

Khmer Ways of Seeing

Migration and Divinatory Improvisation
in Phnom Penh

Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
The Australian National University

June 2018

© Copyright by Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya 2018

All rights reserved

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis is the original work of author

All sources used and assistance obtained have been acknowledged

Poonnatree Jiaviriyaboonya

26 June 2018

Department of Anthropology

School of Culture, History and Language

The Australian National University

Abstract

Since the fall of the Khmer Rouge, local practices of divination, magic and spirit veneration have increased in diversity and popularity in Cambodia, including in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Although modern urban Khmers embody a cosmopolitan lifestyle, the way they see and make sense of the world, still draws upon their religious traditions. The resurgence of various occult technologies in Cambodian urban society supports the case made by scholars who have argued that religious practices in Southeast Asia continue to flourish and change in response to modernity. Anthropologists, however, have yet to provide sufficient in-depth analysis of the revival and reinvention of such religious traditions in Cambodia's modern cities. Furthermore, little attention has been given to the religious experience of urban people, especially domestic migrants, whose reliance on their religious repertoire occurs within a context of historical rupture, socio-spatial dislocation, uncertainty about tradition, and processes of secularisation and globalisation. This thesis is the first full-length ethnography on divination in Cambodia and the first to embed the study of religion in the lived experiences of Khmer urban people. It investigates the multidimensional roles of divination, magic and spirit veneration in the lives of rural-urban migrants in Phnom Penh. In a modern context in which urbanisation and globalisation often foster markedly secular alternatives to "traditional" practices, this thesis examines how urban migrants use divination and associated religious traditions to guide and manage their experiences of mobility, security-seeking and place-making.

The ethnographic account presented in this thesis draws upon 14 months of field research in Phnom Penh from 2015 to 2016. I undertook participant observation within the workplaces, homes and social networks of fortune-tellers and clients; collected life histories; and conducted semi-structured interviews with research interlocutors on their religious practices and life concerns. Examining the experiences of mobility of fortune-tellers and their clients, the findings demonstrate that rural-urban migrants creatively draw upon a diverse religious repertoire in their endeavour to emplace themselves in a new city. The thesis argues that divination, magic and spirit veneration can be seen as forms of empowerment that assist vulnerable people overcome their uncertainties, afflictions and anxieties. It finds that elements of a traditional religious repertoire are

portable and are utilised by urban newcomers to regain equilibrium in unfamiliar circumstances. Divination services address the existential concerns of migrants and offer an affective service—a form of therapeutic treatment — to those who face a moral dilemma or encounter indecision. Divination and magic are used to penetrate the mysteries of urban social relationships, secure beneficial outcomes, and present oneself as a desirable person. Magic and sorcery can be used as “weapons” by people whose position is vulnerable and threatened by unknown actors or forces. The ethnography sheds light on the improvisation of divinatory authority within a context of uncertainty about the past and present, contested knowledge and unequal access to resources. This thesis considers urban Cambodian practices of divination, magic and spirit worship as experimental traditions that migrants assemble and improvise upon to make an unpredictable and changing city home.

Acknowledgements

I have learnt that, in becoming an anthropologist, I must also train myself to become a good story-teller. And in order to attract readers to follow my stories, I have to create a unique style to reflect something realistic, sensible, impressive and unforgettable. Divination, I believe, is a creative channel to tell the stories of Khmer people who are sharing the same fate but never letting fate fully control their lives. Instead of waiting for good fortune to come, they rather create their own style of fortune by explicitly showing self-discipline and hard work. All of the stories contained in this thesis have been inspired by the journey of Khmer urban people and the journey of myself—a Thai anthropologist trying to navigate and explore the Khmer world. My journey could not have reached its final destination without love, passion, inspiration, and hard work, as well as the enormous support of humans and non-human agents.

My PhD journey would not have been so exciting, entertaining, joyful (and of course inducing pressure and suffering) without the magical force of my supervisor, Philip Taylor. It is the power of his magic which inspires and initiates me to step out from my “Thai Studies” comfort zone and make my way to explore another world—Khmer studies. Without his supervision talent, devotedness and contributions, my research project would not have been possible. He is the legend of the Department of Anthropology at ANU who can still give you a “fat smile” after spending 7-8 hours meeting with students. I would like to express my deepest gratitude for his fantastic guidance, support, (constructive) criticism and friendship. My deepest heartfelt thanks must also be extended to my “dream team panel.” I received generous support, insightful comments, and constructive suggestions from Matt Tomlinson, Jane Ferguson and Craig Reynolds. Special thanks to Matt and his “oracle machine”—a magical weapon relieving my anxiety and concern before giving a pre-submission seminar. Additionally, amazing advice given by Aj. Craig inspired me to become a good story-teller. I am also grateful for the intellectual conversations with various scholars including with Peter Jackson, David Chandler, Chris Gregory, Andrew Kipnis, Andrew McWilliam, Alan Rumsey, Mark Mosko, Jim Fox, Kathryn Robinson, Kirin Narayan, Assa Doron, Ta Ta, Tyrell Haberkorn and Holly High. Furthermore, I wish to thank my former mentors at

Chulalongkorn University and Northern Illinois University: Chulanee Thainthai, Niti Pawakpan, Supakwadee Amatayakul, Andrea Molnar, Judy Ledgerwood, Kheang Leang, Kendall Thu, Ete and Grant Olson for their valuable advice, encouragement, support and friendship.

Over four years of my PhD journey, I am particularly grateful for the generous financial support provided by the Royal Thai Government and the Office of Higher Education. I especially thank Dr Chaiwat Khamchoo who sees and believes in my potential and capacity. My deepest appreciation goes to my lovely people at the Office of Educational Affairs, Royal Thai Embassy in Canberra: Kaewta Srisung, Kamonwan Sattayayut, Pamornpan Wong-ngoen, Ploypaphat Ruangwong, Kewalee Sombun and Somjit Wattanatassi. I am so grateful for their sincere understanding and enormous help and support. I would particularly like to pay tribute to the Marie Reay Scholarship which supported my Khmer language course taken in Phnom Penh and the Richard B Davis Foundation which provided a travel grant for my conference presentation at the Thai Studies Conference in Chiang Mai in 2017. I also express my appreciation to Simon Haberle and Roald Maliangkaij who kindly approved additional funding from CHL to cover the full costs of thesis editing. And of course, unsurprisingly, my PhD journey would not have been as cheerful and smooth without the assistance and support from the CHL staff: Jo Bushby, Etsuko Mason, Stella Diao, Kirsten Farrell and Catherine Fisher. I would like to extend my gratitude to Diana Glazebrook; my thesis would not be as readable without her editing assistance. I also thank Kay Dancey and Karina Pelling at CartoGIS Services, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, for the beautiful maps presented throughout the thesis. I also appreciate the assistance offered by Candida Spence and Imogen Ingram to transform my thesis (from scratch) into a good format. I thank Nitipong Pichetpan for his assistance with Khmer transliteration throughout the thesis.

During my fieldwork in Phnom Penh, I received a lot of help and assistance from hundreds of Khmer interlocutors who became my families, friends, sisters and brothers. My deep heartfelt thanks goes to Sokha Pich and her family (Pa, Ma, Tey, Seth, Keang and Da). Thank you so much for accepting me to be part of the family. I also thank Bunthoeun So, Koulen Thin and Timothy for friendship, sincere advice, warm shelter and many luxurious meals. I am also grateful for the friendships, support, and assistance offered by university students at RUPP (Thai Language major): Seng Vo Yem, Sodanek San, Kong Buntha, Ly Echheang, Por Por, Ah Xue; local scholars, researchers, NGOs,

officials and entrepreneurs: Dr. Ang Choulean, Long Sarou, Khiev Vuthon, Chantevy Khourn, Lyheang Khourn, Selinta Clark, Daniel Mattes, Somongkol Teng, Steven Daro. Norng Many, Nareena Tawanmai, Charubhumi Ruangsuan, Natee Vichitsorasatra, Sophearith Meas, Prae pongdao, Sereyroth Lim, Sithi Sok, Vuthy Tan, Nearirath Sreng, Wendy Kong, Danech San, Samnang Kuy, Joline Hanna, Chan Monika, II Oeur, Linda Chhath, Cheryl Yin and Sodany Tan.

