot at three times and hit in the leg. It was explained to me at the ceremony that these accusations were similar to someone being accused of being Khmer Rouge or working for the government and that people were using these labels to kill people they did not like.

In my interviews later on, I learned more about these accusations of sorcery and met some of the family members of those who had been accused and murdered. Un, a 36-year-old, told me: 'They said that my father was a sorcerer [*tmuap*]. It was in 1987. They did a lot of that then. They did that to kill people.' Another young man told me his 57-year-old father, who had already lost his wife to a Khmer Rouge mine, was accused of being a *tmuap* as recently as 2001. While most people seemed to feel that the sorcery accusations were merely an extension of the existing repertoire, one woman (whose story I turn to in a moment) told me, 'the problem with *tmuaps* emerged only after the war because *tmuaps* are afraid of guns and so they wouldn't dare harm anyone [during the actual war period].' Her comment suggests, firstly, that there is nothing new about the existence of sorcery and, secondly, that sorcerers' power is subordinate to military power — after all, why would they be afraid of guns if their magical abilities were potent enough to provide them with protection?

AIDS has added another dimension. Another woman explained that, it was during the period of the second civil war with the Khmer Rouge, with its atmosphere of constant fear, that people started becoming sick with the AIDS virus and so it caused people to panic and begin accusing their neighbours of sorcery. Indeed in the 1990s the development agencies, the market economy, along with the AIDS virus, came to the

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54 May Ebihara defines *tmuap* as 'a special kind of kru, always male, who specialises in a unique form of malevolent magical murder: the *tmop* [sic] can cause a knife, piece of sharp bamboo, scissor, razor or similar sharp object to enter and swell up inside a victim's body' (1968: 436).
villages in Doung Srae and Prei Phnom. The market economy existed to a limited extent in the years prior to the war and Pol Pot but people say that, compared to the Sihanouk years, things became more ‘modern’ in the 1990s. The move to the market towns along the main national highway and the increased movement of persons to different locales to work or trade often brought villagers into intimate contact with new and different people, ideas – and diseases. As one villager explained:

    Nowadays we encounter serious illnesses, because we have the situation where social influences are passed from one society to another.... We do not do things like the old people. ... Now people are more worldly. The society has changed a lot and is now modern.

The AIDS virus is widely feared by the people in Prei Phnom and Doung Srae. One woman told me she is afraid of the large tokay geckos\footnote{It is noteworthy that these tokay geckos enter and live in people’s houses, usually hidden from view. Much like the AIDS virus itself, it enters the intimate domestic sphere where it lies dormant until revealing itself.} (which are blue-gray in colour, with orange-red spots) because they look like they have AIDS! The widespread fear of AIDS stems in part from its invisibility (until it becomes visibly and physically symptomatic), its ambiguous origins, and its penetration of the most intimate of relations. In Cambodia it has particularly damaging consequences for the many families who cannot access or afford proper medical diagnosis, treatment, and support.

Nga, a woman of 32 was dying from what probably was the AIDS virus when I met her. She was living on her own in a small one room wooden house with her three children. Her eldest daughter, 13 years of age, was supporting the family by working for people in their rice fields and gardens. Nga’s legs were covered in sores and her thin exhausted face was almost without colour. Her life couldn’t have been more tragic. She had lost her father and her two uncles during the Pol Pot time (samay Pol Pot). They had been killed after having been sent to work on the massive dam project in the Doung Srae commune. Nga had married her first husband, a policeman, in 1987 in a village along the main highway where many of the residents were relocated by the government during the second civil war. The marriage was quick, she explained, with no time to do...
bride and groom service, the normal custom in Doung Srae and Prei Phnom. In 1994 she accompanied her husband back to her village in Doung Srae, where he was sent to work for a period of 20 days. The Khmer Rouge killed him then, shooting him in front of their house. She explained that when the Khmer Rouge would kill people who worked for the government, they would often also kill their families and that they had wanted to kill her as well. She managed to survive by hiding in other people’s houses, going out only at night.

Some years later Nga married again and she had another child, her third. Her second husband went to Aural to forage for aloewood (kleum) but didn’t return. In 1997 the couple divorced; six months later she received news from Aural that her husband had died, possibly from malaria. She has been ill ever since. She said that some say her husband died of the AIDS virus and she thinks she may have it as well.

Since the end of the fighting in the area, life has changed, according to Nga, but at the same time she has observed that people are now extremely afraid of the sorcerers (tmuap and ap). ‘If someone dies without reason they will blame it on a tmuap’, she told me. ‘And if someone gets angry with someone else then perhaps in two or three years they will end up dead from a swollen stomach through black magic.’ For her fear of the fighting has been replaced by fear of sorcerers. She was unsure how many sorcerers there were but reasoned that there must be many of them, given all the people she had seen die without apparent cause. Nonetheless, she thinks the situation may be improving. She did not say whether she thought her own illness or that of her husband was a result of sorcery.

Nga’s story speaks of several forms of distrust: her distrust of other villagers who may be sorcerers and accountable for the deaths that are occurring in the area and the AIDS virus; her distrust of her husband (and perhaps by extension men in general) who betrayed her by sleeping with other women, possibly giving her AIDS, and leaving her without support. Of course, her fear of sorcerers is not only a transfer of the residue of

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56 Bride service involves a prospective groom working for the family of the bride for a given period of time so that the bride’s family has the opportunity to observe his work and get to know him (Ebihara 1968). In both communes where I worked it was the custom for both the bride and the groom to perform this service for each others’ families in a complementary fashion. (See Chapter 2.)

57 Ap is a type of female sorcerer who flies with her entrails flying behind.

58 See footnote 17 on swollen stomachs.
fear and distrust from the war but also a way of interpreting her present circumstances so that the question of her husband’s loyalty can itself be transferred onto an external source, sorcerers. In this way the intimate trust and security of the family is maintained even as it is questioned.

Another example of distrust also involves adultery, only in this case the individual blamed is a woman. This final episode is again a tragic one. It took place in Doung Srae as recently as 2001. The event suggests how the discourse of ‘bad elements’ and their elimination, dating from before the Khmer Rouge and then used extensively by them—a discourse fuelled by and formed out of distrust—may thus enter into the everyday of ordinary society with deadly consequences. I paraphrase the story as it was told to me below by a group of villagers:

One evening a young woman of about 20 years of age was taken into the forest by her cousin, two village security men and a relative of one of the village leaders and shot dead. Several days later, the stench from the rotting corpse wafted into the village but no one investigated until the dog of an old man living on the forest’s edge returned home with part of the woman’s remains in its jaws. Alarmed, the man followed the dog’s footprints to the corpse, and frightened, he notified the district police. The four men were arrested but only the security man who shot the woman was held in police custody. Later, a group of villagers telling the story explained to me that the young woman (who they mentioned was quite good looking) was a sahai—an adulteress, who was married herself but who had sexual liaisons with several of the married men in the village. They said she was therefore considered a chngrai—someone who causes trouble and brings misfortune to society. The villagers said that, after the woman was accused of being a chngrai, but before she was killed, she had been placed in isolation. When two of her nephews fell ill and then died, she was accused by her family and other villagers of having invoked the wrath of her ancestors. A villager told me that her parents had said she should be killed. The woman’s body was buried in the forest without ceremony, marker, or the Phnom Yong funerary tower (as is the custom in this village).

As the social outcast her actions had led her to become in life, so too she became an outcast in death.
The distrust and intolerance displayed in these stories indicates a very different type of distrust than the everyday suspicion and fear that Ebihara, Spiro and Wikan discuss. Here we see a rhetoric and a violent practice of eliminating what are considered to be bad elements within the community and how labelling is used to justify the killings. The concept of sorcerers or bad elements (chngrai) implies that those so labelled are exercising a secret aggression that undermines proper social interactions and what is considered to be the very integrity of society. In the context of chaos and flux, causes and agencies of uncertainty must be identified and destroyed.

In this story of adultery we see a number of parallels to the introduction of the AIDS virus. Firstly, the killing was clearly gendered, the woman’s behaviour was not to be trusted (nor that of the males who clearly had a choice whether or not to go with her). Secondly, the woman’s behaviour violated the intimacy of marriage relations as well as endangering children – the offspring of marriage. In this way the institution of kinship itself was violated, hence disrupting a significant basis of the social and moral community. As such a threat, she was thus removed, first in life, by her exclusion and then by her death, and later in death through being buried in the wilderness without mortuary rites. Perhaps even more to the point, this placing outside of society and into the wilderness recalls François Ponchaud’s conclusion, in his analysis of the Khmer Rouge, that ‘the killings of corrupt and irredeemable elements in the forest were a prelude to the birth of a moral and more properly ordered society’ (Ponchaud 1989: 160-161). In parallel, it can be argued that something more than the discourse of ‘bad elements’ was transmitted from the Khmer Rouge, for was this contemporary community not also seeking to make a new world? Hence the violent response to a woman who seemed to compromise the integrity of the community they were trying to remake order in the wake of violence.

In the context of extreme ‘uncertainty about categories and intimacy among persons’, violence fixes otherwise murky identities and creates a sense of order. Appadurai observes: ‘... the extreme violence which accompanies many recent ethnic wars is a product of radical uncertainty about key social identities, which produces a surplus of

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59 See section above: Trust and Distrust in Southeast Asia.
anxiety and rage about categorical betrayal' (Appadurai in Baldauf and Hoeller ND). The 1990s saw massive flows of individuals, populations, militaries and foreign ideologies and diseases entering and traversing the area, with a dislodging of categories and an unsettling of intimacy. In an atmosphere of flux and chaos, categories were being restored and social order buttressed by labelling someone as a traitor or a sorcerer. These accusations echo other societies where strong links between charges of sorcery and radical social change have been identified. These studies have shown how the destabilising forces of modernity and globalisation are often articulated by locals as a discourse of sorcery, which provides a logic to the invisible machinations of capitalism (e.g., Geschiere 1997, 1999; Schrouwers 2003). Here too the accusations of traitorous activity and sorcery also seem to provide a logic, firstly, to the chaos of war, and, secondly, to the often mystifying sources of modern globalised products and ideas. But as the story of Nga indicates, sorcery also provides an alternative logic to the distrust located in intimate and sexual relations between men and women, thereby placing the burden of blame outside of the nuclear family, which appears to be the cradle of trust throughout social change. The story of the adulteress in many ways is another version of the same story, only in this case the nuclear family is the community and she as the sorcerer (in the form of a bad element or adulteress) is placed outside. She is like the AIDS virus (or the AIDS-ridden woman with whom he had sexual relations) that penetrated the intimate security of the nuclear family, and the newly re-established community, and threatened the trust implicit within the intimate domestic sphere as well the trust co-extensive with the social and moral order. Because several families within the community were affected she became a danger to the community as a whole.

The Black Market and the Law
Another source of distrust for villagers living in both communes is the ever burgeoning black market trade that brings villagers into ambiguous and at times dangerous contact with the state, outsiders (foragers, traders, etc.), and environmental development agencies whose agendas do not always match that of the villagers. Today in the village of O’Thmaa, an outpost on the wilderness frontier, locals maintain a level of insularity and distrustfulness that is unsurprising, given the illegalities that occur through and within their village. In the periods between planting and harvesting, convoys of two-
wheeled wooden ox-carts, mostly originating from the nearby villages and
neighbouring commune, emerge from the forest on a daily basis, carrying their bounty
of illicit timber wood and wild animal carcasses. Warily, they make their way past the
village police post, trying not to catch the attention of the officers ever ready to make an
impromptu inspection and procure fines in the form of cash or a portion of the bounty.
Occasionally, during these impromptu checks, the police uncover illegal guns hidden
under plastic tarps or bundled within clothes. Depending on the situation, the weapons
are seized and/or fines issued and the event usually would be reported to the commune
headquarters.

In addition to the police checks, there are also periodic raids by the military as well as
spot checks by the officers working for the Ministry of the Environment. On one
memorable occasion an ox-cart driver failed to heed the order to stop for inspection and
the environmental officer ran down the road after him, waving his gun and threatening
to shoot him if he didn’t. The man decided he was better off taking the risk of
continuing and the local police and others convinced the officer to put his gun away.
Another day, an enormous military truck thundered down the earthen road into the
forest, chock-full of ominous-looking black-clad armed soldiers on a mission to seek
out and arrest illegal loggers, poachers and hunters. However, not surprisingly, the ex-
Khmer Rouge tank commander who owned the sawmill up on the mountain, and who
was also a recent resident of O’Thmaa, was not arrested; nor, so far as I was aware, was
anyone else from the village.

While the villagers on the whole do not trust the local police, there appears to be a tacit
understanding between them whereby the police allow the villagers to extract a certain
amount of illegal products from the forest providing they pay a fine to the police in the
form of money or portion of the goods. So, while the villagers hold a generalised
mistrust of the police for the power to search their ox-carts, extract fines, or enter their
homes, they also have a form of reciprocal trust that is buttressed by an interest in
maintaining the status quo and a larger distrust of outsiders, such as myself, who may
interfere with their interests.
Strangers and Powerful People

My presence in the village ignited a certain amount of anxiety. The villagers and local authorities were unsure about me not merely on the grounds that I was an outsider but because of their fears about who I might be. Seemingly they both concluded that I was someone with a certain amount of power, which meant that initially villagers and authorities alike distrusted me because my actions and intentions were unclear and unpredictable. At the same time, it was important to the local authorities that I have a good impression of the people in the village and, as mentioned before, I was told repeatedly that the villagers ‘love one another’ (srolanh knea). Most of the villagers, with a few notable exceptions, tended to avoid any interaction with me, by keeping their doors closed and making little attempt to converse in public. Moreover, the police and administration told the villagers (at times with me present and despite my protestations) that I must be given a good impression of them – should anything happen to me or if I were to draw negative conclusions about the area then the villagers might have problems. The uncertainty attached to me was so great that several villagers refused to allow me to accompany them to the forest, saying that it was dangerous and that I should have the police escort me because, if something were to happen to me, I might hold them responsible and they might be arrested. The police and administration meanwhile had concluded that I was working undercover for an environmental NGO in order to expose the operations in the village.

This personal narrative exposes one of the key forms of distrust in the everyday social sphere: both strangers and those with power are mistrusted. The logic behind both forms of distrust derives from the ideas of non-transparency of intention combined with the potential for lack of moral restraint—that is, a stranger or someone with power is not immediately accountable to the community, unlike someone who remains in the community or occupies the same level within society. The distrust ascribed to those with power is also informed by the knowledge of one’s inability to respond effectively should the wielder of power act against them. It is important not to offend those with power so as not to make them angry, as villagers said on numerous occasions, explaining that they wouldn’t dare approach someone with power. This is especially true for those who take issue with the government or those with greater power. In the words of Ti, ‘If I speak out, I’m afraid that the society (sangkhum) will turn against me.’ Furthermore, villagers are careful to avoid attention that may bring them trouble,
as in the following excerpt of an interview with an ex-Khmer Rouge soldier in Doung Srae:

The governments and the history and politics that go with them have all been according to what was prophesized by the gods in the Put Tomney [Buddha's Prediction].\textsuperscript{60} Everything about the Three Year Regime was foretold, like roads with no one travelling on them, houses with no one living in them, and so forth. Not many people here know about the Put Tomney though, so perhaps we will have problems with them [those in power] if we were to speak about this. If we know a lot then we cannot protect ourselves because there are people who will kill us...The powerful people – they could see it as political.

But this distrust also runs in the opposite direction. As noted earlier in this chapter, Alexander Hinton has shown how those with power in Cambodia distrust those without power for fear that they might one day be usurped from their position by those just beneath them.\textsuperscript{61} Another dimension of this distrust by those above of those below became clear to me during my fieldwork. Some members of the community are wealthier than others – not by much – but ‘they have enough for their family’. These people are viewed by some of those who have less as being interested solely in their own affairs or those of others who have similar or more wealth. It said that those with more are willingly blind to their neighbours who have less. The logic here is that those with less, given the opportunity, will seize their wealth, leaving them with nothing. As Ya, an ex-Khmer Rouge and government soldier and his wife San, explained:

They do not have relations with the poor. They are afraid that, if they have relations with the poor people, the next day their wealth will be finished. It is because the wealthy don’t see [at keun] poor people. They see only those people of equal wealth. These days they want to see only rich people.

Hence those below, if given the opportunity, may seize not only your power but also your wealth. This distrust of those with less indicates a perceived failure of the patron-client relation. As San stated, ‘The rich people, they don’t take care of the poor people, they are afraid the poor people will ask something from them.’

\textsuperscript{60} See Hansen and Ledgerwood (2005).
In the longer term, there is a perceived loss of egalitarian principles within the communities of both Prei Phnom and Doung Srae. People in both communes complain that, at present, if you want something from your neighbour you have to buy it, whereas before everything was shared. They also say that reciprocal relations have diminished from former times and nowadays there is less trust among members of the community.

Reformulating Trust

What then is trust, how is it formed, and between whom? In this section I look at the forms of articulation of trust and the circumstances where this occurred during the course of my fieldwork. Because trust between people usually develops over time, my ability to observe its emergence between villagers was somewhat limited. Nonetheless, I had the opportunity to hear a number of stories where people’s characters were described or actions judged. Alternatively, however, I did have the opportunity to see how it developed between several villagers and myself. I will be using all of these observations and experiences in the discussion and analysis that follows, however, because much of my understanding of how trust develops came out of my own experience I will be relying heavily on these examples with the understanding of the limitations this implies.

What is Trust?

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the Khmer word for trust is tuk chett and means ‘to trust’ and/or ‘to have confidence in’ (Headley 1977: 391). It is composed of ‘tuk’ meaning ‘to keep (in reserve)’ or ‘to put’ (ibid.) and ‘chett’ meaning ‘feeling, heart’, ‘thoughts’ and also ‘mind’ (ibid.: 178). To keep or put someone in one’s heart implies a degree of vulnerability and risk. The heart is something private, unlike the face. It is hidden from view, where it is protected. Therefore keeping and putting someone in one’s heart runs the risk of betrayal – and it is precisely in these most

62 See also Chapter 5.
intimate of spaces, as Wikan (1990) and others have told us, where betrayal is most likely. But there is another meaning implied in the definition as well. To put or keep someone or something in one’s heart also means to place or keep them in one’s mind because ‘chet’ in Khmer also means ‘mind’. Hence to trust someone is also to keep them in mind, be aware of them or ‘see’ them. When Ya (mentioned in the discussion of distrust above) was explaining why the wealthier members of the village distrusted those with less, he said, ‘It is because the wealthy don’t see [at keun] poor people. They see only those people of equal wealth. These days they want to see only rich people.’

_Tuk chett_ also implies having confidence in someone or something. This confidence implies predictability and reliability, and is tied to a notion of integrity. One afternoon I was talking with Yeay Khieu, an 89-year old woman who had become one of my closest friends in the village. She was telling me a story about how her ancestors were able to see an enchanted wedding party with the help of an enchanted forest hermit (_neak sachchang_). The party appeared riding on elephants in the forest, Yeay Khieu explained that her ancestors were ‘were allowed to see this’ because they were honest:

Back in those days people were very honest – if they were going fishing and planned to catch three fish, then they would only catch three and no more. It is because of this honesty that it was possible for them to see the people on the elephants.

In this explanation we see honesty as tied to predictability and also an implicit trust. Those who are honest do exactly what they say they will do – not more and not less. This level of predictability allows them to be trusted by the _neak sachchang_, the enchanted forest hermit, who allows them to see the beautiful enchanted wedding party on the elephants.

When Ya says then that the wealthier villagers do not ‘see’ those with less, he means that they don’t allow those with less into their mind/heart (_chet_). He in turn does not trust them because he cannot ‘see into their hearts and minds’. It is interesting to mention here that the word for ‘morality’ is _plauv chett_ (literally, ‘the way of the heart’)

63 That intimate spheres are also the spheres where the subject is most vulnerable is ubiquitous in the literature on sorcery and witchcraft.
suggesting that a person's morality (i.e., whether they are a 'good' or a 'bad' person is located in the heart). In any case, as in the example of Ya, opacity of the heart produces and is produced by distrust. Conversely, in Yeay Khieu's story we see the link between seeing or being aware and trust. The ancestors were 'allowed to see' because they were trusted for their honesty (indicative of their transparency – they could see because they could be seen and also because of their trust (which here may be more akin to faith). It is also this trust (as faith perhaps) that enabled them to see. Therefore, to not see someone implies a lack of trust whereas to see implies trust. Moreover, we also see how being honest (smah trong) means to be predictable – if one says they will catch three fish they catch three and no more – to do exactly as what one said they would do: to be predictable and therefore their intentions are transparent or clear.

Before leaving the village (to fly home to California to get married), I told the villagers I would return in a month's time. When I returned, several of the elder women made positive remarks about how I did exactly as I said I would: as I had said that I would return in a month's time, so I did. Thus predictability allows a confidence in people and situations that enables a trusting relationship to develop. These remarks were often accompanied by a gesture of affection, such as placing their hand on my arm, indicating that my actions were socially embraced as right moral action. Thus one might say that, beyond predictability, trust implies confidence in a person's reliability, where this has connotations of integrity and competence to do the right thing.

For several months the police chief Phal, who occupied the police post near my house shared the post with another policeman, San, from the neighbouring village. This arrangement was then altered on orders from the commune police chief, who had San replaced with a much younger man, Nhim, who came from another district. Nhim seemed an amiable and honest character, so I did not understand it when Phal would continually complain that he wanted San back, saying he did not trust Nhim. When I asked Phal what he meant, he said he could trust San in a way that he could not trust Nhim. He explained that if something were to happen he knew he could rely on San, who was older and more experienced than Nhim, who was only in his early twenties at the time. In other words, he had a confidence in San to handle a problematic situation given his knowledge and experience.
Therefore, we see that trust can be a confidence in someone’s predictability and also a confidence in someone’s reliability. But is it also something else? Reciprocity is an integral part of Khmer culture as a set of institutionalised exchange relationships between patron and client and within the more informal spheres of everyday interaction with one’s neighbours and kin. Marcel Mauss (1970) has suggested that this form of exchange, which he calls ‘gift exchange’, compels the receiver of the gift to return the favour after some duration of time. The passing of time is integral to the process for it cements a trust that the relation is founded upon: without it there is no exchange. Villagers claim that there is significantly less reciprocity between villagers than in the past. Many add that the introduction of a market economy has led to villagers being less willing to help each other out without attaching a fee for their services. Nonetheless it would be wrong to assume that reciprocity in village relations has disappeared entirely. In everyday practice, villagers on occasion share food, alcohol, care of children, stories, and information with one another, if not on a universal scale than at least between a few select kinfolk and neighbours. Also on some occasions they will help one another out with farm work or other tasks. Within these re-emerging networks of reciprocity, one finds trust in that there is the expectation that one deed will bring another in return, sooner or later. Reciprocity is not just a manifestation of trust in a particular set of social interactions but it is also a means of cementing or establishing it as I discuss in the next section, which looks at some of the ways in which trust is established.

_How is Trust Formed and Between Whom?_  

Trust between Individuals  
On what basis does someone trust someone else? Melford Spiro observed amongst the Burmese that ‘since clearly one cannot know what is in the other’s mind, one can only watch for cues’ (Spiro 1967: 73). Indeed, observation also seems to be one of the central means by which people in Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes determine whether they will trust someone. This happens through their own personal experience and face-to-face interaction, and also by observing how someone behaves over a variety of circumstances and with others.

I have already described how, in the early months of my fieldwork, both villagers and the local administration treated my presence in the village with much apprehension.
Chapter 3

Villagers did not want me to accompany them to the forest and generally kept their distance. Over time, however, the situation improved. It began with Yeay Khieu (mentioned above). While initially hesitant about my accompanying her into the forest, after I had visited a number of times, she one day took it upon herself to show me the enchanted ‘rock box’ (thmâ brâaph) up in the mountains (see also Chapter 7), with her nephew accompanying us. On the return trip, he remarked that he had observed that, when I was tired or hungry, I did not blame other people. This seemed to indicate to him what type of person I was and he then proceeded to tell me how he had been cheated out of his family’s land by powerful people in the commune and implored me to act as his ‘lawyer’ to get it back. Then, following this journey to the mountains, Yeay Khieu let it be known in O’Thmaa and surrounding communities that she had more or less adopted me. She took me along to visit some of the other elderly women in the village and to the forest river to bathe and, surrounded by her peers at a wedding, she showered me with affection. And so I was welcomed into the community of elderly women. Later on, another elderly woman from a neighbouring village made a similar gesture by placing her arm around me in the taxi truck (lan chhuol) for the entire length of the 30-kilometre journey to the market town, despite the fact that I hardly really knew her.

It was clear to me that, although my stay in the village was arranged through the men of the commune – the commune chief, village chief, and police chief – the real entrance into the community was through the community’s female elders and, to a lesser extent, through the younger females as well. Trust was extended along gender lines in a way complementary to how distrust, as demonstrated in the previous section, crossed gender lines. Furthermore, trust was also extended vertically, as elderly women in a sense adopted me into the community. The demonstration of trust on the part of these women then set an example for others in a manner that counted far more (and made possible) the trust extended by younger women in a society that values and respects age.

But why did Yeay Khieu or the woman on the truck come to trust me? And is trust a sufficient explicator of their behaviour towards me? I have used the word ‘adopted’ to describe my relationship with Yeay Khieu and other elder women. The choice of this term was not happenstance but is, rather, based on an institutionalised form of trust found in fictive kin relations, called thoah relations. As Ebihara has shown, these
relationships are invented to indicate a bond of trust with someone, often from an unfamiliar place, who can be relied upon for protection and who can expect to receive the same in return (Ebihara 1968: 177-180). Thoah, meaning dharma, implies a spiritual element to the relationship but the relationship is modelled more on actual kinship relations rather than having much to do with spiritual matters. In the story above, it was I who was in the unfamiliar place amongst unfamiliar people and it would seem that Yeay Khieu, the woman on the taxi truck, and others took it upon themselves to act as my absent kin. Ebihara doesn’t tell us in her account whether thoah relations are usually formed along gender lines but I would guess that they often are. And, while there is a reciprocal trust implied in the relation, there is also a demonstration of that trust to others in the community both male and female.

‘Adopting’ someone as fictive kin, however, does not come without risk. Even if there is the expectation that a reciprocal relation will ensue – comprising exchanges of protection, food, and access to goods or services – there is no guarantee that the other person will reciprocate. Moreover, the arrangement also immediately opens up risks associated with allowing someone into one’s intimate sphere where one is more vulnerable to potential harm. In both respects, then, a significant amount of trust is entailed. So what is it that compels someone to take the risk of ‘adopting’ someone as fictive kin when they could get by (and perhaps better) without forming the relationship? It would seem that the answer lies in a mix of factors: observations (both objective and subjective), the possibility personal emotional or material gain – and a ‘leap of faith’.

Villagers study each other and outsiders for clues and hints of another’s character and intentions. In the words of one woman: ‘I have watched you, how you are and have come to like you and trust you.’ Although someone’s face may mask their true motivations and intention (as discussed in Chapter 5) it nonetheless can also be an indicator. As a brief and humorous example of this, late in my fieldwork I was visiting in a village in Doung Srae commune when a woman came up to me and asked whether I had seen her husband passing by my house in Prei Phnom commune a few months earlier. I said I didn’t recall seeing him, not knowing who he was. She laughed, saying

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64 Except perhaps in cases where the age difference is significantly great to negate the potential for any sexual element to the relationship.
that exactly at the time he was passing my house, my mobile phone rang. I answered and then immediately someone pulled up in a car and photographed him. She said that, at first, her husband (who was probably smuggling goods from the forest) was quite concerned but then he saw that the expression on my face did not reflect the situation — there was a lack of concern or interest in the events — and therefore he concluded that the conjuncture of circumstances was just a coincidence. This searching for clues as to people's character and intentions is fairly typical. People's judgements to trust or not trust someone are often predicated on these often brief face-to-face encounters. Face-to-face interactions often allow a momentary impression that may compel someone into taking a 'leap of faith' to trust someone. Nonetheless, the decision of Yeay Khieu and others to take me under their wing still carried a risk, even though they had had an opportunity to observe me beforehand. However, there is another element to this leap of faith that might be called adventure. To take the leap into trusting someone or a situation opens one to new experiences. It is no coincidence then that it was Yeay Khieu, of all people, who became the first to come to trust me for she was generally considered to be an adventurous type — open to novelty and ready to enjoy herself even if it meant laying prudence aside.

A final means by which trust is established or re-established is through commensality. I touch on this only very briefly here because this topic is dealt with at some length in Chapter 6. Nonetheless, commensality, it can be argued, is a potent means for building trust, partly because there is an implicit risk — as Maurice Bloch has argued, with commensality comes the risk of poisoning (2005: 56-57) — and also more positively because it helps form relatedness. In O'Thmaa this form of building trust and establishing relatedness is communally expressed in the village feast that occurs in the Bon Dalien ritual discussed in Chapter 8.

The examples I have drawn on to demonstrate these formations of trust have come mostly from my own experiences with villagers but are supported by comments villagers would make about each other and of outsiders. Throughout these examples I have shown how trust is tied to notions of predictability, reliability, honesty and transparency, but also carries risk and therefore often requires a 'leap of faith'.

65 In fact up to that point I was never aware of any car driving up and photographing anyone.
Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of distrust and trust?

The Khmer Rouge revolution and the DK period in particular introduced an existential negation of self and society – that corroded trust in the world, in others and self. It did this by re-defining trust and distrust and their expression through the moral idioms of clarity and vision (i.e., the ability to see), visibility and invisibility. De-stabilising fundamental categories and intimacies, they infiltrated pre-existent kin and community relations and demonstrated their fallibility. Leaving behind this wreckage of moral integrity, the entire period left a residue of distrust that continues to destabilise the remaking of the moral and social order. Yet the end of the DK period also brought the opportunity as well as the need to rebuild the moral order and the trust that it implies. Trust, it seems, resurfaces and develops even in the most formidable environments and despite grave uncertainty.

We also saw how the upheaval of war, bringing massive movements of people, and then the introduction of globalised modernity that brought the market economy, the AIDS virus and new ideologies, have spawned novel forms of distrust at a time when people were attempting to re-order their world. A moral rhetoric of ‘bad elements’, dating from before the Khmer Rouge and then used extensively by them, was heard again in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Those people deemed ‘bad elements’, thus inherently untrustworthy by their moral nature, were in fact the products of distrust, responding to greater uncertainties, whether infidelity, illness, or the capitalist market economy. Uncertainty and immorality become interchangeable in this economy of elimination and eradication, the Khmer Rouge political executions transmuted into ‘private’ executions by village communities, both bent on making and securing the pure moral community.66

More positively, we have seen how individuals and communities rebuild and fortify trusting relationships with each other. Trust implies confidence in someone’s reliability

66 See also Alexander Hinton (2002) who explores the ideas of purity and contamination in actualising the Cambodian genocide during the DK years.
or predictability and, the former especially being tied to a notion of honesty, connects to a larger cosmology where an invisible realm may become visible through social and moral behaviour that enables trust. In this manner, it may be reasonable to suggest that people's hearts too became visible to those who are honest and/or conversely that those who are honest are also transparent in that their heart is visible. In other words, what is transparent is trustworthy, and what is trustworthy is transparent. While not a reflection of what people actually do, it seems that this is a moral ideal, whose moral opposite is that the non-transparent is non-trustworthy — a notion that certainly played a part in the Khmer Rouge demand for clarity in their subjects' life histories.

Returning to some of the theories of trust mentioned at the start of this chapter: given the importance of the connection between confidence and trust in the Khmer context, it is interesting to note that Barbara Misztal sees 'confidence' as implying a more habitual set of expectations than 'trust' and argues that the main difference between the two is the level of certainty (Misztal 1996:16). But for O'Thmaa villagers and their neighbours (as well as for Cambodians generally) the habitual set of social and moral expectations were violently uprooted by the Khmer Rouge and it is only since the end of DK that villagers are able begin to re-root their society. Moreover, for the villagers it seems that, unlike the 'confidence' that Misztal is describing as habitual, there is another element. While 'trust' as the 'confidence' born out of predictability can be seen as habitual, it is less clear that the 'confidence' stemming from reliability is at all based on habit. Instead, we have seen how it is tied not only to honesty but knowledge, experience and familiarity. Perhaps a closer match between theory and practice would be Giddens' observation that trust inherently carries with it risk, and therefore a leap of faith (1990). The decision to trust despite overwhelming uncertainty was apparent in a number of villagers' willingness to accept me into their lives and share their stories, hospitality and company. With little on which to base this trust, given my 'strangeness', one can only account for it by attributing a leap of faith, even if that leap was supported by observations. Finally, while Giddens recognises the importance of kinship to trust, he unfortunately frames his analysis in terms of the sociological dichotomy of pre-modern/modern that seems to elude places like O'Thmaa that are neither pre-modern nor modern in the sense that Giddens describes. Moreover, the institution of fictive kinship in Cambodia and the continued relevance and importance of real kinship ties in
midst of modernity would seem to challenge Giddens' suggestion that trust relations between kin members has diminished from pre-modern times.

I end this chapter with a brief word concerning the larger issue of trust in the social and moral order, which as discussed above, Gellner says is 'coextensive with the very existence of a social order' (1988: 42) and predicated on the 'expectation of the persistence and fulfilment of the natural and the moral social order' (Barber in Misztal 1996: 23). Trust in this order can only come through the re-establishment of some level of stability and security that makes it possible for people to engage in practices that help build trust like making relatedness. Now that the wars have ended and villagers have returned to their villages they are rebuilding their lives together restoring trust through the making of relatedness through commensality and the making of kin relations through marriage (see Chapter 6). However the path towards rebuilding trust and re-establishing moral order is not without obstacles. In O'Thmaa the process is hampered by the village's particular past, which one man has come to represent. In the next chapter I introduce this man and discuss some of the effects of his actions (and others like him) on the village community.
Chapter 4

Ta Kam Part I

...the enemy was all around but also inside,
the 'we' lost its limits,
the contenders were not two,
one could not discern a single frontier
but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers,
which stretched before each one of us
Primo Levi (1988)

The Story of a Village Elder

My Introduction to Ta Kam

It was on my second visit to O'Thmaa that I met Ta (Grandfather) Kam. I had visited the village the previous day as part of an exploratory survey of the region whilst still in search of a place to make my fieldsite. I found him in the midst of constructing a thatched hut on the village’s northern slope. His closely cropped silver hair contrasted with the dark caramel of his skin, his face and body lean and angular from a lifetime of work and poverty. I, together with a staff member from the local Lutheran World Federation (LWF) office that was hosting my visit, decided to approach him in the hope that he could tell me a little more about the village. At that point I had no sense of what a crucially problematic figure he was in the troubled history of the village and its moral project of reconstituting trust and relatedness.

When we had visited the village the previous day, I had met with several beleaguered-looking villagers at the home of a woman who appeared anguished and was unable to walk as she had ‘worked too hard during her pregnancy’. Her elder sister lay up in the low-stilted house deathly ill with malaria while the rest of us gathered below. Along with our hostess, the group included a man in his early forties who had lost an eye when a rocket launcher misfired, an older man who supported himself with a cane, having recently injured his knee in the forest, a couple of young men and a few children. The
two injured men had done most of the talking. I hadn't seen any elders apart from the man with the knee injury who was perhaps in his fifties at best, but when I had asked about the local history and traditions of the area they referred me to Yeay Khieu, an old woman in her eighties who ‘remembered these things’ and ‘liked to talk’. There had been no sign – or mention – of this ‘grandfather’, Ta Kam, that day.

Now, on the following day, however, here he was – a stone’s throw from the woman’s house we had visited only the day before. Ta Kam beckoned us to join him and sit on the hut’s bamboo platform (krae), which he had just finished building. Gesturing to the frame of the hut and a small boy, he said that he had only just returned to O’Thmaa for the first time in nearly 30 years after the Khmer Rouge had forced him, along with the rest of the villagers, to move from Prei Phnom commune when they took control of the country. He had brought along the boy, his grandson, to help him build a house. He had been staying in the neighbouring commune of Doung Srae with his sister’s family but had decided to come to O’Thmaa to help his daughter farm the land he owned through his first wife. A woman in her late fifties or so approached the house then and busied herself nearby. She was his daughter but not the boy’s mother.