In Canberra, I received a lot of moral support and warm encouragement from “the Anthropgrads” community. I thank Justine Chambers, Gita Nasution, Xeem Noor, Helen Abbot, Isabela Burgher, Muhammad Kavesh, Column Graham, María Ortega, Hoang Anh Thu, Lee Yen, Geng Le, Xuan Dong, Roger Casas, Chen Liang, Markos Bell, Viet Quan Ha, Lamijo Samsidi, Udeni Ariyaratna, Bo Seo, Stella Hutagalung, Annie McCarthy, Andrei Damaledo, Lan Thai, Teena Saulo, Suzuka Sugawara-Sato, Jodie-Lee Trembath, Joanne Thurman, Simon Theobald, Ian Pollock, Fay Styman, Duy Thanh Vo, Sherman Tan, Julia Brown, Benjamin Hegarty, Shiori Shakuto, Lina Koleilat, Kirsty Wissing, Maria Myutel, Vida Kusmartono, Erlin Erlina, Ibari Ortega, Myra Mentari Abubakar, Naijing Liu, Dayne O’Meara, Zoe Rose, Rizki Fillaili, Ruonan Maya, Rahil Mundkur, Samnang Kuy, Cheunboran Chanborey and Kimly Ngoun,

Furthermore, I would like to extend my gratitude to alumni and students from the Thai community: Pongphisoot Busarat, Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, Prasert Rangkla, Apiradee Jansaeng, Visisya Pinthongvijayakul, Tamthai Dilokwaitayarat, Soimart Rung, Preedee Hongsaton, Pasoot Lasuka, Duangyawa Utarasint, Abhichon Chandrasen, Jessada Burinsuchat, Todsapon Cheowchanpraphan, Supawan Pingjai, Natanaree Posrithong, Panitta Ninpanit, Sirirak Aratrakorn, Thanapat Jarenphanit, Wuthisak Pathomsart, Alongkorn Tanasritunyakul, Thanyaporn Soontornthum, Jirat Hiranras, Ladawan Khaikham, Wimalin Rimpeekool, Tepsuda Rungrat, Wipaporn Wongsumpanwech, Anja Aunyananee, Supanimit Chiampanichayakul, Nitipong Boonyaleepun, Kitiphum Thammasiraphop, Nattapong Jay Luangtongplew, Rungrawee Chalermripinyorat, Aim Singpeng, Thanapat Jarenpanit, Ob Sawee, Ruji Yeoh, Phaothai Sin-ampol, Pupae Rinsai, Jane Hodgins, Wipada Santisuk Srisuwan, Lhing Wanissa and Taksaporn Noikaew. Special thanks to my lovely sister, Vasoontara, and Peter Sbirakos, for their warm hospitality, sincere friendship, practical advice and yummy hybrid Thai food. I also extend my appreciation to the peaceful and multicultural community of the Graduate House Apartments. I would like to express my thanks to Peter Kanowski, Kaori Okinawa

and Robert Freeth for their support, generosity, and hospitality in making the temporary accommodation “home” for international students.

Back in Thailand, I also received great support from my friends and colleagues. I thank my best friends: Nucharee Wongsamut, Yui Vimvipha, Bas Eakaphak, Saranthorn Dolsa, May Arunothayanan, Annie Sakulpairoj. My appreciation is further extended to Morrakot (Miow) Sriswasdi, Anuk Pitukthanin, Montakarn Chimmamee, Napapadol Kittisenee, Punchada Sirivunnabood, Edoardo Siani and Nantana Limpikovid. I am particularly grateful for the moral support given by my colleagues at Nakhon Phanom University, and thank Momay Singsuwan, Jarukanya Udanont, Narongrit Sumalee, Suriya Khamwan, Siriyaporn Saleephan, Apikanittha Nalao, Pawadee Phantarak, as well as my former boss, Suwit Laohasiriwong and Presart Issarapreeda for their understanding, patience, generosity and friendship.

Most importantly, I would like to express my deepest heartfelt thanks to my family. I am very grateful to Papa, Mae Tu, Pooh, Khun Ya, Khun Yai, Na On, Nanoknoi, Na Tom and the late Khun Ta and Akong. I cannot forget their unconditional love, moral support, constructive guidance, sincere understanding and sense of humour. I would like to offer my special thanks to my uncle, Supamit Pitipat (Na On), for his support and inspiration to be a well-rounded and generous scholar. I also thank my *songs*, Pheak Ung and his family, for their love, care, guidance, sincerity, as well as authentic Khmer food and a warm shelter in Sydney when I needed to relocate myself from “Canboring.”

Committing myself to becoming a storyteller, and starting from the beginning, step by step, has meant that I consider any constructive feedback or comment from the audience as my fortunate opportunity as it could improve my communicating skills. I hope that my thesis can inspire other scholars to increase constructive discussion and dialogue in order to expand and broaden the understanding of Cambodian culture and society from different viewpoints, divergent reflections, various stances and multiple disciplines.

Table of Contents

Abstract	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Table of Contents	xi
List of Figures	xiii
List of Acronyms	xv
Note on Transliteration	xvii
Glossary	xix
 Introduction	 1
 Chapter 1	
Spiritual Home-Making	37
 Chapter 2	
The Affective Labour of Fortune-telling	71
 Chapter 3	
Market-Based Divination and Mystical Affinities	105
 Chapter 4	
Khmer Magic as a Weapon for the Weak	143
 Chapter 5	
Improvising Divinatory Authority in Cambodia	169
 Conclusion	 209
 Bibliography	 223

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1 Map of Phnom Penh Location.....</i>	24
<i>Figure 2 Map of districts of Phnom Penh.....</i>	25
<i>Figure 3 Wat Phnom, a symbol of Phnom Penh</i>	26
<i>Figure 4 A card-reading consultation conducted near the riverside area of Phnom Penh</i>	28
<i>Figure 5 The researcher and migrant university students at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.....</i>	32
<i>Figure 6 Brah'angg Dangkoa's shrine in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh.....</i>	46
<i>Figure 7 The god of water and earth perform the function of ancestral spirits.</i>	60
<i>Figure 8 The student from Kampot lights incense for enshrining her personal guardian spirit inside her bedroom at Bung Sala area, Phnom Penh.....</i>	61
<i>Figure 9 Grūpādhya: the miniature lotus was made from gold paper rolled into a triangle form</i>	61
<i>Figure 10 The image of nāngpāknāngpoy</i>	65
<i>Figure 11 Various amulets offered (for sale) to clients</i>	83
<i>Figure 12 various kinds of talismans and amulets made of fabric</i>	84
<i>Figure 13 Grū Bun standing to the right side of the terrace of his house in St. 271 located in a suburb of Phnom Penh.</i>	85
<i>Figure 14 (left) Thai divination books: Patithin Neung Roi Pee (100 year calendar)</i>	92
<i>Figure 15 (right) Thai divination books: Tamra Plu Luang.....</i>	92
<i>Figure 16 An example of the numerological tables and cross which were calculated from my own day, month, and year of birth.</i>	94
<i>Figure 17 Grū Bun reading Sovanna's fortune using his numerology technique</i>	96
<i>Figure 18 shows the first patterns of the cards laid on the table.....</i>	114
<i>Figure 19 shows the second patterns of the cards</i>	114
<i>Figure 20 The card-reading fortune-teller worships the images of gods, goddesses, and deities with offerings every day at her stall inside the Central Market.</i>	127
<i>Figure 21 nāngpāknāngpoy in the form of a boy and girl, with beckoning hands in a symbolic action calling for money, as a sign of wealth and prosperity.</i>	128
<i>Figure 22 The ritual altar at the mediumistic fortune-teller's house in Monivong Rd, Phnom Penh.</i>	135
<i>Figure 23 Images of the child spirits and the baby/child likeness dolls placed next to the ritual altar</i>	136
<i>Figure 24 (left) The red yantra (yānta) is the magical fabric amulet given by the former Khmer soldier of the Lon Nol regime.</i>	152
<i>Figure 25 (right): An example of a fabric amulet drawn and written by Grū Bun in Pali script "namo buddhāya" which represents the five incarnations of the Buddha.</i>	152
<i>Figure 26 A kumāradeba amulet was wrapped in a cloth (like swaddling a baby) and laid down on a miniature bed provided by a female care-taker</i>	154
<i>Figure 27 A residence and different kinds of food and toys were offered to kumāradeba</i>	154

Figure 28 Diagram indicating the relationship between the provincial governor and his two wives in relation to the magical attack made by the Cham/Muslim ritual specialist.....	160
Figure 29 The front cover of the 2016 astrological handbook entitled “Horasart” or “Astrology,” publicising the name of the New Year angel “Monthea Thevy” and the monkey zodiac.....	174
Figure 30 The rear cover features an image of author, Im Borin; a summary of his works and achievements; and a circle chart representing the Khmer 100 year calendar.....	174
Figure 31 The covers of a second astrological handbook entitled “Horasart Khmer Chen Sakol” or “Khmer, Chinese, and Universal/Western astrology.”	175
Figure 32 The rear cover features a picture of Im Borin and a summary of his works and achievements while the bottom part exhibits the symbol of the feng shui octagon mirror.	175
Figure 33 From the cover of a recent astrological book, the photograph shows Im Borin dressed in the formal uniform of a Cambodian government official.....	184
Figure 34 Im Borin conducting “ <i>bidhikâtgroah</i> ” (ពិធីកាត់ត្រោះ) or the ritual to eliminate bad luck at his residence in Phnom Penh Tmey in October 2015	193
Figure 35 Long Bora photographed during an interview with a Phnom Penh Post reporter (23 May 2015 Phnom Penh Post)	202

List of Acronyms

CFF	Cambodian Freedom Fighters
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
DK	The Democratic Kampuchea
RUPP	The Royal University of Phnom Penh
PKP	People's Republic of Kampuchea

Note on Transliteration

In this thesis, I follow the American Library Association (the Library of Congress) or ALA-LC system to transliterate Khmer words. The ALA-LC can be accessed via: <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsd/romanization/khmer.pdf>. The ALA-LC system can generate systematically the Indic loanwords which have been rendered in the Khmer language. The system provides those romanised Indic loanwords in line with those of their original counterparts in Pali or Sanskrit. The ALA-LC also benefits language recognition when readers learn how to transliterate romanised Khmer words back to their original vernacular scripts; they encounter no difficulty since the system gives us the one-to-one matching method of romanisation.

The ALA-LC system is also applied to the Thai transliteration, including the seven of nine celestial bodies (āthit chān, angkhān, puth, phruhatsabōdī, suk, sao), and the names of Thai divination textbooks: *Patithin Neung Roi Pee* (100-year calendar) and *Tamra Plu Luang*. I would like to emphasise that I intend to spell the title of the Thai astrological book *Tamra Brahma-chati* instead of following the transliterated version [phrommā chati] because I want to keep the original meaning of the word “Brahma-*chati*,” the lineage of Brahma—the Hindu Creator god.

However, as can be expected, if the system was to be simply deemed as a total transliterating version of romanisation, then the readership could neither guess nor have access to the possibility of lexical pronunciations from certain written romanised forms unless they learned the language. As such, I did not follow the ALA-LC system for certain words, preferring to follow local people’s common usage in everyday life communication. Such exemptions include the names/titles of local gods and deities, such as Brah’angg Dangkoa (translit. Brah’angg Tangkoa), *dang tung* (translit. *ṭang dung*), Lok Yāy Penh/Daun Penh (translit. lokyāybeñ/ṭūnbeñ) *neak ta* (translit. *naktā*), *bun* [translit. *pun*] Lok Ta Tambang. In addition, I also retain the local spelling and written form for the following: Khmer festivals: *Saen Kbal Terk* (សែនក្បាលទឹក), Bchum Ben (ប្រឡង), Qingming [ឆ្នាំម្សៅ/Chinese]; names of streets, districts, provinces and local markets in Cambodia, such as Chba Ampov, Battambang; the official title “*ouk nha*” (translit. *ukñhā*)

and the title of the Khmer astrological books like Horasart. The ALA-LC is not applied to certain Khmer concepts discussed throughout the thesis including *sneh* (translit. *sneh°*), *samay* (translit. *samāya*), *boran* (translit. *purāṇa*) and manta akom [translit. manta āgaman]. I think this simple written style is effective for communicating to a broader audience rather than the transliterated forms. Readers can view the full list of common written transcriptions obtained from interlocutors in the Glossary section. For the name of the Chinese god and deity *ti chui iea*, I decided to follow the Romanised written form used by Khmer-Chinese people.

I also followed the academic convention to use italics and lower case in the case of Khmer common nouns (denoting a class of objects or a concept as opposed to a particular individual) while using upper case (capitalised) and no italics for Khmer terms representing proper nouns. Examples of common nouns include *nakcūlrūp*, *grū moel*, *pāramī*, *pithi kutkrua*, *yantra* (*yānta*); examples of proper nouns include Kpuan Mahāsangkranta and Lok Yāy Deba

I realise that existing Khmer Studies scholars (both Western and native Khmer) have employed various systems to transliterate Khmer words. This has resulted in diverse forms of written words used in numerous academic publications. When referring to any cultural concept/ Khmer word which has been discussed by other scholars, I preserve their transliterated style or their spelling but put my transliterated words in square brackets {[]}.

Glossary

ALA-LC Transliteration	Common Transcription	Khmer	English
‘ācārya	ajar	អាចារ្យ	an expert religious/ ritual master, or master practitioner
aekauttama	ek-udom	ឯកអគ្គម	a title of the high- rank officials like ministers, representatives or the provincial governor
‘apiyajamṇya	ah pei chum nier	អបិយជំនឿ	invisible belief, supernatural belief
Āgaman	akom	អាគមន៍	(black) magic
Ayū	ayok/ ayou	អាយុ	age, life and to be aged or to be years- old
bhjumpiṇḍa	Bchum Ben/ Bhchum Ben	ភ្នំបិណ្ឌ	festival of the dead, festival of hungry ghost
bhnang	phnong	ភ្លង	derogatory generalised term for minority upland peoples, also the name of one specific upland group in Mondulkiri province who speak Phnong, which belongs to Bahnaric branch of Austroasiatic languages.
bidhīkātgroaḥ	phiti kutkrua	ពិធីកាត់គ្រោះ	the ritual to eliminate someone’s bad fortune
brāy	prei	ព្រាយ	a malevolent female spirit; the spirits of people who have experienced violent death, such as through suicide or car accident
braḥ‘angga	preah ang	ព្រះអង្គ	God, goddess, deity
braḥ‘angg Tangkoe	Preah Ang Dongkar	ព្រះអង្គដងកើ	Phnom Penh’s guardian spirit
Brahbuddha	Preah Putt	ព្រះពុទ្ធ	Lord Buddha

ALA-LC Transliteration	Common Transcription	Khmer	English
Braḥisūra		ព្រះឥសូរ	the Hindu God known as “Shiva”
Braḥrājabidhī Puṇyacrātbraḥnanggāl	j’rort pras naang korl	ព្រះរាជពិធី បុណ្យច្រកព្រះនង្គ័ល	the Royal Ploughing Ceremony
braḥm’aegāngs’ī’īm	pras mae kong si im	ព្រះម៉ែគង់ស៊ីអ៊ឹម	East Asian (Chinese) Bodhisattva
braḥprāṃbraḥ’angga	preah pram preah ang	ព្រះប្រាំព្រះអង្គ	the five reincarnations of the Buddha
braḥse’āryametrāya	preah se a’riya mettrey	ព្រះសេអារ្យមេត្រីយ	the fifth reincarnated Buddha
braḥ grū	preah kru	ព្រះអង្គ	Brahman ritual masters
caryānta	jar yuan	ចារយន្ត	an inscribed/a written <i>yantra</i>
cāḳgambīra	ja gompi	ចាក់គម្ពីរ	a Khmer divinatory technique through reading an old scripture
Ch’engm̄’eng	Qingming Cheng Meng	ឆេងម៉េង	All Souls Day, Clear Bright Festival, Ancestors Festival: a Chinese custom
chmādeba/ chmāpāk chmāpoy	ch’ma tep	ឆ្មាទេព/ ឆ្មាប៉កឆ្មាបោយ	angel cat
chnām̄chung	chnum chong	ឆ្មាំឆុង	clashing year/ inauspicious year
cūlchnām̄thmī	jol chnum tmei	ចូលឆ្មាំថ្មី	New Year
daksā	thiek sa	ទក្ស	an approach or a method of Thai astrology relying on a particular order and set of relations between the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, and Rahu.
dāy	Teay	ទាយ	to guess, to predict, to divine, to prophesy or to read someone’s fortune
devatā	tewada	ទេវតា	guardian spirit, lesser god

ALA-LC Transliteration	Common Transcription	Khmer	English
devatā cangkrān	tewada jongkran	ចង្ក្រាន	the guardian spirit at the kitchen
gāthā	Katha	កាថា	a sacred verse/stanza written in Pali
gambīra	Kompi	គម្ពីរ	scripture referring to a traditional form of knowledge; sacred text
grū	kru	គ្រូ	a teacher, a master, or a mentor. In certain context, grū also refers to the deceased teachers or mentors who originally founded divinatory knowledge.
grū cham	kru cham	គ្រូចាម	A Muslim ritual specialist from the Cham ethnic group (usually male)
grū dāy	kru teay	គ្រូទាយ	Khmer Fortune-tellers
grūpādhyāya	kru ba t'yeay	គ្រូបាឡាយ	An object standing someone's personal guardian spirit
grū kaṃṇoet	kru kaṃṇoet	គ្រូកំណើត	A personal guardian spirit
horā	hora	ហោរា	The Cambodian royal astrologer
jaṃṇāṅghdaḥ	jamneang p'teas	ជំនាងផ្ទះ	the guardian spirit of the house; a female
kpuan	kbuan	ក្បួន	formal knowledge (of astrological divination)
Kpuan Mahāsangkranta	Kbuan Mahasongkran	ក្បួនមហាសង្ក្រាន្ត	a traditional technique of astrology giving a standard formula to calculate the Khmer New Year calendar
kra	kro	ក្រី	poor
kumāradeba	kumantep	កុមារទេព	angel boy; child spirit effigy
Kūn	goan	កូន	child

ALA-LC Transliteration	Common Transcription	Khmer	English
kūnkrak	goankrok	កូនក្រក	a magical/ spiritual effigy made from a woman's foetus or a deceased baby
kūn kātunyoo	goan katunyou	កូនកត្យូ	a grateful child
kungm"ā	kongmar	កុងម៉ា	grandfather-grandmother in Chinese; the Chinese ancestral spirits; sometimes refers to the god of water and earth
kūn c"au	goan chov	កូនចៅ	grandchild
lakon	lakon	ល្ខោន	a play; a Khmer soap opera genre serialised on TV
lek 'atta/ lekhaprāmbūrtua	—	លេខអត្ត/ ឬលេខ៧តួ	the astro-numerological technique which is based on the calculation of seven or nine digit numbers derived from the day, month, and year of birth of an individual
lokjamdāv	lokjamteav	លោកជំទាវ	an honorific female title acquired through marriage to a high-ranking official
loksanggha	loksong	លោកសង្ឃ	Buddhist monk
lok tā isī	lok ta esey	លោកតាឥសី	hermit
lok tā támbang	lokta tambang	លោកតាដំបង	Grandfather Tambang, the guardian spirit of Battambang province
mān	mein	មាន	to have, wealthy
manta āgaman/ vedamanta	manta akom/ vedamanta	មន្តអាគម៌/ វេទ មន្ត	magic
mantrī	montrei	មន្ត្រី	high-ranked government officials or political elites
mian	mian	មៀន	longans