At the time, I found his homecoming extraordinary. It brought into stark relief the rupture and continuity that that seemed to characterise this village. I thought that it must be a profound experience for him to return and see those he had known since his childhood but perhaps had little contact with for decades. Ta Kam said he was 78, and so I asked him if he knew Yeay Kheiu, the old woman I had met the day before. She appeared to be roughly the same age as him and so it seemed likely that he would remember her quite well. His answer took me by surprise. Rather blandly, he said that, yes, he knew her but she was a bit older than him ... and indicated no further connection. I found this peculiar given the under-population of the village. Surely he must have more of a sense of connection with her. But he would say little more about her and seemed to dismiss the topic.

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I did not meet Ta Kam again for four months, when I finally moved to the village and began my fieldwork there. I made several attempts to visit him but was repeatedly told that he was away in the forest or in the other commune.

One rainy September evening I decided to try again. Remembering his hospitality, I was looking forward to seeing him and so I was pleased to find him at home. Unfortunately Ta Kam had fallen ill and my companion and I found him lying on the raised platform (krae) of his hut when we arrived. Like most people in the village, he lacked the money to visit the doctor/pharmacy in the market town on the main highway that regularly prescribed and sold its patrons plastic packets of colourful pills containing vitamins, anti-malarial drugs, paracetamol /or antibiotics at exorbitant prices by local standards. He was describing his aches and pains to us when his daughter interjected, saying that they had nothing to eat apart from the small field crabs and shellfish she could collect in the river and rice paddy. At the time I hadn’t realised that this was a recurrent state of affairs for many of the villagers in O’Thmaa. Nonetheless, Ta Kam welcomed us in with warmth and grace, despite his discomfort. His grandfatherly demeanour was infectious and I found that being in his presence gave me a sense of ease that I did not experience elsewhere in the village. Ta Kam’s manner was reminiscent of the archetypal traditional Khmer elder – gracious, wise, kind, and self-effacing.

I returned to Ta Kam’s house again a short time afterwards. He was healthier this time. We talked a bit about the village history and, before I departed, he agreed to tell me his life story the next time we met.

After that I did not see him for several months but would catch occasional glimpses of him along the road, with his worn red and white checked kroma (scarf) tied into a small bundle and slung over his shoulder. He was always dressed in the same way: a threadbare white shirt, mid-length trousers and wide-brimmed hat. He was often clutching a staff. A thin, gaunt, poorly attired man making incredibly long treks under Cambodia’s sweltering sun, he gave the appearance of a wandering ascetic or a pilgrim.

Over time I learned more about him. I was told that he often attended ceremonies at the temple in Doung Srae commune, where he served as an āchar (Buddhist layman). I
learned that he was related by blood (sach chhiem) or marriage (sach tlai) to most of the people of O’Thmaa. Nonetheless, I also observed that he had little or no interaction with the other villagers. No one seemed to show much interest in or regard for him except his daughter, who herself seemed to enjoy good relations with most of the villagers. It was only much later that I came to understand Ta Kam’s peculiar relationship with the villagers.

The Villagers’ Story of Ta Kam

It was the final months of my fieldwork and I was interviewing the village development chief, Sau, whom I knew quite well by then. We were discussing the executions that had occurred in the village in the early 1970s when the Khmer Rouge first came to the area. I remarked how I had noticed there were a disproportionate number of widows in O’Thmaa as compared to other villages in the area. Twenty six per cent of village households at the time of my fieldwork were headed by widows.\(^6\)\(^7\) Agreeing that there were more widows than in other villages, Sau went on to explain:

During that time they [O’Thmaa] had a chief like I am today. He wanted to have a good face and so he would issue complaints against people here to the commune leadership and they believed him. They would come then and catch these people and take them away to kill them. So it was wrong of our leader, because the leader led to the Left [the wrong way] ... The local leader complained about the villagers – some of the people committed no wrong – but he complained about them anyway to gain face (yok mukh). Why is it that there are so many widows? It is because in this village the local leader was ignorant – had no [formal and moral] education (at cheah deung). Therefore, when he would receive strict orders from above, he would arrest the people in order to kill them even though they were innocent. They took these people away to be killed. They didn’t care whether the people were good or bad. That village chief was Ta Kam....

Ta Kam, whom I had perceived as a warm, grandfatherly and revered elder, was in fact a killer – a collaborator who betrayed his own people. This might explain the tension I

\(^6\) This figure comes from LWF data and corresponds with data I collected from the village chiefs and commune offices. It is interesting to note that O’Thmaa, the most western village, has the highest percentage of widows, followed by its two neighbours immediately to the east.
had sensed in the village from the beginning of my fieldwork and the apparent absence of warmth between villagers.

After this interview with Sau, it clearly did not take long for word to spread that I now knew about this village secret, for I began to hear stories from other villagers as well. I learned that Ta Kam had been the deputy village chief under Lon Nol and then was elected by the villagers to be the acting village chief under the Khmer Rouge. As leader, then, Ta Kam had doubly betrayed the villagers. As leader, he would have been expected to behave morally and offer the villagers some protection in exchange for their support. He not only failed to do this but also transgressed his role by sacrificing them to promote his own welfare and longevity. Ta Kam had become, in the words of one villager: ‘that Ta, who caught the people to take to kill.’

Viewed as a killer of his own people, Ta Kam today is socially shunned by the villagers more than 30 years after the killings occurred. He does not speak with anyone in O’Thmaa apart from his daughter. He was notably absent at the annual village harvest festival, Bon Dalien. One former Khmer Rouge soldier, who had lost his father, told me:

That Ta, he doesn’t dare to look anyone, young or old, in the face. No one really likes him either. They don’t want to be friendly with him, they hate him.
If people wanted to, they could take revenge (sângseuk) against him at any time. But people think it is over now and so they don’t want to fight and claim for (team tear) their parents’ blood.

People in O’Thmaa thus describe Ta Kam as someone lacking a sense of right and wrong and who is concerned only for his own promotion and welfare. He earned credit with the Khmer Rouge by sacrificing his neighbours and kinsmen to them — and yet, remarkably, the children and wives of those he killed do not seek revenge for their losses. Saying that the past is behind them and that they have no desire to continue

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68 In May Ebihara’s dissertation research (1959-1960), she observed that local village leaders were informally selected by their communities in part for their moral character (Ebihara 1968: 208). This point is further substantiated by Ledgerwood and Vijghen who argue that, there appears to be a strong moral component to leadership that was not only present in the past but is still evident in local conceptualisations of leaders as they are or at least ought to be today (Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002). See also Chapter 5.
fighting suggests that they have found a means by which to begin to heal from the wounds of the past, even if Ta Kam’s living presence still continues to haunt them as a reminder of their lost family members.

People remained reluctant to talk about Ta Kam even though, over time, the village people had become more willing to share their stories with me. Instead, when they did speak about that terrible period in their past, they would more often comment that the people of that generation committed evil deeds against one another for reasons they cannot understand. These types of statements sharply contrasted with their everyday narratives about the pre-Khmer Rouge past when, the villagers said, they loved one another and lived in harmony – the same narrative they had greeted me with on my first arrival and, presumably use to describe themselves to all outsiders.

As for Ta Kam’s daughter, one might have anticipated that the villagers would also shun her, but in fact she enjoys warm social relations with most of them. This would appear antithetical to the idea that family members are morally affiliated to each other (discussed in Chapter 6), an idea that had also informed the practice of arrests and executions under the Khmer Rouge locally in O’Thmaa as well as later on during the Pol Pot regime. The Khmer Rouge practice of arresting entire families reflected broader beliefs about kinship ties in vertical relations of politics and violence, as appears so often in Khmer fables and folktales.69 It may be that horizontal relations, especially among familiars, are more nuanced and individualised when it comes to ascribing blame but the important issue at this point is that not blaming the family as a whole may provide villagers with a means of healing. By welcoming Ta Kam’s daughter, the tear in the community is contained. As a reminder: most villagers are related to Ta Kam by blood or by marriage. Hence there would seem to be a vested interest in keeping his family within the community while surgically removing him.

More specifically, the welcoming of the daughter may serve to contain the immorality associated with the actions of her father. Villagers’ statements suggest that they do not see Ta Kam himself as innately wicked or immoral but, rather, amoral. They said that his actions stemmed from a lack of moral education, that is that he was like a child or

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69 For instance ‘The Story of Bhikku Sok’ in the Gatilok and the well-known story ‘Tum Teuv’.
an animal. They never said he was evil-hearted or a bad person but that his actions stemmed from stunted moral development. Thus, if Ta Kam himself is not intrinsically ‘bad’, then there is no reason for it to follow that his daughter is bad either by moral affiliation. The same logic applies to all Ta Kam’s extended kin relations (nhetsandan) in O’Thmaa village, which might all be morally blighted if Ta Kam himself was intrinsically immoral. Hence the power of the distinction between ascribing the immorality to his acts and not his person and, more subtly, to focus the immorality of all the acts that occurred in that period, by him and others in the village, only to him.70

Once villagers named Ta Kam as the source and sole locus of internal betrayal and ‘evil deeds’ committed within the village, he comes to embody all these betrayals by his generation. In this manner, the corruption is contained and can perhaps later be erased from social memory. By confining the immorality solely to him, villagers do not have to address the traitorous acts of others within their community. Thus it is not, after all, incongruous that Yeay Khieu, whose husband was killed by Ta Kam, made a point of socially embracing his daughter. It is not only the daughter but the wider community that is saved by not including the daughter in moral culpability.

The question, however, remains: why do the villagers not then seek revenge and kill Ta Kam? Why do they not ‘fight and claim for [team tear] their parents’ blood’? Indeed, Alexander Hinton has argued that revenge is not only a salient cultural model that may elicit violence (Hinton 2005: ch. 1), but that Cambodians are ‘morally obliged to repay a bad deed’ by taking revenge (1998: 355). Surely here in the case of Ta Kam villagers would have good reason for enacting revenge against him -- and yet they abstain. Moreover, unlike René Girard’s ‘scapegoat’ (or Hawthorne’s heroine in The Scarlet Letter (1920)), Ta Kam does not become a spectacle of evil or sin whose redemption lies in martyrdom. For Girard, the scapegoat becomes the focal point that achieves its final expression in a blaze of sacrifice and martyrdom (1986).71 There are no such forces at play in Ta Kam’s case. Rather than being the focus of attention, he is in fact ignored – even shunned. Indeed, this response very broadly is in line with the pattern of social erasure described in Chapter 3 in the story of the young woman accused of

70 As mentioned in Chapter 2, it is quite likely that a number of villagers reported on one-another during that period and this accords with what villagers said themselves.

71 It should be noted that the origin of the sacrifice is quite different for Girard, who is seeking to explain the origin of culture and society through a study of primitive religion. He argues that sacrifice originates in the mimetic desire between several individuals over a single object and is only resolved by the scapegoating of an Other, which brings about a period of peace and stability.
adultery and also the intentional 'forgetting' of the old village where the cholera epidemic occurred. It seems reasonable to infer that villagers are seeking to socially and morally erase Ta Kam in order to preserve the perilous moral community that is the village. Yet there are also important differences. Ta Kam after all was not fully eliminated as were those accused of sorcery and the young woman in Doung Srae. An immediate explanation for this lies in the fact that Ta Kam's actions occurred in the past whereas those of the sorcerers and the young women occurred in the present and therefore their continued presence was considered a danger to others in the community. Ta Kam alternatively is distanced for his acts in the past and although despised, is no longer considered a threat. I leave this point for now and will return to some of these themes later in the conclusion.

Having now discussed villager's perceptions of Ta Kam and some of the ways in which they cope with his past actions and continued presence in the area, I now turn to Ta Kam's story as he told it to me himself during an interview.

*Ta Kam's Story*

Ta Kam was born in O'Thmaa in 1923 to a family that lived in the area for generations. Like other villagers at the time, most of his children died in infancy and later a son, who was taken by the Khmer Rouge, died under Pol Pot. The practice of forcible conscription by the government or insurgent forces was common practice in Cambodia in the second half of the 20th century. Ta Kam said that he has relatives in every village across the two communes; however, when asked about his relatives in O'Thmaa, he said there was only his daughter and a couple of nephews. In fact, as we know, he is related by blood or marriage to all of the original village families.

His account of his childhood is sparse. He did not go to school, as there was none. He helped his parents tend their rice paddy and garden and helped to collect forest products for consumption and trade:

> In those days people lived a simple life and would only do what was needed to get by and not more. As long as there was enough to eat that was sufficient.
The people of that time were not ambitious or concerned about wealth like the people are today.

One of the significant events that Ta Kam remembers from his childhood was seeing a French hunter astride an elephant and accompanied by some Khmer soldiers. He hid himself in the forest at the time because he feared the Frenchman, just as he feared soldiers or police. Later on, he also evaded an encounter with a delegation that was sent from the District Governor’s office to conscript boys for military service. (These encounters with outsiders of higher social rank and representing larger systems of power are important in understanding Ta Kam’s later acts and the history of the village, as will be argued in Chapter 5.)

In 1943, Ta Kam married for the first time at the age of 20 near O’Thmaa creek. His wife was also from O’Thmaa and had inherited some land from her parents near the river where they could plant a garden (châmkar) to grow dry rice, corn, cucumbers, pumpkins, and perhaps other vegetables and fruit. They established a household but, with the onset of the battle for independence, which brought the Issarak guerrilla forces to the area, they were forced to flee and go up to the mountains to the north to avoid the fighting. He, his wife and the other villagers did not return to O’Thmaa for four years during the fighting and, when they returned ‘everything was overgrown with forest and the elephants had come and eaten 400 of the sugar palm trees.’

At age 35 Ta Kam went to work up on a nearby mountain, where Norodom Sihanouk was building a residence. He recalls that there were 20 households in O’Thmaa when he left and 25 by the time the Khmer Rouge entered the area in early 1970. ‘Then,’ he explained, ‘Pol Pot came to the area and they were killing everyone except me and a few others who managed to survive.’

He continues with this period from 1970 to 1975, a particularly bloody chapter in O’Thmaa’s history:

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72 This narrative of the place returning to a state of wilderness and the destruction of agriculture is often repeated by villagers when talking about the state of the village after the events of the Thai invasion, later the Issarak and then the Khmer Rouge.
Before 1975 I didn’t do any work [meaning he held no special position]. I was just like other people, someone eking out a living. The war happened and some people fled to the forest, but I didn’t. After that the Khmer Rouge pushed me to drive a cart and carry cloth, rice seed, and other stuff [again not in a power position].

Later Ta Kam admits that he fled to the forest but qualifies it, saying, ‘In Doung Srae commune nothing happened to them. They didn’t have any trouble. Here we had a lot of trouble and had to flee to the mountains to live.’

Ta Kam explained that he spent two or three months on the mountain while the Vietnamese fought the government soldiers, and then he came down from the mountain and went to live in Doung Srae commune. When the Khmer Rouge were victorious in 1975 Ta was sent to the seaside in Koh Kong as part of a population exchange programme where 19 families from one village in Doung Srae were exchanged with 19 families from a village in Koh Kong. When I asked him what he did there, he replied, ‘I didn’t do anything. The Khmer Rouge ordered me to farm and I just lived there.’ Ta Kam said he was part of a work group called kong roksa roth, meaning literally ‘the wheel that takes care of the state’. Out of the 19 families sent there, Ta Kam said only three that he knows of survived. Ta Kam and his wife spent three months in Koh Kong before the Vietnamese arrived, forcing them to flee again from the fighting:

The Yuan [Vietnamese] fought there and I ran back. Vietnam entered and the people scattered. I just went into the forest and went up into the mountains and then returned to Doung Srae.

It is interesting to note that Ta Kam’s narrative here is nearly identical to how he described what happened in the early 1970s. On both occasions, the Vietnamese were also fighting, people also scattered, and Ta Kam also fled to the forest for three months and then descended to live in Doung Srae. These parallel narratives have a somewhat mythical nature: in a state of chaos wrought by war and violence, the community scatters and is forced to live for a period of time in the forest, which is the moral realm of savagery and rebirth. He then once again descends the mountain to the domestic and civilised world, this time in Doung Srae commune, which was in his mind relatively
unscathed by the chaos of war. Ta Kam’s narrative continued in a very interesting way. Perhaps recognising the parallels between the two wars and the flights and the returns from the mountain, he suddenly turned his attention back to O’Thmaa, speaking initially of his present relationship to the village but, within the space of a sentences, ending up back at that critical juncture in the past.

For me, if my wife hadn’t had a rice field here, I wouldn’t have come back to this remote area [O’Thmaa] because it is a difficult district. It is a remote area, the wilderness, and so, when something happens, it happens here sooner and faster than in other districts. It is very difficult here and it was difficult and destroyed...I was born in the difficult society [ânh khat niw sângkhun pibak]...

He suggested that it was only out of economic necessity that he has now returned with his children and grandchildren to O’Thmaa. While he himself would not or could not remain in the village directly, he could still hold onto his land claim through his relatives. In the Cambodian context one’s homeland is also the homeland of one’s ancestors.

I asked Ta Kam to explain what he had meant when he said it was ‘quite difficult in O’Thmaa’ and to tell me about the leaders at the time. He replied, saying that a lot of people died in O’Thmaa at the hands of the Khmer Rouge and twice indicated that someone was shot on the site where my house now stood. At that time, the villagers were forced to move to the commune centre where the cooperative called ‘Four Rows’ (Buon Chuor) was established and where they stayed until the time the Khmer Rouge captured the country in 1975. He said that, under the Khmer Rouge, there was a commune chief as well as a village chief. The commune chief was executed and replaced by the village chief named Chat who was also later killed along with all of his relatives at the time the villagers were forced to move to the cooperative. I asked Ta Kam why Chat’s term as village chief was so short lived, to which he replied:

He didn’t have any problems before his younger brother became a Khmer Sâr [White Khmer]. Perhaps when they investigated his brother they found a connection to him and therefore they arrested him too.
Ta Kam went on to say that, before the village chief Chat, there had been another named Cheun, who had been the village chief under Lon Nol. He explained that Cheun’s career ended when ‘Lon Nol’s soldiers accused him of being a member of the Khmer Rouge and they took him away to the east to hang him.’ This was in the early 1970s. Cheun was village chief for only one year before the Khmer Rouge arrived. Ta Kam explained the difficulties faced by Cheun (and perhaps himself), saying ‘It was very difficult working for two sides – if they investigate closely, then it will be difficult.’

I asked whether there was anyone else who was a village chief (having been told that he himself had held this office) but Ta Kam did not respond. When I asked him again, he replied that it was the time when the Khmer Rouge came and they caught Cheun and forced him to be village chief. I asked him outright then whether he, Ta Kam, was also ever made to be the village chief. He replied that he had not been a village chief and finally that he has ‘always gone to the temple’, implying that he has always been a moral and practising Buddhist.

The interview ended with Ta Kam explaining that he has never been a monk but, at the request of Doung Srae’s temple monks and laymen, he now has come to serve the monastery there. In a candid statement, he explained that he has taken up this work in an effort look after his next life. Begging leave, he then turned to me and asked whether he could collect a donation for the temple in Doung Srae.

The narrative of Ta Kam’s life is essential to understanding the village today and I return to it in the chapter that follows. In the next sections of this chapter I turn to some of the repercussions of his actions on the healing and restoration of moral order in this community as well as suggesting how his survival and continued presence continues to be problematic.
Chapter 4

Narratives of Victimhood

Anyone who has either studied or visited Cambodia in recent years would be familiar with the stories of starvation, terror and hardship of the ‘three years, eight months and twenty days’ during which the Khmer Rouge ruled the country. Hearing these stories from Cambodian refugees led the historian Michael Vickery to identify common features in these narratives of victimhood, which he called the ‘Standard Total View’ (1984: 36-63). This view is a relatively homogeneous narrative that refugees employ to describe their experiences under Pol Pot. The narrative describes how people bearing traits of the wealthier and more educated classes were targeted for persecution and destruction in a wider programme to abolish all previous social institutions including family, health care, education, and social class. The anthropologist Judy Ledgerwood has argued that this standardised narrative resonates with Khmer people’s experiences within Cambodia and abroad, that it ‘provides an explanation for the inexplicable, and creates from death a re-established sense of national identity’ (1997: 82-83). Ledgerwood’s observations in turn link up with a wider body of literature on the narratives of victims of genocide and large scale violence that demonstrate how collective victim narratives provide individuals with a means of framing their experience and creating a sense of collective identity. A central feature of these post-violence narratives is the clear articulation of a victim–perpetrator dichotomy, where perpetrators are represented as a destructive and often sinister aberration of a pre-existing moral order.

In what follows, I suggest that a lack of strongly distinguished categories of victims and perpetrators contributes to the difficulties in reconstituting a moral community in the wake of violent upheaval in O’Thmaa village. What has emerged here is a vague sense of victimhood tethered to the idea that the mountain locale is a border zone or frontline where, repeatedly over the centuries, its inhabitants are perceived as enemies by whatever forces may be occupying the area. This idea is found translated into stories about the treachery of Thai invaders in the early 19th century, the Independence (Issarak) fighters in the 1940s and early ’50s, and Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Vickery argues that the content of this narrative is largely inaccurate. However, Vickery’s perspective is not without its critics. Kalyanee Mam has argued that Vickery failed to recognise the policies specifically aimed at destroying the traditional family (Mam 1998). See for example Laurence Kirmayer (1996) and Jack Kuglemass (1996) on the Holocaust.
90s. People use the word ‘difficult’ (*pibak, lombak*) in describing the locale and these violent historical episodes. The term is employed especially when talking about the internal violence that occurred in the early 1970s. Unlike the cohesive ‘Standard Total View’ in refugee narratives, urbanites and other Khmers for whom the distinction between victims and perpetrators is more clearly discernable, in O’Thmaa villagers are still struggling to find ways of making sense and articulating their experiences. These processes are hampered by, firstly, the blurred distinctions between victims and perpetrators that arise out of villagers choosing different sides in the conflict and, secondly, the collapse of the boundary between villagers and outsiders when the violence became internal to the village as some villagers collaborated with the Khmer Rouge and turned over their neighbours and extended kin to be killed.

The blurring of the distinction between victims and perpetrators is not unique to O’Thmaa village. Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim’s book *Victims and Perpetrators?* (2001) and Rithy Panh’s film ‘S21’ (2003) both demonstrate how former prison guards of the notorious ‘S-21’ prison consider themselves to be victims of the Khmer Rouge regime, having had little choice but to obey the orders of their superiors. The underlying suggestion (explicit in Ea and Sim’s account and implicit in Panh’s) is that, given that most of the guards were relatively young at the time of recruitment, they too were victims of the regime. In Panh’s film, the prison guards return to S-21 prison in a contemporary reunion with two of their former prisoners. In a riveting exchange, one of the survivors asks his guards whether they consider themselves to be victims or perpetrators. One guard replies, ‘We are victims – like victims of a car crash’, in other words, victims of circumstance. Something happened to them over which they had no control. Their former prisoner then asks, ‘Victims? If you are victims then what were we?’ To this another guard replies, lamely, ‘Well, there is the first order of victims and the second order of victims....’

*Victims of Circumstance*

One of the consequences of the war coming to O’Thmaa in early 1970 was that it forced villagers to choose sides. The Khmer Rouge, the Lon Nol government and the renegade guerrilla group, the White Khmer (*Khmer Sâr*), were each recruiting villagers. John Marston has observed that political unrest in Cambodia is more along the lines of
competition in matters of personal loyalty than ethnicity or ideology (1999: 81). Indeed, from villagers' own accounts, it does appear that their decisions to join one or other group often had less to do with political ideology than more general concerns about welfare and with familial affiliation. Usually families tended to be aligned with the same political faction; however, there were cases where family members ended up on opposite sides of the conflict, for example, one brother fighting for the Khmer Rouge and the other for the government. Remarkably, this appears to have had little effect on family relationships. Villagers explained that often the Khmer Rouge would simply take people to fight for them and therefore the villagers tended to view these alliances as circumstantial and necessitated by the need for self-preservation.

Similarly, in efforts to account for the atrocities that occurred in this village in the early 1970s, local people will often say that the village’s locale in the mountains and on the edge of the forest made circumstances difficult for them. Villagers explained that outsiders to the mountain area, whether they be Khmer Rouge or the government, considered the villagers untrustworthy by the mere fact of where they lived, thus echoing the widespread Khmer notion that the forest is the lair of outlaws, insurgents and fugitives. This negative characterization of the forest and its residents resonates with Khmer ideas of moral order that places the wilderness as the opposite of that which is considered to be Khmer and civilised, as will be discussed further in Chapter 6. This recognition on the part of the villagers that they are perceived as the Other, the enemy, by external forces provides a sense of collective identity that reaches beyond loyalties to political entities. Ties of both kin and community are more important than political ideologies. It was not unusual for soldiers to switch sides or, as mentioned above, for two brothers to be fighting for opposing forces. The explanation for these events is always circumstantial, with little mention of personal inclinations or choice. This passivity crops up repeatedly in villagers accounts, with one notable exception – where fellow villagers collaborated with the Khmer Rouge against other villagers, their actions are not attributed to circumstances. These people are seen as ambitious and their actions are viewed as a violation of the insider–outsider boundary that the narrative of victims of circumstances rests on. They have violated the ties of kinship and community.
**The Problem of the Collaborator**

Ta Kam’s account of his life, described above, suggests that he shares the ‘victims of circumstance’ viewpoint of his former neighbours, not only for his fellow villagers but also for himself. Like the villagers, he presented himself as a passive entity, subject to the whims and will of more powerful outsiders and circumstances. He told me that Cheun was forced into becoming the village chief and so we can assume that he may also see himself as having been forced to take this position. The villagers do not agree. They say that they elected Ta Kam to be village chief and he accepted the position. For them, he was not like the soldiers forcibly conscripted by the Khmer Rouge. For them, he is not a victim but an opportunist who, motivated by ambition, became a perpetrator against his own people. Moreover, unlike other villagers who joined the Khmer Rouge, his actions were directed locally against his extended kin and community, thereby violating the tacit collective identity of villagers as victims of externally driven circumstance. Even today, villagers do not talk openly about Ta Kam’s place within village history. As a member of the former village, he is one of them and therefore his actions are in some sense viewed as a reflection on the villagers’ character as a whole. Yet he is also no longer one of them, as he himself has chosen to live elsewhere and villagers are apparently very willing to see him socially erased. But what other consequences have followed from Ta Kam’s actions in the past?

**An Absence of Elders**

In David Chandler’s ‘Songs at the Edge of the Forest’, he describes and analyses a Cambodian poem written in the 19th century, which, as a ‘world of suffering, instability and war’ (1998: 85) was a period analogous to the 1970s and 1980s a century later. The poem is about the rescuing of civilisation from the clutches of chaos, the restoration of moral order, and the attempt to smooth over the rupture with that order’s past. It tells how a loss of merit occurred, evinced by a loss in lineage – a vacuity of ancestral past (ibid.), and then proceeds to narrate the story of what transpired. Following a Khmer massacre of Vietnamese, the Vietnamese attack, forcing the people to flee (ibid.: 89). The protagonist of the story then orders ‘his [extended] family to leave (*jat kruo*)"
of whom were elderly,\textsuperscript{75} to fill their ox-carts with possessions and to leave at once.' In the haste of the departure, Chandler explains, many of the valuables end up strewn over the ground (ibid.). The poem reads: '…many possessions were lost forever, scattered along the roads and in the forest' (ibid.). These possessions, Chandler tells us, ‘are the symbols of civilisation, ways of expressing a frontier between the wild, undifferentiated world, and the world of hierarchies anchored in ritual and in the past’ (ibid.: 89-90).

Here I suggest, in studying the after effects of cataclysmic violence that occurred over a century after the writing of the poem Chandler describes, that it was the elders themselves who, in the poem, might have been the most important of the valuables in need of being rescued. They were the ultimate bearers of the moral and social order, for they enabled transmission of the past order and, as living ancestors, were representatives and embodiments of that moral order as well. In other words, they were the signified and the signifier of Khmer civilisation. As we will see, this interpretation of the meaning of elders for Khmer society takes an interesting turn in the post Pol Pot period.

\textbf{Strong Elders versus a Lack of Elders}

It was immediately apparent to me that the two communes, Prei Phnom and Doung Srae, were today very different, an observation that was also shared by many of the residents of both communes. Despite war and hardship, the commune and people of Doung Srae seemed to be thriving communally, spiritually and, in some cases, economically by comparison to those in Prei Phnom. There was also a marked perceived, and real, difference in the number of elders who had survived and returned home. Overall more elders survived in Doung Srae commune than Prei Phnom. The most extreme example of this difference is the village of O’Thmaa.

Today people of both communes talk about the differences between Prei Phnom and Doung Srae in terms of the lack of elders in the former, and the presence of strong elders in the latter. They say that Doung Srae has ‘strong elders’ who ‘have a clear memory of the old traditions and the ways of the ancestors.’ When describing Prei Phnom, on the other hand, people say that there is a ‘lack of elders’ since the war, and

\textsuperscript{75} Emphasis mine.
that traditional knowledge and practice in this commune is therefore relatively weak. This loss of elders, they say, explains why the people of Prei Phnom have lost interest in traditional practices and knowledge and instead have turned toward ‘modern’ ideologies and ways. The commune chief of Prei Phnom explained to me:

The young people don’t know much about the ancient traditions, and the old people who did are dead now. These days the younger folks are into the popular modern ideas. However, in Doung Srae they practise the ancient customs and traditions and have a lot more elders who know how to perform these traditions.

There are other real and perceived differences between the two communes. For example, in Prei Phnom commune, we see a tentative Buddhist revival and also some conversion to Methodist Christianity (especially in the remote western villages), loss of some traditional practices, and interest in contemporary (modern) fashion and thought (popular dress, music, capitalism, etc). Methodist Christianity (as will be discussed in Chapter 5) and interest in secular ideas arising out of a global market economy are two forms of foreign ideologies that look forward to the future rather than back towards the past. Alternatively, in Doung Srae commune we see ‘strong elders’ with ‘clear knowledge and memory of traditions and customs’, pervasive religious participation, a strong temple, vibrant revival of religious practice and tradition, and 100 percent of the population remaining Buddhist. Indicative of this concern with the past, there is a current project led by the senior layman (âchar) to research, record and archive traditional practices in an attempt to restore knowledge and practices associated with the past – a patently modern enterprise! An excellent illustration of the disparity in traditional practices can be found in the restoration (in Doung Srae) and abandonment (in Prei Phnom) of the practice of building phnom yong khmaoch funeral towers after the demise of Democratic Kampuchea. Many families of both communes used to build these towers before the war and the Pol Pot regime kept them from doing so. However, while the practice has enjoyed a vibrant revival in Doung Srae, in Prei Phnom it has

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76 My thanks to David Chandler for reminding me of this.
77 These are very tall wooden towers under which the body is cremated following a period of burial. In Doung Srae there are two types: the more ubiquitous temporary smaller houses which are abandoned after the cremation and the uncommon larger permanent houses where the ashes are placed following cremation. This latter type may also be used to house the ashes of other consanguinal kin relations.
long been abandoned. Villagers in Prei Phnom say that the commune simply lacks the elders who know how the practice should be conducted. As one woman explained:

Before and during the Sihanouk period, people used to build *phnom yong* for their parents when they died. But nowadays no one does *phnom yong* any more when their parents die. The people who knew how to make *phnom yong* all died and we, the young generation, do not know how. In Doung Srae, on the other hand, they still have a lot of old people there, whereas here we do not.
This woman’s explanation of the abandonment of such traditional practices in Prei Phnom, and their revitalization in Doung Srae, was repeated by many of the villagers in the area. The distinction between the two communes is evident to people in both communes but the situation, unsurprisingly, is not entirely black and white. Many residents of Prei Phnom commune express an interest in traditional practices and there are some elders there who have retained their knowledge of these matters. By the same token, it would be wrong to say that the people of Doung Srae are uninterested in modern music, dress and ideas. Rather, the difference is a matter of degree, people’s perceptions, and the level of their expressed interests.

David Chandler has suggested that, in the aftermath of chaotic historical episodes, restoration of order is sought not by innovation but through a return to the traditions of the past, those of the ancestors (Chandler 1998, 1998). Order is restored by honouring the ancestors and then maintained through the predictable transmission of stories, rituals and customs drawn from this ancestral past. This seems to be true of Doung Srae, with the appeal to tradition and the ancestral past after the chaos of war and violence and this is reflected in their current revival of traditions and rituals, as well as their preoccupation with excavating and reconstructing their social history. In Prei Phnom, the small size of the elderly population has created a void not only of the past but in the present. The absence of links between the past and the present limits the resources that might be excavated from the past to fill in and enrich the present and provide a model for the future. The ways of their ancestors are being lost, the connection to the past frayed or broken.

However, there may be deeper reasons than sheer physical numbers of elders.

‘Immoral’ Elders as Obstacles to the Restoration of Moral Order: Ta Kam revisited

The morality of the generation of Prei Phnom elders that I have been discussing so far is considered by people of both communes to be extremely questionable. People say that they ‘don’t understand why this particular generation did the things they did to each other’ or ‘why they killed one another’. Some others say that ‘the people of that time lacked moral knowledge or education’ (at cheah doen)*, which somewhat neutralises
the charge of immorality of the elder generation of Prei Phnom commune – just as villagers in O’Thmaa neutralised Ta Kam’s actions.

Ta Kam is one of the few elders of O’Thmaa. He is also a social pariah. As one of the oldest members of the original village, he is well versed in its traditional knowledge, practices, myths and stories. However, because of his own past, his knowledge is inaccessible to the next generation; it is tainted by his past behaviour. People will (eventually) talk about him but they will not talk to him. Ironically, it was a man who was working in the village but came from elsewhere who told me, ‘If you want to hear the real old dialect of O’Thmaa, just listen to the way Ta Kam speaks.’ But, for the surviving villagers, he has become (and been rendered) mute, incapable of acting as a medium for the transmission of the past. Ta Kam represents a triple blockage to the remaking of moral order. Firstly, it is evident by villagers’ own accounts that his presence prevents people from forgetting the immoral past that ruptured order. Secondly, Ta Kam blocks the transmission of a moral past since he cannot legitimately pass on traditional knowledge. And, thirdly, he stands as the antithesis of moral order itself by inverting the structural order that places elders and ancestors in a morally elevated position.

It may seem ironic then that Ta Kam acts as a Buddhist layman in the neighbouring commune, which is clearly making efforts to sew up the past by turning sharply towards tradition, evident as well in their treatment of Ta Kam himself. As an elder, he is treated in the traditional manner, a role that he finds pleasing. In this commune he has been re-stitched into the moral fabric of society: the tears and holes in society are mended and the surface made smooth again. However, in Prei Phnom, and especially O’Thmaa village, this is not possible, for the people cannot entirely forget this man’s role in ripping apart their world. They must live with the knowledge of the larger implications of his actions, and the actions of others of his generation that he has come to represent. Perhaps this is why alternative ideologies and orders such as Christianity and, even more so, modernity have their appeal here. As long as people like Ta Kam remain living, reconnecting with the traditional past is difficult and new modes of social/moral ordering are seen as offering a preferable way forward. Ta Kam himself, however, expresses no sense of gap when he explains his own religious activities: ‘I am only looking after my next life.’ For him personally, it seems, the process of mending the
moral order is less problematic than it is for the children of his victims. Perhaps he never perceived a breach in the moral order at all.