ALA-LC Transliteration	Common Transcription	Khmer	English
mreṅkangvāl	m'rengkongveal	ម្រេញកង្វាល	the child spirits who are “homeless” and move around different places
mcâsdýkmcâstī	m'jatuk m'jadai	ម្ចាស់ទឹកម្ចាស់ដី	the Khmer god of water and earth
moelpia	meol bhea	មើលហៀ	to read the cards; a card reading divination
‘nakcūlrūp	neak chol rupp	អ្នកចូលរូប	mediumistic fortune-tellers
‘nakleng	neak leang	អ្នកលេង	a type of Cambodian political figure whose power has been gained through amoral actions.
nāngpáknāngpoy	neang bork neang bouy	នាងប៉កនាងបោយ	The goddess who beckons her hands, also known as the god of luck and prosperity
‘naknayopāya	neak noryoobay	អ្នកនយោបាយ	Ministers, politicians
nissāya	nisay	និស្ស័យ	destiny; mystical affinity
ukñ”ā	oknha	ឧកញ៉ា	wealthy businessmen/ billionaire
Pāramī	boramey	បារមី	a benevolent supernatural/ spiritual power
pāysī	baisey	បាយសី	a banana leaf tray
puṇcūlchnāmthmī	bun jol ch’num t’mei	បុណ្យចូលឆ្នាំថ្មី	Khmer New Year
puṇ’umḍūk	Bun umm tuk	បុណ្យអុំទូក	the Water Festival
purāṇa	boran	បុរាណ	tradition, old, ancient
Rāsī	reasi	រាសី	sign of zodiac, fortune, luck, chance
rāndevatā	rien thewada	រនទេវតា	the shelf of devatā images
sackathā	sai katha/ sai k’tha	ខ្សែកថា	waistband amulet

ALA-LC Transliteration	Common Transcription	Khmer	English
s‘aen kab‘āl t‘ýk	saen kbal terk/ sen kbal tek	សែនក្បាលទឹក	a ceremony held in June to thank the patron god of the river for giving life and fertility to human kind.
saṃṇāṅg	samnang	សំណង	fortune, luck, resource, chance, opportunity
sangvara	songva	សង្វារ	a certain form of umbilical cord, a decorated band or a rope crossing the shoulders
tūntā	dunta	ដូនតា	ancestors
tākrapong/ tābukmâtvaeng		តាក្របោង/ តាពុកមាត់វែង	spiritual protectors or territorial guardians influenced by Chinese religious tradition
tha‘ngai s‘īl	t‘ngai sil	ថ្ងៃសីល	Buddhist Holy Day
vāsanā	veasanea	វាសនា	life fate
vāsanādhamṃ”	veasanea thom	វាសនាធំ	big [prosperous] fate
vāsanāl‘a”	veasanea l‘or	វាសនាល្អ	good fate
vedamanta sneh	veatamon sneh	វេទមន្តស្នេហា	love magic, attraction magic
yānta, yantra	yuan	យ៉ន្ត	magical tattoo or fabric amulet
yānta khluan	yuankluan	យ៉ន្តខ្លួន	body tattoo

ALA-LC**Transliteration****Thai****English**

angkhān

อังคาร

Tuesday

āthit

อาทิตย์

Sunday

chān

จันทร์

Monday

cho. so

จุลศักราช

The solar calendar
which is used in
Cambodia and
Thailand

Chulasakrat

pho. so

พุทธศักราช

BE (Buddhist Era)

Buddhasasakaraj

phrurhatsabōdī

พฤหัสบดี

Thursday

puth

พุธ

Wednesday

sao

เสาร์

Saturday

suk

ศุกร์

Friday

kho. so Kritasakaraj

คริสต์ศักราช

A.D.

kumarn thong

กุมารทอง

angel boy; child
spirit effigy*Tamra Brahma-chati*

ตำราพรหมชาติ

Thai astrological
handbook

Introduction

One of my research interlocutors, whom I call Sithi, was raised in a wealthy family in Phnom Penh.¹ He encouraged me to explore aspects of the city's cosmopolitan lifestyle such as shopping malls, luxurious restaurants, hipster cafés, trendy hobbies and social activities typical of the middle class. Sithi's life was the sort of dream life that Khmer people strive for, personally and professionally. He finished his PhD in the US; worked for the World Bank; and travelled to different countries. He seemed to be happy with the development and modernisation of Cambodia's society and economy. With his modern lifestyle and intellectual thinking, I was not surprised that he expressed criticism of superstitious beliefs and practices. He laughed when I first communicated to him my plan to conduct research about the fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh. He explained to me that the Khmer term for fortune-teller is "grū dāy." This term refers to "a teacher or a master who can guess people's fortune. He went on to say that highly-educated people do not tend to believe in fortune-telling and tried to convince me that Phnom Penh was not the right place to look for real and reliable fortune-tellers. It is the rural village where one finds the authentic form of divination. The fortune-tellers in the city, from what he had seen, are "cheaters." Most fortune-tellers were uneducated and unemployed and without prospects, thus they turned to fortune-telling.

Although Sithi voiced disagreement with such divinatory services, he would go and consult with fortune-tellers when he encountered a life-crisis or when uncertain about his job. At least once a year he would participate in the annual Khmer and Chinese ghost festivals to make merit for his ancestors and the homeless spirits, thus cultivating his fortune and preventing bad luck from supernatural forces. When his wife got sick and could not recover through modern medical treatment in the hospital, he brought her to the

¹ The name Sithi is a pseudonym. In this thesis, I have changed the names of most of my researcher interlocutors in order to safeguard their confidentiality.

monks in Wat Phnom for a water blessing, believing it could be an alternative way to cure her sickness.

What surprised me was seeing Sithi and other educated urban residents, who embodied a modern lifestyle, trying to make sense of their lives through divination, magic and spiritual rites. The turn to such religious practices in the capital city of Cambodia is common to all of its social groups: from the powerful to the marginalised; the wealthy and the disadvantaged; men and women; long-established urbanites and newly arrived migrants. ‘Traditional’ forms of divination, magic, and spirit beliefs flourish in Phnom Penh, even though it is renowned as a national centre of modernity,² education, and cosmopolitan global culture.

This thesis examines the significance of divination in the lives of people in Phnom Penh. The research locates persistence and change in this set of religious practices within the dynamics of migration, urbanisation and globalisation in this post-socialist city. Cambodian urban residents, new and old, revive and reinvent their religious traditions in the context of historical rupture, spatial dislocation and uncertainties about the world. Since the fall of the Khmer Rouge, religious practices including Buddhism, divination, mediumship, magic and various spirit cults, have been revitalised in various forms throughout the country (Ang 1988; Marston and Gunthire 2004; Kent and Chandler 2008). Especially in the city, such practices are vastly diverse and complex: developing in every corner, spanning markets to temples, and appealing to all social strata. Although people from all over Cambodia flock to Phnom Penh to access a modern education, and benefit from the city’s capitalist market economy, they still make sense of their lives through occult beliefs when they encounter transition and crisis.

I understand from comparative studies, and from my personal experiences in observing religious life in urban Thailand, that modernity is enchanted (Comaroff and Comaroff

² This thesis uses the terms ‘modern’ or ‘modernity’ to describe the contemporary epoch in Cambodian society marked by conditions of globalisation, capitalist market relations, socio-spatial mobility, and an aspiration to self-improve in line with cosmopolitan or up-to-date trends in education, fashion, technology, media and material culture. For many Khmers, modernity is a prestigious subjective identity, and often is contrasted with ways of life described as ancient, rural, parochial, backward, technically undeveloped, educationally deprived, and/or socially constrained and repressive.

1999)—that the vibrant proliferation of local religious beliefs and practices is not in conflict with modern phenomena. Following Peter Jackson (1999), Philip Taylor (2007) and Pattana Kitiarsa (2012), this thesis supports the argument that local religious practices in Southeast Asian countries are not fading, but increasing and expanding in response to modernisation and the globalised capitalist market economy. This religious resurgence occurs in the context of social and spatial disjunctures linked to the enlargement of market-based relations, new technologies, industrialisation and rural-urban migration (Ong 1987; Mills 1990; Taylor 2004, 2007; Hefner 2010). Religion is of particular significance to the millions of migrants in Southeast Asia, who cross borders and come to the cosmopolitan cities seeking to better their lives, bringing with them elements of a traditional spiritual repertoire which serve as resources to aid their settlement in a new home (Jackson 1999; Taylor 2007; High 2006; Endres 2011; Prasert 2014; Ferguson 2014).

As Phnom Penh emerges as a major destination for migrants from all over the country, anthropologists and sociologists have begun to give attention to the experiences and subjectivities of Cambodia's rural-urban migrants. But we know almost nothing about the religious lives of these migrants and what role religion might play in their view of the world or their experiences of establishing themselves in the city. Religious studies specialists and anthropologists have discussed the contemporary ferment and revival in Khmer religiosity but there is a notable lack of in-depth ethnographic research on phenomena such as divination, magic, and spirit cults in the urban environment and the lived experience of urban people. Regarding the study of Cambodian divination, a few scholars have explained divination in the contemporary context as a response to the destructive legacies of the revolutionary period or as a traditional mode of healing (Eisenbruch 1992; Oversen and Trankell 2010; Bertrand 2004). However, in such accounts, much is left unsaid about the resurgence of divination in contemporary society, or how such a way of seeing the world might relate to the existential concerns of Cambodians who are remaking their lives within the context of an industrialising and globalising city. Finally, we lack understanding as to how contemporary practices such as divination might relate to the Khmer "tradition" given that so many traditional cultural forms were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge.