Conclusion

Focusing on the role of one man, Ta Kam, this chapter has outlined a number of the challenges to the remaking of moral order in the aftermath of the violence that occurred in O'Thmaa. Specifically, I have shown how local collaborators such as Ta Kam pose difficulties for the process of rebuilding order and smoothing over the rupture. I have also shown how, despite these obstacles, people have found some means of mending through such acts as forgiving soldiers on both sides and by invoking a narrative of ‘victims of circumstance’. We also see that, despite the opportunity to avenge the deaths of their family members by retaliating against Ta Kam, villagers have turned away from violence in an effort to allow healing and move on with their lives. One of the modes of this healing, I have suggested, emanates from a process of erasure: social erasure, erasure of social memory and erasure of individual and ultimately collective immorality. It seems that villagers first contain the immorality of the past by limiting it to one man’s actions and then begin the process of erasure by socially shunning him, removing the immorality from his person (and hence the potential contagion through his affiliation to other members of the community) by making it an issue of lack of moral judgement rather than innate evilness. By first concentrating on him as the sole author of immoral acts of that period and then effacing his actual presence as a reminder, villagers create the possibility of also ‘forgetting’ the immoral acts committed by others of his generation. By placing the emphasis on his lack of moral judgement (rather than moral substance) they prophylactically shield his kin and community from association with the immorality. But what about the motivations the villagers ascribed to Ta Kam? Do they make sense in light of the choices Ta Kam made throughout his life? And finally do they indeed suggest, as villagers say, a lack of moral judgement? The following chapter takes up these questions by closely analysing Ta Kam’s choices and actions from existential and ontological perspectives as they link up to Buddhist and Cambodian cultural ideas and practices.
Here we continue on from the examination of Ta Kam’s story in Chapter 4, and focus specifically on the question of explanations – ways of understanding Ta Kam’s conduct – as offered by villagers and also by Ta Kam himself. As said earlier, villagers blame this man, Ta Kam, for the deaths of their fathers, uncles, grandfathers and brothers. They say that he was the deputy village chief under Lon Nol but was later selected by his community to become the village chief under the Khmer Rouge. As one man put it, ‘Those in power remained in power.’ Villagers say that, as village chief, he tried to score points (sna dai) with the Khmer Rouge and to ‘gain face’ (yoke mukh) by making complaints to his superiors against people in the village. Those he accused were taken away and executed. They say he did this ultimately because he is morally ‘uneducated’ (at cheah deung), that is, morally ignorant. It is this moral ignorance, they say, that caused him to lead the ‘wrong’ way (‘wrong’ that is in the moral sense). These explanations for Ta Kam’s behaviour that were voiced within the village community are the touchpoint of this chapter.

Ta Kam’s acts as village chief under the Khmer Rouge has led villagers to place the burden of blame on him for the deaths of their family members in the early 1970s, even before the state of Democratic Kampuchea was fully established. Ta Kam was certainly not the only O’Thmaa villager of his generation guilty of betraying his neighbours and extended kin in the atmosphere of terror and chaos that prevailed during the civil war. Nonetheless, by focusing on this man, as villagers seem to do, we can see that Ta Kam’s case is emblematic in a number of ways. Firstly he is, as a former leader of his village, an emblem of the former community. As leader, he represented his community both morally and politically. Secondly as the object of blame, he is an emblem of the wrongdoings of his entire generation. Villagers say that his generation committed bad deeds against one-another but point to Ta Kam as the sole representative of those deeds.
Given the centrality of Ta Kam’s role within O’Thmaa’s history then, it is worthwhile to consider closely the motivations that villagers ascribe for his actions, while also taking into account his own story. These present-day explanations for his actions are relevant to how villagers themselves (including Ta Kam) attempt to understand the violence of the past. Of course Ta Kam and his neighbours accounts are not identical—the villagers blame him and he blames the circumstances of the village’s locality and less explicitly the Khmer Rouge. But in either case this accounting for the tragedy that occurred in the past is indicative of people’s attempts at coming to grips or understandings with the events that occurred and getting on with their lives in the present. It is for this reason that in this chapter that I attempt to unpack villagers’ explanations (to the extent that is possible), exploring their potential meanings and implications, and analyse them together with Ta Kam’s own accounting of his life. Moreover taking on board the reasons for Ta Kam’s behaviour, I speculatively look at how Ta Kam may have understood his choices and actions within these frames and connect this to the ideological worlds he inhabited and the existential circumstances that accompany social and historical change.

Under consideration here are the choices and decisions as Khmer Rouge village chief in the civil war years prior to the establishment of Pol Pot’s government. Of course we can never know for certain what motivates people, however, it is nonetheless reasonable to examine his choices in light of villagers own explanations which are themselves grounded in local knowledge and practices, and also within the moral order he lived under prior to the DK period.

To examine these questions, I begin with the assumption that these critical decisions were informed by a set of beliefs and propositions about the world that were already contained within the existing Khmer cosmos. Although there are numerous beliefs and notions at play, I confine myself to the subject of moral judgement followed by the four themes of: face, patronage, merit and sacrifice, which seem to me to be salient to the circumstances.

In Cambodia the concepts of ‘face’ and ‘patronage’ are usually ascribed to the political spheres of life whereas ‘merit’ and ‘sacrifice’ are generally associated with religious
Chapter 5

spheres. Perhaps somewhat unconventionally, in the following sections I bring these four themes together, crossing their normal domain boundaries, in order to examine features of their structural makeup. Specifically I will be looking at the structural similarities between the practice of patronage and merit making – concepts that are in many other ways significantly different from each other. Moreover it should be noted that I am not approaching these topics through a hermeneutic study of Buddhism in the sense of the ‘big tradition’, but have, rather, confined my analysis to the ‘little tradition’ – that is, Buddhism as it is locally practised and understood. In this sense, I am following Stanley Tambiah who sees religion in the everyday context as it serves people’s everyday needs and is integrated into people’s secular lives.

Ignorance and Moral Judgement

What does it mean when the villagers say that Ta Kam was morally ignorant? In the previous chapter I suggested that moral ignorance implies amorality: the inability to ‘know right from wrong’, a state of being normally associated with children, or ‘the wild’ as opposed to ‘the civil’. Here I would like to briefly expand on this idea and connect it up with the ‘modern’ Buddhist notion of sati sāmpajāñja as it is described in the Gatilok (Ways of the World) drawing on the work of Anne Hansen (2003; 2004). The Gatilok was written in the early 20th century by the Khmer scholar and poet Okna Suttanataprija Ind. Composed of moral tales, it is an ethical guide on how to live morally in the modern world. As a vernacular Theravada Buddhist text, it relates more to the ‘little’ Buddhist tradition. The Gatilok is concerned with sati sāmpajāñja, the practical application of moral judgement. The word sati sāmpajāñja is composed of sati, meaning mindfulness and clarity, and sampajāña, meaning ‘discrimination’ or ‘attention’ or ‘awareness’ (ibid.2003: 819). Hansen is keen to point out that Ind’s interpretation of this term is vastly different from its associations in the canonical texts, which call for the monastic qualities of worldly detachment:

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78 For a full discussion of face and patronage see Marston (1999) and also see Hinton (2005). For merit see Marston (2004) and Ebihara (1968) and for sacrifice see Chandler (1998).
79 This is not, however, to argue that there are not other relationships between Buddhism and political power as discussed further along in this chapter.
While in the various Pali suttas [sic] satisampajāṇa [sic] is explained as a moral possession that must be cultivated gradually by monks who have attained higher levels of skill in meditation, in the Gatilok it is a moral attribute necessary to anyone who wants to live as a good person in the world. Although some exemplary characters may be endowed with satisampajāṇa by birth, for most it is a moral virtue that must be cultivated through life experience and education... (Hansen 2003: 820).

As an ability that the ordinary person may posses, sātisampajānia is the ability to practise moral judgement or discernment that is developed through the experience that generally comes with age and also through formal and moral education. Sātisampajānia allows the mature individual to know how to act morally in varied and changing situations and contexts (2004: 55; 2003). Babies and ignorant people do not have this quality for, as Ind, the author of the Gatilok writes: ‘There is a whole category of people who are ignorant because, like babies, they do not possess satisampajāṇa [sic]’ (Ind in Hansen 2003).

Thus, when villagers say that Ta Kam was morally ignorant, it is plausible that they are suggesting that he lacks the quality of sātisampajānia in the sense used in the Gatilok tales. That is, he lacked the ability of moral discernment in responding appropriately to situational contingencies.

It is interesting to note briefly that sātisampajānia, as described in Hansen’s analysis, is similar to the Aristotelian concept of phronesis as described by Michael Lambek (2000) and also by other scholars. Lambek translates phronesis as ‘moral practice or judgement’ (2000: 309) and emphasises that it provides an intersection between ‘contemplative thought, reasoned action (praxis), and creative production (poesis) characteristic of any given social setting’ (ibid.). Rosalind Hursthouse has noted that the meaning of what Aristotle intended by the term phronesis remains the subject of much scholarly debate but that the modern usage of the term, which she translates as ‘practical or moral wisdom’, implies the requirement of experience that normally comes with adulthood (Hursthouse 2003). That is, children lack the necessary experience to know when doing what is morally right can be wrong in certain situations. A person who possesses practical wisdom then knows how to behave in a manner that does not
bring harm to others across varying situations (ibid.). Here we see then that the 'modern' usage of phronesis may share some features with the 'modern' usage of sâtisampajñâni. Of course, this must remain here little more than a passing insight given that the two are derived from entirely different historical and cultural backgrounds (although it is interesting to wonder whether similar types of ideas exist cross culturally and/or whether the similarity is a result of the cross-fertilisation of concepts that came with colonial encounters and later globalisation). What is important here is the emphasis (that both cultures seem to make) on the link between moral ignorance and some deficiency in the ability to apply moral distinctions contextually. Failed sâtisampajñâni, like failed phronesis, means the lack of the moral wisdom needed to practise 'right' behaviour in changing contexts.

Applied to the case of Ta Kam, this idea of 'failed sâtisampajñâni', the lack of the ability to judge, is in accordance with villagers' statements that Ta Kam was morally ignorant and hence made the 'wrong' choices. This theme provides a vital backdrop to understanding villagers' interpretations of his actions.

There are a number of implications of following this through. It would imply that the villagers are describing his choices and actions as if derived from considered judgements of right and wrong action to achieve particular moral ends. But what would these ends be? I confine the discussion here to what are considered meritorious acts within Khmer Buddhism as it is practised locally in O'Thmaa, and 'right' behaviour within Khmer hierarchical relations.

Crucially, how does the explanation from moral ignorance relate to the other statements made by villagers? Are they competing explanations or do they ultimately potentially resolve under the wider idea that Ta Kam lacks the wisdom to judge when ordinarily 'right' behaviour could become wrong in different contexts. What do villagers mean when they say that Ta Kam was seeking to 'gain face' or 'score points' and how are these ideas situated within the world of understanding they live in now and that Ta Kam might have lived in before?

81 Michael Lambek (2000) has suggested that the concept of phronesis as in his definition above may prove useful in the anthropological study of religion for it wed the ideas of Bourdieu's ideas of practice together with morality allowing the anthropologist to view the subject as a morally driven agent acting within specific and varying historical and social circumstances.
Face, Patronage, Merit and Sacrifice

Like other East and Southeast Asian cultures (e.g., Wikan 1990; Yan 1996), Khmer people are extremely concerned with gaining and maintaining ‘face’ (mukh) (Hinton 2005). While trying to account for Ta Kam’s actions in turning in his neighbours for execution, several of the villagers asserted that he was trying to gain face (yoke mukh) and score points (sna dai) with the Khmer Rouge. It was also said that Ta Kam was ambitious and sought to gain a better position within the Khmer Rouge establishment. It is interesting to consider these statements. Here I briefly discuss some of the potential meanings of this proposition that Ta Kam had his neighbours executed in order to gain face, score points and improve his position under the Khmer Rouge. While this proposition may at first seem implausible – given the enormity of the consequences of his actions – one has only to remember that none other than Hannah Arendt made an even bolder assertion when she said that the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann was motivated by nothing more than a sense of administrative duty and a desire to move up the bureaucratic ranks:

Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He merely...never realized what he was doing (Arendt 1994: 287).

Arendt’s conclusion here is worth considering. Was Ta Kam ‘merely’ pursuing his banal ambitions like Arendt’s Eichmann, also incognizant\textsuperscript{82} of the effects of his actions as he worked to advance himself up the administrative ladder and improve his lot? Was he just following orders, as his own account of his life under the Khmer Rouge suggests? What does it mean to say that he was trying to ‘gain face’ with his superiors?

Arendt was making the point that, in some sense, Eichmann did not really contemplate his action in the fullest sense – certainly that he was not motivated by a desire to do evil

\textsuperscript{82} Meaning that he did not think about or contemplate the violent effects of his orders.
or seek revenge. It is impossible to know the extent to which Ta Kam contemplated the full moral ramifications of his actions—something that even the families’ of the victims do not ascribe to him (no one said he was evil hearted or intentionally malicious). But the comparison to Arendt’s account of Eichmann stops here. The historical and cultural context are vastly different. Eichmann was operating in the bureaucratic milieu of a totalitarian state as Germany was in the 1930s and 1940s. What cultural concepts and frameworks then might Ta Kam have been drawing from when he decided to report his neighbours? The examination of local cultural cosmologies and concepts and their relation to violence has been undertaken by a vast number of scholars across a variety of regions and cultural/historical contexts.83

Alexander Hinton argues persuasively that, for Cambodians, holding a grudge84 against someone and seeking revenge are salient motivations to kill and were instrumental in actualising the genocide under Pol Pot (Hinton 2001, 1998, 2005).85 Indeed, even today one has only to skim the Phnom Penh Post newspaper’s ‘Police Blotter’ to find numerous cases of murders committed on that basis (as is true in Europe and America). At the same time, it is clear that villagers do not see Ta Kam’s actions as stemming from a grudge or a desire for revenge. In fact there is no mention by Ta Kam or the villagers of any former hostility between Ta Kam and his victims. Villagers instead suggest that Ta Kam was acting out of concern over his own future rather than settling scores from the past. Moreover, even if Ta Kam did bear a grudge against some of those he turned over for execution, it is not clear that a grudge would have necessarily

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84 This is reminiscent of ordinary Germans, the so-called ‘grudge informers’, betraying their neighbours during the Nazi period to settle some score or quarrel (see Fuller 1969).
85 Alexander Hinton’s argument is that the Cambodian model of revenge is that of ‘disproportionate revenge’ (1998). However, I am not altogether convinced that the revenge is any more culturally salient in Cambodia than say in America where reports of murders on just that basis and seemingly disproportionate to the crime occur regularly. Secondly, the story of Tum Teuv, the story that Hinton argues epitomises the model for disproportionate revenge, I would argue has a different meaning: it is a story about morality and the consequences of breaking taboos. The revenge of ‘seven generations’ moreover is in fact ‘7 categories’ of kinship which together form, I would argue, a single moral entity. And, finally, while Hinton claims that revenge is a moral imperative as the inverse of gratitude (1998: 355), there is little evidence that people generally feel equally morally compelled to enact it as they would, say, offering a gift as an expression of gratitude for aid given. In fact, through my experience it would seem that people more often feel morally compelled not to enact revenge even when they have the opportunity to do so. Nonetheless I would agree that for a few individuals revenge may be a motivating factor in the perpetration of genocide, and for those individuals Hinton’s argument, especially as it appears in Chapter 1 of his book (2005), is convincing.
compelled him to kill. As a poignant reminder, villagers today blame Ta Kam for the deaths of their family members but they also have consciously chosen not to take revenge. It seems that for the villagers now, and Ta Kam before, other matters were at stake.

Face and Patronage

One of the explanations that villagers’ gave for Ta Kam’s behaviour in the past had to do with the concept of ‘face’. Gaining and maintaining good face accords two benefits. Firstly, it offers protection by hiding inner feelings. Generally in Southeast Asia open displays of sentiment are frowned upon, whereas maintaining ‘a clear bright face’ (Wikan 1990) and smooth countenance, which indicates a ‘cool heart’, are valued. Further, concealment of one’s inner feelings reduces an individual’s vulnerability to the potentially malevolent thoughts and actions of others. Wikan, writing about the Balinese, discusses this primarily in terms of witchcraft and sorcery, which are also present in the Khmer setting. ‘Face’, in Wikan’s analysis, conveys a composure that effectively masks vulnerabilities, thereby protecting the individual from potentially harmful acts by visible and invisible beings with ‘bad hearts’ that are hidden from view. For Hinton, by contrast, ‘face’ is more a person’s reputation that itself must be protected by a ‘shield’ constituted out of behaving with respect and proper etiquette; but, unlike for the Balinese, it is not a shield in itself.86 Thus Hinton emphasises the metaphorical use of the term ‘face’ to mean reputation, whereas for Wikan ‘face’ is used literally to imply one’s facial composure which both makes and sustains one’s social reputation but protects a person by masking vulnerabilities.

The maintenance and achievement of face in the Khmer context takes on other meanings87 in addition to offering protection. Most relevant here is Hinton’s observation that ‘face’ signifies an individual’s position within the social order (Hinton 2005: 253). That is, ‘face’ can represent someone’s social status in a dynamic relationship where the loss and gain of face corresponds to diminution and augmentation of status. This definition of face is more akin to the Chinese sense of the

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87 For a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the Cambodian cultural model of ‘face’, especially its role in the genocide under Pol Pot, see Alexander Hinton’s ‘Why did they Kill’ (2005).
term, where ‘face’ can be seen as prestige. Finally, there is also a third aspect of ‘face’. As one Cambodian explained it to me, the phrase ‘gaining face’ is often used in situations where an individual behaves in a manner to gain favour with his or her boss but that these acts that the boss sees do not reflect the true feelings and intentions of the individual. In other words, the emphasis is on the superficiality of the acts and implies hidden agendas. This is not unlike James Scott’s account of ‘hidden transcripts’: whilst subaltern classes articulate what he calls ‘public transcripts’ in their engagements with the more powerful, they also articulate ‘hidden transcripts’ that take place ‘off-stage’ and out of view from the power-holders (1990). The emphasis on public display versus alternative motives and agendas is hinted at in Wikan’s analysis too, not in terms of power in the sense that Scott uses the term but more in terms of spiritual dangers linked to not knowing what people’s real intentions are. In other words, people fear that, despite friendly appearances, others might be or become angry and inflict harm on them using black magic. But it also links up with Hinton’s view of ‘face’ where it is a metaphor for one’s social reputation and prestige because, in the eyes of ‘the boss’, the individual becomes socially elevated through his or her acts. With these definitions of ‘face’ in mind, it is now interesting to reconsider villagers’ statements that Ta Kam was motivated to betray his neighbours in order to ‘gain face’.

Before Ta Kam became the village chief under the Khmer Rouge sometime in 1972-3, he was the deputy village chief under Lon Nol. Thus Ta Kam had occupied, for some time at least, a slightly elevated role within his community. In pre-revolutionary times, village and commune chiefs were elected by their local constituencies (Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002: 117). The chiefs were viewed as members of their communities and selected on the basis of perceived moral attributes and education (ibid.). Ta Kam when elected as deputy village chief during the Lon Nol period would have been chosen on this basis and he would have had the choice of whether to accept the position (unlike during the Khmer Rouge period where he may have felt compelled to accept the position out of fear). Khmer society is hierarchically oriented through patron–client relationships that revolve around power, protection, and status (Hinton 2005; Marston 1999) and are based on real forms of dependence and dominance that social etiquette attempts to mask (Marston 1999). It may be that Ta Kam’s decision to accept this

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88 I thank Charles Stafford for this observation and his explanation of Chinese notions of face.
position of status and power was indeed to 'gain face' as villagers claim – that is, to achieve a respected position in the public sphere (Wikan 1990). This position, then, would have accorded Ta Kam with at least some of the benefits and responsibilities that patronage entails within Cambodia, which generally include receiving of services, gifts, respect and support from constituents and the offering of protection and assistance from leaders in return.\(^89\)

In this mountain village of O'Thmaa and its surrounding community, political and economic hierarchy today, and probably even more so in the past, is less pronounced than in the urban communities and the plains areas.\(^90\) Describing a fairly egalitarian society, villagers said that in the pre-war past food (especially meat acquired through a hunt) was shared by all, wedding costs and duties were shared equally by both the bride and the groom’s side,\(^91\) and distribution of wealth was more or less equal. Most of these features still exist today except that food is no longer shared, some people have more wealth than others, and there is a perceived decline in mutual assistance and cooperation between villagers as I will discuss later in Chapter 8.

This is not to say that the Khmer people living in this area do not participate at all in the hierarchical and patronage system so well known in other parts of Cambodia. But rather, that it would seem that their engagement with the system comes most noticeably into effect in their interactions with the state and other powerful entities that originate outside of their immediate community and also from their engagement with religious hierarchy within the Buddhist temple. To understand how this hierarchy works we can compare these relations to the Thai model of hierarchy discussed by Lucian Hanks (1962) in which people are morally ranked along a trajectory where those at the higher end are further removed from suffering and manifest more ability to produce efficacious acts, while, correspondingly, those at the lower end are more subject to suffering and their actions lack effectiveness (Hanks 1962: 1247). In a key clarification, Hanks tells

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\(^89\) See Caroline Hughes (2006) for an analysis of how contemporary Cambodian leaders abuse this tradition of reciprocity to their own hegemonic ends and the populace’s response to these gestures.

\(^90\) Although age is still morally ranked. See Chapter 3, and also May Ebihara (1968) and Gabrielle Martel (1975) for similar findings for pre-revolutionary rural Cambodia and also Stanley Tambiah (1970) for Thai villages in Northwest Thailand.

\(^91\) In preparing for weddings, both the bride and groom and their respective families would contribute equally to the costs and gifts; both members of the prospective couple would spend a period of time before the wedding working for their future in-laws. See also May Ebihara (1968) who describes an early 1960s village as fairly egalitarian but where only the prospective groom worked for his future in-laws.
us that people do not occupy ‘fixed positions within the social order’ but, rather, individuals may move ‘in their fixed setting, like players with their rules and tactics on a football field’, through the accumulation and loss of merit (ibid.). ‘Face’ is thus a vital element in an individual’s social mobility. Certain moral attributions also follow from this. We see that individuals are not taken to be simply subject to the karmic preconditions set in their previous life but may exercise a degree of agency that allows an individual to take moral action (Tambiah 1970; Keyes 1983).92

How, then, can we interpret villagers’ statements that Ta Kam was seeking to ‘gain face’ with the Khmer Rouge when he turned over his neighbours for execution? Hinton in his research on the DK period found that ‘face’ (as well as honour) were compelling motivators behind individuals’ willingness to kill, given that killing had become a means of demonstrating revolutionary loyalty during this time (Hinton 2005: 260). Killing became a means to achieve ‘face’ in the form of recognition and honour during the DK period because the idea was implicit within the revolutionary teachings (ibid.: 260-264). Moreover, the act of killing had an existential impact on the killer who, in an atmosphere of existential uncertainty, was able to realise self affirmation on both the individual and group level (ibid.: 268). Of special interest here is an example given by Hinton in which a Kompong Cham villager tells of an uneducated man named Boan in his village who reported many of his neighbours to the authorities in order to ‘gain face’ and ‘rise in rank’ (ibid.: 269).

It is not difficult to see how Hinton’s account of ‘face’ makes a certain degree of sense in Ta Kam’s case. Indeed we see exactly the sort of phenomenon Hinton described in O’Thmaa villager Ya’s explanation of Ta Kam’s actions:

My understanding is that, because some individuals wanted to have great power and therefore committed wicked deeds [ampeu akrok] because they needed to score points [sna dai] for other people (the Khmer Rouge) to see. They [the Khmer Rouge] would promote these people to be a big person,

92 Compare with Melford Spiro (1967) who argues that meritorious action produce karmic consequences only for the next life. For a discussion of Spiro’s debate with Tambiah on the influences of Buddhism and the spirit cults see Valentine Daniel’s and Charles Keyes’ jointly edited volume *Karma: an anthropological inquiry* (1983).
saying that that person did a good job. During that time, killing a person is doing a good job.

As Boan’s and Ta Kam’s cases indicate, there are obviously a number of people in Cambodia who committed similar acts, which are explained by villagers in a like manner: that is, the culpable villager was ambitious but also uneducated and therefore committed these acts to gain status. But there are an number of key issues and questions that remain. Firstly, it is not clear whether such an explanation was actually believed at the time or whether it is a present day explanatory device that may afford some level of healing from the past. Ya, for example, would have been a young child at the time the village executions occurred (including his father’s). In the 1980s Ya became a Khmer Rouge soldier and so he would have spent most of his life indoctrinated with their ideology. Would Ta Kam himself have seen things the same way at the time? Was killing for him merely a means of becoming a ‘big person’ within the Khmer Rouge apparatus? Does he see it differently now?

Secondly, unlike Hinton’s subjects, Ta Kam did not commit these acts of lethal betrayal during the period of DK. He was probably exposed to some of the Khmer Rouge propaganda in the early 1970s but the Khmer Rouge’s enterprise had not yet acquired the degree of dominance that was achieved later on. There was also a war still ongoing and it was not until the villagers moved back down the mountain and were being relocated to the commune centre cooperative that the Khmer Rouge had any real control or influence in the area. Up to that time, the state (as represented through Lon Nol’s soldiers) and the Buddhist Sangha (as represented by the monks and Buddhist laymen) were still present. It is most probably the case that the ideological constructs and cultural references of the past would still have retained much of their same meaning as before the war. It is therefore interesting to reconsider villagers’ explanation of Ta Kam’s actions in light of the ideological frameworks in place prior to the introduction of the Khmer Rouge propaganda and indoctrination.

Hinton provides an excellent analysis of how ideas of ‘face’ as reputation and prestige, honour, and rank played a key role in motivating these people to commit acts of violence against their countrymen in the context of existential uncertainty that was characteristic of the DK period. What differentiates my study here of Ta Kam is that, by
looking beyond the context of the DK period and focusing on moral choices, actions and motivations, I show how Ta Kam’s existential dilemma was lifelong and that his actions under the Khmer Rouge were in some ways consistent with other choices he made from boyhood to old age. To achieve this requires not only accounting for Ta Kam’s ‘public transcript’ via ‘face’ which is well covered by Hinton, but also those ‘hidden transcripts’ which in Scott’s sense would include grudges but here seems instead to mean survival. As I mentioned earlier and will mention again, there is no indication by Ta Kam or anyone else that he held a grudge against those he killed. Thus, Ta Kam’s primary concern, as we shall see, hinges mainly around looking after himself and ensuring his own survival through the existential uncertainties that he must have experienced during the Khmer Rouge revolution.

Merit and Sacrifice

The villagers said that Ta Kam’s actions were driven not only by a desire to ‘gain face’ but also to ‘score points. In this next section I begin with a different but related concept of ‘gaining merit’. Within Buddhism, an individual strives to accumulate merit throughout their life not only in order to secure their immortality through rebirth onto a higher level than their present life, but also to influence their present life (Keyes 1983; Tambiah 1970). Merit making may be achieved through performing virtuous deeds (thvoe bon) such as respecting one’s elders, becoming a monk or by making offerings to ancestral spirits and the Buddhist temple. Buddhist laypeople may also earn merit by collecting religious donations (Marston and Guthrie 2004: 128). The antithesis of meritorious behaviour is committing wrongdoings or sins (thvoe bap). Thus, committing good or bad deeds contributes to or subtracts from one’s store of merit that secures one’s fate in the next life, as well as influencing the current one.

The structural relationship between the patronage system and the Buddhist concept of making merit deserves consideration. As Hanks (1962) observes, those at the higher end of the patronage system, with goods, wealth or favours to distribute, increase their status and reputation and therefore gain face and social position, by distributing to those beneath them. Alternatively, those below make offerings to those above them in the form of services, small gifts, respect and loyalty. In return for their deference, they receive protection and favours that may lead to an improvement of their situation. In
this respect, we can see that religious merit making and political patronage systems in some ways resemble each other, even though they are not the same. That is, in both the religious realm and the political realm, protection and the betterment of one’s situation is provided in return for deference and offerings as service or gifts.

Merit making entails giving, through distribution of wealth and favours, providing services and making offerings or gifts. In the vicinity of O’Thmaa villagers today still honour the local tutelary and ancestral spirits by offering them food, incense, cigarettes, water and other, mostly consumable, items in a manner that resembles the merit making activities of making offerings to the Buddhist monks. Within these local practices, in certain circumstances an animal will be sacrificed as an offering, such as a pig in wedding celebrations offered as a gift to the ancestors or a chicken to local guardian spirits to seek their benevolence and protection. In rarer cases, in years where there is a drought, villagers will make a special sacrificial offering of the raw blood and entrails of a black animal, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 8. This practice is unknown in most of Cambodia today but in the past sacrifice was common and included domestic and wild animals (including buffalo), and at times, human beings (Chandler 1996). In fact, the offering for rain mentioned above has links to another ceremony, called Leung Neak Ta, in which, as recently as late 19th century Cambodia, humans were beheaded in certain regions as an offering to the tutelary spirits (Chandler 1998).\footnote{Offerings to the tutelary spirits can be seen as part of the Brahmanic heritage but also probably stem from emic animist beliefs, as in the example of the offering to ask for rain to Lok Ta Ply, a tutelary spirit without obvious association with Hindu deities.}

There is nothing to suggest that human sacrifice took place in O’Thmaa. The 19th century is however very much a part of the collective memory of O’Thmaa’s villagers and serves as an explanatory model for many events today (as we will see in Chapter 7). For Ta Kam, born in 1923, ‘recalling’ the 19th century would have been easy, because his parents and grandparents would have lived through much of that period.\footnote{For an in-depth historical analysis and discussion of stories from that period, see also David Chandler’s History of Cambodia, chapters 6 and 7 (1973), and his thesis Cambodia Before the French (1973).} Therefore Ta Kam would have grown up with the transmitted memories of his parents and grandparents as well as the community as a whole.\footnote{I discuss the potency of these stories in Chapter 7, especially those related to the Thai invasion in the 1840s.} Thus, his way of understanding and experiencing the world would be partly through a certain knowledge set – and a
way of knowing — based on these stories and through his observation and participation within the family and community. Through this transmitted knowledge, he would have learned how to behave in different circumstances as well as what he could expect of others’ behaviour. For example, he would have learned that, to seek protection from the tutelary spirits, one needs to make offerings; that to seek protection from those with more political power, one needs to offer one’s service and loyalty; and, finally, that to be protected in the next life, one needs to earn merit by providing offerings and services to the Buddhist Sangha. Hence a structural symmetry between the spirit world, Buddhism and politics in ways of seeking protection.

How are we then to interpret Ta Kam’s actions during the time he was the village chief under the Khmer Rouge and later on when he became a Buddhist layman, serving the Buddhist temple and monastery in Doung Srae? Clearly, we will never be able to know what he really thought or what his true motivations were. But Ta Kam’s own account of his life and explanations for at least some of his choices are worthwhile to explore and may perhaps reveal some form of logic that can help us understand not only how villagers understand his actions and how he may see them himself; but also how his choices in the present may link up to that past. Therefore my search for an explanation is not the same as identifying a ‘cause’ for genocide. Instead, as at many points within these pages, I am trying to understand his motivations by unpacking villagers’ interpretations of his past actions, and trying to see how some of the concepts arising from the past may have influenced Ta Kam’s choices and continued to be played out in his life when I knew him a few years ago.

The Road to Immortality: Making Merit, ‘Scoring Points’, and Making Offerings

Ta Kam’s actions as Khmer Rouge village chief and later as a Buddhist, I would argue, are informed by tacit social and cosmological understandings of the world that he absorbed in pre-revolutionary times. In particular I argue that making merit, ‘scoring points’, and making offerings in both the political and religious contexts share the

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96 For an analysis of the causes of the genocide in Cambodia from an anthropological perspective, see Alexander Hinton’s ‘Why did they Kill’ (2005).
theme of providing protection and securing immortality. I have outlined the basic principles of merit, ‘face’, patronage and sacrifice in the previous section, and will be incorporating these ideas here in interpreting Ta Kam’s life.

Generally, Khmer people see those with power and potency as potentially dangerous and who therefore must be avoided or appeased. ‘Those’ here includes not only people with political power, or who occupy a higher social rank but also includes potent guardian and ancestral spirits that have the power to inflict harm. Within Buddhism, however, power is closely associated with morality and therefore those with power are to be respected rather than feared. This is not, however, to suggest that there is no danger within Buddhism: in fact, a failure to earn merit through virtuous deeds, or the accumulation of bad deeds causing demerit, can lead to a lowly and miserable life upon reincarnation.

Returning to Ta Kam, we saw that avoiding confrontations with powerful people, whether state representatives or colonial figures, seems to be integral to his practice of living. In his account of his formative years, he said he avoided French hunters out of the same fear one would expect him to have for policemen. Later on, Ta Kam also managed to avoid the state representative who came to draft him into the army. By avoiding these confrontations, he protected himself from those who clearly had more power. Ta Kam did not talk to me about any of his experiences in regard to his relations with the spirit world but it is without question that he, like the other members of the community, are highly cognizant of the power and dangers of that world and what encounters with these spirits may imply. Khmer people usually take special care to avoid committing acts that might offend these spirits, and make offerings to them to receive their benevolence.

In his adult life, Ta Kam achieved a certain amount of social rank himself by becoming the deputy village chief under Lon Nol. This position eventually segued into his position of village chief under the Khmer Rouge in the pre-DK years. During his tenure Ta Kam is said by some to have turned over his neighbours for execution in order to ‘gain face’ and ‘score points’ with the Khmer Rouge, thus improving his status with the Khmer Rouge and therefore his situation. Beyond the face value (no pun intended) of the villagers’ explanation, how might we read these actions in terms of the frameworks
of patronage and religion? Was Ta Kam providing a service to the Khmer Rouge leaders in return for their protection and to better his lot? Can this in turn be seen as a form of merit making that allowed him to gain credit with them, leading to a prolongation of his mortal life – and therefore in a sense allowing him to parallel the Buddhist concept of earning merit to secure one's immortal existence? Was offering his neighbours to the Khmer Rouge a form of sacrifice? And, if so, was it merely an attempt to seek the benevolence of his superiors, or might the sacrifice of his neighbours in some sense have been an attempt to save his community as a whole by naming certain 'bad elements' in order that the others might survive? Was he confusing the parallel structures of ritualised and secularised spheres of power (which would surely suggest a lack of moral judgement)?

Ta Kam himself never admitted to me that he was a village chief but the stories he told me of other episodes in his life are consistent with the themes of self-preservation, betterment of his situation and a stoic deference to powerful persons and entities. I use the word stoic here to suggest that he downplays his agency and thereby also his responsibility for his actions. He did, however, consciously avoid situations where his livelihood might have been jeopardised, such as with the French colonial hunter and the military conscription delegation. He also managed to be one of the very few survivors of his generation in his own village as well as among the group of villagers sent from Doung Srae to Koh Kong during the DK era: by his own account only three people (men?) besides him survived out of the 19 families sent there. Also, in Ta Kam's more everyday accounts, he attributes his decision to marry to a desire to better his lot and, finally, he presents his decision to serve the Buddhist monastery as a means to secure his next life. We can see then that Ta Kam employs a degree of agency in his efforts to provide himself with security. Yet, ironically, his accounts also systematically downplay this agency. Nearly every instance where he indicates that he made a decision to act is clothed within stoic claims of deference towards more powerful persons, forces or entities. For example, he says that he avoided the draft delegation 'but he doesn't know how' he did it. He says he worked for the Khmer Rouge but only did as he was ordered to; and he says he served the Buddhist monastery but only at the behest of the temple laymen and monks. In these crucial moments, as he presents it, he did not make the choice but was rather propelled to do it, either by forces unknown to him or by political and religious entities greater than himself.
Turning back to the concept of making merit, we might recall that ethical behaviour and virtuous deeds committed in this life have a karmic consequence on one’s rebirth in the next life.\(^{97}\) It is thus that those occupying higher positions in the hierarchy are generally considered to have earned those positions – through the meritorious acts of their previous lives – and therefore it is expected (at least theoretically) that those with power will act morally and are deserving of respect and patronage.\(^{98}\) In return for this patronage and support, protection and favours will be provided. Hence we see how the Buddhist moral and political hierarchies relate to one another and mirror each other. A third function of making offerings appears in the role of the ancestral and guardian spirits. These spirits offer protection or simply benevolence in this life, but are not involved in determining the next life. This form of offering and its relation to power relates to patronage in a very different way from Buddhist merit making. Unlike Buddhism, the spirit world can offer a means of protection, allowing people to gain or retain power, and it can also increase someone’s power. This protection may be simply in the form of benevolence, for example allowing someone safe passage, or it may be a more generalised form of protection against misfortune and malice. This second form of protection is often invoked through the employment of potent amulets, tattoos, strings, blessings, mantras and other symbols. It is not entirely separate from Buddhism in that the blessings or mantras may be Buddhist or the objects may have received blessings from a monk. Returning to the issue at hand, however, what is important is that the three ideological systems, Buddhism, Politics and the Spirit World,\(^{99}\) each provide a form of protection through the making of offerings. To sum up, making offerings and providing services to the Buddhist Sangha, to people with power, and to powerful

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\(^{97}\) By the same token, actions that cause demerit have negative karmic consequences. Moreover, as a reminder both merit and demerit may affect a person’s current life as well.  
\(^{98}\) See Lucien Hanks (1962). It should also, however, be noted that amongst Khmers it is understood that, even though someone may have earned their position through merit accumulated in a previous life, they may not always act morally in this one. Alexandra Kent (personal communication) identifies the contrast between neak mean bon (those who have received merit from their past life) and the neak mean sel (those who have done good deeds in this life) as a site where this distinction is played out. Moreover, it is also true that other forms of power and protection are available even to those who may not have earned position through a meritorious past life. For example, a notorious gangster was credited in a local tabloid as having acquired three kaun krāk, which are dried out human embryos taken from usually a wife or girlfriend’s womb and which provides the bearer with knowledge and protection, allowing him a degree of invincibility among his enemies.  
\(^{99}\) While Buddhism in Cambodia is generally considered syncretic, including animist and Hindu practices, I separate these practices here because they are perceived as discrete by my informants, who clearly and consciously distinguish between why, when and what offerings are being made within Buddhist practice and which are offerings to the spirit world.
ancestral and guardian spirits all serves to provide protection and in some cases improve one's situation.