These problematics inspired me to undertake ethnographic research on divination in the lives of urban migrants in Cambodia's capital city. During 14 months of fieldwork in

Phnom Penh, I built close relationships with migrants from provincial areas, with the goal of learning if and how they have used divination, magic and relationships with spirits to emplace themselves in their new urban environment. I became acquainted with a range of diviners with diverse specialisations, knowledge and social statuses and observed them interact with their clients through consultations. I aimed to understand how divination, magical technologies and spiritual beliefs responded to the variety of challenges that Khmer people face in the modern changing city. I wondered if their spiritual practices enabled migrants variously to build alliances, resolve dilemmas, gain influence, retain status, and accumulate prestige. Through my observations and gathering of the life-narratives of interlocutors, I came to realise that most of the fortune-tellers and clients with whom I engaged were skilful improvisers who had assembled their religious knowledge and practice from a variety of sources. I was interested in their experimental approach to constructing knowledge, power and authority from available sources and how in the process they had shaped divination into a resource of particular relevance to migrants.

One of the main themes addressed in this thesis is how divination, magic and related spiritual practices act as resources of empowerment for migrants. In this respect, the thesis aims to fill a gap in the literature on religion and society in Cambodia by focusing specifically on the religious experiences of Khmer migrants. It shows how rural-urban migrants use divination, and other spiritual technologies to guide and manage their experiences as newcomers to the city. Some have drawn on their own religious repertoires and the services of specialist diviners to better comprehend their relationships with others, resolve dilemmas, and process uncertainties and emotional anxieties associated with their new urban life. Many have attempted to secure their fortunes through maintaining good relations with different spiritual patrons, including deceased ancestors, guardian spirits, territorial spirits, homeless child spirits, and hungry ghosts. Others use magical techniques to attract benefits, influence others, defeat their enemies, and establish their status and authority.

The thesis also explores migrants' religious practices and knowledge in the context of the uncertainties generated by historical rupture, dislocation and rapid social change. The Khmer Rouge revolutionary era created a rupture with tradition, leading Khmer people to express uncertainty about the authenticity of their knowledge. However, traditional religious knowledge also has been shaken up by socio-cultural changes connected to

economic migration flows, modernisation, industrialisation and globalisation in a contemporary Cambodian urban setting. Against this backdrop this thesis explores aspects of improvisation, hybridisation and experimentation in contemporary urban religious life. Improvising on their religious traditions, Khmer urban migrants apply and adapt a range of divination and magical technologies to comprehend their world and achieve desirable outcomes. This thesis explores how divinatory authority is improvised and contested in contemporary Phnom Penh and locates religious improvisation within the experience of migration in Cambodian urban settings.

In the following sections, I review anthropological approaches to Cambodian society and culture and point to new directions in the study of urban society to which I hope to contribute. I assess the recent anthropological focus on the creative revitalization of religious traditions in Cambodia and identify a need for anthropologists to embed the analysis of religious revival in the realities of life in the capital city. I also trace studies on Khmer divination, and outline some fruitful leads for exploring divination in contemporary urban society. After grounding my main lines of enquiry in the literature, I provide a sketch of my fieldsite in Phnom Penh and outline the main aspects of my research methodology. This introduction wraps up with an outline of the topic, evidence and argument advanced in each of the main thesis chapters.

The Anthropology of Cambodia

Anthropological studies of Cambodia in the twentieth century initially were undertaken by French scholars.³ French colonial scholars, artists and administrators attempted to portray the Cambodian/Khmer society and culture through the lens of authenticity and purity by referring to Angkorean Civilization. Many colonial projects intended to reproduce and circulate ‘blueprints’ of arts, religion, custom and tradition—idealising the real Khmer identity for the purpose of uniting and building the nation (Edwards 2007; Hansen 2007). The colonial administrators also portrayed the Cambodian countryside as “pure”; as the centre of ancient tradition in contrast to the urban as “corrupting” (Edwards

³ Numerous French scholars not trained in anthropology have contributed to the study of Cambodia. Some prominent scholars who have contributed to the historical accounts include: Aymonier (1900), Coedès (1968, 1951, 1938), Groslier (1957, 1958, 1960a, 1960b) and Martini (1955a, 1955b, 1955c, 1955d).

2007: 50). Some French writers in the 1910s observed a tension between tradition and modernity within the dynamic of cultural transmission and hybridity emerging in the early twentieth century Phnom Penh (ibid). In a similar way, the later generations of scholars considered the “Khmer village” as a primary fieldwork setting where they could detect the purity and authenticity of Cambodian traditions. During the 1950s and 60s, Khmer studies scholars sought to capture the Khmer agrarian rites of the peasant community, Buddhism and folk religious traditions as well as homogenised village culture emerging in the pre-war Cambodian society (Leclère 1899, 1904, 1916; Porée-Maspero 1962; Ebihara 1966, 1968, 1971). Porée-Maspero (1962) looked at the characteristics of agrarian social structure, myth, and traditional belief system. Following the structuralist approach, she also emphasised the prominent dualism of the Cambodian agrarian rites, festivals, and mythology that coexist with environmental conditions (ibid).

May Ebihara’s (1968) dissertation provided the first insightful ethnographic portrait of pre-revolutionary Khmer peasant village culture. She undertook baseline research on Khmer kinship systems, the agricultural cycle, land holding, residence patterns, religious practices, and social and political organizations.⁴ Ebihara (ibid: 609) portrays “Khmer village life” in the pre-war time through the approach of “peasantry” where villagers cultivated their subsistence production and had a deep-rooted attachment to their lands, agricultural practices family, religion, and community. Similar to other Theravada Buddhist countries (Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar), “Khmer culture” represents a “Hinduized culture[s]” (ibid: 608). Moreover, Ebihara (ibid) also argues that Buddhist doctrine (virtues and precepts) and traditional religious practices play a key role to reintegrate social institutions such as family, village, and nation, together with individuals and families or households, in a homogenous way. Buddhist virtues such as maintaining precepts and participating in merit-making activities can transform individual subjectivity and communal relationships to become “harmonious,” “courteous,” and “generous” while the traditional religious practices involving spiritual and magical technologies can

⁴ Ebihara’s (1968[2018], 1971, 1974a, 1974b, 1977, 1984) village studies have become an important referential source for the later scholars to understand social structure which relies on patron-client relations, the relations between individuals and social institutions (Buddhist temples, family, community), gender ideology and relations, as well as indigenous cosmology and practices, and the moral role of religious traditions that play an important role in the everyday life experiences of peasants.

immediately and incidentally resolve individuals' unexpected experience of suffering due to sickness or misfortune (422, 442).

Anthropologists had to end their journey to the Khmer world at the beginning of the Khmer Rouge regime, namely Democratic Kampuchea—DK (1975-1979). The destruction of culture and widespread social suffering unleashed under this regime prompted scholars such as David Chandler (1983, 1991, 2002, 2008a, 2008b), Alexander Laban Hinton (1996, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2008) and Ian Harris (2013) to investigate the cultural origins, motivations and impacts of Cambodia's traumatic experiment with revolutionary socialism. Others have pointed to the colonial ideological obsession with the "real Khmers," a "national style" and "Khmer cultural homogeneity" as inspiration for Khmer Rouge leaders to develop and implement their revolutionary policy to transform peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds to become "authentic Khmers" (Edwards 2007: 52, 62; Hansen 2007: 5). Within four years under the DK, once peaceful Cambodia became a state of chaos as a result of social engineering programs that brought devastation, mass killings and extreme human rights violations. The Khmer Rouge attempted to demolish family and kinship relations, political and governmental institutions, religious ideology and practices, educational and industrial systems, and occupations and social classes (Ebihara, Mortland, and Ledgerwood 1994; Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Harris 2013). The Khmer Rouge regime not only destroyed people's physical bodies but also demolished traditions involving Buddhism and superstition that are deeply rooted in Cambodian cultural practices (Harris 2005). A large number of Buddhist monks and other religious practitioners were killed during the four years of Khmer Rouge (ibid). The regime also destroyed temples, demolished libraries, burned books and historical documents (palm-leaf manuscripts), ruined arts, banned entertainment culture (music, movie, media), and pulled down private properties (Chandler, Kiernan, Chanthou 1988; Chandler 1991, 1996, 2002; Ebihara, Mortland, and Ledgerwood 1994; Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Harris 2013).