How does this help us understand Ta Kam's actions under the Khmer Rouge, starting with accepting to become village chief? On some occasions, villagers say that Ta Kam even killed people himself; at other times they say that he made complaints against them that led to their execution. In either case, though, it can be seen as an act predicated on the expectation of something in return even if this was merely his own survival. However, some villagers say that Ta Kam was seeking something more than mere survival. They claim that he was seeking promotion, therefore betterment, of his situation. The villager's statement that Ta Kam was seeking to 'score points' (sna dai) with the Khmer Rouge, may thus be interpreted as meaning that Ta Kam was seeking to earn credit with the Khmer Rouge in return for their benevolence and possibly protection. Although this conclusion is seemingly obvious as we will see its implications may be more complex. Being loyal and serving the Khmer Rouge, who were clearly in power, would have been within Ta Kam's understanding of the world. From his childhood, making offerings and deferring to entities with greater power would have been second nature to him and become part of the everyday. Later on, his years of experience helping to build the city on the mountain for the then prince and head of state, Sihanouk, would have developed his understandings of hierarchical relations and the patronage system that supports it. Throughout all of his years up until the Khmer Rouge arrived, making offerings to local spirits and the monks at the Buddhist temple, and deferring to those with authority would have been part of the everyday. But can offering up your neighbours and extended kin for execution really fit into this? Could this too be seen as a form of service or offering, as the villagers suggest? In the context of our discussion so far, it is clear that providing names of people to the Khmer Rouge could well have served this purpose and also seems to be in line with the models of patronage and hierarchy that he would have been familiar with.

But is it possible that there might be another explanation?

As we have seen, Ta Kam was a leader of his people and was even elected by them. As such, he would have been expected to protect his people in exchange for their loyalty and support. Clearly, his betrayal within this role made him appear morally abominable.
to the villagers. But could his actions in some sense have been an attempt to actually *save* his community? Could he have seen the sacrifice of some individuals as a means of saving the community as a whole? We have already examined the notion of sacrifice both as a means to receive benevolence and protection both for individuals and communities. For example, the proper sacrifice of a certain type of animal, or in earlier times a human being, is expected to bring about favourable conditions that enable the community to have an abundant harvest and hence flourish. Might then Ta Kam’s actions have been an attempt to appease the Khmer Rouge’s hunger for enemies in the interest of the community as a whole? This speculation, however, retains a degree of implausibility. The notion of human sacrifice would have been consciously remote for Ta Kam even if he was more familiar with its more symbolic forms. Moreover, it is unlikely that he would have viewed the Khmer Rouge in the ritual framework that the offerings to the tutelary spirits takes place within. Might there have been yet another conceptual force at play?

Naming people as directly or indirectly traitors is the same as naming people as bad elements (as elaborated on in Chapter 3). It is a common practice to remove the bad elements from society for the betterment of the community as a whole.\(^{100}\) This phenomenon can be applied to an entire village as in the story of *Phoum Derichhan* (or Bestial Village) where the village was renamed ‘Bestial’ – and thereby placed outside of society – in order to preserve the moral character of the greater society (as will be discussed in Chapter 6).

Returning to Ta Kam’s situation from this perspective: he would have known that some of the people in the village were in fact opposing the Khmer Rouge revolution by either working for the White Khmer or Lon Nol, or simply by not being supportive of Khmer Rouge policies. Of course, as a former deputy village chief under Lon Nol, it is unlikely that he would really have considered those working for Lon Nol to be ‘bad elements’. More widely, it does not seem that, at that point in the history of O’Thmaa, there was the same sort of labelling of Lon Nol supporters as there was of ‘White Khmer’

\(^{100}\) See also Penny Edwards (2004) – who describes how in the urban capital women accused of being mistresses and/or cheating partners have on many occasions had acid thrown in their faces (often by people hired by the wives of the cheating husband) with notably little moral condemnation by the Cambodian public – provides another contemporary example of how the individual is sacrificed (in a semi-Girardian sense) for the moral good of society.
supporters: it appears that the accusation of being 'White Khmer' did indeed carry the same sort of moral potency as calling someone a traitor, a sorcerer, a bad element or adulteress. Thus perhaps Ta Kam implicitly felt that, by removing the 'bad elements' of society and offering them up to the Khmer Rouge, he could somehow save his community. But is an offering that is a bad element truly an offering? Generally, no. Offerings are generally supposed to be things or services that are good and will be appreciated like gifts, candles, good food and so forth. But, as the example of the offerings of the black animals mentioned in the previous section tells us, what a deity may like may not always be the same thing as what humans like. Eating dogs or monkeys is generally considered morally reprehensible amongst Khmer Buddhists, the colour black (as in the west) often associated with immorality. The Khmer Rouge were, of course, not deities and the people who were executed were not animals. Nevertheless, the cultural logic that speaks of providing offerings that are according to the tastes and desires of the receivers holds. In Chapter 6, I will discuss villagers' accounts that tell how the offerings made to the teveda and guardian spirits are according to the predilections of the teveda and guardian spirits, just as offerings to monks are also chosen with reference to what the monks would enjoy and appreciate. Likewise, in the politico-scape of patronage: certainly here we see that people generally provide gifts and services to those in power dependent on that person's or entity's proclivities and needs.

Seen in this light, then, it is possible that Ta Kam's actions were in part an effort to appease Khmer Rouge desires and in return could have been motivated by something other than revenge, ambition or self-perseveration. We will certainly never know for sure but the evidence seems to suggest that his acts would have been situated within an epistemological toolkit that bears some resemblance to ideas and concepts described above and that he would have put to use in understanding the world and making sense of the changing circumstances. He was almost certainly not the only person accusing his neighbours. In all likelihood many of his generation participated in the lethal rash of accusations that transpired. But he was considered to be the leader by his community and that is what makes his case different from the others and important also to understand.
In the next portion of this chapter I leave the past and turn to Ta Kam’s present occupation as a Buddhist layman (âchar) at the temple in Doung Srae.

**Next lives – Karma and Heaven – what the future holds**

Ta Kam has become a Buddhist layman (âchar) in the neighbouring commune of Doung Srae. In this section I will be discussing and analysing Ta Kam’s turn toward religion in his latter years. I shall draw comparisons between his heightened interest in Buddhism and the ex-Khmer Rouge Christian converts who make up 10 percent of O’Thmaa’s population: I ask whether the two types of appeal to religion can be compared and what implications might be drawn from the two cases. I also examine the relationship of deference and religious authority and the role of religion in ameliorating sins and providing security for the future. This section ultimately asks how these religious institutions might allow for the transformation of a person’s moral standing within the community and therefore provide a means of regenerating oneself as a social moral person?

Ta Kam became a pious Buddhist later in life: why this turn towards religion? In the Khmer context this question would at first seem to be fairly obvious. As people progress become chah tum, grandparents and elders within the community, it is quite usual and expected for them to take a greater interest in religious affairs and increase their participation in the activities in the Buddhist temple and monastery. Temples rely on the participation of elders in caring for the monks and sharing their knowledge of traditional practices and beliefs. At this elderly juncture, people become more concerned with their future in the karmic cycle and so many go about preparing for their next life by participating in merit-rich activities such as assisting the monks. Furthermore, people will also often say, more pragmatically, that their elderly status puts them in a position where they are now able to participate more in temple activities: they no longer have children to look after and do not need to work as they once did, now that their grown children support them. This freedom from responsibility allows

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101 For an in depth discussion of the roles and behaviour associated with different age groups see May Ebihara’s doctoral dissertation ‘Svay, a Khmer Village in Cambodia’ (1968).
them to devote more time to Buddhist practices and merit making activities within the temple.

When I had asked Ta Kam whether he considered himself to be more religious now than in the past, his reply was: ‘I don’t know. I am just preparing for my next life.’ This statement could have been made by any village grandfather or person of his age who has turned toward religion in the late hours of life. Ta Kam also told me that his greater participation in Buddhist practices was an attempt to ‘take care’ of his future.

Ta Kam is an ăchar at the temple in Doung Srae. Generally speaking, ăchars are allotted considerable respect by the populace as a whole and it is a role that only a minority of elders assume. While the majority of elders make donations to the temple and frequent the temple on Buddhist holidays, not everyone invests the time and effort that accords them the title of an ăchar. Therefore, Ta Kam’s decision to become an ăchar places him at a socially and morally elevated level in this life as well as securing an elevated position in the next. Socially shunned in O’Thmaa, in Doung Srae he has acquired a status that brings with it a degree of respect within his new community. While Ta Kam has lost face, or rather has been de-faced, within his own community, he has gained face elsewhere, in Doung Srae.

But why does he continue to visit O’Thmaa at all? Why would Ta Kam voluntarily place himself in the humiliating position of being faceless, that is, without social recognition? Here too one may glimpse a way in which he is ‘taking care’ of his future. He himself says that he returned O’Thmaa to show his daughter and grandchildren his land and, later again, to help them to farm it. But was this necessary? His second wife owns land in Aural and he often stays with his sister in Doung Srae. Clearly he does not really need the land for himself and, if he wished to bestow it on his descendants, there is no need for him to continue to visit. Perhaps then the reason is related to lineage. O’Thmaa is the village of his ancestors and it is his birthplace. He is bound to O’Thmaa’s land by the ancestral spirits, which also bind him to the other descendants of those same ancestors, in other words, his former community. It is possible that, in his later years, he seeks to maintain this kin identity tied to place despite the difficulties. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 6, kinship forms the basis of one’s social and moral identity. It is what makes someone a human and part of what it is to be civilised. One
must maintain the relationship with one’s ancestors and one must produce descendants. Even though he is socially shunned, his visits are nonetheless tolerated by the other villagers, and his daughter is socially embraced by the community. Through her and his grandchildren, Ta Kam is able to maintain his place within the community in the homeland of his ancestors. By returning to O’Thmaa and claiming his land for his daughter and grandchildren, he has re-established his moral existence as a human within the civilised world and ensures that his identity will continue after his death.

Ta Kam’s successful turn toward religion in his later life also opens up the large question concerning the role of religion in ameliorating sins, a question with implications far beyond this thesis but worthy of brief consideration. It would seem that religion in this context provides a means of redemption not only after death, but also in this life. For Ta Kam, Buddhist practice has provided a means of elevating and securing his position in his present life within the community of Doung Srae, as well as potentially in his next. He serves the temple by doing a variety of tasks, such as helping with festival preparations and the collections of funds. While he denies the title of achar (and thereby demonstrates the virtue of humbleness), he nonetheless reaps the benefits of this positive association. But it is not only this life he is serving – as he said to me he is serving the temple in order to secure his next life. In this way Ta Kam can be seen as serving the temple in exchange for gaining more face in this life which may carry him into a better life in the next.

It is interesting to consider then that Ta Kam may be serving the Buddhist temple in somewhat the same way he served the Khmer Rouge leadership and, less obviously, Lon Nol. In each of these cases, he uses his position to secure his longevity (survival and immortality) and position. But there may be more to Ta Kam’s choices and actions, particularly in relation to the notions of karma and fate.

It is quite possible that Ta Kam sees his current predicament as a matter of fate and accepts it as such. This resonates with Ta Kam’s narrative of his life, in which events and people cause him to do things or render him the creature of certain circumstances. Moreover, it provides a more culturally plausible explanation than the idea that he willingly endures the shame because he sees it as some form of penance for his crimes. He may feel that he is paying a penance but it is questionable whether he feels he is
responsible. Rather, it is more likely, in light of what he said, that the situation in O'Thmaa was yet another situation that 'befell' him much like everything else that has happened to him. Choice, it seems, is not something he readily acknowledges, especially about issues with possible moral implications. Yet, as we have seen, denial of agency is not a correlate of beliefs in karma (kamm), and so therefore his passivity cannot be fully ascribed to some form of karmic determinism. Ta Kam's choices and actions in fact suggest that he sees his acts as influencing karmic events, as seen for instance through his increased religious activity later in life. But is this means available and employed by others?

Most adults in O'Thmaa are of the generation that followed Ta Kam. Amongst them, many are former Khmer Rouge who would not have grown up in the same social and cultural milieu as he did. Many became soldiers while they were still children and spent the majority of their lives between military bases and battlefields, with little exposure to Buddhism and its associated practices. Some of these former soldiers and their families later converted to Methodist Christianity. One man in particular in Prei Phnom commune, who was converted on the Thai-Cambodian border, became a pastor and eventually recruited a number of others in the commune. At present O'Thmaa village claims the highest percentage of Methodists in the commune: 10 percent at the time of my fieldwork.

Thus not everyone has turned to Buddhism for their salvation. In Prei Phnom the pastor and his wife run a school - the only school in the vicinity of the outlying villages. As the wife of the pastor explained, they converted because 'it was the only religion that could save them'. Both, now middle aged, worked in Phnom Penh city during the time of the DK period. By serving God, they reap the benefits of goods, status, and respectability within this life and a chance of spending an immortal life in heaven when this life ends.

Most of the adult former Khmer Rouge population is aged 30-40 and would have spent most of their formative years under the Khmer Rouge; those who became Khmer Rouge soldiers would also have spent the majority of their adult life under the movement. While most former Khmer Rouge living in the area did not convert to Christianity, it seems that more conversion takes place amongst former Khmer Rouge soldiers and
their families than among the rest of the community. There are a number of explanations for this, the first being the prevalence of missionaries along the Thai border in the 1980s where the Khmer Rouge were based. Other reasons include the material and educational aid offered by Christian missionaries, and/or the appeal of the ideology itself after that of the Khmer Rouge had proved untenable. The former soldiers may have been particularly open to the new ideology, which, like the Khmer Rouge ideology, was oriented toward the future and encompassed notions of utopia. In any case, these children of the revolution who grew up without much direct Buddhist influence were probably easy converts for the Methodist missionaries who offered spiritual salvation as well as material help in the form of food and education.

Both Buddhism and Methodist Christianity, although sharply different, may provide individuals the means to repair and better their lives in the present as well as secure their lives after death. The Methodist Church and Buddhist Temple each provide ways for local actors to transform themselves into socially recognised moral beings. Protestant Christianity provides people with agency to bring about God’s forgiveness through Christian action, and Buddhism provides people with the opportunity to influence karmic consequences for the next life and improve their status in this one through meritorious action. Hence we see that both religious institutions and ideologies provide a medium that allows negotiation of an individual’s or community’s past with their present and future.

Conclusion – the Stoic Self

Throughout this chapter we have seen how Ta Kam’s choices are consistent with the world view that he would have inherited. Within everyday contexts, his form of behaviour would have generally been morally correct and appropriate. However, with

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103 By ‘direct’ I mean that they did not grow up practising Buddhism by attending temple events, celebrating Buddhist holy days, and or other outwardly Buddhist practices. This is not to say however that they were not implicitly exposed to some Buddhist notions through the Khmer Rouge ideology itself (see Hinton 2005). Moreover, contact with older members, especially family members, who would have recalled the more explicit forms of Buddhist practices would have had a significant impact when those people were available. This was not the case however for Ya and many others like him who lost their parents to the Khmer Rouge in the early 1970s. That said it should be added that some of those who did not convert to Christianity made an effort later on to learn about the ways of their parents and ancestors.
the advent of the Khmer Rouge, the same behaviour became morally abominable: a fact that Ta Kam has seemingly either failed to realise or chosen to ignore.

Through Ta Kam’s narration of the choices and actions he took in life, we saw that he tends to deny his agency therefore in a sense also his selfhood and identity. He represents himself as a victim – or, sometimes, beneficiary – of circumstances and denies holding positions of responsibility, claiming that he was never a commune chief nor even an ăchar. He also says that he never ‘worked’ for the Khmer Rouge, meaning he held no special position, but always only did what he was told or ordered to do like other people: pulling carts, tending rice and other menial jobs. In a further understatement of identity, he states his ties to place, and therefore his ancestors and kin, only vaguely. The village development chief in Doung Srae commune told me that Ta Kam ‘is always running here and there’. When I asked Ta Kam where he considers his home to be he answered:

Hmmm...It is difficult...I feel like my home is here a little, there a little...If I go there I feel like my home is here, and if I am here I feel as though my home is there. If I live here, I worry about there, and if I live over there, I worry about here. I can’t decide which one carries more weight. I just go here a little and there a little...to three places [O’Thmaa, Doung Srae, and his current wife’s village in Aural].

Whether he is here, or there, or moving in between – whether he is a small boy hiding from a French hunter, a Khmer Rouge village chief sacrificing his neighbours and extended kin, or whether he is a Buddhist layman serving the local monastery – he is constantly looking after his self. He is, and he continues to be, despite, or possibly because of, his apparent passivity. His passivity in a sense is a form of ‘face’ that allows Ta Kam a degree of agency to attend to his well-being and aspirations in a manner that might not be possible otherwise. In a sense then it is like the ‘masking’ described by Marilyn Strathern where the mask provides a form of liberation of the self (1979). As an instance of existential survival, it might be Ta Kam’s discourse of stoicism is a relatively recent response to the terror of the past (Feuchtwang 2006: note 4) but it also may be a part of his identity that has always allowed him to persevere through the critical moments that punctuate his difficult past, and that will secure his future.
It seems that for Ta Kam then (in a manner reminiscent of Paul Tillich, although Tillich would be appalled at his moral choices), the higher moral order never really falls apart, unlike for many of his compatriots. Perhaps he was unaware or unwilling to accept the rupture in the moral order and continued to operate as though the higher order were still ultimately intact. This is perhaps one of the biggest indicators that Ta Kam case is one of a lack of moral judgement (sātisampajānīya), because he fails to fully acknowledge and incorporate the changing circumstances into his decisions on how to behave morally. This may be part of the reason why villagers say that he was morally ignorant.

By disclaiming agency, Ta Kam has escaped the contradiction between his past ‘wrongdoings’ and his ambitions for the future. However, he has nonetheless lost social recognition in his own community, who deny him social and moral personhood. While they see his actions as immoral, they also see him as amoral and hence not a full social and moral person. By shunning him socially they are erasing him and therefore the wrong doings he is associated with from village memory. He of course was not the only one of his generation guilty of such crimes and therefore it is the wrong doings of the generation as a whole that must be blocked out.

In the next chapter I pick up on many of the themes from this chapter including the notions of ignorance and its association with amorality. In particular it explores the categories of the amoral and moral realms and how those categories are employed in the making and unmaking of relatedness through the notions of the ‘wild’ and the ‘civil’.
Chapter 6

The Wild and the Civil, Kinship and Commensality

Then about ten days after this, on the 27th of April there was suddenly an order that the name of the village Kraing Liev be changed to Phoum Derichhan. This was because they assumed that the demonstrators were criminals, and like beasts that did not know right from wrong because, they dared to kill a big person.

Ok Kiem and Ouk Om, Phoum Derichhan (1964-65)

The above passage, written by two Cambodian nationalist writers in the 1950s, relates to events that occurred on 18th April 1925 when a French tax collector and his two aides were beaten to death in a village outside of Kompong Chhnang. By royal decree the village was subsequently renamed ‘Bestial’ (Derichhan) for a period of ten years, during which the villagers were required to conduct ‘expiatory Buddhist ceremonies on the anniversary of the killings’ (Chandler 1996: 140). David Chandler suggests that, because the community had rebelled against being ‘consumed by the king’ (saoyreach) – governed – it was deemed necessary to make the village into an ‘other’ by placing it out of the realm of the social and into that of nature (ibid:157). The story of the transformation of the village previously called Kraing Liev into one re-named as Phoum Derichhan provides a clue to the moral force embedded within the metaphorical realms of nature and culture as construed within Khmer ontology.

The story shows how the categories of nature and culture were employed to cut off the relation with a particular village in order to preserve and sustain the moral integrity of the wider society, which the villagers are deemed to have violated. The villagers’ actions here were characterised as criminal and offensive to the moral order (given that the condemnation came from the king), while the villagers themselves were said to be ‘like beasts that did not know right from wrong’ (reminiscent of Ta Kam and the generation of Prei Phnom village elders). ‘Not knowing right from wrong’ is thus aligned with being amoral, akin to nature or the wild.

104 ‘Saoyreach’ is the provincial word for ‘governed’, that is, the verb ‘to consume’ used of royalty. See also Katherine Bowie’s (1988) analysis of 19th century Northern Thai peasants’ resistance to being consumed by their leaders.
Within this logic, the village itself, renamed as the ‘bestial village’ is thereby returned to nature, but only for ten years. And so we can see that the return to the place of nature is also a locus from where it may be purified (Ponchaud 1989).

The themes contained in Phoum Derichhan echo the stories told in previous chapters concerning the particular ways in which the moral order is established and maintained. As we have seen, the transformation and maintenance of moral order is performed through the application of moral categories or qualities such as clarity, wildness, and civility to social forms of behaviour. In what follows I take a closer look at this process by focusing on the categories connoting the ‘wild’ and the ‘civil’, as they are expressed through relatedness and commensality: practices employed to make and re-make sociality and the moral order. This chapter shows how relatedness is made within the contemporary community, as well to the ancestral past. These themes are especially important in understanding the processes by which people re-make moral order and rebuild their lives together in the aftermath of violence.

What are ‘Wild’ and ‘Civil’?

Cambodians express the nature/culture dichotomy as the wild (prei) and the civil (viel or srok). Srok – defined as ‘district’, ‘country’, or ‘village’ (Headley 1977:1255) implies the domestic realm (Martin 1997: 82): for example, a domestic animal is ‘sat srok’ as opposed to a wild animal, ‘sat prei’. Another term that is used to convey domesticity and civilisation is the Khmer word for field: viel, any land that is cleared cultivated and thus ordered. These and other associated meanings combine to form a notion of what is ‘civil’. Hence we see srok and viel used as markers of civilisation, that which is ordered, cultured, law-abiding, and cultivated. Contrary to this, prei represents wildness, all that is chaotic, barbarian, untamed and lawless. This dichotomization is so ubiquitous to mainstream Khmer thought that it is found in many Khmer classificatory systems, linguistics, and social ordering (Chouléan 1986: 115-116; Chandler 1996: 76-99; Martin 1997: 83-84; Ponchaud 1989: 161). The dichotomy itself is not a rigidly defined moral boundary: in some contexts the forest becomes a site for moral recreation (Ponchaud 1989: 161), enchantment (Chandler 1998) or spiritual enlightenment (Marston 2001). Thus in the regional literature, as in my own findings,
nature as *prei* is a potent force that constitutes not only a site of destruction, chaos and violence but is also capable of producing and reproducing society and individuals.

**Making Sociality and Relatedness: Commensality and Kinship**

Where does nature end and culture begin? To answer this question Lévi-Strauss turned not only to an extensive analysis of kinship and exchange ([1949] 1969) but also to food, its preparation and consumption (1969; [1949] 1969). This link between commensality, kinship and culture has been explored by a number of anthropologists. In cultures everywhere, the sharing of food is regarded as communally binding, whether as, maintaining or creating a shared substance between people (Bloch 2005: 45), or informing conceptualisations of self (Meigs 1997), or creating personhood and relatedness (Carsten 1995, 1997), or constructing social history (Gow 1991). But it is not just the physical preparation, sharing and consumption of food that matters: it is also the symbolic properties of the food that are expressive of social and cultural categories (Douglas 1991; Lévi-Strauss 1969) and enable transformation from disorder to order (Douglas 1991), nature to culture (Lévi-Strauss 1969), and stranger to intimate (Bloch 2005). As the studies above demonstrate, sociality, kinship, food and commensality are all interlinked not only as an expression of morality (Bloch 1973; Overing and Passes 2000) but also as a generator and sustainer of a given moral order.

In the sections that follow I look at these themes through Khmer notions of ordering as expressed in 1) the making of kinship relations including conception and gestation, engagement and marriage, 2) the making of non-kin relations, and 3) the making of relations with the guardian spirits and Hindu deities (*teveda*), Buddhist *Sangha*, and ancestral spirits. In the final section I analyse the breaking of relations through the breaking of taboo. This last piece concerning changing ideologies leads to the conclusion.
Making Kin: Food and Commensality in O'Thmaa and its Surrounding Communities

For the Khmer, mealtime is a family time. Usually each person within the family is dished out a serving of steaming white rice (bay) that forms the basis of a Khmer meal. The family will usually sit together on the floor in a circular fashion with the bowl or bowls filled with a stew or soup (samlaw) or some other protein dish (mhoup) such as meat, fish or eggs and, finally, some vegetables. Fish sauce or brohok, a fermented fish paste, is usually served as an accompaniment, often prepared with lemon grass and chillies. Proper etiquette amongst family members, and also with others, dictates that one first eats a bit of the plain white rice – dished out generously into individual bowls – before helping oneself to the other dishes. Unlike the bowl of rice, which could be considered ‘a full portion’ in western terms, the other dishes are shared, with each person spooning only a miniscule amount onto their rice from the communal bowl and finishing this before taking more. Rice may be the staple of the diet and be representative of civilisation and humanity105 but meat and its equivalents are also considered a crucial part of the meal and much value is placed upon it.106 That the protein dish (mhoup) is shared by all rather suggests that it is valued and that it may be representative of community and egalitarianism much as the sharing of meat from a hunt would have been in times past, according to villagers’ accounts, with the rice representing the humanity of the individual.107

As in other parts of Southeast Asia (see Carsten 1997), the cooking and sharing of food within the family works to establish and strengthen kinship. This is clearly evident in the expression ‘to give someone their pots and pans’ that is used to indicate the establishment of a separate and economically independent household after marriage.

105 For an extensive discussion of the meaning of rice in Khmer culture and its role in agrarian rituals, see Éveline Porée-Maspero’s Étude sur les Rites Agraires des Cambodgiens (1962). Ing-Britt Trankell’s study of the Tai Yong in Northern Thailand ‘Cooking, care, and domestication: a culinary ethnography of the Tai Yong, Northern Thailand’ (1995) offers additional insights on the value and meaning of rice, many of which can be said to hold true for Khmer people as well.
106 I was admonished a number of times by the cook and her family (as well as other neighbours) when I proposed that I would eat only vegetables and rice for dinner. Looking at me as if I were crazy, they would tell me repeatedly that it is simply not a meal without mhoup – that is, a protein food whether it be meat, fish, eggs or tofu.
107 In recalling the pre-war past villagers will nearly always paint a gilded picture of egalitarian practices where ‘meat was shared communally by all’. Moreover, in the village feast at the Bon Dalien harvest festival (Chapter 8) the community shares the meat stews, which are ladled onto individual bowls of rice.
The new pots and pans indicate that the couple will now be cooking and eating together and forming a new family in the process. This transition may take time. When a couple is married, they do not necessarily immediately stop eating with their parents. For example, in O'Thmaa after a young man and woman married, they continued to eat for a period of time with the young woman's family. As the woman's father explained to me, 'It is too soon to have her not eat together with us.' With pregnancy and children, considered synonymous with marriage, however, the couple begins feeding themselves and their born and unborn children.

*Feeding Within the Womb and Beyond: Making Babies Human*

It is interesting that, when a baby is first conceived it is simply called 'blood' for the first few months. 'Blood' in Khmer culture appears to be what Sherry Ortner would call a 'key symbol' in that 'it comes up in many different contexts' (Ortner 1973: 1339).  

It is said that, when the baby is first in the womb, it feeds off of the mother’s blood through a sort of nipple called the *sok*, which fits in the baby’s mouth, and so evolves from blood into a foetus called a *kuok* (although some people simply call it a baby (*i koun*)). The mother’s diet is strictly regulated at this time: generally (but not always) she is allowed to eat only domestic foods such as white rice, chicken, fish or pork. It is said that, whatever the mother eats the baby also eats and therefore it is important that the mother refrains from eating anything that might disagree with the baby such as hot foods containing chilli, but also that she avoid alcohol. The diet of a pregnant woman is at times compared to that of a monk – that is, containing only foods that are associated with humanity and civilisation.

After birth, while the baby is breastfeeding, it is still considered to be ingesting the mother’s blood. The ubiquitous view in the region is that milk is essentially the same substance as blood. Often cited as evidence is that, if milk is left to stand in the sun

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108 Blood, as we will see, is used literally and metaphorically in a variety of circumstances, including expressing kinship and as an offering to the guardian spirits. It is also used to distinguish different types of sources of protein: white blooded such as crabs versus red blooded such as pork. In addition, it was an idiom employed by the Khmer Rouge to convey the kinship of the nation (see Hinton 2005: 85).  
109 In interviews with nearly 60 households in both Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes, when asked whether a mother’s milk was the same substance as a mother’s blood, nearly every person answered affirmatively, many with the additional explanation of the transformation of the milk back into blood if left in the sun. See also Ledgerwood (1990: 43) for similar findings amongst Khmer immigrants in America.
for a couple of days, it reverts back to its previous state as blood. Therefore the nursing
mother’s diet continues to be restricted for whatever she eats the young child eats as
well. An example of this widely held view can be seen in my neighbour’s decision to
throw away her birth control pills, which she believed were making her young breastfed
daughter ill. It is easy to see why certain foods and substances would be banned from
the mother’s – and hence the child’s – diet if they might harm or disagree with the
child, but why the restriction on eating wild meat or vegetables? It is tempting to
suggest that this follows the logic of the making of the social and moral person.
Children are amoral wild beings in need of socialisation and moral education in order to
become fully human (Bloch 1993): hence they should eat domestic, humanly produced,
food rather than food that grows wild outside the village. Clearly, the idea of a process
of becoming a social and moral person is evident in Khmer culture at large, where
increased authority and respect comes with age, marriage, parenthood and
grandparenthood (Ebihara 1968; Ponchaud 1989). Indeed the amoral status of children
is suggested by the use of ‘a’ in front of their names, a derogatory prefix that one would
never use on an adult unless there were true animosity against them.

In O’Thmaa and its surrounding community, however, the distinction between wild
food and domestic is not always as sharply distinguished as it is in the lowland areas.
My neighbour from Takeo, who was pregnant at the time, explained that, although she
would not dare eat wild vegetables and greens in her current state, although many of the
local village women did and had no problem with it. ‘For them,’ she explained, ‘it is
normal.’ However, it seems that there are some limits on the amount of wild food a
pregnant woman may eat, which is put in terms of its ‘taste’. As one native O’Thmaa
resident explained, ‘If the food has taste, it can improve the child’s health. If we eat
mostly wild food then, there isn’t really much nutrition for the baby.’

It appears that, for residents in forested and mountainous areas like my fieldsite, and
also the mountain village I visited in the neighbouring province, the moral distinctions
between wild and domestic foods are less strictly defined than they are for the plains
people. However, this does not mean that the wild/civil distinction does not exist for
them, as people do use these categories regularly to distinguish between different
sources of food and also to make moral judgements. There is a restricted diet for
pregnant women here as elsewhere – but with the exemption of wild greens, which are
considered an everyday food in this forest habitat, without any special properties beyond being ‘healthy’.

As we saw above, the making of babies and children is a process. The foetus is initially ‘blood’ that is a product of both parents, and is later fed through the blood of the mother from the time it gestates in the womb until after it is born and weaned from the mother’s breast. In the next section we will see how the mother’s blood in some sense can be the same as the father’s, for it is through the process of marriage that the couple become ‘flesh and blood’ (sach chheam) relations through the consumption of particular combination of substances: betel, betel leaf, and lime powder.

*Marriage and the Making of Kin: Eating Sla, Malau, Kambaor*

The real and symbolic consumption of betel, betel leaf, and lime powder (sla, malau, kambaor) is one of the key substances employed to make relatedness among Khmer. Amongst Cambodians generally, betel and its accompaniments are enjoyed by elderly women (but occasionally too by elderly men) on a variety of occasions, including holidays, weddings, and other social gatherings. However, here I want to focus on its use in marriage. Betel (sla) seems to be so important in the making of relatedness in marriage that several of the early stages of marriage are named after it. For example, the making of initial gifts to the bride’s family to offer engagement is called the ‘placing of betel’ (sla dak), and the negotiation of bride price is called ‘the questions of betel’ (sla somnuah), and the closure of the engagement agreement occurs with the parents of the bride eating a piece of the betel (pisa sla sangkau). Once the engagement is established, the mothers of the prospective bride and groom will also offer betel, together with its leaf and lime powder, as an invitation to the wedding. I had the opportunity to participate in this tradition when the mothers of a prospective bride and groom paid a visit to my house to invite me to the wedding of their children. The invitation was given by offering the betel, leaf, and lime powder to me and my acceptance was indicated simply by my eating it. Much to my surprise, I found that the combination of substances (bitter and pungent in taste) proved to be a stimulant, which may contribute to its being considered a potent vehicle for making relatedness.

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110 The stages of engagement and marriage in Doung Srae and Prei Phnom are not identical and even vary from village to village. However, in all cases betel and its accompanying leaf and lime powder figure prominently.
Later, in the wedding ceremony during the ‘Tying of the Wrists’ (Chong Dai) ceremony, the bride and groom are bound to each another and the community by the tying of their wrists together. First the bride, kneeling, has strings tied around her wrist. In her hands are placed betel leaf (malau), betel (sla), a betel cutter and the special metal box containing lime powder (kambaor). Money is then placed in her hand by family and guests. This ceremony is repeated for the groom before the couple’s hands are bound together, thereby binding them as a couple.
Betel, betel leaf, and lime powder are often used to symbolise the different substances of the body. As one Buddhist layman explained to me, the betel symbolises the blood, the lime powder the bones, and the betel leaf the flesh.\footnote{This symbolism is not a 1:1 correlate but more abstract. As symbols, these substances carry no inherent meaning themselves but are more like vessels or algebraic symbols onto which different meanings (or values) can be ascribed in different contexts and by different individuals. In the following chapter we will see that the same abstract qualities are also applied to landscape.} Also, the leaf containing the betel and lime powder is sometimes folded in different ways to symbolise male and female. In many ways, the combination is a metaphor for the person. Perhaps this is why it is said that in the past *Lok Ta Ply*, the *neak ta* (guardian spirit) responsible for rain (and discussed below) is said to have demanded betel, betel leaf, and lime powder – if he did not receive it, it is said, people would die. Some people saw *sla, malau, kambaor* as a substitute for rice, which is also associated with humanity. An old woman told me, ‘When there is no rice to eat, you can eat this [*sla, malau, kambaor*] instead.’
The āchar explained that the belief that these substances represent human beings (lit. 'flesh and blood') is not a part of Buddhism but added that he, like others, also believes the truth of the metaphor. Using Maurice Bloch's terminology, sla, malau, kambaor is an extremely good social conductor (Bloch 2005), and is in fact the medium through which engagements and marriages are consummated. The story of how this came to be is recounted in a folktale that is told in Vietnam as well as Cambodia. I summarise the version from my Khmer language coursebook:

Two brothers go to study and live with a wise teacher who has a beautiful daughter. The two brothers have an enormous amount of love for each another but soon the elder falls in love with the daughter and the two are wed. Later, the younger brother, feeling neglected by his elder brother, who no longer has time for him, decides to leave. On his journey he comes to a stream where he stops to rest. At the stream is a spirit house where a particularly cruel spirit lives. The spirit, offended by the younger brother's failure to ask the spirit's permission before resting in this spot, transforms the young man into a limestone rock. Later, the older brother, realising that his brother ran away out of love for him, falls into despair and goes out to find him. Arriving at the same place where his brother stopped, the elder brother too decides to stop for a rest and repeats his brother's folly of failing to ask the neak ta's permission. Again the spirit is angered, and transforms the older brother into a betel nut tree. Soon after, the wife of the older brother goes to look for her husband when he does not return home. Following the same path as the two brothers, she finds herself at the same resting place, where she is transformed into a betel leaf. As the story goes, it was love and loyalty to one another that determined the fate of the two brothers and the young woman. Subsequently, however, a king arrives on the scene and, realising that something is amiss, decides to investigate. To determine the truth of the matter, he conducts an experiment by combining the betel leaf with a slice of the betel nut and the limestone, which produces red water that flows like blood. The king concludes that this is the blood of the two brothers who loved each another and also the blood of the husband and wife, who also loved each another. The king thenceforth passes a royal decree that, from this time forward, betel, betel leaf, and lime powder is to be offered by the prospective groom's family when they go to the house of the bride to seek her family's acceptance of the marriage. The story tells us that this symbolises the love and
loyalty between the bride and the groom and between the bride and groom’s ‘flesh and blood’ [sach chheam] relations.

It was during my fieldwork that I learned that husband and wife are considered ‘flesh and blood’ (sach cheam) relations. One day I was conducting an interview in Doung Srae regarding the tradition of building mortuary towers, phnom yong khmouch. The woman I was interviewing had built a large phnom yong in her rice field for her deceased husband. The phnom yong contained the ashes of her late husband but she told me that the ashes of other relatives can also be placed there, provided they are ‘flesh and blood’ relations and if special permission by the family is given. I asked her if a husband and wife were considered flesh and blood relations and the answer was ‘yes’. I later asked as many people as I could 112 whether they considered husband and wife to be related by flesh and blood and all answered in the affirmative. Where there was disagreement it was about when or how this occurred. Some people located the moment in the wedding ceremony itself, especially during the ‘Tying of the Wrists’ ceremony but most people would laugh, embarrassed, and gesture towards their children.

Marriage in Cambodia is thought to be synonymous with having children. When I returned to my fieldsite after my own marriage, several of the elder women started making joking suggestions about pregnancy and children. In the story about the betel nut, leaf, and lime powder, the king’s power transforms the three substances into one shared substance that is blood. Likewise, the couple, when they wed, are transformed into the same ‘flesh and blood’ through the conception of a child who also is initially blood. 113

The offering and ‘eating’ of the betel, betel leaf, and lime powder in wedding negotiations is a metaphor for the offering of human flesh and blood in order to create a sense of shared substance. The consumption of the betel can be seen as the moment of communion between two people in the sense that Maurice Bloch has suggested (2005:

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112 In fact I included a question on it in the 59 interviews I conducted across the two communes.

113 One Buddhist monk told me that, according to Buddhism, the foetus is initially water before becoming blood but the common perception appears to be that the foetus is initially blood.
but it can also be seen as the means of re-creation. Indeed, David Chandler, writing about the restoration of moral order in the wake of the chaos and violence of 19th century Cambodia, observes that the king reorders the kingdom by ‘consuming’ (saoyreach) the land and his subjects (Chandler 1998: 106). In the case of marriage, it seems that the husband and wife consume each other vicariously through their respective families’ consumption of betel, in a sense thereby producing a child that is the manifestation of their shared flesh and blood substance. But it is also interesting that the parents of the bride and groom themselves establish new relations through the production of the grandchild who shares the same flesh and blood. In Khmer, however, there is no word meaning ‘in-law’ and the parents in-law and children in-law are not viewed as part of the same structural arrangement. The term used for son-in-law or daughter-in-law is koun brosav; for parents in-law it is aupok (father) or mday (mother) khmek. Each set of parents calls each other by the term domlong, which indicates that they do not share the same substance.

Hence marriage is a means of making new relations and re-making the moral order of community on the most basic of levels. It not only literally produces the community by creating children but it also forms bonds between people who marry their children to each another and even those who come as guests and thereby share in the making of relatedness through consumption: consuming the betel nut and its accompaniments at the point of being invited and later by sharing in the communal wedding meal. In this way, all the guests share some degree of substance, making them into the communal body of which the couple is a part. As the couple marries they, like people in other parts of the world (cf. Bloch 1993), they become full social and moral members of their community.

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114 Bloch argues here that commensality forms a communion between people by giving them a sense of a shared substance between them. Here he is drawing from the idea of the communion found in the Last Supper that is ultimately associated with a set of rituals where there is a sacrifice.

115 In the beginning of this chapter I mentioned Chandler’s argument that the villagers of Kraing Liev were objecting to being consumed in this manner and therefore ended up outside of the king’s body, ejected into the realm of nature. See also Ashley Thompson (2004) for a fascinating analysis of the role of the physical and spiritual health of the king’s body in the moral ordering of the kingdom.
Making Relatedness with Extended Kin or Non-Kin

Sharing food, of course, is a common way of establishing sociality with people who are not family members. My fieldsite was no exception to this. A number of villagers in O’Thmaa, including the neighbouring police post, warmly and graciously invited me to eat with them and on occasion would join me at my house for supper or a cup of coffee. The invitations to meals that I received were often prompted by my hosts’ procurement of special foods or delicacies that they wished to share with me. Through these experiences, I learned a bit about how different forms and types of food produce social relatedness in differing ways.

Chrouk Prul: An Introduction to Prohibitions

The first hint I had that there were any restrictions on or orderings of food (apart from those on mothers) came when my neighbour Thon and his dogs emerged from the forest after several days of hunting. He had brought back a turtle and a chrouk prul, a peccary by dictionary translation (Headley 1977:262), which, as my neighbours explained, had the ‘head of a pig’ but the ‘paws of a dog’. I was told that this meat would not be shared with me because it would not be good for me to eat and that generally women do not eat it.

I was slightly surprised but had no desire to insist. Surprised because, as a foreigner, I was often exempted from gender-dependent codes of conduct, especially in matters of food and drink. The consumption of alcohol in Cambodia is considered improper, especially by Khmer women, who are seen as bearers of culture (Ledgerwood 1996). This was a role that, as a foreigner, I was not expected to fulfil. Hence my surprise at being told that I could not share in eating the peccary. Perhaps it was the association with dogs or dog meat (widely considered morally improper for consumption by Khmers) that made the proprietor decide that it was in my best interest not to eat it. Dog meat, while not widely eaten, is at times consumed by men for its potent properties and, if roasted, is always consumed together with some form of alcohol. Black dogs in particular are sought for this purpose. The connection between the potency of the meat and the potency of the alcohol is easy to infer, especially as alcohol will usually be consumed with some form of meat (preferably wild game and preferably roasted) or
fish, if meat is unavailable. Drinking alcohol with roasted meats is a means by which a
group (usually men) may become more socially connected though the experience (so
long as a dispute does not occur in the process). Any remaining meat will usually be
prepared, like any other domestic meat, in a stew and shared with the family – without
alcohol.

Lévi-Strauss’s distinction between roasted foods and boiled foods (Lévi-Strauss 1978:
479-495) is obviously pertinent here. Boiled foods, being thoroughly cooked, are
associated with culture and group solidarity. Roasted foods are associated with guests
or people outside the group and occupy a more ambiguous status because they may be
raw (and hence associated with nature) in the centre despite their charred exterior.
Therefore in a sense the roasted foods present a correlation to the invisibility of
people’s hearts and true intentions as discussed in previous chapters.

Figure 17: Communal drinking and eating

116 While the anthropology of alcohol in the past tended to emphasise the socially integrating function of
alcohol use, more recent studies emphasise its ‘(dys)functionality’ in this respect and offer a more
historical and agent oriented analysis (cf. Dietler 2006; Spicer 1997).
Chapter 6

Moral Connotations of Monkey Meat

Eating monkey is generally considered to be morally objectionable among Khmer Buddhists. However, as I learned one evening, the moral meanings of eating monkey meat may vary according to individual interpretations of the practice and particular circumstances.

One evening, I noticed my neighbours, Dara, Li’s mother, and little Srey all going off somewhere. I asked Heng, who was in the midst of cooking dinner where they were going. ‘To see the sva [monkey]!’ she explained. ‘Sva? Is it alive?’ I queried. ‘No, it’s dead.’ She apparently had already seen it so I took my leave, hopping onto my bike and followed the others to Eng and Thee’s house down the road. Leaving my bike, I ascended the path to the house, joining the others gathered there. The ‘monkey’, a large male gibbon, lay on its back — one hand already missing where the jaws of the trap had taken their bite. The group of onlookers were remarking on how ugly and mean this monkey’s face was. At this juncture, the monkey still retained its long grey hair that in a moment Dara and Eng’s brother Chan would cut away and discard before cleaning and butchering it. Eng told me he would not be eating it but Li’s mother, Dara, and policeman Sam said they would. Having peeled the skin off and washed the body, Dara chopped off the head, arms, legs, tail and cut out the genital organs. Turning to the trunk of the body, they cut open the belly causing the innards to come spilling out. A fetid smell rose from the monkey, which had died a few days earlier.

Thinking I had managed to escape eating the monkey, I returned home but soon went over to my neighbours for a visit. Dara, whom I found pounding lemon grass for kreuung, insisted that I promise to try the meat. I soon found myself at the police post, together with the commune chief, the commune police chief and another policeman who had come to O’Thmaa to check up on things. The commune chief handed me a can of beer as Dara came over and set down two bowls full of roasted monkey meat. Police Chief Phal, who regularly stayed at the police post, returned just about this time and was encouraged by all to join in the meal. Phal said he would, but actually did not, and acted a bit cagey in response to my questions on whether he was going to partake of the meat with us. He drank a bit but he didn’t eat. As a diversionary tactic he fusses over whether there was enough light and wanted another oil lamp to illuminate the contents
of the table. I said I would fetch a candle from my house, using the opportunity myself to stall eating the monkey.

Candle set, beer opened – there could be no further delays. The meat itself was slightly gamey red meat with so much sinew it was difficult to eat much of it. To my left Chief Bor was rapaciously gnawing away at one large chunk of meat after another, tossing the bones to one of Thon’s dogs. The commune chief and other policemen ate more gingerly but they too were eating the meat. Police Chief Bor, known as a ‘bad guy’ type, made a show of amicability towards me, indicating his apparent approval of my joining them in eating the monkey together. Phal however still refrained from eating any of the meat, as did the village chief, Sau, who had arrived on the scene moments after the departure of the commune chief and his entourage. When asked, Sau stressed that he would not dare (ât hean) eat the meat for it would make him ill.

Shortly thereafter, Bith, the ex-Khmer Rouge commander from the end of the road, arrived. Bith was originally from another village in Prei Phnom commune but had settled in O’Thmaa after he defected to the government in 1998. He apparently had some clout with the police and local administration but he was also clearly seen to be a questionable character. (It was the mention of his house that had prompted one of the village women to tell me the story of pregnant women being killed and buried under the Khmer Rouge dam as told in Chapter 2). And so I was apprehensive when I found myself being invited by Bith to eat monkey meat with him. By this time everyone else was gone except Phal. Bith continued to insist that I eat the meat with him, refusing to take ‘no’ for an answer. I realised there was more at stake here: we would share a moral affiliation by eating together and by sharing food considered by many to be immoral. I was not sure that I wanted to show affiliation with Bith. I told him I was already full, having eaten dinner, and that I had tried some of the monkey already and did not want any more. He responded by saying that we were friends, a group, and that we trusted one another. For some reason, both he and Phal then indirectly asked me if I did not know who Bith was, thus indicating that I should be showing respect for Bith.\textsuperscript{117} I replied that of course I knew Bith, and said that it was for this reason that we were all

\textsuperscript{117}This demand for my deference appeared again during the \textit{Bon Dalien} festival when the village chief told me that Bith wanted to dance with me. I refused, not wanting to be morally affiliated with him in the eyes of the villagers.
drinking beer together as friends. Phal, coming to my rescue, said yes, we are all drinking together! That seemed acceptable to Bith. We finished the beer and then, to my surprise, Bith invited me to his daughter’s wedding. In hindsight, it is not difficult to see the structural similarities and contrasts to the wedding invitation involving the mutual consumption of betel and its accompaniments.

It was explained to me later that while, for some, to eat monkey is to commit a moral wrongdoing (thvoe bap), some people still will eat it. What seems evident is that by eating monkey one crosses a moral boundary and, in crossing that boundary with others, one becomes morally affiliated with them. In this manner it is reminiscent of a classic rite de passage. Communal consumption of alcohol operates similarly but on a different scale. Buddhism discourages the consumption of alcohol but alcohol does not carry the same taboos as the consumption of monkey meat. If the monkey is seen as close to human in the Buddhist hierarchy that makes eating it close to cannibalism. But it would be wrong to say that it was the potency of the meat came merely from its ‘wild’ and ‘prohibited’ status. It was also the manner in which it was being shared, that is, roasted and accompanied with alcohol, and therefore closer to being raw and closer to nature in Lévi-Straussian terms. This contrasted with the stew that was made from the remainder of the monkey meat (which was boiled and therefore closer to culture) and eaten together with rice (also signifying culture) by most members of the family across the road. There it had become simply another meal shared amongst kin.118

But there may be yet more meanings encompassed within the cooking and consuming of monkey meat that may be connected to ritual practices. The fact that the monkey bears some likeness to humans and was served roasted and accompanied by alcohol, making it a potent substance not only to consume but also to be shared, may have its roots in ritual, as we will see in the following section on the offerings to the guardian spirit of the rain. In a complementary fashion, meat made into a stew and served with rice that was eaten by the family mirrors the offering made to the guardian of the village – the domestic realm – during Bon Dalien (discussed in Chapter 8) but also briefly

118 It needs to also be noted here Lévi-Strauss also argues that the sharing of boiled foods signifies endo-cannibalism and roasted foods shared with guests as exo-cannibalism, which the findings in this chapter seem to support, but I do not wish to make this my central argument here.
mentioned here. This duality and complementarity between the wild and the civil, and kin and community is striking and one finds it over and over.

Making Relatedness with the Teveda, Guardian Spirits, the Buddhist Sangha – and Ancestors

In this section I discuss the making of offerings to the sacred world of the teveda (Hindu deities), the neak ta (guardian spirits), the Buddhist monks, and the spirits of the ancestors. Making offerings implies a continuity of relatedness that is especially important following separation (Stafford 2000: 101-102). In this case, the separation would have occurred during the Khmer Rouge revolution and Democratic Kampuchea (DK) years when villagers were prohibited from making offerings. Moreover, offerings for local spirits in and around the village would have been postponed for some years after the end of the Pol Pot era until the time they would have been able to return to the village in the late 1990s.

Ancestral and Guardian Spirits, and Tevedas

Offerings made to the ancestral and guardian spirits and the tevedas (Hindu deities) are based on the believed proclivities of the spirit or the deity. Hence, for example, ancestral and guardian spirits, the neak ta, are generally said to appreciate the same types of foods that humans enjoy whereas the tevadas have a taste for sweets. As one O'Thmaa villager, Than, explained: ‘The neak ta like cooked chicken, bananas, and cake. All the food we like to eat.’ The tevedas, on the other hand, ‘only like sweet foods’. In any case, the food offered to neak ta and teveda are generally domestically produced foods.

There is, however, one exception to this. Lok Ta Ply, one of the neak ta and attributed with the power to influence the amount of rain, is said to demand the raw organs and blood\(^{119}\) of a black chicken, black cow or black monkey, depending on the year. These three animals are offered sequentially each year of drought. As discussed in Chapter 8,

\(^{119}\) This practice of offering the organs and blood to the ancestral spirits is also practised amongst the Jarai in north-eastern Cambodia.
the ceremony associated with this spirit, is called *Som Teuk Plieng*, and entails asking for rain. This ceremony corresponds to another ceremony called *Laung Neak Ta* or 'Raising the Ancestors'. This ceremony, also associated with ensuring the next harvest, involved human sacrifice as recently as the 19th century (Chandler 1998) as well as other animals, wild and domestic (including buffalo). In this regard it also interesting to consider Ing-Britt Trankell’s (1995) findings on this topic in her study of the Tai Yong in Northern Thailand. Amongst the Tai Yong, she tells us, the consumption of raw buffalo meat is used as a substitute for the human meat that was previously used in ritual contexts, although the practice was abandoned with the advent of Buddhism and its associated civilising process (ibid: 95). That sacrifice is continued today in offerings to the same type of *neak ta* as *Neak Ta Ply* above, that is, one who controls crop fertility and rainfall, and that these are made at the same time of year, raises some interesting questions. It would seem that there may be a corresponding link between the two sacrifices. Indeed Éeline Porée-Maspero noted that, in the ‘Asking for Rain’ (*Som Tuk Plieng*) ceremony she witnessed in the 1940s in the region of my fieldsite, a buffalo was sacrificed and its raw blood collected and offered to the spirit (Porée-Maspero 1962: 242). After the raw blood was collected from the dying animal, the buffalo was beheaded and its head placed before the spirit. This act of beheading also seems to mirror the beheading of humans in the sacrifices in the ‘Raising the Ancestor’ (*Laung Neak Ta*) rituals of the 19th century mentioned by Chandler (1998). Finally Porée-Maspero also mentions that, in the ‘Asking for Rain’ ceremony she witnessed, the buffalo was grilled after being cut up, and the grilled meat *together with alcohol* was then offered to the spirit before being shared with the community.

As we have seen sharing grilled meat and alcohol is a means of forming camaraderie and moral affinity. Apparently, the more taboo the meat the greater its potency for binding people socially and equalising moral status. In the rain making ceremonies, for example, the sharing of prohibited food is directed towards ensuring protection of the community, abundant rainfall and crop fertility. It seems that in most of these cases the offering to the ancestral spirit traditionally was human flesh either in reality as Chandler mentions, or symbolically as Trankell suggests. It is also possible too that in the ceremony recorded by Porée-Maspero, the sacrificed buffalo symbolised a sacrificed human. But what are we to make of the black monkey, black dog and black chicken? It
is impossible to know whether these three animals were ever intended to be symbolic of humans, although their moral status as potent and prohibited remains. Black animals in general and dogs and monkeys, in particular, are taboo to eat but can be eaten in certain contexts. We have seen how monkey meat carried moral significance for many of those who ate it; the same to a lesser degree is true of eating black dog. Whilst visiting some relatives of my Khmer language teacher’s in a neighbouring province, we came across a man lying down, who complained of feeling ill. My teacher explained that his illness was a result of his having eaten a black dog together with others whilst drinking alcohol. He added that, despite the prohibitions, some men eat black dog meat for its alleged potency.120

The animals used for offerings to the guardian spirit in the ‘Asking for Rain’ ceremony are therefore considered deviant from ordinary food by their colour and, in the case of the dog and monkey, also by their species type. As such, their consumption becomes especially potent, but also dangerous, as the case of the ill man above demonstrates and as Sau had explained when he avoided eating the monkey. It is not clear why this particular guardian spirit is said to demand this type of meat but it may be related to the fact that this neak ta is located outside the village (in the wilderness) unlike the neak ta discussed below. Therefore securing the relationship with this neak ta may require more potent substances. In any event, we can see how the community reclaims their relationship with this neak ta through the offering and also with each other by making the sacrifice together. The sacrifice not only binds them but equalises them morally as all having participated in it. It is obvious that a single sacrificed chicken, dog or monkey could not feed an entire community as a buffalo would but the sharing is probably symbolic; as one informant explained, they ‘play with the blood’ throwing it on one another. It is possible that this throwing of blood is related to the fertility of the harvest and the community in a manner similar and complementary to throwing water on each other during the Khmer New Year, although more research is required here.

120 It should be noted that, while eating dog meat is considered morally deficient behaviour by Khmer people generally and most people will deny that Khmers engage in this practice; in fact, it is fairly common in the countryside. To the best of my knowledge, all of O’Thmaa’s dogs were used strictly for guarding the house and hunting but the restaurants along the main road in the market town at times sold dog stew, amongst other dishes. A woman in Kompong Speu town told me that when dogs are killed on the road their carcasses are quickly gathered up and used for food.
The sharing and consumption of prohibited foods produces social cohesion amongst non-kin or extended kin whether it is happening under the aegis of ritual or within the everyday sphere. The greater the taboo, the greater the power to bind people socially. This, however, is not to denigrate the importance of consumption of the more everyday domestic foods in making relatedness. Communal eating such as in the Bon Dalien festival, discussed in Chapter 8, provides a prime example of the other end of the spectrum. Bon Dalien, a harvest festival and ritual coming at the end of the harvest season, is the complement to the ‘Asking for Rain’ ceremony that occurs at the beginning. In this village festival, food is communally cooked and shared within the village and also with guests from neighbouring villages. The food is served on long tables specially prepared for the occasion rather than eating alone. Here the offerings at this ceremony made to the Neak Ta Pia Srok, the guardian spirit of the village, is rice – thus completing the association with the world of humanity that is the world of the civil.

The Buddhist Sangha: The Feeding of Monks

Also associated with the world of the srok – the civil – is the Buddhist Sangha and the selection of food and other offerings for the monks reflects this ordering. The offerings of food to the monks is based on what it is assumed they need and what they would appreciate and enjoy, while still observing the prohibition on food and other consumables forbidden to monks, like alcohol and wild game. On holidays or other occasions where ceremonies are held at the vat or in the villages, typical offerings include cooked white rice, a variety of meat and vegetable stews (samlaw), fruit and coffee, tea and soda pop. The food offered to the monks is consumed publicly at the end of prayers.

This public consumption of the offerings could be seen in some sense as the consummation of the exchange of the offerings for the blessings: the community feed the monks and in return the monks provide them the dhamma (Buddhist teachings). Through the feeding of the monks at local ceremonies and Buddhist holidays observed at the temple, the community maintains a relationship with the Buddha and dhamma. The community does not eat together with the monks, an act that would suggest moral equality. Rather, monks, who categorically occupy a morally elevated position in Khmer culture and society, eat only with other monks. By feeding the monks the
villagers are not only maintaining a relationship with Buddhism but also with the greater community that is served by the temple. The majority of monks within the temple come from the local communities, which helps to elicit a strong relationship between the local communities and the temple.

Feeding the monks within certain ceremonial contexts also helps to maintain the relationship with the ancestral spirits, as I explain below.

Figure 18: Offering to a local spirit
Figure 19: Offerings to the ancestors at a Doung Srae wedding

Figure 20: Offerings to monks in Bon Da ceremony in Doung Srae
Chapter 6

Ancestors

Families will regularly make offerings to their ancestors, privately and in ceremonial settings. But the most significant events in Khmer Buddhism that involves the feeding ancestors is *Pchum Ben*, a holiday that is uniquely Cambodian (Davis 2006: 4). The event lasts 15 days during the end of Cambodia’s rainy season between September and October. Families go to the vat early in the morning before the sun rises on at least some of these days to feed their ancestors rice formed into balls and thrown into the shrubbery around the temple. Later in the morning, the monks recite prayers for the dead and make blessings and then take their midday meal. At this holiday event, family members will accompany the food offerings with the names of their deceased ancestors. The monks’ chants then convert these offerings into merit that will help the ancestors in the afterlife (Davis 2006: 7). In Prei Phnom commune, each village is accorded a special day to visit the vat during this holiday to feed the ancestors and monks and receive their blessings. On the final day of *Pchum Ben* all the villages in the commune are invited to attend. In 2003 I attended this holiday in Prei Phnom on the day that was O’Thmaa’s day to visit the vat and found that almost no one attended while I was there during the late morning and early afternoon, with the exception of one young family and a handful of elders, some of whom came from neighbouring villages. A few more families went on the day of the commune-wide celebration of *Pchum Ben* but on the whole people told me that they were not interested or felt they could not afford the time or the cost to attend. This lack of participation may be attributable in part to the lack of elders in the community (as discussed in Chapter 4), who would normally devote more time to the activities at the vat and whose presence would perhaps provide an incentive for their families to join them for part of this occasion. In any case, even if participation by O’Thmaa residents in the *Pchum Ben* ceremonies at the vat was not overwhelming, it would be wrong to assume they are neglectful toward their ancestors, whom they feed and look after throughout the local holidays and festivals within their village.

Offerings to the ancestors and offerings to the spirits at ritual ceremonies are one way villagers form and maintain relatedness with each other and with the ancestral past. In the following section, I look at another form of relatedness and its connection to food. This section, while not explicitly about commensality, is nonetheless about prohibitions and offerings and relatedness.
Totems, Taboos and Religious Conversion: The Man Who Became a Christian by Eating Rabbit

One afternoon, Ya was explaining to me why he converted to Christianity:

I could feel God's spirit enter me. Before, when I still believed in Buddhism, I was prohibited from eating certain foods. I couldn't even eat rabbit. Even looking at one would make my eyes swell up. But when I began believing in Christianity I could suddenly eat rabbit and nothing would happen to me ... I believe in Jesus because of this. However, if I was to eat rabbit and it did cause my eyes to swell, I also would stop believing in it.

The conversion sounded peculiar to me. But the story soon became even stranger... A day or so later, I was asking another man from the same village, Sau, whether he had ever converted. He had not been present at the time I had talked with Ya and so I was surprised when he said:

No. It is like with foods that we are prohibited to eat. If we are prohibited a certain type of food, we cannot eat it. Like rabbit, I cannot eat it. It is prohibited. But the old people know about the truth of this prohibition. They say that this is a prohibition for hunters.

It is interesting how this local taboo against eating rabbit is employed by people to talk about their religious orientation and their ideas about conversion. Ya sees his ability to eat rabbit as a sign of the moral potency of Christianity over Buddhism and the ways of the past. Sau, on the other hand, uses the traditional prohibition against eating rabbit to explain why he cannot convert – for him Christianity is morally indigestible.

But where did this prohibition against eating rabbit come from? And was it true that only hunters do not eat rabbit? I began asking such questions and I was also told that the taboo applied only to residents of O'Thmaa and a violation would mean the destruction of the village by tigers and elephants. I also heard that a policeman from another area had recently caught a rabbit in someone's nearby field, which, together
with some of the children from the village, he cooked and ate (without any obvious ill
effects). The exemption from the taboo for children comes from their amoral status,
which makes them not responsible for their actions. And, because the policeman came
from elsewhere, the prohibition also did not apply to him.

Sau explained the story behind the taboo as follows:

One day a hunter left his house to go hunting, when he met a tiger. Maybe this
tiger can talk, I don’t know, but the tiger said ‘Hey Ta!', climbing down from
the tree. ‘Let me eat you!' The hunter was so scared he could not shoot the
tiger, so he told the tiger ‘Before you eat me I must tell my wife and children, I
have to run to tell them first!' While he was running home he met a rabbit [the
Rabbit Judge — a formidable character in Khmer folklore] when he was
halfway there, who asked him, ‘What is it, Ta? Where are you going and why
are you screaming and crying?' And the hunter replied ‘Oh dear brother rabbit
[bâng sophea-huey], there is a tiger that wants to eat me! And now I have to
run to tell my wife and children about this.' The rabbit said, ‘Don’t worry. You
must offer me some rice flakes [ambok] and bananas and then you must go
back to see the tiger with me.' When they returned to the place where the tiger
was, the tiger said: ‘You come here!' The rabbit realised what had happened
earlier and so he ordered the hunter to climb up onto the look-out platform. He
asked the hunter to explain fully what happened before. The rabbit then told
the hunter ‘You’ve got to pull your crossbow, aim, and release the arrow.' The
then hunter aimed at the tiger, and the rabbit told him ‘Release the arrow!' and
so the tiger was killed.

Sau paused then for a second and then added:

And then we also have the Reamke [Ramayana], which continues up until the
present. In this story, they conclude that the hunter was freed from the tiger by
the rabbit. Therefore, because of these stories, we do not dare eat rabbit. We
cannot eat it because that is the prohibition that is a result of the rabbit having
helped us.
The story suggests the innocence and transparency of the man who is seemingly incapable of deception, a trait that, as we will see, affiliates him with his ancestors who were described as equally transparent. Secondly, his ability to converse with a rabbit suggests he has access to the enchanted world. Additionally, it seems that the rabbit may represent knowledge through his cleverness, and also culture in his request for domestic foods. Two of the morals of the stories can easily be read as the triumph of knowledge over the gullibility of the tiger and the conquest of the wild by the civil. However, none of these explanations tell us why it is only in O’Thmaa that people are forbidden from eating rabbit.

One possibility (although very unlikely) is that the rabbit may be a totem.\(^{121}\) As we have seen, the villagers largely share common ancestry associated with particular locales. It is possible that these earlier clans were associated with totems, which would explain why the prohibition applies to all people of O’Thmaa (not all of whom are hunters) and not to the neighbouring villagers, some of whom also hunt. What is more likely within the Cambodian context is that, firstly, the rabbit is associated with Buddhism\(^{122}\) and, secondly, that the story about the rabbit and the hunter correlates to numerous folktales of the clever rabbit, who continually outsmarts or helps out those with less mental agility.\(^{123}\)

Returning to the story of Ya’s conversion, it is unclear how Ya came to the decision to try eating rabbit whilst becoming a Christian but he probably was well aware that the prohibition was associated with the ancestral past of O’Thmaa in particular. After all, the taboo did not hold for any of the other villages in the area (all of which are primarily Buddhist), which suggests it carries more meaning for residents than an affiliation with Buddhism. If the taboo then also represents the village identity and its ancestral past, why then did Ya not feel a connection to it when clearly many of his neighbours, like Sau, do?

As we have seen, Ya did not feel comfortable in the village of his ancestors. Having lost both of his parents during the revolution and Khmer Rouge years, his connection to that

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\(^{121}\) I thank John Marston for bringing this to my attention.

\(^{122}\) The Buddha was a rabbit in one of his earlier incarnations before enlightenment (Eric Davis: personal communication).

\(^{123}\) For a study of the rabbit in Khmer folklore, see Chanthyda Chor (2004).
past had been severely damaged and disrupted. It is possible, then, that Ya was seeking to reduce his affiliation with the village, its sordid past, and its present day difficulties by rejecting its very local culture and tradition. He may in this way be attempting to form a stronger relationship to his wife’s village in Doung Srae. By eating rabbit, a food prohibited to his ancestors and relations he appears to be cutting himself off from his community and his ancestral past – whereas Sau, using the same metaphor, asserts his place within the village and its past, while simultaneously placing Christianity outside.  

Sau and Ya were both too young to be soldiers during the DK era. But in the 1980s Sau joined the government army that fought the Khmer Rouge, whereas Ya joined the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge had executed both men’s fathers in the early 1970s and both men blame Ta Kam for these assassinations. The fact that they both lost their fathers to the Khmer Rouge at approximately the same time and in a similar manner suggests that Sau’s decision not to join the Khmer Rouge or to become a Christian is not simply the outcome of having lost his father. But Sau is one of the people in Prei Phnom who shows an active interest in the traditions of the past, an interest that may well stem from the survival of his 89-year-old mother, Yeay Khieu, who not only remembers some of the traditions and stories from the past but who also enthusiastically shares this knowledge with her children and anyone who will listen. Her presence and influence seemed to mitigate the gap whereas for Ya (and his wife, who also lost her parents under the Khmer Rouge) the connection to the ancestors seemed to be weakened by the loss of parents, who might have otherwise provided a positive connection to the past.

**Conclusion**

Several themes have flowed through this chapter but perhaps the most important is how commensality, food, and notions of the wild and the civil all work to simultaneously express and transform the moral order. The power of food to transform social relationships through its consumption and sharing, as suggested by a number of

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124 The employment of taboos to open and close relationships has been well covered by Michael Lambek (1992).
scholars, is evident in the practices of villagers in O'Thmaa today, as it appears to have been in the past. We saw that the breaking of taboos both forms and severs relatedness and therefore has the power to transform sociality and society as a whole. In this light, it is then interesting to look back at the Khmer Rouge policies that sought to transform the practices that constitute relatedness. The power to transform relatedness may lend some further explanation as to why the Khmer Rouge were so keen to break so many prohibitions concerning kinship, commensality, food, and ancestral worship. Here, Hinton's work (2005) has gone a long way to illuminate a number of expressions of Khmer Rouge policy and practices in this regard, such as the reform of family and wider social structures, but this chapter helps to understand some of the intricacies of what undoing those old 'cultural models', to use Hinton's term, would have implied. Here in this chapter I have shown how a number of these categories, qualities, and 'key symbols' such as blood, and the wild and the civil, are employed in the re-ordering happening in the present. In the next chapter, I continue to study this re-ordering process through the mediums of story telling and landscape.
Chapter 7

Mountains, Morals and Memory

If the doors of perception were cleansed
every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.
For man has closed himself up, till he sees
all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.
William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790 to 1792)

We have been examining some of the ways in which moral order is expressed, maintained and remade through the deployment of notions of the wild and the civil, potency, and prohibitions in the processes of making relatedness through the institutions of commensality and marriage. This chapter approaches these same themes but this time by looking at stories, histories, and myths in which features of the landscape figure in significant ways. In recent years the relationships between landscape, memory, myth, history and identity have been the focus of numerous studies. The classical view that landscape is an entity fixed in historical time and outside of social and cultural processes has long been overridden by new perspectives that take a less objectifying or colonising stance, viewing landscape instead to as a dynamic and part of cultural processes (Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995). Such studies show how features of the natural environment become landscape through cultural processes whereby metaphoric meanings are applied through social, historical and political processes (Abercrombie 1998; Schama 1996; Taussig 1997). It is now accepted wisdom that accounts of landscapes provide insight into people’s social values and metaphysical concerns (Bloch 1995). As a dynamic interface of culture and nature, landscapes take shape and become imbued with our imaginings and memories, which, seen as projecting an expansion of our consciousness (Bachelard and Jolas 1994), allow us to see how landscape becomes the metaphor of social consciousness.

A dynamic sense of the role of tales that embed the landscape is found in accounts by David Chandler (1998) and more recently Penny Edwards (forthcoming), who locate a space of potency and enchantment on the edge of the forest between the wild and the civil; a space that is neither fully human nor fully animal but where magic, moral
transformation and creation occur. In O’Thmaa, situated literally on the border between the wilderness and civilisation, this space of enchantment offers a site for contested moral meanings and practices. Within the landscape here are magical forest hermits, treasure-filled boxes made of stone, enchanted weaving looms, mythical weddings and host of other enchanted creatures, characters, objects and events. But how are these embodiments of enchantment related to harsh everyday realities? Where are they situated in relation to the cataclysmic violence of the recent past and do they offer a space for negotiation and transformation?

Referring back to the chaos and violence that took place in 19th century Cambodia, both Chandler and Edwards agree that, despite the upheaval, peoples’ conceptions of the cosmological order endured the chaos and later helped to explain it. Oral histories, stories and normative poems provided the means to interpret the events and to fill them with moral meaning. Disorder and violence appear to be managed in part through a process of embedding stories in the landscape. This chapter builds upon this idea, showing how villagers in Prei Phnom and Doung Srae incorporate local stories to interpret the past and the present. This process, however, is not smooth or unproblematic. Rather, the existence of competing stories and inconsistencies suggests a process involving contradictions and multiplicities of meaning. But what do these stories do exactly and why are they tied to features of the landscape?