Western and native scholars have proposed two competing propositions in regards to the consequences of this social upheaval on Cambodian society and culture, as well as on the state of Cambodian people's knowledge about their traditions. The first proposition suggests that Khmer society and culture were seriously damaged by the Khmer Rouge. Religious practices and scriptures relating to Buddhism and folk religions were badly damaged and, in some cases, completely destroyed (Ebihara, Mortland, Ledgerwood

1994; Chandler 1991, 1996, 1982, 2008; Hinton 2008). Exponents of this proposition, the anthropologists Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal, writing in 1996, argued that Cambodian social relations had been demolished and had not yet recovered. As a result, Khmer people did not care for or assist others through reciprocal and exchange relationships like previous scholars had observed in the pre-revolutionary era (Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal 1996). More recently, other scholars have observed that social and cultural relations in contemporary rural Cambodia are significantly different from the situation that pertained in pre-revolutionary times. Some note that the upheavals and injustices during the civil war and the Khmer Rouge period never were adequately redressed while others point to the devastating effects on rural communities of abuses such as land grabbing, corruption and environmental plunder (Zucker 2013; Beban and Work 2009; Milne and Mahanty 2015)

A second proposition suggests that traditional social and cultural patterns have continued to order Cambodian life into contemporary times, in spite of the historical rupture and social devastation of the Khmer Rouge period, even though aspects of those traditional patterns have been reordered and reconfigured. Following the second approach, Ebihara and Ledgerwood (2002) argue that the civil war could not destroy Khmer traditions. Pre-revolutionary traditions, such as familial relations, social bonds, patron-client networks, religious practices, and moral actions have been largely continued in the countryside. They also identify certain aspects of social change and transformation of village life through the life-narratives of peoples over different timelines (Ebihara 1990a, 1990b, 2002; Ebihara & Ledgerwood 2002). In one chapter in an edited volume, Ledgerwood (2008) wrote about striking continuities in religious practice that she encountered in rural areas of Kandal province. Ledgerwood visited the province in 2003, over forty years after May Ebihara did her research there. She observed many religious practices were similar to what Ebihara saw in the 1960s, including merit making, ordinations, precept-taking, the observation of Buddhist holy days, the practice of *dana* and the construction of temples. However, she raised an interesting point:

If you ask rural Khmer about Buddhism today you are likely to get the reply that Buddhism is much the same as it was before war and revolution devastated their country. What is different today, they will say, is the morality of the people, their inability to live according to the tenets of Buddhism [...]
(Ledgerwood 2008: 147).

One of the significant changes noted in Ledgerwood's chapter is the fact that young people are less interested in their traditional culture than in the past. Instead, their attention is riveted by modern culture and the prospect of migration to the city (Ledgerwood 2008).

The topic of rural-urban migration is the focus of the most recent strand of anthropological analysis. A new generation of Khmer studies scholars has highlighted the agency of migrants and urban people as contributors to socio-economic transformations in Cambodia associated with globalisation, the industrial market economy, and social modernisation (Öjendal and Sedara 2006; Kent 2006; Derks 2008; Peou 2015, 2016; Farib 2015; Peou and Zinn 2015; Kimly 2016). In particular, studies on rural-urban migration in Cambodia emphasise the formation and articulation of individual agency through peoples' aspirations, decision-making, and mobility (Derks 2008; Peou and Zinn 2015; Peou 2015, 2016).⁵

Annuska Derks (2008) explores the experiences of the increasing number of rural-urban migrant workers in Phnom Penh from three main sectors, including garment factory workers, sex workers, and street traders. Focussing on female migrants, Derks notes that their urban lives and occupations often put them in conflict with their families and traditional Khmer expectations about female roles. The migrants she came to know were sensitive to this conflict yet the determination they demonstrated to create a life in the city made them key contributors to the changing cultural ethos of Cambodia's capital city. Derks argues that migrants' agency is enabled through creative capacity and skilful knowledge which allows them to resolve a dilemma or make a decision within the socio-cultural constraints of the urban environment. In this way, the mobility of Khmer migrants, especially women, seems both flexible and practical depending on individuals' speculation as to whether tradition (*boran*) or the modern way (*samay*) will maximise their resources (Derks 2008).

Migration scholars in contemporary Cambodia have looked at the decision-making, desires, and aspirations of Khmer migrants in the context of urbanisation and the flows

⁵ In fact, the movements of domestic migration and social mobility have been observed since pre-war times when individuals could elevate their status within the peasant strata through education and urban migration (Ebihara 1968).

of capitalism and global market economy emerging across the whole country. Peou (2015, 2016) has conducted sociological research on the subject of Cambodian youth—young rural-urban migrant labourers and university students—looking at their expectations, decision-making, uncertainties, and risks through their experiences of migration, mobility, and social change. Despite the constraints and difficulties experienced by urban workers, Peou argues that labour migration can be conceived as a “rite of passage,” in a temporal sense, which allows the young migrant workers to assemble economic, occupational, and psychological resources. The benefits they receive from migration include being able to support their family and achieve financial independence and, importantly, financial security in the longer term.

This recent focus on migration is pertinent to my own inquiry, for most of the interlocutors who became part of my research project in Phnom Penh were migrants to the city. Insights from the literature on migrant agency, subjectivity, marginality and change helped me to frame my own research questions. However, what is missing in the literature is any attention to the religious lives of Cambodian rural-urban migrants. With regards to subjectivity, I was concerned to understand whether migrants in Phnom Penh cast their migration experiences in religious idioms and how their cosmology might shape their emplacement in the city. With regards to marginality and empowerment I wondered whether migrants drew on divination, magic and ritual as resources to comprehend their situation or indeed to change their fate in the city.

Religious Continuity and Creativity in Post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia

In the twenty-first century, anthropologists of Cambodia have turned their attention to the issue of religious re-enchantment, and to the great creativity observed in all aspects of contemporary religion, including Buddhism, spirit cults, mediumship and magic. They focus on the various ways Khmer people creatively have restored and repurposed their religious repertoires to address rupture, fragmentation and change in their society and culture. Anthropologists have proposed numerous approaches to understand the functions, meanings, efficacy, and affects of Cambodian post-revolutionary religious traditions which are linked to the processes of social memory and conflict reconciliation, as well as the reformation of individual subjectivity, identity, tradition and morality

(Bertrand 2001; Marston and Gunthrie 2004; Marston 2008; Kobayashi 2005, 2008; Kent and Chandler 2008; Ledgerwood 2008, 2011, 2012).

One trend in this new research is to understand the ways that religious practice has responded to and been altered by the devastating effects of the Khmer Rouge period. For instance, John Holt writes about *phchum ben*, the Cambodian ancestor festival, and its rites of caring ritually for the dead (Holt 2012). He gives a detailed description of the ceremonies and beliefs associated with this festival in various localities, which he grounds in an analysis of Indic tradition and Buddhist doctrine. However, what gives this festival its particular salience for participants in the present is the fact that so many of the ancestors venerated in the festival perished during the Khmer Rouge period. The festival therefore has the character of a collective commemoration or requiem for the dead of the revolutionary era (Holt 2012). Writing on *neak ta* spirit cults in the Southwest province of Kep, Matthew O’Lemon too discusses how aspects of contemporary religious practice have been transformed by the turmoil of the revolutionary period. The worship of spirits is prominent in individual and collective religious practice in Kep. O’Lemon points to the relative weakness of Buddhist institutions, which he traces to the lingering effects of Khmer Rouge-era attacks on the Buddhist clergy. The loss in knowledge and practitioners has made it difficult to revive Buddhism to its former richness and strength. He suggests that, as a result, compared to the past, spirit cults today may play a greater role than Buddhist worship in the religious life of many people in Kep province.

A second focus of scholars writing on Cambodian religious practices in the post-revolutionary era is to highlight the pronounced syncretism of Theravada Buddhism, animism and Brahmanism that continues to shape the Cambodian religious landscape (Ang 1988; Eisenbruch 1992; Ebihara 1990a; Bertrand 2001; Harris 2005; Ledgerwood 2008, 2011, 2012; Marston and Gunthrie 2004; Beban and Work 2014; O’Lemmon 2014). This creative hybridity in Cambodian religious traditions already was observed by Ebihara (1968: 363, 425) as a characteristic of pre-war religious repertoires. The Khmer indigenous folk belief is a “blend” or is “mingled” with various forms, involving Theravada Buddhism and Hinduism, considered as “traditional” (Ibid). Pre-revolutionary traditional folk beliefs included various forms of guardian spirits (*neak ta*, *mrin konvil*)⁶,

⁶ While Ebihara (1968) defined *mreṅkangvāl* as the guardian spirits of various animals, my ethnographic data argue that the urban Khmer people conceptualise this type of entity as the

ancestral spirits (*meba*), house spirits (*cmnieng ptea*) [*jaṃnāngphdah*], ghosts (*kmauit*, *baysayt*, *brai*), and spirits of dead persons (*arak*,⁷ *bonbet*) (Ebihara 1968: 423-432). If villagers failed to venerate such spiritual agencies with appropriate offerings, they would encounter illness, misfortune or disaster, and their family and community would be endangered (Porée-Maspero 1962).

Many have noted how Buddhism, emphasised by Ebihara (1968) as the moral doctrine of karma and acceptance of one's fate, mingles with the veneration of spirits in the contemporary ritual activities of Khmer people. In various ethnographic studies, scholars argue that 'non-Buddhist' religious traditions, including spirit cults, play a key role in reconfiguring Buddhist morality while also helping to establish the authority of Buddhism (Ang 1988; Bertrand 2001, 2004; O'Lemmon 2014). The magical efficacies of local *neak ta* spirits seem to be the primary focus of anthropologists who attempt to sketch the whole landscape of religious power of Khmer villagers (ibid). The identities and spiritual powers of contemporary *neak ta* are extremely varied, and depend on their historical origins, status, and geographical location (Bertrand 2001, 2004; O'Lemmon 2014). The social organisation of *neak ta* veneration has no central authority or strict hierarchy (ibid). However, Khmer villagers recognise local hierarchies and a general order to the place occupied by *neak ta* in rural rites (ibid). Virtuous Buddhist followers gain spiritual support, protection from danger, and auspicious blessings from the virtuous *neak ta*, namely *pāramī*, who are the representation of the Buddha (Bertrand 2004). In this way, the identities of *pāramī* and *neak ta* represent various figures of iconic virtue that help quell moral disorder at individual and collective levels. In addition, *brāi* or "the spirits of women who died in childbirth, or spirits of virgins" are also involved in the moral reconfiguration between humans and spirits. The *brāi* look after and monitor those virtuous Buddhist practitioners who display appropriate manners inside the monastic area. In this way, immoral individuals can be disturbed or violated by spirits due to moral

homeless child spirit, see more details in Chapter 3 and 5 of this thesis My finding is similar to that of Porée-Maspero (1962: 15) who explains that *mréñ koñvāl* [*mreñkangval*] spirits are the servants of *neak ta*, who look like: "children of seven to ten years of age with dark skin, live in trees, and are invoked to keep animals from ravaging the fields." Only the house spirits are "completely altruistic" and never create trouble.