Just as landscape can be constructed by our thoughts and ideas, it can also serve to shape them. Keith Basso’s (1996) work amongst the Apache points to a number of ways the landscape mingles with stories and moral virtues that is also relevant here. Inspired by Heidegger, Basso argues that for the Apache, features of the landscape act like vessels filled with moral knowledge that is conveyed through the stories associated with these features. Recognising these places and reflecting on the stories allows the Apache to ‘drink’ the moral knowledge contained therein, making it ultimately a part of their consciousness. That is, remembering and reflecting on these places changes people’s perceptions about the world and how to act within it. Moreover, the stories associated with features of the landscape not only dictate proper moral practice, but they also connect people to the past. Their ancestors shared these same stories and also ‘drank’ from the same places. Thus for the Apaches the land is a reflection and reflector
of their moral order and the past in the present and it is maintained through the telling of the stories associated with the particular places.

Features of the landscape also remind Khmer people of particular moral tales, which are told and passed on to their children who are then able to narrate them themselves. For example, a particular mountain may be said to be the mythical crocodile of a mythical fable, or a ridge the body of a princess. But it is not just mythical tales of the ancestors and enchanted creatures that are told; historical events are also absorbed into the land's features. As we will see, the two types of stories, those of a historical event like the Thai invasions of the early 19th century and those of mythological giants become increasingly similar over time. Both often contain moral lessons and both are told in varying ways to compensate for and reflect present circumstances.

Sites for Memory, Moral Order and Magic: Rocks, Weddings and Feasts

The Enchanted Rock Box

In O'Thmaa there is a story about a peculiar shaped boulder on a nearby mountain. The boulder is called The Stone Box, or thmā brāap. As the story is told, this boulder is no ordinary rock. In fact, it would once have manifested itself as an enchanted box containing all the clothing and articles one would need for a wedding. Eighty-nine-year-old Yeay Khieu, together with her nephew, Nang, took me one day to see it, as I described in Chapter 3. It was the first time anyone from the village had willingly put aside their mistrust to accompany me into the forest and allow me to glimpse that hidden enchanted realm.

The story of the boulder, as Yeay Khieu told it to me, went something like this.

The stone is actually a box containing everything that is needed to perform a traditional Khmer wedding ceremony. In the past, when the ancestors wished to perform a wedding ceremony. 'They would give a prayer and then the box would open and they could borrow all the beautiful silks and so forth that the box contained.' When they were finished with the ceremony, the items would be returned to the thmā brāap and it would close again until the next occasion.
A prayer was offered to an ancestor spirit of the mountain, *Lok Ta Phnom Chan*, and went something like this: ‘If you will permit me to borrow these items from you, then I promise that I will not keep them for myself but will return them to you when I have finished with them.’

Eventually, however, the stone stopped opening because people failed to keep their promise and did not return the items. As a result, the rock became harder and harder until it could no longer be opened and, according to Yeay Khieu, it will never open again. So sure of this was Yeay Khieu that she even challenged me to go and try to open the rock myself:

Please go ahead and try and open that rock! You can’t! It can’t be opened! There is absolutely no way to open it because they never returned the things they borrowed.

When I asked Yeay Khieu why people did not return what they had borrowed, she said she did not know why but that the people were greedy. She said that the people ‘were not really honest with the spirit *Lok Ta Phnom Chan*, whereas the spirit had been ‘extremely honest and generous with the people’.
Figure 21: The ‘stone box’ (*thmâ brâap*)

The story of the *thmâ brâap* is a fairly typical Khmer tale. My research assistant told me that he had heard of this story in other parts of Cambodia. Nonetheless, there is indeed a large boulder in the forest that villagers say is *thmâ brâap* and it is always referred to when telling stories about the area and the ancestors. The *Lok Ta Phnom Chan* in the story is the ancestor spirit of the local mountain and, although it is said that generally people do not believe in these ancestor spirits as they once did, in practice, as I heard and saw in the stories told and offerings made, these spirits are still very much a part of people’s consciousness. Often, however, when speaking of the *thmâ brâap*, and also an enchanted weaving loom near the rock, villagers would refer to the *neak*
sachchang,\textsuperscript{125} or forest hermits who are enchanted forest people but are also considered to be ancestors of sorts who are normally invisible but occasionally will appear. Elaborating further, some villagers say that most of the local neak sachchang were Khmer people who hid in the forest during the Thai invasion some 150 years earlier, although some were also Suoy\textsuperscript{126} and some even Chinese. Other villagers say that the local neak sachchang appeared to their ancestors several generations back. Nonetheless, whether the thmâ brâaph is associated with the spirit of the mountain or neak sachchang, the rock is still clearly associated with the ancestors and is considered by the villagers to be one of the local features of the landscape that ties them together as people from a shared place and history. The theme that runs through this story (which links back to the discussions of trust and honesty in Chapter 3) and other stories that I was told, is that a golden ancestral past existed when people were honest and pure and kept their promises and when magic and enchantment flourished. With the passing of time, however, people have become increasingly self-interested and dishonest, and so the enchanted world has faded into the realm of the invisible except in rare cases where magical forest hermits (neak sachchang) ‘allow’ people to see them and their world.\textsuperscript{127} In particular it is said that in the past (before the Khmer Rouge revolution), some of the elder members in the community who ‘knew how to see everything’ (cheah aoy kheunh krop yang) could see this invisible realm.

Despite the present day invisibility of this world – or perhaps because of it – stories are still told about it and are carried forward generation after generation. Anchored as this world is to visible features of the locale, the visible landscape provides a representation of the larger unseen world, perhaps in the way the tops of trees and buildings poke through the cloud cover in dawn’s light, giving only a suggestion of the enchanted world beneath. In this sense, it is not like the Apache landscape studied by Basso where ‘wisdom sits’ in the visible features of the land and is conveyed through the ‘attached’ moral tales. Here too the visible landscape is associated with moral tales, whose

\textsuperscript{125} The neak sachchang are commonly depicted in Cambodia as white haired and bearded male magical forest hermits who dress in white robes. They are generally attributed with the power to control wild animals and will help those who pray to them. They are also seen as potentially dangerous if they are not accorded proper respect. In the area of O’Thmaa, the neak sachchang carry most of these attributes but can also be women and can appear as ordinary people.

\textsuperscript{126} A Mon-Khmer ethnic group in Kompong Speu, discussed in Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{127} This, of course, is reminiscent in some ways of Weber’s ‘disenchantment of the world’ (2002) but see also Candace Slater’s (1994) description of the plight of the enchanted dolphins in Brazilian Amazonia and their role as an idiom for social change.
potency and wisdom seem to be connected (at least in part) with the idyllic morality of the past that lives on in this invisible enchanted realm.

The division between the visible and invisible worlds, however, is not always obvious. For example, I had taken a number of photos of the rock on my visit and, when my neighbour Thon heard this, he told me that he would really like to see these photos because he did not believe that the rock would be visible in the photographs. Others also shared this view, presumably, that the rock really belonged to the invisible world and therefore would be invisible on film. Needless to say, when he saw the photos he was surprised but then asked whether we had asked permission from the *neak sachchang* to take the photos of the rock. My answer was that I assumed that Yeay Khieu or her nephew must have done so, on the presumption that Thon believed that it was only because the spirit had allowed us to see the rock in the photos that it appeared. But also implied here is that we, as humans, were able or allowed to see the box in its rock form whereas a camera, which is a technological device (and therefore entirely amoral), would not be able 'to see' it.

**The Enchanted Wedding Party**

Yeay Khieu told me another story about an enchanted wedding. I include it here (although already outlined in Chapter 3) because it provides a further vivid illustration of the invisible landscape and its associated people, objects and events and also because it allows us to see how these Khmer villagers view the past and explain the present.

The 'old people' had told Yeay Khieu this story about her ancestors, a very honest husband and wife. The couple were in the forest one day when they appeared before them a man and a woman and a wedding party travelling on three elephants. One elephant had tusks of red (the colour of red lime powder), one was blue and the third white. The people riding the elephants dressed according to the colour of the tusks, a practice that Yeay Khieu said was a tradition in this region.

The bride's family and the groom's were each astride different elephants, with the bride's side being from one mountain and the groom's another. Along with the wedding couple, there also appeared an enormous betel nut, the size of a coconut, matched by an
equally oversize betel leaf and a silver box that traditionally would hold the lime powder [the significance of which should be clear from Chapter 6]. The people on one of the elephants offered the betel nut and leaf to the man and woman on the ground. Yeay Khieu continued:

My ancestors asked the people on the elephants, ‘Oh Sirs and Madams! Where are you going?’ And the people on the elephants answered, ‘Oh we are going to marry our children!’

Yeay Khieu explained that the husband and wife were told by the people in the wedding party that their daughter and son, who came from two different mountains, were soon to be wed. After that, the people on the elephants said that it was late and they needed to go. Soon after, the entire wedding party disappeared, leaving only the husband and wife standing alone in the forest. Even the path they had travelled on had disappeared and there was nothing but forest all around. Yeay Khieu ended the story saying:

Our ancestors were very good people – incredibly honest – and that is why they could see all of this. If they had not been good people they would not have been able to see them.

From our discussion, it became clear that Yeay Khieu considered the people of the wedding party to be neak sachchang (enchanted forest hermits). She said that this area belonged to them and that they still lived in the forest. She explained, ‘When we pray to them, the prayers come true.’ In the past, she said, her ancestors were able to see these neak sachchang people and other representations of the enchanted world but nowadays they are largely invisible. What is invisible in the everyday landscape is only revealed in certain circumstances.

*The Enchanted Feast and Other Stories*

My neighbour Thon also had stories to tell of the neak sachchang. He explained that he, as well as his grandfather, had had the good fortune to be ‘allowed to see’ some elements of the invisible realm. For example, he said that his grandfather had met a neak sachchang along the road one day. The neak sachchang appeared as an ordinary
person, greeted his grandfather and invited him to share in a wonderful feast. Thon explained that, when people were hungry or needed wood for a fire, they would ask the *neak sachchang* and whatever was needed would appear. Thon remembers a time when he was a child and he found a bronze anklet whilst tending cattle on the nearby mountain. He left it there and went to fetch his grandfather to show him what he had found but when they returned the anklet had disappeared. He speculated that either the *neak sachchang* had only momentarily allowed him to be able to see the anklet or perhaps did not want him to have it. He explained then that the ancestors used to have the knowledge necessary to be able to see these things but since the time the Khmer Rouge came everything had disappeared, including the old beliefs and knowledge. Nonetheless, it is interesting that, later, when he was a Khmer Rouge soldier running from the Vietnamese and found himself lost in the forest with nothing to eat, Thon recalls being fed by the *neak sachchang* during his sleep. He thought about the *neak sachchang* and the spirits of the mountain and forest and at night he would dream of the *neak sachchang* bringing him food. During the day, he found he was not hungry. Thus, he believes that this knowledge and associated beliefs are still true but it requires the ability ‘to see’.

I asked Thon whether he thought the war was responsible for the loss of beliefs and the other articles, such as the anklet, and some statues, that he had said were now invisible. His response took me by surprise:

> It is difficult for me to make any assumptions about this. If I would do some research on it like you, Eve, I could know. I wonder whether during the ancient times the ancient people had all kinds of beliefs that allowed them to see some of those things. Even now, they [*neak sachchang*] just allow us to see the pottery fragments up on the mountain and all around here. Maybe this pottery was from that ancient period.

There are two points to make here. Firstly, it confirms that the pottery fragments, like the rock box, are a partial representation of the invisible realm. Secondly, there is a notable shift from atemporality to temporality. Earlier, I had thought we were talking about a realm where enchanted beings lived in a morally elevated and atemporal universe. I knew that the *neak sachchans* and enchanted objects and sites were not
subject to any of the natural laws of birth and decay. But here was Thon, who only
moments ago had been talking about enchanted relics and statues, now discussing
actual pottery fragments and wanting me to investigate how old they actually were. In
fact the next day, Thon returned from the mountain with a bag full of pottery fragments
and, as I described in Chapter 2, asked me if I could arrange to have them dated. They
were from around the 14th and 15th century AD.128

The stories told by Thon and Yeay Khieu seem to be strongly associated with moral
ordering. Certain moral behaviour was rewarded whereas other behaviour is punished:
those who were honest, good, and believed in the enchanted world were granted access
to its treasures but those who lacked these qualities were punished by being denied
access to the enchanted world and its gifts. Moreover, it is specifically the transparency
of people’s intentions, reflected in their honesty, that ‘allows’ people ‘to be trusted’
(Chapter 3) ‘to see’ the enchanted world. Once again we see the idiom of clarity as it is
linked to notions of honesty, trust and ultimately the full scope of the moral world. A
further substantiation that the ‘enchanted world’ is the nexus of moral order is found in
the description of the enchanted wedding where we find the connection to the ancestors
and the making of kin and community all told through the medium of marriage between
clans and the associated use of betel and its accompaniments (see Chapter 6).

But how does this enchanted realm interface with social change? The stories told by
Thon give some hints of the ways in which the enchanted past also becomes a site
where social change is negotiated. In his narratives we saw the mixing of his own
‘autobiographical memories’, that is, those events he remembers having experienced,
with elements of the enchanted past recited by Yeay Khieu, which can be called
‘semantic memory’, memory learned from others and recalled.129 This raises the
question of why he merges these two versions of the past, even to the extent that they
enter his dreams. One answer may be that, in Eric Hirsch’s terms, the enchanted world
gives ‘background potentiality’, meaning that it is a site where people attempt to
overcome the precariousness of existence (Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995: 10). It provides

128 By way of reminder from Chapter 2: I took the pottery shards to the Angkor Conservation office in
Siem Reap to be analysed. Through a comparison with similar pottery shards it was determined that there
were three types: Khmer Vietnamese and Thai all from around the 15th century BC (some perhaps earlier
some later).
129 I take these definitions of autobiographical and semantic memory from Maurice Bloch who himself
access to a moral, potent and atemporal world that can be a resource for the negotiation of social change. Thon's stories hint at this – although he mixed it with a strong sense of historical time, as shown in his demand to date the pottery. Let us now take a wider look at the relationship between the past and the present and the negotiation of social change on the level of the community.

Landscape and Moral Tales as a Buffer for Social Change and a Site for Historical Interpretation

For Khmer people, the Cambodian landscape is a storybook. Khmer people impute mythic form and substance to the features of their natural environment and these place-stories and the wisdom they carry with them is passed orally from one generation to the next. All this is evident in the stories described above. We also saw that composite moral wisdom was embedded in the storytelling and emplaced in the symbolic images found in the local features of the landscape like the thmá brāq. However, stories such as these also gave me some level of understanding of the local 'landscape' as a non-fixed process, interfacing with people's sense of identity, history and recollections that together form a sense of community. Individuals narrate their past to accommodate differing moral ends and social and existential contingencies (Cole 2003; Sorabji 2006; Lambek 1996). Likewise, I suggest, so do communities. Communities, like the individuals who compose them, do not have identical histories and therefore (their members) may direct their narration of the past to differing collective moral ends. Making such collective narratives, I suggest, is where part of the process of ordering, making sense out of historical events, is revealed.

In Chapter 4 I argued that the two communes experienced the Khmer Rouge period differently and therefore their means and relative success in recovering from their pasts are shaped by these experiences. In Prei Phnom, villagers seem to have abandoned the past and embraced what they see as modernity. In Doung Srae, however, people have embraced their traditions and past, an initiative that aims to place the past into the present, rather than abandoning it. In Prei Phnom, people have formed a narrative of 'victims of circumstance' to account for the violence they endured but this narrative of victimhood is compromised by events that happened within their own community. In
Doung Srae it appears that no such contradiction exists and hence its people can better accept what happened as circumstantial and move forward.

Expanding on these themes below, I shall suggest that representations of the Thai invasion and the ‘footprint’ in the rock in fact reflect the present day circumstances of the villagers in the two communes and that the variations in the tales arise out of their differing experiences during the Khmer Rouge era.

**The Chinese (or Thai) Footprint**

In the mountains near O’Thmaa village there is said to be a rock that bears an indentation in the likeness of a footprint. According to O’Thmaa’s residents (and their neighbours within Prei Phnom commune), this stone is the footprint of a Chinese man and there is a tale associated with it. The footprint was also the subject of stories in the neighbouring commune of Doung Srae – only there the footprint is said to be Thai, not Chinese (although they acknowledge that the residents of O’Thmaa see it as Chinese). Why do the two communes differ in their accounts? What meanings are attached to these two versions of the story? In the section that follows, I provide a brief account of the two versions which, as told by the villagers, are interwoven with stories of the Thai invasion in the 19th century.

One afternoon in Ta Mahn’s house, we were talking about the *thmā brāap* and the *neak sachchang*. He said that, before the Thai came a long time ago ‘there was a lot of jackfruit, pine trees and eggplant growing here. Now there is nothing left.’ He said that the Khmer *neak sachchang* were people who had fled to the forest from the Thai invaders, who were capturing Khmer people and then leading them by a string connected through metal disks through their noses to Thailand to be slaves. Those Khmers who fled to the forest to escape were still alive and living there today, But he also said that other *neak sachchang* living in the forest surrounding O’Thmaa could be *Suoy* or Chinese. When I asked him why there were Chinese *neak sachchangs* in the area, he told me the following story:

> It is according to the story at the place called *Smar Krohey* [the oxen’s shoulder] which is where the Chinese footprint [snum choeng Chen] is located. You see, there was a Chinese man who had lost his buffalo and was looking
for it but could not find it. So this Chinese man prayed to the *Lok Ta* [spirit], beseaching him to help him, and in return he promised he would make the *Lok Ta* a very special offering. Shortly thereafter, the Chinese man found his buffalo but he did not make an offering to the *Lok Ta* as he had promised. Soon after, a tiger came along and killed and ate both the Chinese man and his buffalo. Now the tiger, buffalo and the footprint of the Chinese man are all there in stone.

A second version of the footprint tale that was told to me in Doung Srae. The story there was also couched within another story about the 19th century Thai invasion. A little like a Russian doll, this story also contains still another story, only this one is about the Khmer Rouge. I heard this story first from an old man and later from the commune chief. The two Doung Srae versions were essentially the same, with a few minor differences. The old man told the story as follows:

There was a *Krosang* tree here in Doung Srae that was so high that, when its fruit fell, it landed all the way over in Thailand, where it caused people to die. Also, another tree here, the *Kaheach* tree, had leaves\(^{130}\) that would also blow to Thailand and kill people. The Thai king investigated the matter and realised the fruit and the leaves must have come from Cambodia, so he sent his army to Doung Srae and attacked the temple. All the sacred statues there were broken by them ... The Thai built up their battalion here ... I don’t know quite what happened exactly regarding the Buddha statues but I myself saw they were damaged. The Thai had said that the Khmer trees were very potent, only one leaf can kill people in another country! ... And so they broke the Buddha statues – everything in the temple including the big drum.\(^131\) *Then later the Khmer Rouge broke all the Buddha statues again.* The Thais arrested a lot of people here and they cut down the *Krosang* and *Kaheach* trees.

At this point in the story a young man who was part of the crowd listening to the story interjected:

\(^{130}\) In the commune chief’s version of this story, it is the leaves of the *Rokah* tree that fly to Thailand and cause the Thai people to fall ill and die.

\(^{131}\) The commune chief’s version of the story suggested that the drum was so potent that when it was struck it was heard and caused people to die in Thailand.
They put holes through their ears and ran a string through them. I don’t know what century that was, but you can still see the shoeprints of the Thais here.

The old man explained:

The old people call it the ‘One Leather Shoeprint’ and it relates to the story about the Thai soldiers. You can still see the shoeprint, along with the marks from their swords in the rock in O’Thmaa. The Thai wondered, ‘Why are the Khmers full of magical talent?’ They would bring the Khmer people to that temple but they were unable to stab, cut or shoot them because of their magical power. The footprint is to the west of O’Thmaa -- we call it ‘One Leather’, meaning one infantry battalion of the Thai. Not everyone agrees about this though. Some people say it is is the ‘Chinese footprint’ [snam cheung Chen] whereas others say it is the ‘Thai footprint’ [snam cheung Thai]. But in reality it was the Thai who arrested people and pulled them by their ears and not the Chinese. There is also another place called ‘Siem Louk’ [Thai Occupation’]. This has a really long history but there are no longer old men here who can still remember it, if they were alive they would remember. The Thai’s warehouses of ammunition, such as gunpowder and bullets, has now become mountains. At that time the giants were fighting each other: Khauv Som Montia’s husband and one other giant.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to add some elements of the commune chief’s version of the Thai invasion that were not included in the old man’s version above. The chief explained that:

When they [the Thai] came to Doung Srae they stole the Kompi [the holy text], the Books of the Dhamma [Buddhist teachings], and all the other holy texts from Doung Srae’s temple. The Thais then visited a village nearby but the people there called them aps, thinking that the Thais came there to inflict harm upon them. So the villagers killed some of them with their own swords and washed the swords in the pond there afterwards. Some of the Thais made it back to Thailand, taking most of the texts and bronze statues with them.

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132 A famous Cambodian mythological giant who is now in the form of a rock not far from my fieldsite.  
133 Vampiric-like sorcerer creatures who fly with their entrails flowing behind.  
134 The pond which is near the temple is called Trapaing Lieng Dau meaning 'The Pond of Washing the Sword'.
and leaving only a few at the temple ... When the Thais did this, they caught some Khmers, stringing them together through their punctured ears, to take along with them to explain the Kompi and other holy texts. Some others were caught to be servants. There was one man named Ta Khen who, together with the Queen of Prei Phnom, helped people to escape to the mountains. Now the mountain that is between Prei Phnom and Doung Srae carries his name.

These stories are interesting in several respects. Firstly, they demonstrate the multiplicity of meanings and the contested nature of the attribution of stories to the landscape. Secondly, they are evidently of a moral nature. Thirdly, the stories, together with their associated features of the landscape, appear to provide a potential template for interpreting and integrating the Khmer Rouge experience into a larger moral framework or order. Let me begin with the story of the Chinese footprint in O’Thmaa.

In the localised O’Thmaa version of the story, the main character of the tale is a Chinese man. We never learn why he is roaming around the wilderness outside of O’Thmaa. The importance of the story and its telling seems to be its moral aspect. The man made a promise to the guardian spirit and then reneged on it, only to suffer the consequences in the end. The moral of the story is on an immediate level the same as the story of thmâ brâap: if you are not honest, then you will suffer the consequences (albeit harsher consequences in this instance). While no more complex than an Aesop’s fable at first glance, the story still leaves us with the nagging question of why the main character is a Chinese man rather than a Khmer man or an animal, like a tortoise or a rabbit, as in other Khmer tales. To begin with, we can rule out that it has anything to do with a local Chinese population in the area. Some people here are to a greater or lesser extent Sino-Khmer. However, no one I spoke to claimed to be of Chinese descent; nor, to the best of my knowledge, does anyone here participate in Chinese cultural practices common amongst the Sino-Khmer urban population.135 There are three other explanations for the man being Chinese. Firstly, it is possible that there were Chinese traders in the area in the past. Secondly, it is possible that this story, like the story of the thmâ brâap and the enchanted wedding party, is also told in other parts of the country and therefore may have originated elsewhere. These explanations are both plausible but one is still left to wonder why over time a Khmer farmer was not substituted for the

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135 See also Willmott (1967; 1970).
Chinese man: after all, as we have seen in the story of the thnã braãhp, Khmers also do not always keep their word.

In the course of my fieldwork I asked many people whether they felt the traditions and rituals had been changed by the Khmer Rouge era. The majority replied that, the traditions remained similar to those of the past but that the expression of these traditions at ritual festivals and ceremonies had changed, becoming ‘more modern’. When I asked them to elaborate what they meant by this, many of them explained that the music and the dress today was ‘Chinese’! This was surprising to me because the popular music that was actually played at ritual gatherings and festivals tended to be Khmer, not Chinese, and, if the influence was from anywhere else, it was most certainly was from Thailand. In fact, several very popular songs came from the Khmer population living on the Thai side of the border. The same could be said about fashion. Most of the clothes considered to be fashionable were articles that flowed over from the Thai markets and factories.

Another explanation for the Chinese character in the tale might be that Khmer people tend to associate the Chinese with the modern urban centres where they play a prominent role in business and banking, and where a lot of modern goods, such as DVDs, CDs, audio and computer equipment and so forth are sourced. Finally, but probably less important, it was also the Chinese state that supported the Khmer Rouge attempt to leap towards modernity by supplying them with technological goods and guidance. Most of the villagers who grew up during that period would perhaps have seen the foreign Chinese as representing a modernity of some sort. Nonetheless, none of these explanations adequately addresses the question of why the everyday forms of modernity in popular culture are considered Chinese over Thai. My guess here is that the answer is to be found at least in part in accounts of the Thai invasion, where the Thais are depicted by both communes as the enemy and in the Doung Srae version especially as an enemy of reduced moral status and potency.\(^{136}\)

\(^{136}\) It is interesting to note here that the events that preceded and followed the Thai riots in Phnom Penh on January 29\(^{th}\) 2003 captured many of these themes. In O’Thuma, the event brought about the recall of the brutal behaviour of the Thai during the early 19\(^{th}\) century.
The story of the 19th century Thai invasion is presented in a very different light in the two communes. In O'Thmaa and Prei Phnom commune in general, it is a story of persecution: the Thais descended upon the hapless villagers, who were either enslaved or simply forced to flee and live out their lives in the forest. In Doung Srae commune, on the other hand, the story is told very differently. Through their lethally potent fruit, leaves and drums, the villagers were the original perpetrators in the battle with the Thai and, even when the Thai invaded, the Khmer villagers still managed to kill many of them. It is also significant that the villagers saw the Thais as aps, which are inhuman vile creatures, whereas the Thais in the story viewed the Khmers as implicitly superior and civilised because of their great knowledge and potency. Finally, even though both communes tell of their ancestors being taken away as slaves, in the Doung Srae version it is noted that several were taken for their abilities to read the sacred texts, something the Thai apparently were incapable of doing. In the end it seems the Doung Srae version casts the Thai invasion as a story of local potency whereas in the Prei Phnom version it is a story of persecution and victimhood.

It is interesting that the story also links up with the Cambodian legend Preah Ko Preah Keo, which tells of the Thai capture of the Khmer kingdom in Lovek in 1594 (Chandler 1996: 84-86; Smith 1989-42). In this tale, the Thais trick the Khmers into cutting down the bamboo that protected their statues, the sacred cow (Preah Ko) and sacred stone (Preah Keo), which together held the collection of gold and texts that composed the Khmer kingdom's sacred knowledge and potency. The Thai are said to have then stolen the statues and, along with them, the moral potency of the Khmer kingdom. Even more interesting, Chandler tells us that this story, first published in the late 19th century, may be tied to the events that occurred in the 19th century and possibly even the sacking of Angkor by the Thai in 1431 (Chandler 1996: 85). Recalling that the pottery fragments (composed of Thai, Vietnamese and Khmer pieces) in the area of O'Thmaa date from somewhere between the 15th and 16th centuries raises some interesting questions as to what was being recalled from what periods in the telling of these present day stories.137

137 It is entirely possible in any case that the Thais came through the area in 1594, as mentioned in Chapter 2; however, more research is required.
Returning the present stories of the Thai invasion, we see a strong narrative of victimhood in Prei Phnom commune while, interestingly, in Doung Srae the chaos and destruction of the Thai invasion is explained through a narrative that ultimately places the Khmers there in a superior light. The Thais fail in their attempt to steal all of the holy treasures; those they do manage to steal they are unable to decipher; and the Thais themselves are mistaken for vampiric sorcerers (aps) by the villagers; and several are killed (suggesting some level of Khmer victory). In contrast, in Prei Phnom, the village ancestors were either turned into slaves or forced to live in the forest like animals (I return to this point further down).

Modern Morals and Meanings?

It is said that nowadays the people of Prei Phnom commune are primarily interested in ‘modern’ ideas, music, and dress and have lost interest and knowledge in the ways of the past (see Chapter 4). Let us apply this to the story of the Chinese footprint: if we replace the Chinese man with ‘modernity’ in the story we get a pretty straight moral – with modernity and a market economy, the traditional guardian spirits are disregarded and there is a danger that comes with this. The spirit sends a tiger to devour and kill the Chinese man and his ox. The tiger, a potent animal in the Khmer cosmos and representing nature, kills the ox and the Chinese man and eats them, thereby transforming them into a natural feature of the environment. The wilderness, as we have seen in Chapter 6, is transformative. It is a site of destruction but also a site for rebirth (Chandler 1998). Ponchaud (1989) described the Khmer Rouge sending urbanites to the ‘cradle of their race’, the forest, the natural, to be cleansed and purified. One may ask, then, was the Chinese man, representing the rejection of the ancestors and Khmer traditions and beliefs, also being returned to nature to purify him from his immoral ways?

The story structurally resembles the story of the rabbit told in Chapter 6. Because the hunter keeps his promise to the rabbit, he is saved and the tiger is killed. In the story of the Chinese footprint, by contrast, the promise is reneged upon and therefore the Chinese man is killed. This suggests not only potentially a warning against putting aside the ways of the past but also the potential penalties of dishonesty and non-transparency (as discussed earlier in this chapter as well as in Chapter 3).
Chapter 7

Presences, Absences and Destruction

One of the points that I have been raising here (and that I also suggested in Chapter 4) is that Prei Phnom and Doung Srae's distinct ways of coping with the past and notions of modernity and tradition reflect their recent histories. To illustrate this, I turn back to the landscape as invoked in the stories of the Thai invasion. In the Doung Srae version, we find that the story has already been elaborately drawn out onto the features of the landscape. There is a mountain named after one of the Khmer heroes of the war, a pond named after the killing of Thai soldiers, a mountain said to be made of Thai ammunition, and, of course, there is the Thai footprint. People in Doung Srae show these places to their children and tell them the story that is connected to it. In this manner, the story is cast into the landscape where it becomes a feature of the moral order. That is, the historical event has been morally resolved in a manner that constitutes the ancestral past as both moral and potent, an achievement resolved in landscape through the social act of making it into part of the landscape (for example: the mountain of ammunition or the Thai footprint). The mountains, pond, trees and rock all become signifiers of an event that itself signifies the potency of the ancestral past where, even in the face of adversity, the Khmers proved to be of superior to their Thai rivals. This interpretation of the event resonates well with Doung Srae's present pride in their traditional past and their concern with its transmission.

In O'Thmaa and Prei Phnom commune, when people spoke of the Thai invasion, no one pointed to mountains of ammunition, potent trees, or ponds. The only physical representations of the event are through statements about their past presence, the loss of certain cultivated trees and plants. A few people in Prei Phnom commune also mentioned a road that runs through the centre of the commune and that they called the Thai road (plauv Siem) where they say there used to be fragments of the broken pottery left behind by the Thai. Several villagers say that there were also statues that were broken by the Khmer Rouge, including a statue of Lok Ta Ply (the spirit whom I discuss in Chapter 6 and 8). When speaking about the Thai period villagers talk about flight to the forest but do not mention any breaking of statues during that time. By contrast, in Doung Srae we saw the comparison made between the breaking of the statues during the Thai invasion and later by the Khmer Rouge.
In Chapter 4, I mentioned David Chandler’s analysis of a poem written about the dark period following the Thai invasion in the 19th century where he posits that the scattering of possessions ‘along the roads and in the forest’ symbolised the loss of civilisation (Chandler 1998: 89). In both Prei Phnom and Doung Srae this ‘loss of civilisation’ appears in the breaking of statues. For Prei Phnom this is connected to the Khmer Rouge era and in Doung Srae it evokes both the Khmer Rouge era and the Thai invasion. Does the fact that Doung Srae is able to easily associate the breaking of statues with the two periods suggest that the violence of the past is being more effectively resolved within a mythico-historical narrative?

The symbols themselves (whether they be statues or mountains) are clearly not fixed to a particular narrative or context but instead provide means of objectifying and articulating social change. Prei Phnom, as compared to Doung Srae, appears not to have yet reached this point of articulation, given its relative lack of narrative and projection onto the landscape. In either case, however, we see the stories of the Thai invasion taking mythic proportion and being employed to serve the present. Peter Gow said that myths ‘solve new problems’ by creating analogies with old problems that have already been solved (2001:279) and therefore are historical products (ibid.: 303). Here we see this process at work. In both communes the experience of the Thai invasion is recast to reflect current interests and predicaments. In Doung Srae the story of the Thai invasion is a tale about the potency of the Khmers and their traditions reflecting their current interests and moral ordering process (as discussed in Chapter 4). In Prei Phnom, by contrast there is a theme of victimhood, also present today. It is interesting, however, that in their story the emphasis is on the flight to the forest which has its own redemptive qualities. We can recall from Chapter 6 that the forest is also associated with cleansing and enchantment. The stories told by Ta Mahn, Thon and Yeay Kheiu above suggest that the enchantment associated with the forest may well provide a resource for overcoming the destruction of the past and remaking the moral community once again. As Ta Mahn said earlier in this chapter, it was the descendants of those who fled who later became the neak sachchang who possess the power and magic of enchantment. The fact that even younger members acknowledge this world, despite people’s discounting these beliefs may provide evidence for this possibility. Perhaps also the story of the China man and his ox may be taken as a suggestion in this
direction. In any event, it is clear that certain versions of the past are being told to achieve certain moral ends in the present (Lambek 1996: 239) that reflect the varying experiences and concerns of the two communes. For Prei Phnom and Doung Srae these moral ends are associated with the realm of the 'civil' and include relatedness, potency, and honesty among others that articulate a model that can then be projected onto the future.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated a number ways in which the past is evoked in the present through references to landscape, stories, and myths. We saw that landscape can be seen as an semi-abstract signifier within, and of, the moral order and is capable of expressing a variety of meanings using the past and moral tales as its 'values' in the mathematical sense. These 'values' are interchangeable to meet the particularities of current circumstances and allow for ordering to take place. Put differently, these moral tales are not fixed narratives but, rather, are re-formed and re-expressed to meet the varying exigencies of peoples' experience.

Maurice Bloch (1998) has made the point that there are several ways of evoking a memory of the past through narrative and non-narrative means, whether that memory is 'autobiographic' or 'semantic' in origin. In his own work on the 1947 Malagasy rebellion, he found, firstly, that a number of different co-existing narratives evoked the memory of this event and, secondly, that people choose which narrative to produce according to what they feel is appropriate to the social situation. These findings of Bloch are certainly true of Doung Srae and Prei Phnom. In previous chapters, especially Chapters 2 and 3, I provided a number of examples of people's personal recollections of the Khmer Rouge era. These accounts included autobiographic memories, that is, their personal recollections of their experiences during that time, as well as their semantic memories, recallings of what they were told by others. Here I have suggested some other ways that people talk about the Khmer Rouge era through stories of the 19th (or earlier) Thai invasions. We have therefore seen some of the different ways that the memory of the Khmer Rouge is evoked in the present and also how the memory of this period may influence the evocation of other past events and stories. But is there a
connection between the destructive events of the past Thai invasions and the upheaval wrought by the Khmer Rouge?

Bloch makes another theoretical point that is relevant here. He agrees with Halbwachs (1980; 1992) that the production of narratives about the past that Halbwachs dubbed 'collective memory'\(^{138}\) has an effect on the memory of individuals (Bloch 1998). Referring to the individual (rather than the community) and drawing on the work of Baddeley, Gilligan and Bower, Bloch writes:

... certain memories which appeared to be totally lost can be retrieved when the person concerned reenters the emotional state they were in when the original event occurred (Baddeley 1990: chaps. 12& 15). This means that the past is an ever changing resource according to the situations or moods in which the persons find themselves, situations and moods which will often be due to organised social contexts (Gilligan and Bower 1994). (Bloch 1998: 119).

The events described above concerning the Thai invasions and Khmer Rouge era are not individual. Nor were they experienced by the people in 'organised social contexts' in the sense meant by Bloch (or Gilligan and Bower), although they most certainly were socially experienced. Nonetheless, what we can take from the passage above is the idea of resonance between two or more events that may produce the resurfacing of memories. Of course, in the case I have been discussing we are talking about a collective emotional state, not an individual one, but it seems that the chaos and upheaval that characterised the Khmer Rouge period resonated sufficiently with the experiences recalled from the collective narratives of the Thai invasions earlier in the 19\(^{th}\) century and maybe even before.

Bloch goes a step further, arguing that the difference between memories of one's own experiences (remembering) and those of others (recalling) may in some cases be slight. This is because imaginatively reliving the events with the aid of mnemonic devices, such as features of the landscape, allows people to 'relive' events of the past in a manner that makes it difficult to distinguish from the memories of those people who

\(^{138}\) Bloch objects vehemently to Halbwachs' term 'collective memory' and also Halbwachs' Durkheimian relegation of individual memory to no more than a reflection of the collective and all that follows from that (see Bloch 1998: 117).
actually lived through them. It is difficult to know to what extent this may be true in the case of the Thai invasions discussed above, but it is nonetheless worthwhile thinking about. Moreover, in the story of Thon, earlier in this chapter, we saw that he has integrated what he has obviously been told about the neak sachchang with his own experiences in the past. This is especially true where he spoke about dreaming about the neak sachchang. What is the relationship between dreams and experience and how does this intersect with collective representations of the past? I leave this question open.

Finally, I wish to end this chapter by returning to the story of the rock box and the enchanted wedding party. In these stories we saw depicted the idyllic world of the ancestors that seemed to centre on the making of relatedness. The emergence of the enchanted world into view in these stories suggests one way that O’Thmaa villagers emplace the ritual ancestral past in the present. However, nowadays the weakness of their relation to this past remains evident. In the next chapter I examine another way in which O’Thmaa villagers were tentatively reconnecting to their ancestral past and also to each other through the ‘re-emergence’ of the Bon Dalien harvest festival.
Because of the two civil wars and the Pol Pot years, the *Bon Dalien* harvest festival had not been celebrated in O’Thmaa village since 1970 until it was revived in 2000. In 2003, during the Khmer month of *Makh* (January-February), I had the opportunity to observe and participate in three *Bon Dalien* festivals in Prei Phnom commune, including one in O’Thmaa and another in a commune closer to the provincial capital. Through these experiences, I was able to gain a degree of understanding of the festival's composition as well as an appreciation of the variation across villages. The most compelling facet of the festival for me was that it challenged a number of assumptions I had had about the effects of the war on the state of the moral order and social cohesion within the village. From my observations and discussions with villagers, it was evident that the devastation and upheaval had crippled social discourse and also diminished ritual knowledge. As discussed in earlier chapters, few villagers remained who could remember the local practices of the past. Thus, when I was presented with the camaraderie and enthusiasm surrounding the celebration of *Bon Dalien* and the apparent vitality of this local traditional practice, it raised a number of questions for me.

The questions raised by the resurfacing of *Bon Dalien* take two forms. The first concerns the nature of ritual itself and focus on the persistence of ritual over time and through periods of radical social change—a very broad issue that has long intrigued anthropologists, who have approached the question from a variety of perspectives within the discipline.\(^{139}\) The second question relates to a debate currently being waged between a number of Cambodia scholars that centres on the degree to which communal relations and institutions have been restored or remain in a state of disintegration in the wake of the war and Pol Pot regime. In this chapter I will address the second question

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\(^{139}\) This is a big topic but, for a sampling of the variety of approaches see: Abercrombie (1998); Bloch (1986; 1989); Connerton (1989); Geertz (1973; 1980); and George (1996).
while indirectly referring to the first; focusing on this latter question can be seen as a providing a specific case study of some of the larger questions raised by the former.

In the wake of Pol Pot's genocide, have communal bonds within Khmer society disintegrated or do they remain largely intact? One view, held by Frings (1994), Luco (personal communication), Ovesen, Trankell, and Øjendal (1996), and Virorth (2003), asserts that, in the aftermath of Pol Pot, Cambodian communities were left atomised, with little or no social or moral bonds between members beyond the nuclear family. These studies are largely oriented toward the concerns of development agencies interested in conflict management and building 'communal' relations. Nonetheless, implicit in this view is the suggestion that the violence of the past has far-reaching consequences for social relations and accompanying discourse, a finding that resonates with studies of post World War Two Germany (Buruma 1995; Linke 2002; White 1998), Southwest China (Mueggler 2001), and Madagascar (Cole 2001). These studies demonstrate, in different ways, how violent pasts may continue to penetrate the veneer of present-day social institutions.

Taking a more optimistic view on the state of Cambodia's villages following the war and genocide, Ebihara and Ledgerwood assert that, despite the fairly recent upheaval, social institutions and relations have in fact emerged from the Pol Pot era largely intact (Ebihara 2002; Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Ledgerwood 1998) and that villagers have thus successfully managed to 'layer-over' the past (Ebihara 2002). Both of these scholars conducted fieldwork within the same village in Cambodia's central plains, jointly spanning a timeframe of roughly 40 years. Their studies underline the durability of social relations and institutions as well as the relative success of Khmer villagers in getting on with their lives in spite of the enormous upheaval and suffering they had experienced.

Proponents of the first position, Frings (1994), Luco, and especially Ovesen and colleagues (1996), claim that, in the wake of war and genocide, what social and moral

\[140\] However, ethnographic studies of Khmer refugee populations have also expressed similar findings (Becker, Beyene, and Ken 2000). Becker, Beyene and Ken note: 'Overcrowding is extreme. Nevertheless, people frequently report feeling isolated, lonely, and easily upset. Indeed, they often live in isolation from others outside the nuclear immediate family' (ibid.: 327).
cohesion ever existed\textsuperscript{141} beyond the household has become fragmented. While Ovesen et al. recognise some degree of connection across households in the forms of common labour exchange (\textit{brovas dai}), patronage networks, guardian spirits (\textit{neak ta}) and Buddhism, they argue that these connections do not constitute what in western terms would be considered a village or even a moral community (see Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal 1996: 66-77). It is on this point specifically that Ledgerwood and Ebihara disagree with them, identifying \textit{brovas dai} (labour exchange), the strength of kinship networks across households, the bonds of friendship, and the enthusiastic participation in Buddhist ceremonies and festivals as evidence of a social and moral community that has weathered the cataclysm of violence and emerged intact.

My own findings suggest that a society's ability to successfully reconstruct itself in the wake of war and genocide will depend on its particular socio-historical past – prior to, during and after the violence. The history of the locale directly influences the form and relative success of the reconstruction. I will be returning to this debate towards the end of the chapter where I will elaborate on my findings in more detail. In what follows, I examine the themes of social rupture and notions of permanence in the context of O'Thmaa's \textit{Bon Dalien} harvest festival and its background.

\textbf{What is Bon Dalien?}

More than any other, this annual village festival marks a moment when a village comes together in a show of village pride and communal spirit, as young and old, rich and poor alike work together to create this annual event. It is the largest festival of its type, involving the whole village and surrounding communities. Not only are the monks invited from the temple (\textit{vat}) that is used by all the villages in the commune but a key part of the festival involves issuing invitations to neighbouring villages and, in turn, attending those villages' \textit{bons}. Representation of the village through their own \textit{Bon Dalien} and through a collective offering at other villages' \textit{bons} provides an open display of village identity and therefore solidarity. The \textit{bon} evokes a sense of past and solidarity between villagers, as offerings are made to the local tutelary and ancestor

\textsuperscript{141} Ovesen, Trankell and Öjendal raise the point that the 'normal' social and moral bonds that are considered to constitute a village community may have been absent even in the pre-Pol Pot period (Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal 1996: 66-67).
spirits associated with the village and which form its foundation. I was told a number of times that the purposes of the *bon* were, firstly, to offer thanks to these spirits for the present harvest and to receive their blessing for the next year’s; secondly, to respect and continue the traditions of their ancestors; and thirdly, to pass the tradition onwards to the next generation. It was also emphasised that the performance of the *bon* requires the willing participation and cooperation of the villagers as a whole. Therefore, while the villagers do not produce the *bon* with the conscious intention of creating social cohesiveness, they nevertheless recognise that it may be a favourable by-product as they work together to create the *bon* and preserve the traditions of their common ancestors.

In answer to my questions about the meaning and purpose of *Bon Dalien*, Yeay Khieu gave me the following explanation:

*Dalien* means ‘offering’. It is the mat that the un-husked rice is placed on. The unhusked rice is to give thanks to the *Lok Ta* [guardian spirits] - it is an offering to the spirits. Earlier we had asked the spirits to help make the planting and harvest go well and without problems such as insects eating the crops, and that they bring good health and welfare to the people.

Yeay Khieu’s explanation tells us that the *Bon Dalien* festival is dedicated to providing offerings and prayers of gratitude to the local tutelary spirits for the harvest and welfare of the local residents, and that it is linked to an earlier ceremony in the planting season where the blessings of the spirit were sought. In essence, that is what the ceremony and festival are about. The word *bon* in Khmer means festival/holiday. The word ‘*dalien*’ is actually composed of two words: ‘*da*’ and ‘*lien*’. Porée-Maspero, in her three-volume treatise on Khmer agricultural rites, tells us that the word ‘*da*’ is a rite for the dead (1962: 918) but in another section uses the same word to describe the offering mounds of paddy that, once ‘ordained’, become an offering, a ‘*da*’, in the ‘ritual of abundance’ in the Khmer month of *Makh* and in the ‘rite of the sun’ (ibid.: 53). Headley’s dictionary also translates ‘*da*’ as the ‘offerings to the dead or to the spirits of ancestors’ and tells us further that the word is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit word ‘*tara*’, meaning ‘protector; carrying across’ (1977: 319). While Headley’s and Porée-Maspero’s definitions of ‘*da*’ are clearly in agreement, the same could not be said about
their interpretations of the second part of the word, 'lien'. Headley translates 'lien' as: a 'flat area, floor, square...', explaining that a lien-chedey is the parvis in front of the stupa (ibid.: 917). Porée-Maspero, on the other hand, defines 'lien' as 'areak', that is, ancestral spirits (1962: 919) but also notes that 'lien' can also mean banquet or festival (ibid.: 235).142

Local understandings of the Bon Dalien festival, as in Yeay Kheiu’s explanation above, support Headley’s definition. Because the word bon already means festival and da already indicates it is an offering to the ancestors, adding lien as the area where the offering is made (the mat) constitutes the name as the festival of placing the offering to the ancestors on a square. Porée-Maspero’s error here is, however, understandable. In her rigorous study of Cambodian agricultural rites, there is no festival that quite resembles those that I experienced in the course of my fieldwork, nor is there a mention of Bon Dalien under this name. Nonetheless she does describe several rituals that are performed within the same Khmer month of Makh, including the ‘offering of the fire’ and the ‘piling up of mounds of paddy’; these share a few of features with the Bon Dalien festivals I attended, such as the mounds of paddy and the eating of rice noodles (ibid.: 579-586).143 These discrepancies and similarities suggest the possibility of variation over locales as to whether Bon Dalien is considered a single festival in the month of Makh, or a combination of what are in fact separate festivals.144 It may also be that over time a number of festivals occurring around the month of Makh have been absorbed into a single festival encompassing a number of rites and practices.145 This question remains to be studied further. For the time being, I turn to Bon Dalien as it is practised and understood by the inhabitants of O'Thmaa and the surrounding communities today.

142 According to the Headley dictionary translation, it is the word ‘lieng’ (as opposed to ‘lien’) that means to feast or entertain (Headley 1977: 932).
143 Porée-Maspero also discusses related festivals such as the ‘Asking for Rain’ (Som Teuk Plieng) in the planting season. For additional information on the ritual ‘Asking for Rain’ (Som Teuk Plieng) see Porée-Maspero (1962) and also Ian Harris (2000).
144 It should be noted here that Porée-Maspero (1962) herself describes a significant degree of variation across locales as to the manner of practice of these ceremonies and festivals.
145 Porée-Maspero contends that the two festivals—that of the ‘piling up of mound of paddy’ and that of the ‘offering of the fire’ are ‘usually mistaken as being one’ (1962: 579) but also says that further research is needed to ascertain the proper ordering of these ceremonies within the lunar season (ibid.: 598). May Ebihara has also noted the ‘piling up of mound of paddy’, which she calls ‘Making a Festival for a Mound of Paddy’, and provides a four-sentence description, saying that it is not part of the larger ritual cycle, but contains only usual sorts of blessings, that it is celebrated at the temples, and that people bring a bit of their rice to form a mound at end of harvest season (1962: 407).
Bon Dalien is traditionally organised every year sometime towards the end of the cool dry season in January or February after the annual rice harvest has finished. Usually, an elder achar from the village will be the key spokesperson and organiser of the bon. However, in cases where there are no village achars, a local village chief or leader may stand in, as was the case in O‘Thmaa in 2003. The ‘Village development leader’, whom locals called the village chief⁴⁶ (even though he lacked formal political power), was therefore put in charge of organising the festival and he in turn called on several of the village's ‘old people’ (elders with longstanding residence) to help him.

The Dalien festival differs from other Khmer religious holidays in that it is entirely a local village event organised by villagers. Nonetheless, it is customary for the village to coordinate the date with other neighbouring villages also celebrating within the same time frame, with the temple whose monks will come to give prayers and blessings, and also with the local government, especially for provision of police if need be. It is not directly a part of the major Khmer holidays during the year but is nevertheless linked to this cycle.⁴⁷

The chief achar at the vat in Prei Phnom explained the local nature of the bon:

*Bon Dalien* – we have this ceremony every year! There are no set regulations for this bon but, if someone were to say that it should be done a particular way, it is because that way accords with their beliefs. But it is not like those [Buddhist holidays] I mentioned before that have regulations from the high monkhood …

Here in Prei Phnom commune, when we wish to celebrate this festival, we must first ask our grandchildren [descendents] whether they have completed

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⁴⁶ He is not the government village chief but was elected by the villagers as the village development leader in part of a restructuring programme organised by development agencies. The village originally had its own chief before the war; however, in the 1980s the PRK government, faced with diminished village population in the region, combined several of the villages and put them under the authority of a single village chief. This village is now under the authority of the village chief of the neighboring village. Nonetheless, the vector village development leader is the *de facto* leader if not *de jure* chief in most village-level affairs including the settling of disputes, organising events, and representing the village's interests to development agencies and others like myself.

⁴⁷ For extensive discussions on the cycle of Khmer holidays and the cycle of agricultural rites including a discussion of their relation to fertility, see Ian Harris (2000) and Porée-Maspero (1962).
their harvest. If each house has completely finished their harvest, then we must celebrate *Bon Dalien*. We call it *Dalien – Dalien Phum*.\(^{148}\) It is not like the *bons* at the temple like *Pachum Ben*\(^{149}\). If it is in [the village of] Prei Thnout, they do it in Prei Thnout, if it is in Ream, they do it in Ream, if Svay, Svay. In this ceremony prayers are offered asking for as much rice the following year as they have had this year and that there be enough rain.

Separate offerings are made to several deities and local spirits including the local spirit of the village *Lok Ta Pia Srok*, one or more Hindu deities\(^{150}\) (*teveda*), and to the ancestral spirits (*neak ta*, *baisach* or *areak*). In addition, the Buddhist monks from the *vat* are also invited to the ceremony. The monks give prayers, blessings and recite stories of Buddha’s life, and they too are provided offerings of food.

The ceremony commences in the evening and lasts until about noon the following day. It begins with the monks’ prayers and the placing of offerings on the shrines to the *teveda* and ancestral spirits; it ends the following day with more prayers by the monks and the sending off of the ancestor spirits.

As discussed in Chapter 6 and mentioned above, *Bon Dalien* is related to another ceremony earlier in the year. During the planting season, between the months of May and July, the villagers make offerings of cooked food, candles, incense and other offerings to the local spirit, *Lok Ta Pia Srok*, who oversees the elements related to agriculture and villagers’ health and welfare. At around the same time, if there is insufficient rain, they will make another offering to a different spirit called *Lok Ta Ply*, who influences rainfall. This is a very different ceremony and involves the sacrifice of a black animal:\(^{151}\) a chicken, dog or monkey. Ta Mahn explained it as follows:

*Bon Dalien* is connected to the planting season ceremony where offerings are made to *Lok Ta Pia Srok*, the *Machas* [Master] *Srok* [land] and the ancestors

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\(^{148}\) Village.

\(^{149}\) See Chapter 6.

\(^{150}\) I am uncertain as to which Hindu deity/ies are represented here. Some informants said the *raong* is to honour a number of different *tevedas*; however, I was told on one occasion the *teveda* is blue, which would suggest Siva or Vishnu. Moreover, in another agricultural rite that also involved offerings to the *teveda* at the *raong* shrine, the songs that were sung were directed towards wooing 'the stick god' from the mountain, who, I was told, was an avatar of Vishnu (possibly Krishna).

\(^{151}\) If no black animal is available, they will use charcoal to change the animal’s colour.
all together. We offer food and rice to them. Then we offer a black monkey, black chicken, or black dog to Lok Ta Ply. In the old days we would follow the order: dog, monkey, and then chicken. Ta Ply demanded this be so. In those times a black dog, chicken or monkey could not walk past the offering area. If it did then it would die because the spirit would kill it. We would kill the animal in this place and remove all the organs and offer them to the spirit. Then we would play with the blood, throwing it on each other and onto a banana leaf. This banana leaf with the offerings would then be placed near the bushes in the rice field... Ta Ply is in the form of a stone figure with a big stomach. Later on someone broke it during the Three-Year Regime. Before that time we would drop this statue into the water and ask for water when it was really dry.

The ceremony of asking for rain is common in other parts of the country (Porée-Maspero 1962; Harris 2000) and is also practised in Doung Srae. However, I have not seen or heard of the practice of making ritual offerings to Lok Ta Ply elsewhere, which suggests it is a spirit local to the region. This ceremony was performed in O'Thmaa in both of the two years prior to my arrival; however, in the year I was present they decided the ceremony was unnecessary as there had been sufficient rainfall.

I now turn to the background of O'Thmaa's Bon Dalien.

**Prelude to Bon Dalien**

The air of joviality and camaraderie in the days leading up to O'Thmaa's third post-war village Bon Dalien harvest festival was striking – striking because, for me at least, it was unexpected. Based on what I had seen and heard from informants, gaiety and communal spirit were rare in this village. Hardships, distrust, and fear contorted otherwise beautiful faces and crippled social interactions. People visited or spent time with a select set of close kin but rarely socialised beyond that, with the exception of young unmarried males who would go off gallivanting in small groups to the neighbouring villages in the evening hours. The Khmer tradition of labour exchange

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152 See Chapter 7 for the meaning of broken statues.
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(brovas dai) during harvest and planting was uncommon in the village, and it seemed that few people went far out of their way to help a neighbour in need.

A Khmer community development worker, who also spent time in the village, confessed to me later that, of all the villages in the area, O'Thmaa was the most difficult in terms of setting up communal projects: while people were willing to contribute money, they were not willing to give up their time and were generally not interested in working together. He pointed to the lack of socialising in the evening, the normal time for Khmers to visit each other after a long day’s work. His sentiments echoed the NGO Director’s comment made to me a year earlier that, of all the communes, this commune and in particular this village along with its two neighbours, had been the most reluctant to adopt development programs.

But O'Thmaa was not always like this, according to the villagers, who often refer back to the pre-war past as a golden age of harmony, peace, happiness and goodwill. Ya explained the difference:

This is not political. I just want to tell the truth about this commune and O'Thmaa village as it is in the present, and was in the past. People are different to how they were before. Nowadays people do not love each other.

Ya, who is in his 30s, may be too young to actually remember the pre-war past but he is familiar with the stories that were told many times during my stay by young and old alike. Villagers would often say that in the old days people loved one another and could rely on each other for help. If you needed something, your neighbour would give it to you or if someone caught an animal while hunting, the meat would be shared by all. Ta Mahn, in his late sixties, explained the difference:

Before, we would help one another, brovas dai [labour exchange] with the farming, but now people don’t help each other anymore. Now, for instance, there’s not enough rain and some people’s rice fields have water. But they don’t help anyone else out. They only look after themselves.
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Ta Mahn and Ya, like others, saw a lack of the philanthropic sentiment between villagers that they believe existed before the war. As Ya elaborated more fully, the mutual trust and concern that forms the base of social interactions has been eroded by the treachery of the past. Despite villagers’ attempts to renew their community and bury the memory of the early civil war and the Pol Pot era, it still retained a presence:

Here they are friendly but I do not know what they think in their hearts — because in the past, the old people died because of their own people. They had said derogatory and inflammatory things and a lot of them died.

Quite often, another man, Nang, when drunk would suddenly say to me:

Everyone in the village was killing each other! You might be killed too! I don’t want to kill you or anyone else. Now villagers love each other (sralanhankea). And I love you like a brother and sister. I do not want to kill you because I love foreigners just as my father did.

Nang’s spontaneous outbursts would often unsettle those around him, and it was not always easy to get him off the subject of people killing each other and loving each other. Nang’s utterances reminded me of Gunter Grass’s *Tin Drum* in that, in recalling the past he was giving voice to moral realities that others might have tried to repress or ignore. Nang’s pronouncements explicitly summoned the treacherous past into the present. But other villagers, as mentioned in previous chapters, would also comment that ‘society changed’ during the Khmer Rouge period and the good will and cooperation that existed before that time never resurfaced. This is not to say that today there are no instances of sharing, mutual aid, or regard for one’s neighbour. It was, rather, that their trust in the community as a whole had become tenuous and uncertain.

Evidently, experiences of the Pol Pot era and the turmoil of transition — the market economy and the repeated dislocations — have conspired to create an uncertainty in the present. It is against this backdrop that villagers are currently taking steps towards

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153 This is referring to the people of the past. ‘Old people’ can mean elder or ancestor.
154 Günter Grass (1962).
155 See also Erik Mueggler (1998) where he draws on Yu Hua’s ‘Nineteen Eighty-six’, which describes a man who blatantly calls attention to the violence of the past but is ignored by his neighbours and family who simply want to see him (and the memories he represents) gone.
rebuilding their society by putting the past behind them through the means discussed in previous chapters and by re-establishing local traditions such as *Bon Dalien*.

The realities of the market economy, illegal trade, and political instability are always framed by the violence of the past and are difficult to separate from it. Near the time of the *Bon Dalien* festival, there were two more unsettling national political events. Just prior to the *bon* on January 29th 2003, anti-Thai riots seemingly ‘out of the blue’ destroyed several Thai businesses and the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh, resulting in the Thailand temporarily severing diplomatic relations with Cambodia.156 In addition, the national elections set for July were only five months ahead, and elections historically have coincided with increased political violence as well as potential political instability. Both of these events contributed to a sense of anxiety within the village and Cambodia as a whole, as the population again was forced to consider the possibility of further political violence and — in the minds of some — another war.

If a casual observer were to witness the days approaching the *bon*, he or she would probably be impressed with the village’s show of communal activity and perhaps conclude that the villagers had successfully put their difficult past behind them. In this light, the complaints made by villagers, as discussed earlier, would make little sense. Instead, one might accept at face value the insistence of the commune chief and village development leader, at the beginning of my research, that there is only love between the villagers and no problems whatsoever. They emphasised that nearly everyone was related to one another and hence mutually supportive. On the other hand, while it is true that most of the families are related to each other, the testimonies of Ya, Ta Mahn and Nang indicate that it certainly did not follow that they all helped one another. So, how would things work out ‘on the day’ of the *Bon Dalien* — or indeed in the preparations and aftermath?

Thus, before providing any further analysis of the *bon*, allow me to focus on the event itself, discussing the organisation of the *bon*, followed by the event and its aftermath. Through these discussions I hope to provide some sense of the emotional and practical obstacles and successes of the *bon*’s production. Following the description of the *bon*

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156 Alexander Hinton (2006) analyses this event through imagery and discourses in the media and internet sites, arguing that the violence that ensued is tied to notions of Khmerness and the foreign ‘other’.
Preparation for Bon Dalien 2003\textsuperscript{157}

Preparation for \textit{Bon Dalien} evolves through three stages: the first is imagining and anticipating the \textit{bon}; the second is organising the event, including choosing the date, assigning tasks such as hiring musical entertainment, purchasing food and drinks, collecting money, and similar tasks; and the third is doing the work – that is, setting up the \textit{bon}. Below I discuss each of these phases as they transpired in O'Thmaa, illustrating the ambiguity and tenuousness attached to this re-creation of a community festival in a village that has only recently attempted to pull itself together after a 30-year break.

\textit{Imagining the Bon}

It was in the early weeks of my fieldwork when I first heard of \textit{Bon Dalien}. I had begun my fieldwork enquiring about the local customs and practices of the village and, in a conversation with the village chief, I had learned that there was going to be a great festival in the village. It would be only the third time since 1969 that the festival was to be celebrated in the village. When I asked the chief to elaborate further on the festival he said:

\begin{quote}
Just wait and you will see.... When everyone finishes the harvest all the villagers will come together and hold a great party.... People will come from all over, from as far as Phnom Penh! We will clear an area for the guests to park their cars...
\end{quote}

More than this he would not say. Later, I was told the same story in the neighbouring village where they pointed to the road they had built up to the \textit{bon} site and the place they had cleared for cars. This struck me as doubly odd: firstly, because in my experience private cars were a complete anomaly in this remote area and, secondly, it

\textsuperscript{157} For more explanation as to some of the ritual components of the \textit{bon}, see (Porée-Maspero 1962).
was difficult for me to imagine who these car-chauffeured urbanites might be who would travel to this poverty stricken ex-Khmer Rouge region on the wilderness frontier to celebrate their local harvest festival – and at night! In fact, what actually happened was quite different: on the night of the *bon* not a car was to be seen apart from the trucks delivering supplies; yet I heard no one remark on this absence. This lack of attention or concern over the missing urbanites and their cars, and the vagueness over their identity, gave me pause to think about why the villagers might have been making such grandiose claims: the build up or ‘hype’ in anticipating the *bon* was not a component of people's actual expectations. In fact, I would go on to suggest that this anticipatory ‘hype’ was integral to pulling the villagers together and motivating them to make the *bon* happen. Put differently, as the excitement for the *bon* mounts, so does the motivation to participate in it.

The time of the *bon* came closer as harvest time unfolded. Harvesting began with the *chāmkar* rice, the garden variety of rice, which is cultivated in dry paddies. This rice has a lower yield than the wet rice variety and, when I asked villagers to estimate their annual rice yield for previous years, they sometimes did not even include it. The harvest of wet rice came next. All the women and older children and many of the men participate in the reaping (*chraut*) and threshing, either by rubbing the grains free of the stalks, using their feet or by beating it on long tilted boards. Afterwards, the women sift the rice several times by pouring it from a height, or tossing it into the air from a wide flat basket, to separate the rice kernels from the chaff before pounding the kernels free from their husks using a mortar and pestle. The rice is then stored in large sacks for family consumption. If there is a surplus, they will sell the rice to the vendors at the market. However, in this commune the recent years’ rice yields had been insufficient even to feed a family throughout the year, and families relied on what they could purchase and receive in aid from development agencies and the government.

In the final phases of the rice harvest, as the *bon* time approaches, the men of the village begin making trips into the forest to collect wood, bamboo, and occasionally wild game to bring additional money and food into the household. This work is performed in anticipation of the approaching holiday season that includes weddings, Dalien festivals, and the Khmer New Year’s celebration: all events requiring monetary donations for paying for music, new clothes, food and other expenses. The increase in illicit trade also
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brings more outsiders into the area and hence too an increase in tension amongst villagers and with others as they seek ways to increase their profits whilst negotiating pay-offs to the military, police, middle tradesmen, and others in the sale of their goods.

At this time, the colours of the hills and surrounding forest have changed from green to autumnal tones, as the trees surrendered their leaves to the dry winds, creating a crackling carpet over the dusty earth. All trace of the rainy season’s green lushness is now gone and the landscape displays the bleakness of the cold season, offset only by a radiant blue sky. During the daytime only the mornings are chilly but at night the temperatures drop substantially, leading animal and human alike to seek out the warmth of fire.

Despite the hard work and moments of tension, an air of festivity began to emerge in the village as the last grains of rice were stuffed into sacks and people began gathering at the canteens for snacks and drinks, and to talk about local issues and the upcoming festivals. One question that increasingly popped up at these gatherings was ‘cheah roam, åt?’, ‘do you dance?’, as people anticipate dancing themselves and/or watching each other – dance is one of the festival’s highlights. Initially, the idea of these villagers dancing together seemed a bit remote to me given the normal everyday solemnity. However, in fact it is precisely in keeping with the notion of ritual where the everyday behavioural norms are altered or even reversed, thereby contributing to the ‘time out of time’ quality of ritual.¹⁵⁸

Organising the Bon

Organising the bon is a delicate affair requiring improvisation, negotiation and diplomacy. With only two bons in O’Thmaa’s recent past, there was plenty of room for innovation and not everyone was always of the same opinion. Therefore the job of the bon’s organiser required sufficient judgement and diplomacy to bring the villagers together to produce the festival and make the necessary decisions, while at the same time allowing members to feel that their views were heard and respected.

¹⁵⁸ Numerous works have been written on the nature of ritual. Particularly pertinent to the ‘time out of time’ are Bloch (1986; 1989), Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1995).
One morning the village chief called an informal meeting at the *bon* site to plan the upcoming festival. Although all villagers were invited, only about 15 adults gathered, mostly from families with longstanding residence in the village. They squatted together on the pewter-coloured earth amongst the dry foliage that billowed and crackled with every shift or shuffle. The men all sat in a rough semi-circle to the southwest and the women made up the other half, facing the men when they were not chatting between themselves. The children present tended to favour the female side but occasionally they would wander over and join their fathers.

There was no formal structure to the meeting and the chief made several unsuccessful attempts to lead the group in discussion; instead several discussions took place simultaneously between different members. The decisions that had to be made concerned setting the date of the *bon*, collecting donations for purchasing the food and providing music, and generally assigning tasks. The food traditionally served at this festival is *nom banh chuk*, cold white rice noodles, usually served with a choice of two stews (*somlaw*), conventionally one made from fermented fish, *prahok*, and the other made from chicken. Only 25 of O'Thmaa's 40 families had a sufficient degree of wealth to be the primary financiers and their contributions were set at the meeting. It was also agreed that the *bon* would be held on the sixth day of the new moon (*khat*), following the *bon* in Trapaing Slaa village, which was scheduled for the 2nd of February, the first day of *khat*, and finally that the *bon* site would be the same as in the two previous years.

The meeting finished, the group dispersed, and several moved over to Li's canteen across the road, which her husband, Dara, had built for her when my house and the police post went up opposite. Li had recently acquired a hand-operated ice shaver that allowed her to make the syrupy sweet ices that were so popular in the swelter of the midday. The ice would come daily in large blocks on the back of the passenger/goods trucks whose last stop was O'Thmaa. Not everyone was drinking ices, though, on that noon: Yeay Khieu felt it was a perfect time for some local rice whiskey and so I bought her a round and one each for her two elderly nieces, Ta Kam's daughter, Pheap, and Tho. With Yeay Khieu's characteristic enthusiasm and zest, she began to sing and dance the traditional songs and dances of *Bon Dalien* as they used to do, with Tho soon taking over the singing. Then Pheap decided she would demonstrate the uncouthness of
the popular ‘modern’ style of dance, mimicking the various moves to the amusement of all present. None of these women is young and Yeay Khieu, in her late eighties, danced elegantly even with her 10-year old granddaughter jumping on her back during her performance.

The next day a number of the women who had been absent at the previous day’s meeting visited the village chief asking that the donation amount be raised to meet costs, and more important, that the date of the bon be changed so that O’Thmaaa would hold the first of the celebrations in the commune. Traditionally the bon was held according to the order of the villages, starting with O’Thmaaa in the west, and moving eastward down the mountain to Trapaing Slaa and the other villages. The problem was that, this year, O’Thmaaa was late in organising their bon, which one of the villagers blamed on the village chief’s lack of organisation. However, according to the village chief, the timing was dependent on the completion of the harvest in the village. Whatever the truth of the matter, an elder Buddhist layman in the neighbouring village said that he and the other elders of that village found it peculiar that O’Thmaaa was so late in beginning preparations for the bon. To repair the situation, the chief went to the village of Trapaing Slaa and requested that they change their bon to a later date – but they refused, as they had already completed their preparations. And so it was that O’Thmaaa’s date for its Bon Dalien would remain on the sixth day of the new moon and, in a break with the past, O’Thmaaa would not celebrate their bon before the other villages in the commune. This alteration did not seem to bother the village chief very much: he dismissed the matter saying, ‘It doesn’t matter which village does it first but it must be done over the same [Khmer lunar] month.’

The chief proceeded to describe to me the process of the exchange of invitations and donations that followed on from the meeting:

Three young people are sent to invite the monks. There is no need to tell people about it because the village chief visits the other village leaders at their bon and then gives them an invitation.

Then, talking about how each village made contributions to other people’s bons he continued:
The young people here go around collecting money from the villagers, about 100-3000 riel, as people wish. They will collect 1 to two meun\(^{159}\) [riel] to give to the âchar [Buddhist layman] in Trapathing Slaa. The âchar will then announce this contribution. All villages have this exchange and the money is given on the day of the bon. In the case of O'Thmaa, which does not have a resident âchar, the money will be given to the village chief. The amount is then recorded and announced for each village.

In this way villages represent themselves as separate social entities that are embedded in a set of relations with their neighbours through these exchanges. On the day of the actual bons families also express their relatedness by making individual donations at their own and other villages bons. These donations are socially rewarded and recognised through the receiving of a blessing from the âchar or elder and the subsequent public announcement of the donation.

*Setting up the Bon*

One morning I awoke to the sharp crackle of fire and the dull whoosh of dry leaves being raked up. A few of the families who had participated in the meeting were busily cutting, burning and raking the area to clear the space for the bon. In a day the place was transformed from wilderness into a festival ground as the men had constructed tables, a monk’s shelter and a collection booth. The place was decorated with colourful flags made from scraps of material. The following day, posters of the life of Buddha in ‘day-glo’ colours and garlands of forest leaves, coconut fronds and smaller flags were added to the monk’s shelter. Yeay Khieu explained that the branches from the forest trees were for the spirits of the forest (*neak ta prei*), the coconut fronds were for the spirits of the garden (*neak ta châmkar*), and the flags were for protection against all pestilence.\(^{160}\) Meanwhile, a group of women and girls gathered to chop up the tough lemon grass, tamarind, coconuts, and other ingredients that would go into the stew, using every knife or machete available. Not far away, a deer was cleaned and prepared for the giant cooking pots. Amidst this activity, the men who made up the core of the

\(^{159}\) One meun equals 10,000.

\(^{160}\) Harris (2000) mentions the offering of ‘parasols and banners’ associated with the rite of asking for rain.
village gathered to sit in a circle at the canteen and drink a combination of beer and local rice whiskey. Much camaraderie and good cheer were apparent, creating a festive air that was markedly different from the cool and reserved nature of normal everyday social interaction. Nonetheless, it was clear that it was only a handful of the village families who were doing most of the work.

In the afternoon two trucks arrived. One brought ice, drinks, and supplies for the small canteen, and also delivered two massive baskets heaped high with spiralling white rice noodles nestled within a large banana leaf that separated the damp noodles from the dry reeds of the basket. Another truck arrived, with a mobile sound and dance system, and people began to set up a wall of speakers, which intermittently blasted Khmer pop across normally quiet wilderness. Towards evening, two older men of the village began assembling the important *raong* shrine for the *teveda*. The *raong* shrine is a three-tiered bamboo structure designed to hold the offerings to the *tevedas*, such as coconuts, incense, candles, bananas, cooked rice, tobacco, betel leaf and areca nut. These days it is customarily covered with an umbrella or cloth. There was some disgruntlement because the men had fallen behind on all these important tasks and were not fully prepared. A cover was needed for the *raong*. Yeay Khieu explained that, in former times, trees provided shade for the *raong* but they had been cut and so some other sort of cover was needed. Since nothing else was readily available, I offered my umbrella, which was immediately used to shade the *teveda* from the light of the moon.\(^{161}\)

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\(^{161}\) The only explanation I ever heard for this was that the *tevedas* do not like to be in the light, which does not entirely make sense given that candles are placed on the *raong*’s steps.
While the two men worked on the raong, others helped to make a bamboo enclosure for the un-husked rice offering for the spirit. The rice was emptied onto a bed of empty sacks within the enclosure, creating a mound that was then studded with incense sticks. During the bon the rice is an offering to Lok Ta Pia Srok, the guardian spirit of the health and fertility of the village people and agricultural land; however, the following day this rice would be sent to the temple for the monks. In addition to these ritual preparations for the tutelary spirits and teveda, there was also a litter of offerings arranged for the ancestral spirits, who are not individually identified but are referred to jointly as the baisach or areak.