⁷ Ebihara (1968: 429-430) explained that *arak* refers to the spirit of a dead person which can possess and speak through spirit mediums. *Praet*, based on the villagers' perspective, refers to the spirits of dead persons who committed a sin deemed to be dreadful such as slaughtering animals (Ibid: 431).

transgression (Ang 1988: 37). The influential role of such local spirits towards the reconfiguring of religious morality is explored through the process of “Buddhification” of local spirits (Forest 1992; Bertrand 2004; O’Lemmon 2014: 40). As O’Lemmon (ibid: 40) reports for Kep Province, the Buddhist monks assist the laity to hold the ritual to worship the *neak ta* Chum Teav Mao (Yeay Mao), a form of tutelary spirit protecting the monastery area. This religious phenomenon illustrates how Buddhist virtuous ideology and conduct legitimises and institutionalises the local belief system involving the magical power of benevolent spirits such as *neak ta*, *brāi* and *pāramī* (Ang 1988; Bertrand 2001, 2004; O’Lemmon 2014).

A third focus in the anthropology of Cambodian religion is the ways that religion is caught up in Cambodia’s recent integration into the market-based capitalist order. Religious revival movements are important in the post-socialist context where social hierarchies are being reformed and individuals are coping with uncertainty due to the shift from a socialist to a capitalist market economy.

In Ledgerwood’s work focusing on the *phchum ben* ceremony or ‘festival of the dead,’ she argues that in the contemporary Cambodian countryside, the festival’s gift economy binds the community and recreates a village social order reliant upon social hierarchy, kinship networks and patron-client relations (2012). The festival of the dead has the potential to pass and deliver merit and prosperity to the dead (relatives, ancestors, the hungry/wandering ghosts) and living agents (urban and rural residents, the rich and the poor). In this sense, the ceremony not only rebuilds the social relations of the living descendants but also re-establishes a “cosmic order” through spiritual reciprocity and memories of the dead that the living descendants have cultivated since the pre-war period. The way pre-war patterns of social relations are re-ordered through ritual exchanges with the dead and redistribution of gifts and resources, Ledgerwood argues, should be understood in a contemporary context, where the global capitalist economy and social mobility allow powerful village patrons to assemble power and resources required for achieving local authority, both from within their locality and beyond, at the translocal, transregional, and transnational levels.

Many scholars have noted great flux and creativity in contemporary Cambodia’s religious scene. Contributors to a volume edited by Marston and Guthrie (2004) look at new religious movements such as king worship (the cult of the leper king), practices of

mediumship (*grū pāramī*), ascetic hermits (*tāpas*) and nuns (*tūn jī*) who are invested with authority and power. Such new agents have revitalised the social, moral, and cosmological orders of the country while also provoking change in religious practices. Using a similar approach, Kent and Chandler (2008) present historical and ethnographic studies on the restoration of social and moral order in the post-war society through the resurgence and transformation of Buddhism and other religious traditions, and the circulation of new memories, religious ideals and legends. Scholars have focussed on the healing functions of ritual and moral teaching that can help restore the memories of Cambodia's glorious past or return to the righteous way of life existing before the revolution (Eisenbruch 1992; Bertrand 2004). Others look at religion as a protest rite. Beban and Work (2014) observe the persisting situation in which Khmer villagers lost their land ownership as a result of government plantation development. The subsequent resistance action, "the spirits are crying," performed by well-known *neak ta*, "Yeah Tape" [Lok Yāy Deba] protests capitalist and state domination.

Overall, the literature on Cambodian religion in the post-Khmer Rouge era has highlighted the creativity of religion, whether that be how religion has responded to historical crisis; the phenomenon of syncretism and the blurring of religious 'genres'; or the role of religion in refiguring and critiquing the socio-cultural order. However, I have been unable to pinpoint studies that have explored systematically questions of religious subjectivity or of individual religious experience and agency. As some scholars argue (Taussig 1987; Lindquist 2000; Saleminck 2010), the resurgence of religious traditions in post-colonial and post-communist countries, can be seen as a way of healing experiences of suffering, fulfilling modern desires and aspirations, and rebuilding individual agency. In this regard, I wonder whether by drawing on and modifying their religious traditions, individuals in contemporary Cambodia can gain access to resources and opportunities that enable them to reformulate their selves through their agentive capacity.

Additionally, for those who may be interested to understand urban religiosity, anthropological research that ethnographically embeds the religious life of Cambodian city-dwellers in their urban context is notably absent. No studies to date have explored the religious lives of Cambodian rural-urban migrants. When I embarked on this research, I found myself wondering whether religion might help migrants comprehend and process the many dilemmas entailed in their new urban lives. The dilemmas migrants face include grappling with a host of unknown factors in a new city; penetrating the mysteries of being

a successful and worthy urban person; knowing who to trust; reconciling competing expectations from rural and urban homes; and wondering what the future might hold in store for them. These aspects of migratory experience and modern urban life particularly interested me and thus I resolved to learn how religion featured in attempts by newcomers to the city to construct an urban identity and make a home for themselves in Cambodia's capital city.

Divination in Cambodia

The formal meaning of the English term “fortune-teller” is “a person who is supposedly able to predict a person's future,” for example, “by palmistry, a crystal ball or similar methods”, while divination refers to “the practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means” (Oxford Dictionary 2014). I tend to favour the second term for it encompasses a broader range of meanings and functions—of the kind that I expected to find in Cambodia. Divination entails seeing not only the unknown future, but potentially also the past and present, as well as occult realms, forces and principles that normally are inaccessible to ordinary people. However, in this thesis I use the terms “fortune-tellers” and “diviners” interchangeably, mindful that both terms are interchangeable in colloquial use.

In Phnom Penh, divination practices employ both mediumistic and inductive techniques. Based on my observations, the urban-based fortune-tellers can be roughly classified into four groups. The first group uses the traditional divinatory technique called *câkgambîra* ចាក់គម្ពីរ⁸, or ‘reading fortune’—from an old scripture or a traditional astrological book which is available at *wats* like Wat Phnom. The second group comprises fortune-tellers specialised in card-reading (*moelpia*), who offer their services in local markets. The third

⁸ Khmer people do not call the person who performs this technique *grūdāy* but, rather, call him *grū câkgambîra*. In 2015, I observed most to be around 60 years old and share a preference for a costume comprising white t-shirt and black pants. The process of *câkgambîra* will start with the placing of the old text (*gambîra*) on top of the client's head. The client will use an object like a toothpick to randomly select a page number. The *grū câkgambîra* will open the selected page and read the prediction audibly. The traditional texts comprised a short poem using old Khmer colloquial terms. This kind of divinatory technique is largely found in *wats* in Phnom Penh such as Wat Phnom and the Royal Palace.

group comprises the mediumistic fortune-teller (*nakcūlrūp*),⁹ who can divine through the assistance of numerous spiritual entities, usually in the client's private residence. And the last group are skilful in numerology (*lekha prāmbīrtua*), using formulae from astrological books to reach insights about a person through calculations based on their birth date, month, and year. Most of my research interlocutors in Phnom Penh reflected that the practitioners specialising in numerology are more respectable and trustworthy than the mediumistic and card-reading fortune-tellers in the markets. This is especially true of the royal astrologers or *horā*, specialised in numerology, whose 'high-rank' is derived from their history of servicing the requests of the royal family and government officials. In addition to these four groups, some urban Khmer people also obtain divination services through the Internet. Some of them download horoscope applications on their smartphones for practicality and convenience. However, online divinatory services are not as popular as the face-to-face fortune-telling consultation given in person.

Within the resurgence of religious traditions in Cambodia, however, the subject of divination has been examined by only a small number of scholars. Historically, Khmer folk religious practices involving divination, astrology, and magic can be traced back to the Angkorean Empire (the ninth-twelfth centuries) (Harris 2005: 60). However, the historical literature does not explore how and whether divination and astrology played a significant role in peoples' everyday lives. During the colonial era (1863-1953), divination and astrology was practised by the royal astrologers, or *horā*. The archival evidence suggests that the *horā* had assisted the king during the colonial era (Bulletin Individual De Note 1902-1903), predicting the lunar eclipse in 1934 (Bulletin De Soit Communiqué 1934). According to Khmer tradition, royal astrologers helped the king and the royal families interpret symbolic meanings during royal rituals or ceremonies, especially the Royal Ploughing Ceremony or "*brahrājābidhī puṇyacrābrahṇānggāl*."