While there was some variation as to where the cooking, eating and dance areas were placed within the different villages, certain other aspects with ritual or religious significance were constant. Here is a diagram showing the spatial arrangement of O'Thmaa's bon:

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162 For an elaborate account of the ‘piling up of mounds of paddy’, see the chapter on the ‘Festivals of Makh’ in Porée-Maspero (1962).
The spatial arrangements of the *bon* follow Buddhist precepts and local tradition. The shrine for the *areak*, ancestral spirits, sits behind the monks, which may indicate the spirits' lack of connection to Buddhism. The Buddha image must always face east. Yeay Khieu, who is not particularly religious but who is knowledgeable about the local ceremonies, explained:

The monks must face the road. They always face that way, we don’t know why…. The Raong Lok Ta must face east and be beside the monks. The *srov* [mound of rice offering] sits east of the Raong Lok Ta.

Yeay Khieu’s explanation of the placement of the monks is only true of her village. The *bons* in the other villages were held on the opposite side of the road with the monks facing away from it. In O’Thmaa it is likely that the positioning is the same as it was in the pre-war past, when the *bon* was held in a rice field southwest of where it is held now, along an oxcart road that parallels the new road today.
Figure 24: Clearing the bon site

Figure 25: Preparing food at Bon Dalien
Figure 26: Old woman at Bon Dalien

Figure 27: Children at Bon Dalien

Figure 28: Offering to Lok Ta Pia Srok
The Night of the Bon

The evening began with prayers and blessings by the monks and ăchars, and a speech was given by the village chief, followed by his reading off of donations. During this time, the elders and other members of the community gathered around to listen or participate, while other villagers partook of the meal served, family style, at the long tables. Restless boys, hair slicked with gel and wearing flashy shirts decorated with dragons, faces of the band KISS, or other lively designs mingled together, anticipating the start of the music. Their female counterparts, in platform sandals, long skirts and button-down shirts, hung about in groups, giggling and chatting and watching the boys’ antics.

When the speeches and prayers ended, the centre dance pole lit up like a space ship and the amplifiers came alive, bringing the boys flocking to the dance circle. Around the pole they rocked and reeled to the rhythmic bass of Khmer pop music. A few older males and children joined and the music changed spontaneously to the more traditional roam vong dance, and the older girls joined too. Then men, children, adolescents and one or two elders became a moving circle – their hands, arms and feet undulating to the music. The dance of the ancestors and that of the villagers became a continuum flowing to the future with every child’s graceful step; the terrible past seeming momentarily distant.

The revelry ended with dawn’s light and it was time for the monks to return for morning prayers. Not many people remained and it took one of the elders of the village to call people back from their houses, using the amplified megaphone. Eventually a few trickled quietly in to join the morning prayers and the proceedings began with an air of solemnity. The women set about preparing the food for the monks, the more elderly women amongst them sitting together and chewing betel. Prayers were given and the ăchar together with two village elders sent off the ancestral spirits with food, tobacco, water, and a carved elephant and ox-cart for their journey back to where they came from. Ta Mahn, one of O’Thmaa’s elders in his fifties explained the blessings and the litter:
This was for the baisach. It is to send them [the areak; spirits] back. The elephant and the ox-cart are so that they can ride them. At the start of the ceremony these spirits were invited and offered food and white cloth. We send them back with pumpkin, cucumber and sesame seeds and we throw rice to send them off. The litter with the offerings was placed behind where the monks sit.

Figure 29: Sending back the ancestral spirits to the wilderness

Following the sending back of the ancestral spirits, there was the conclusion of the monks’ prayers. The monks then ate their morning meal and Bon Dalien officially ended for the village of O’Thmaa that year.

Aftermath

After the bon that day, a sombre mood momentarily hung over the village. As sweet as the event had been, there was also an element of melancholy as people were wrenched back into difficult realities that the bon had temporarily put aside. With its ‘time out of time’ quality, the festival had, for a few hours, presented a different reality where
everyday codes of social interaction and behaviour were exchanged for those of the ritual festival – rather than eating at home with their families, the villagers had cooked and eaten together; instead of returning home after work, they had stayed up all night and danced; boys and girls usually shy with one another had openly flirted, and so on. These ritual norms present an antithesis to everyday social behaviour, forming what Victor Turner has called *communitas* (Turner 1995: 96). Turner argues that, in this stage of ritual, sentiments of camaraderie and egalitarianism are established between participants, and that a portion of such sentiments will be carried back into society at the ritual’s close, thereby reinforcing and strengthening it (ibid.: 95-96). In the case of O’Thmaa, this afterglow of social solidarity was mitigated by the harsh realities of the present day and the continued presence of a terrible past in their midst. The bittersweet quality of the celebration also stemmed from the way it wrapped up people’s hopes and aspirations into a vision of what could be – a vision of peace, everlasting fraternal love, and a life laden with meaning and permanence. As the *bon* approached, the community had imbibed this vision and consciously or unconsciously reproduced it through the social discourse of the *bon*’s making. Old and young alike had gathered together to plan and prepare for the *bon*. A genuine sense of harmony and camaraderie had prevailed, culminating in the *bon* itself. But the aftermath of the *bon* did not yield that heightened sense of solidarity that Turner claims is the product of such rituals. Instead, a certain emptiness permeated the atmosphere, lightened perhaps by the warm memories of the *bon* and the glimpse of what might be possible for the future.

Throughout the remainder of the week following O’Thmaa’s *Bon Dalien*, several villagers, especially the young males, walked or rode bicycles to the *bons* in neighbouring villages. The atmosphere of togetherness and goodwill from the festival thus lingered on to some extent, but only a week had gone by before an incident took place that again reminded me of the fragmentation that characterised the village. One of my neighbours, an amputee, who came from a large and rather poor family, was bitten on his remaining foot by a tiger caught in one of his traps. His wife came to my house, urging me to come to her house at once to help her wounded husband. I brought my few basic medical supplies with me but his nearly severed foot required proper medical attention and not one of us had a vehicle to take him. I turned to my other neighbours (who also did not have a motorbike) and the police to see if they could find someone. In both cases I was told that they could not help, and that others would not either, because
that was just the way people are in this village. I expressed my dismay, given the extremity of the case. My neighbours and the police (all from other villages) agreed: they explained that people here were not like the people from their own villages where people help each other. They didn’t know why. Finally, the policeman radioed another in a neighbouring village and the wounded man’s daughter was driven by moped to the health clinic to purchase antibiotics for her father.

The villagers themselves recognise that their village suffers from discord and lacks a sense of communal obligation. Nonetheless, as I was told many times, they sincerely hope the situation will improve and the village will regain the sense of goodwill and harmony that they insist was present in the not so distant past. The preparation and celebration of Bon Dalien, of course, presented a wonderful occasion for villagers to come together, as a number of them did for O’Thmaa’s bon: they were successful in producing the bon. Even so, several months later, my neighbour Thon expressed his concern over the lack of participation by ‘many of the villagers’:

When planning a bon in our village, O’Thmaa, we go to people’s houses to tell them the date and ask them to come and help out. We tell them but then they don’t come. I don’t know why. Our village is made up of only a few people but we don’t have solidarity/unity. We will not be able to continue this bon if the people do not help each other. It’s an unhappy and very difficult situation. . . After all, that is why we live – we live and so we must look after each other whether we are each other’s relatives or not. We must join together and be happy together. Then, if we want to do something, it is possible. But some people do not involve themselves. We tell them but still they will not come. That’s why there is only my family, Mr. Than’s family, and others who help each other to do the bon. We don’t want to give up the seasonal festivals. If it is the festival season and we were to do nothing it would not be proper.

Thon, whose family did a fair share of the work in putting together the 2003 Bon Dalien, is justified in his complaint: most of the planning and work was done by only a handful of villagers. Nonetheless, when it came to the actual event, the bon itself had a sizeable turnout, with most of the villagers attending, and so, in this sense at least, it can still be seen as relatively successful.
Conclusion

The sense of fragmentation and distrust within the village found expression in the sentiments villagers later shared with me and in attitudes I observed during the time I was there. Such sentiments were juxtaposed to references to a bygone gilded past where villagers lived a relatively egalitarian existence. This discourse of a golden past of fraternal love carries with it socially, historically and culturally specific imaginings for the residents of O'Thmaa that are vivified, constructed and negotiated during events like Bon Dalien. Today the bon may not be the fully communal event with total village participation that O'Thmaa’s residents claim it was in the past (or hope that it will be in the future). Nevertheless, most villagers seemed to feel that the event contained all the ceremonial and social elements that it should – the communal banquet, the dancing, the prayers and the offerings. In this way, the villagers see the bon as having continuity with the past because, despite the replacement of traditional dress and music with ‘modern’ or so-called ‘Chinese’ music and dress, they would agree overall that the Bon Dalien was celebrated in much the same way as before the war. In this way, continuity with the past is sustained, even though the meanings for the participants may have changed, given the historical circumstances.\(^{163}\)

I return now to the debate concerning the overall impact of the Pol Pot regime on a community’s ability to recover. As a reminder, one view holds that the re-construction of societal institutions and relations has been relatively successful: they have been resumed largely as before, allowing villagers to ‘layer-over’ the Pol Pot past (Ebihara 2002; Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002). The opposing viewpoint contends that rural communities have not been successful in re-establishing themselves as ‘true communities’: they are little more than an archipelago of self-interested households with little sense of social/moral obligation linking them (Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal 1996).

The claims by Ledgerwood and Ebihara that the Pol Pot past ultimately has had little impact on enduring social relations and institutions does not apply in the context of my

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\(^{163}\) See Bloch (1986) for an intricate analysis of how the meanings of ritual may change through historical episodes while the symbolic form of the ritual remains intact in his study of the Merina circumcision ritual.
fieldsite. Here the violence of the civil wars and Pol Pot have become internal to the village, as members turned each other in to be killed. The extended kin network comprising the village unfortunately has not been capable of resisting the terror wrought by the civil war and Khmer Rouge. Ultimately, these forces managed to penetrate and then consume the community from within: the repercussions still ripple beneath the social surface today. These reverberations from the violence are felt within O'Thmaa, not only in physical markers such as artefacts or bodily injuries\(^\text{164}\) and the absence of elders but also in everyday social relations. Therefore while, on the one hand, we can appreciate the relative success that many villagers have achieved in ‘getting on with their lives’, we must also recognise that deeper damage remains and resurfaces in unforeseen ways.

It might therefore seem that the argument of Ovesen and colleagues is the one that fits the circumstances of the village. However, here too the argument fails to capture the full complexity of the situation, not least the fact that, despite the odds, the *Bon Dalien* was carried out relatively successfully. By setting aside community religious rituals in their analysis of what constitutes a community, they miss seeing the moments when villagers manage to put aside their fears and come together to reproduce their traditions and maintain their links to their ancestors, each other, and the underpinnings of their society, asserting, however briefly, a sense of their relatedness. O'Thmaa and its neighbours came together as communities and produced the annual harvest *bons* in their villages with no outside support from development or government agencies. This would seem to indicate that there are bonds between villagers, even if often tenuous and in flux. While it is true that there was not total participation, especially in the preparation phases of the *bon*, the event was nonetheless spectacular and most villagers did attend.

The villagers’ production of the *Bon Dalien* festival is, as I hope I have shown, a positive act that helps to (re)form the moral order and build a sense of community. But the ritual also serves another end, which can be said to be an act of negation rather than creation. Through its re-establishment, the *bon* acts as a ‘counter-memory’ to the destruction of people and their traditions and society that was enacted by the Khmer Rouge over the 1970s. By effectively producing traditions again such as *Bon Dalien*,

\(^{164}\) But see French (1996) for a perceptive analysis of the social repercussions of the bodily injuries suffered by Cambodian amputees in the refugee camps along the Cambodian–Thai border.
the destruction is at least partially negated. This negation occurs in a variety of ways but, by connecting to the ancestors through sharing the practices, and by passing these traditions forward to future generations, it provides a sense of continuity for individuals and society as a whole. Finally, on a very basic level, it also brings boys and girls together who meet, mingle, and later often marry. In this way, society is literally reproduced and kinship within the village becomes extended across the village and also to the villages beyond. Returning to Ledgerwood and Ebihara’s argument, then, we can see how Bon Da lien, in offering a counter-memory to the treachery that occurred in the recent past, may well indeed serve to ‘layer-over’ that past, helping to ease the residual fear and distrust that Ovesen and his colleagues observed in their fieldsite, as I did in my own.

I conclude that, given the circumstances at this particular historical junction in O’Thmaa, the bon marked an occasion where villagers came together through their own individual moral motivations to re-establish some of the village’s traditions and in so doing to rebuild moral order and community and strengthen and reconnect to the ritual past. While there was not full participation, those who did participate managed to produce a festival reminiscent of the bons in the nostalgically ‘remembered’ past. More precisely, the connections that can be constructed between the bons of today and those of the past fill in the time when there were no bons at all. Once again, the anticipation, organising, setting up, and participation in Bon Da lien can become a regular yearly event in O’Thmaa, making it difficult to imagine the time when it failed to take place.
Chapter 9

Conclusion

This dissertation concludes with a reflection on the ideas of moral judgement, relatedness and social change; and how these themes intersect with the past and moral order.

I begin with the concept of sātisampajānīya (moral discernment). As Hansen, drawing on the Gatilok (Ways of the World) explains, sātisampajānīya is ‘a moral attribute necessary to anyone who wants to live as a good person in the world’ (2003: 820). Composed of sati, meaning mindfulness and clarity, and sampajānīya, meaning ‘discrimination’ or ‘attention’ or ‘awareness’, sātisampajānīya is ‘a precursor to living as a fully developed moral agent’ (2003: 819). This ‘mature moral agency’ arises from the proper ethical orientation toward the world, which requires ‘recognition of the true nature and connectedness of self and others’ (emphasis mine) (ibid.: 813). It is because of this centrality of relatedness, then, that the world is a place where actions have ‘reverberating’ consequences on others, especially those closely affiliated to them (ibid.: 821): it is only someone who possesses sātisampajānīya who has the capacity of discernment ‘to respond to situations of harm in such a way that avoids injury to themselves and others’ (ibid.: 829). Thus we see that the moral order and morality itself is made through relatedness, and therefore individual actions have profound consequences for those around them. Being a moral person begins by being connected to other people and behaving in a manner that takes under consideration concern for their well-being. This form of relatedness then defines what it is to be a moral person within the world and belonging to the world of humanity – the ‘civil’.

At the beginning of my fieldwork I found myself asking ‘Why do the villagers say that they ‘love’ one another?”. I have tried throughout this dissertation to answer this question, if not always directly then implicitly. I make my answer explicit here. In short, the answer has to do with morals, that is, moral ideals or virtues that individuals and their communities strive for. For the villagers in O’Thmaa ‘to love one another’ is a moral ideal that reflects the value and necessity for relatedness. In the case of Ta Kam
we saw that during his tenure as village chief under the Khmer Rouge he neglected this value and therefore his case shows that not all individuals possess the quality of sāisampajania and their actions may thus produce negative consequences for others.

For society, then, a combination of familial and fraternal love is the social ideal. This is achieved and expressed through the making of relatedness through commensality and marriage as discussed in Chapter 6, participation in village-wide ritual festivals (Chapter 8) and also through trust as suggested in Chapter 3. It also seems evident that villagers' statements that they 'love one another' today are connected to similar statements said about ancestral past. Generally, it is said that, before the Khmer Rouge came, the 'old people loved one another'; the same is said for the ancestors generally. The concept that people living together are familial and love one another is an ideal that is also expressed through stories like that of the enchanted wedding party told in Chapter 7, and that of betel in Chapter 6. For the Khmer villagers with whom I worked, it is the way communities should live and society ought to be. A place where people 'love one-another' (srolanh knea) is a place belonging to the civil world, the world of human relatedness, and implicitly opposed to 'the wild', where relatedness does not exist.

For O'Thmaa village these concepts have a special force. With the shadow of the past in the present, the moral status of the village within the Khmer cosmos is perhaps not as certain as in other places where fewer internal accusations and executions occurred. Moreover, people are aware of the ascriptions of 'wildness' placed upon them in light of associations between them and the highland locale where they live. Because of their place and past, then, O'Thmaa residents have a vested interest in presenting their community in its ideal form to outsiders like myself, as well as to themselves. The model of ideal relatedness is transmitted through stories of the ancestral past. The villagers are thus imbuing the village with this ideal—mirroring the 'love' of the ancestors. This is not so much an imitation of the idealised past but rather, a projection of it onto the future as a moral ideal, a theme familiar within 19th century Khmer Buddhism (Hansen 2004) and the notion of repairing and maintaining the Khmer kingdom as a whole through the body of the king (Thompson 2004).
This perspective allows us to see why past wrong-doings must be erased and clarity sought and valued. As discussed in Chapter 7, historical events over time become part of the mythical past of the ancestors. In Prei Phnom this mythical past was revealed through the stories of ‘honest ancestors’ who we were presented with in the stories of the wedding party and the stone box. In Doung Srae, alternatively, the ancestors became the potent bearers of culture and knowledge during the Thai invasion. In either case, however, the ancestors came to represent aspects of ideal states of virtue: being honest and bearing the traits of clarity and wisdom. These reflections of the past, then, illuminate the moral future. Villagers are then motivated actors working to order the past in a manner that accommodates their vision of what the future ought to be. The light of the past, however, can only pass through to the future with the quality of ‘clarity’. ‘Clarity’ of vision gives individuals in the present the ability to ‘see’ the past and to absorb and project its wisdom. This ability ‘to see’ is based on the viewer’s moral clarity as well as that of the past itself, which must be free of imperfections.

These themes were also evident within the utopian ideology of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) period, discussed in Chapter 3. As a reminder, there we saw that the DK sought to create ‘clear’ life histories that would then allow for the realisation of their vision of the future. Such moral clarity, however, is more of an ideal than a reality in ordinary Khmer society. In the world of the everyday, people’s hearts are not transparent and much of the order of things in the world is opaque. Hence we saw in Chapter 3 that trust in another person or the moral order as a whole may require a ‘leap of faith’.

One of the means by which the past and present is cleared of imperfections is through erasure, as discussed earlier. In this manner the problem of the immorality of the past may be eventually resolved (at least theoretically if not in practice). However erasure is not the only means of doing away with the wrong-doings of the past and present. Another way that I have suggested is through the ascription of amorality. That is, people may be placed outside of the moral realm and deemed ignorant (not knowing right from wrong), which then removes the immorality from their person. A person who commits wrongdoings but who is not fully cognisant of their choices is not inherently evil because they were not fully conscious of their actions. They are therefore not ‘immoral’ but rather ‘amoral’. This resonates with Marilyn Strathern’s findings where
subjects under the spell of sorcery or magic are made unconscious of the moral connotations of their behaviour and are thus rendered amoral (Strathern 1977). Thus I have shown that in O'Thmaa the villagers with whom I worked are resolving the immoralities firstly by containment (the wrongdoings of Ta Kam’s generation for example were limited to him) and then rendering those who committed the deeds as ignorant. I showed that this ignorance or lack of knowledge is associated with amorality that is associated with ‘the wild’. Ta Kam, however, was not the only instance where this logic is at work. It was also clear in the story of the ‘Bestial Village’. However, in the case of the woman who was accused of adultery or people blamed for sorcery this does not seem to apply. In these cases the ‘immorality’ was removed through eradication suggesting that in these cases the objects of blame were considered irredeemable and a continuous threat that resisted containment.

Returning to relatedness, we have seen that in the world of everyday practices, relatedness is an ideal that is valued and pursued by people. In many ways, it is the nexus of the moral order for it is here that it is made and expressed. This expression is found in decisions to form or not form relations with others. These decisions come from judgements about the rightness and wrongness of the relationship based on knowledge of the world and observations. It is a conscious choice that may then be enacted through trust, commensality, the sharing of ritual festivities and even marriage.

Joel Robbins has said that morality has everything to do with social change because change is registered by actors in moral terms (2004: 316). That is, people consciously deliberate and consider the issues involved in making their choices on how to respond to social change (ibid.). Robbins’ view is thus in keeping with Lambek (2000), who advocates employing the concept of phronesis as an analytic lens to understand people’s choices and actions, by seeing them as instances of ‘practical wisdom’.

When villagers observe that ‘society changed when the Khmer Rouge came and will change again’, they are acting as fully conscious agents who are reflective and discerning. Their awareness of change may, on the one hand, arise from their Buddhist heritage, which emphasises impermanence, but, as I have suggested in this thesis, it is also a reflection of the knowledge they have gained through experience. It is in fact this knowledge that allows them to draw on other pasts such as the 19th century Thai
invasions to morally order the present in a manner that meets with their vision of the way the world ought to be. In this manner, they are acting as Jennifer Cole's subjects whose moral projects frame their choices of how to recall the past (Cole 2003). Where her study looked at the way in which different social groups (i.e., soldiers, urban and rural dwellers) and different generations recall, in my study the comparison is between two communities: Prei Phnom and Doung Srae. However what is clear in both her study and my own is that different histories and different experiences produce variations in the way the past is evoked. But, more than this, I suggest like Cole, that it is people's present concerns and moral aspirations that also serve to frame such evocations, not only the past itself. This, then, is an additional step forward from the body of work that advocates that the past is drawn on in the present through particular moral registers, as writers such as Arjun Appadurai (1981) and Young (1996) have claimed. Specifically, Appadurai has argued that not just anything can be drawn from the past but that which is drawn on must comply with cultural norms. Young, offering a different take in the same direction, shows how narrations of past traumatic events in the present retain the language of the moral order or ideology that existed at the time the event occurred. For example, the grandmother in Young's account told her story of abuse using a vocabulary associated with the Catholic church, which manifested the moral order as it was when the event occurred. Here, however, I have shown that the events of the Khmer Rouge period were collectively narrated not through the vocabulary of the Khmer Rouge but, rather, through another historical event that held certain similarities to the Khmer Rouge period and had also destabilised the prior moral order, namely the 19th century Thai invasion. Indeed, it was the Khmer Rouge period itself that employed the 'vocabulary' of the preceding order in its attempts to re-order, as Hinton has argued well and I have also suggested, especially in Chapter 3. What makes this even more interesting is that the 'memory' of the 19th century Thai invasion might itself well be a 'memory' of an earlier Thai invasion in the 16th century and that, as Chandler has suggested, is in turn a 'memory' of the original sacking of Angkor in the 15th century. This way of seeing the past, then, gives some hint of the ways in which 'clarity' discussed above works. If all these events in fact flow together, then there is a 'clear' visionary path back to Angkor – which is for Khmers (and was also for the Khmer Rouge) the emblem of Khmer civilisation and potency. But how do these pasts live in the present?
In Chapter 7 I discussed some of Bloch’s ideas about how the transmission of semantic memory may become autobiographic through mnemonic mediums such as landscape and also, and importantly, through the ability to imagine. Here I would like to make a slightly different point. In *Autobiographical and Semantic Memory* (1998) Bloch gives an ethnographic example in which children imaginatively re-enact the 1947 rebellion that their grandparents had experienced and transmitted to them. He argues that the memories of the children who re-enacted the events are difficult to distinguish from the memories of the grandparents. The similarities exist he suggests, because the memories were processed in similar (but not identical) ways and include many of the same references. This point is picked up by Cornelia Sorabji (2006). Sorabji wants to show how it is possible for transmitted memories to vary from generation to generation (and also individual to individual) and therefore allow social change to occur. Her aim is, first, to show that her view does not radically conflict with Bloch’s, whose purpose in that article had less to do with social change than how the transmission of the past actually works. Sorabji’s argument then is that, although different generations and individuals may share similar experiences and pasts, which allows them to narrate the past near identically, they also have the means to construct it differently from one-another. This is because their own individual experiences may influence and can be a resource for constructing different narratives. (An analogy for this may be why identical twins are not identical as a result of their differing experiences and yet are quite similar as a result of similar environments and identical hardwiring). In any case, Sorabji’s point is well taken in light of the circumstances for Doung Srae and Prei Phnom communes as well as other communities in Cambodia more broadly, however while Sorabji is addressing the level of the individual, I am speaking on the level of the community. Thus we can see that while the communities share many of the same social, cultural and historical references, their particular histories and social and moral concerns are not identical and therefore they have the means and motivation to produce different narratives about the past that still share common features.

As I believe I have made clear throughout the thesis, the findings of my study link up well with other studies of Cambodia in different time periods, such as David Chandler’s studies of 19th century Cambodia, Anne Hansen’s studies of the beginning of the modernist period, and Alexander Hinton’s studies of the DK period and a number of others. My study contributes to these works by providing an ethnographic account of
how relatedness, the past, and morality come together to constitute, express and absorb the social changes that occurred with the beginning and end of the DK era in different but overlapping ways. Also important, this study has made an ethnographic contribution by focusing on communities and practices previously not studied.

Of course, further questions also remain as to the relationship between the ideal and everyday models. In other work than that described above, Maurice Bloch (1992) has shown that the realms of the ideal (as immortal/transcendent) and the realms of the everyday (as mortal/discontinuous) interact in a manner that enables the impermanence of the natural world to be overcome through its conquering by the transcendent (ideal). Do the two forms of *satisampajannia* — that of the everyday practised world presented in the *Gatilok* and that of the Pali *sutras* addressed to monks — fit within this model? How then is the everyday ‘conquered’ by the ideal transcendent state that is part of the Buddhist vision? Is the value of relatedness in the everyday world exchanged for the shedding of relatedness (as in the monastic life of the monks) the key to immortality? How does this happen for ordinary people and how does this dualism relate to social change?

An additional area that needs to be looked into more thoroughly in Prei Phnom and Doung Srae and in other communities in Cambodia is the role of monks and traditional healers in remaking the moral order and reconciling the memories of the past. Elsewhere in Cambodia, Maurice Eisenbruch has already studied the role of traditional healers in individual recovery; other studies like Alexandra Kent’s and John Marston’s (Kent 2005; Marston 2006, 2001) have addressed what is happening within the temple monasteries. But much more work remains to be done.

More research is also needed on the local level; that is, we need to know more about other villages throughout Cambodia to ascertain commonalities and differences between O’Thmaa’s ways of coping with the past and making their future. Questions remain as to how the varying histories and regional differences influence particular ways of responding to social change. As we saw in the cases of Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes, communities do not always choose the same means to re-establish their connection to each other and to place. Their particular histories and circumstances
made some means more salient and efficacious – and available – than others in remaking moral order.

We also need to learn more about the way in which the state today positions itself as part of the moral order and how is this then transferred down to individual agents such as policemen, teachers, soldiers, government workers, other state workers, on the one hand, and civilians, on the other? Alexander Hinton’s work on the DK period is a study of the state during that period. But what morally motivates these agents today and how are institutionalised immoralities (such as corruption) made into part of the moral order? When and how is the order weakened or strengthened? – meaning, how is trust instilled in the order and when does it falter? The impunity within the justice system that Cambodia has become notorious for and the general consensus amongst its populace that the leaders are not to be trusted is well known. What is less clear is whether the means are available within this order that might enable its repair.

Also in relation to the state and national discourses, it will be interesting to see how the expected tribunal for the Khmer Rouge leadership will be understood and interpreted by Cambodians both within the cities and in places like O’Thmaa. As I have argued through this dissertation, it would appear that immorality is to be removed or erased rather than recorded and inscribed. The purposes of international tribunals of the kind being organised in Cambodia, however, does the opposite by exposing the events considered to be immoral and creating an official ‘memory’ that is then inscribed into history and transmitted to future generations. The elucidation of ‘the truth’ and framing of official memory is aimed at providing some form of reconciliation of the past, and it also settles it within the moral order of international human rights. While the two means of dealing with immorality in the past – erasure vs. inscription seem to be at odds of one another this does not mean that they are mutually exclusive. We have seen that the infusion of so-called ‘modern’ ideas that are part of the globalised present are sometimes joined with more traditional ways of seeing the world. Will the trial then create a tension in people’s memories of the past and therefore impact their visions of the future? Will the treacherous acts of the Khmer Rouge be eventually forgotten or will Cambodians adopt the ‘western’ view that immorality is resolved not through erasure but rather through trial, historicisation, and remembrance?
In summation, this thesis has demonstrated how Cambodians in one village and its surrounding communities contend with radical and violent social change. I have demonstrated how the impact of these revolutionary years and the DK period that followed had long lasting reverberations on the community of O’Thmaa that have posed particular challenges to remaking the sense of permanence and re-establishing relatedness. As described above, we saw that particular ‘sites’ of moral order making emerge and are employed in the reconstruction. This study has not been within the tradition of post-conflict studies that employ discourse analysis to understand the trauma endured by subjects and their subsequent means of coping. Instead, by combining a ‘social memory’ approach together with theoretical paradigms concerning morality, I was able to focus not only on what people say but also what they do and their motivations for doing it. It has led me to not only get a glimpse of how the villagers I lived with look back but, equally important, how they also look forward.
## Appendix I: Timeline of Select Events in Cambodian History

*Local Events in Prei Phnom and Doung Srae Communes are highlighted in grey. Source for these events is primarily villagers accounts.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd - 7th c. AD</td>
<td>Funan Period and Indianization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th - 8th c.</td>
<td>Chenla Period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th - 15th c.</td>
<td>Angkorian Period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th - 16th c.</td>
<td>Rough dates of Thai, Vietnamese, and Khmer pottery found in vicinity of O'Thmaa village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15th - 19th c.</td>
<td>Cambodian ‘Dark Ages’ – continual invasions by Thai and Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1534</td>
<td>Thai invasion and the capture of Lovek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1833</td>
<td>Thai invasion down the Tonle Sap and into Phnom Penh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>Khmer rebellion against Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>Larger Thai invasion. Cambodia a battlefield between Thai and Vietnamese forces for next five years with mostly Khmer casualties. Ang Doung takes the throne (1841-1860)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841</td>
<td>Likely the time of the Thai invasion discussed by residents of Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>Beginning of French colonial period (1863 – 1953) – French establish protectorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>French Resident killed in Kompong Chhnang – Phoum Derichhan (Ch 6).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Rise of Cambodian Nationalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Norodom Sihanouk is crowned as King of Cambodia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan occupies Cambodia during WW II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>End of Japanese Occupation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Re-imposition of Protectorate by France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Beginning of Issarak War of Independence (1947 – 1953)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 1950s</td>
<td>Prei Phnom villagers flee to the north to escape fighting between Issarak, French and Vietnamese forces for a period of two to three years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 1953</td>
<td>Cambodia gains complete Independence from the French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun 1960</td>
<td>Prince Norodom Sihanouk becomes head of state</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1965 Sihanouk breaks relations with the US and allows North Vietnamese to establish bases within Cambodia

Apr 1967 Samlaut Rebellion: a peasant revolt put down by Lon Nol's forces.

1967-69 Expansion of Vietnamese forces in Cambodia; by 1969, 50,000-60,000 Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops operating in Cambodian provinces bordering South Vietnam165

1970-1975 First Civil War with Khmer Rouge (Khmer Rouge Revolution)

Early 1970 Khmer Rouge, North Vietnamese, and possibly renegade guerilla under Prince Chantararingsey, the White Khmer (Khmer Sâr), establish military bases in the vicinity of Prei Phnom and Doung Srae communes


Prince Sihanouk is granted asylum in Beijing.

5 May 1970 People's Republic of China recognizes Prince Sihanouk's government-in-exile, the National United Front for the Liberation of Cambodia is established and includes Royalist forces (Khmer Rumdos) and the Khmer Rouge.


1970-1973 A small number of American bombs and possibly napalm dropped west of Prei Phnom. No one was reported affected by this as the strikes were in remote areas Doung Srae commune was also spared, but the airplanes are remembered.

1970 – 1972 Most of O’Thmaa’s villagers and some from the nearby villages flee to a nearby mountain where there is a Khmer Rouge base and to escape the fighting between the North Vietnamese (or possibly Viet Cong), Khmer Rouge and Lon Nol forces. Some stay for a few months, some stay for more than a year.

1972 – 1973 Vietnamese withdraw from region of Prei Phnom having defeated the Lon Nol forces together with the Khmer Rouge under Ta Mok.

Khmer Rouge cooperative ‘Boun Chua’ founded in centre of Prei Phnom Commune. All residents are forced to relocate there. Number of residents accused as traitors and executed rises.

1974/1975 Khmer Rouge organize family exchanges between a villages in Doung Srae with villages in Koh Kong, Battambang and Aural.

Most of Prei Phnom’s population is relocated to Doung Srae commune to work on the dam being built and other large-scale agricultural projects. Only a handful of elders are held back to grow tobacco and raise chickens.

Fall of Phnom Penh. Beginning of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) (1975-1979)

Pol Pot send in raids to Vietnam, massacring thousands of Vietnamese villagers.

Cambodia is invaded by Vietnam.

Vietnamese capture Phnom Penh marking the end of Democratic Kampuchea and the beginning of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) under Heng Samrin’s leadership.

Sihanouk flees to Beijing.

Second Civil War with Khmer Rouge

People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)

Cambodian famine.

Many of Prei Phnom and Doung Srae Residents who are Khmer Rouge soldiers join their leaders flight to the border of Thailand where the Khmer Rouge establish bases and begin a protracted civil war against the Vietnamese controlled state.

All people are evacuated by the Vietnamese from Doung Srae and Prei Phnom to the market town along the highway.

Doung Srae residents allowed to return to their homes. Prei Phnom residents allowed to move to Prei Phnom commune centre where they can be protected and also prevented from joining the Khmer Rouge.

Some of the residents of Doung Srae and Prei Phnom commune together hold a Phnom Yong ceremony in Prei Phnom’s commune centre.

Sihanouk, Son Sann and the Khmer Rouge form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) to resist Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia

Hun Sen becomes Prime Minister of PRK.

Khmer Rouge re-establish power in region. Residents of Prei Phnom and Doung Srae are re-evacuated to market towns along highway.

Viet Nam announces that all of its troops will leave Cambodia by September 30, 1989

International Conference in Paris fails to bridge differences among Cambodian factions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year(s)</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989 - 1993</td>
<td>The State of Cambodia (SOC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1993 – Pres.</td>
<td>Kingdom of Cambodia</td>
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<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Mass surrender of Khmer Rouge</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Former Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary surrenders and granted amnesty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jul 1997</td>
<td>Coup d’Etat – In a military coup Hun Sen ousts co-prime minister Ranariddh.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997 – 2003</td>
<td>O’Thmaa villagers return to the village</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apr 1998</td>
<td>Pol Pot Dies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jul 1998</td>
<td>Hun Sen wins National Elections. Ta Mok, the remaining Khmer Rouge leader wages attack on villagers in Anlong Veng.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 1999</td>
<td>Ta Mok and remainder of Khmer Rouge surrender.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>O’Thmaa holds its first <em>Bon Dalien</em> in 32 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 2003</td>
<td>Thai riots in Phnom Penh. Thai embassy and businesses attacked by mob over alleged claim that a Thai actress claimed Angkor Wat as Thailand’s. Border with Thailand temporarily closed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul 2003</td>
<td>Hun Sen wins national elections.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendices

Appendix II: System of Transliteration

A Note on Transliteration: Franco-Khmer Transcription

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONSONANTS</th>
<th>TRANSCRIPTION</th>
<th>VOWELS</th>
<th>TRANSCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>1st</td>
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<td>-`</td>
<td>ang</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>(\emptyset)/(^c)</td>
<td>-`</td>
<td>ah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)When followed by another consonant, as in chnam [year].

\(^b\)Final U is written p.

\(^c\)When subscript to another consonant, as in s\(\text{at}\) [clean].

\(^d\)Before a velar final, as in neak [person].

*Note:* Transcriptions in this book are based upon the Franco-Khmer transcription system developed by Franklin E. Huffman in 1983. Although Huffman's system is similar to that used in many French-language works on Cambodia, additional diacritics were added to distinguish all of the various vowel sounds. Only one of those diacritics (\(\emptyset\)) is retained in this text.


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