The ploughing ceremony is held annually in May, the rainy season in which Khmer people start planting their agricultural products ("Royal Ploughing Ceremony" 2008; Porée-Maspero 1962). Traditionally, the Cambodian king would lead a symbolic

⁹ In Phnom Penh, Khmer people use the term *nakcūlrūp* mediumistic fortune-tellers. In the provinces, such as Kampong Thom and Battambang, the local people usually experience two types of mediumistic fortune-teller: *nakcūlrūp* and *grū moel*. Both of them are considered skilful in divining through spiritual assistance and healing their clients.

performance of ploughing comprising the sowing of seeds and offering different kinds of food to the royal oxen. In the first part of the ceremony, the king or the government official (as a representative of the king) would take the lead in planting and sowing the seeds. This symbolic ploughing action could guarantee the wellbeing and prosperity of the country. The second part of the ceremony is associated with divination because Brahmins and astrologers apply their knowledge of astrology and divination during this ceremony to make predictions about the outcome of the harvest based on what the royal oxen consume (Tiang 2015).

The consumption choice made by the royal oxen is used as information for the Brahmin ritual master or royal astrologer, who plays a key role to read and predict the wellbeing of the country through agricultural production (yield) in relation to the seasonal or environmental forecast. Many Khmer people know the general pattern of astrological prediction. If the royal oxen drink water, Khmer people will not encounter drought during the dry season but must be wary of flooding. If the royal oxen eat rice, corn, sesame seeds, or beans, farmers or agriculturists will be satisfied with an immense yield. In contrast, if the royal oxen drink wine, the astrologers or Brahmins could predict that, “the nation will suffer at the hands of gangsters, robbers, or drunkards” (The Royal Embassy of Cambodia 2016).

The ploughing ceremony illustrates how Khmer people define and conceptualise divination in certain aspects. This ceremony allows a preliminary understanding of divination and its authority in relation to notions of wellbeing, fortune, and prosperity of individuals and the state. After the Khmer Rouge, the government attempted to revitalise and reinvent the ploughing ceremony which had traditionally involved knowledge of astrology, divination and magic in the contemporary society (*see also* Ledgerwood 2008; de Bernon 1997). Through this ceremony, we can understand the role, position, and responsibility of the royal astrologer/diviner who served as the mediator between human/secular and natural/sacred world. Via the ploughing ceremony, his divinatory service could help establish the king’s political legitimacy and authority by predicting the future or ensuring the wellbeing of the country.

In several scholarly works, Cambodian divination practice is discussed as part of the talented skill of religious specialists. Adhémar Leclère (1889) describes the Cambodian fortune-tellers in the nineteenth century as traditional sorcerers who applied their

specialised skill to diagnose and cure their patients' diseases. Ian Harris (2005) and Oversen and Trankell (2010) suggest that the traditional *ācārya vāti*¹⁰ or master of Buddhist laity can take on the role of *horā* (astrologer) or *grū dāy* (fortune-teller/diviner), offering a consultation service for predicting auspicious and inauspicious days for conducting certain ceremonies/rituals of the temples. They can read fortunes through charts and offer various types of service such as spiritual divination and herbal treatment with the use of magical skill (*manta akom*). Bertrand (2001, 2004) observes that spirit mediums and medium-monks can offer divination services and provide healing treatment to their clients through the spiritual assistance of *pāramī* (2004).¹¹

Some researchers have approached divination in discussions about the prominent ritual practitioner, *grū*, and the Khmer traditional concept of healing. In the pre-war time, the *grū* or “magic practitioner” performed various kinds of ritual techniques, such as curing illness, finding lost objects, making amulets and charms for protection and invulnerable love, eliminating/chasing away misfortune and spiritual exorcism (Ebihara 1968: 433). In order to cure a serious or long-lasting illness, the *grū* needed to employ his divinatory knowledge to read the patient's horoscope from their year month and day of birth. Sometime *grū* is specialised in *sneh* or “techniques of making someone fall in love” (ibid). According to Eisenbruch, the contemporary performative character of the *grū* —their magical and healing skills—resembles the pre-war observations (Eisenbruch 1992). During the healing process, the *grū* enter a trance state which allows them to embody spiritual power to diagnose and heal patients from illnesses caused by demons, ancestors, moral violations, and sorcery (ibid). The *grū* will utilise various forms of bodily activities, such as spreading ointment around the patients' organs and marking their skin to locate the spirit inside their bodies.

Furthermore, Eisenbruch (1992) argues that the healing authority in the post-Khmer Rouge era is reinvented within relations with the spiritual cults of traditional religion. The

¹⁰ Harris spell the Khmer term for “Buddhist laity” as *achar*, while Oversen and Trankell (2010) use *achaa*. Scholars also interchangeably use *wat* or *vat* in referring to a Buddhist temple.

¹¹ In popular understanding, *pāramī* symbolises a virtuous spiritual power which can protect humans from malevolent spirits, and also help them cope with life crisis. At this point, it is clear that there is a connection between *pāramī* and divination practice; however, Bertrand (2001, 2004) does not provide a precise explanation as to how the concept of *pāramī* generates the knowledge and spiritual power of Cambodian divination.

reciprocal and exchange relations between humans and spirits also illustrates the magical efficacies and healing cosmology which are revitalised in the contemporary society. The Cambodian notions of illness, healing and wellbeing are constructed within the inter-relation between human and spiritual agents. In the healing ritual context, Eisenbruch's fascinating research, thus, sheds light on lived experiences of illness and healing that allow us to see the cultural transformation of individuals' bodies through the inter-relation between humans and spirits.

Improvising a Theory of Cambodian Divinatory Authority

My approach in this thesis joins with the aforementioned anthropologists in treating divination in Cambodia as a form of folk rationality, empowerment and healing. In doing so, I draw upon a number of classical anthropological contributions to the study of divination and magic. For instance, in keeping with the intellectualist approach developed by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1937), I adopt the view that Khmer divination can be appreciated, not as a false science, but as an indigenous mode of rationality. Inspired by Malinowski, I also analyse the practical functions of magical practice. In "The Role of Magic and Religion", Malinowski (1948: 36) argued that magic and religion have a practical and social function in mitigating the psychological states of individuals, such as uncertainty, suffering and anxiety that can affect individuals and pose a danger to social solidarity (ibid). I also draw upon Victor Turner (1975, 1982), who views the divinatory procedure as a social process which allows Ndembu diviners and their clients to communicate and express the tensions and moral concerns of their tribal society. During the divinatory process, the diviners, who are possessed by spirits, can read and detect the causes of misfortune and death, as well as wellbeing, good-luck, health and fertility, through such auspicious objects as seeds. Such auspicious objects convey dominant symbols that can be observed and decoded during the divinatory process. Turner thus argues that diviners play a key role in resolving conflict and reconfiguring moral law and order among the Ndembu descent groups (Ibid).

Following phenomenological theorists including Desjarlais (1992), Kapferer (1979), and Jackson (1983), this thesis sees divination as a mode of embodied experience that gives expression in embodied symbolic form to Khmer notions of morality, fate, fortune, wellbeing and auspiciousness, as well as culturally salient ideas about suffering, illness

and death. Furthermore, phenomenology offers a way to understand how young Khmer migrants cultivate their fortunes through embodied moral behaviour and embodied spiritual patronage. Marxist approaches influence this thesis in understanding the resurgence of occult beliefs in a post-revolutionary country like Cambodia as a way to express marginalised people's experiences of spatial, temporal and social disorientation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). The Marxist approach to divination and magic offers a sympathetic lens to view such religious traditions as a form of empowerment for those who are powerless, suppressed, and marginalised within an inequitable capitalist society.

One of the difficulties I encountered when researching divination was to identify any kind of consensus as to what the tradition of Cambodian divination actually might have been. During the course of my ethnographic research, I found that few urban fortune-tellers—practising a variety of divinatory techniques—could provide a systematic account of the traditional or formal principles of Cambodian divination, or explain how such knowledge became historically developed and established in the city. Even the most knowledgeable astrologers and diviners I met in Phnom Penh struggled to identify for me any authoritative traditional sources and references in the field of Cambodian divination and astrology. Each seemed to have learned their own craft through idiosyncratic means, involving a combination of personal, familial, local, and peer-network exchanges, and, for some, a degree of text-based learning. As a result, many of them struggled to earn recognition from their peers in their profession that their practice was authentic or effective. This lack of consensus has had a bearing on the reinvention of this set of religious traditions-in post-war society.

One possible reason for this lack of consensus is that a national astrology and/or divination association has never been established in Cambodia. The lack of an institutionalised divinatory authority – overseeing, for instance, the printing of textbooks or professional classes – may explain the absence of a standard set of astrological or divinatory techniques. As a result, there is no agreement among the fortune-tellers and astrologers I met as to what authentic divinatory knowledge is, or how it is to be transmitted. This differs from the situation of Buddhism in Cambodia, which has been the subject of cultivation, standardisation and propagation as a national creed by various states since the colonial period (Edwards 2007, Hansen 2007). Lacking the same degree of institutional backing, divination has tended to be transmitted through a whole variety

of local, familial and ethnic traditions, with considerable scope along the way for individual improvisation, making for a truly diverse and fragmented field of endeavour.

A second reason for this fragmentation may be the lack of textual materials on Khmer divination, astrology and magic. This state of affairs may be due to the destruction of texts during Cambodia's communist revolution, when religious knowledge was denigrated and attacked. However, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which the revolution itself might have been responsible for the deficit in divinatory texts. Potentially, owing to the lack of a large middle-class urban readership and a robust market for texts in pre-revolutionary Cambodia, only relatively few astrology and divination books might ever have been published in the Khmer language before the Khmer Rouge came to power, thus contributing to the shortage of such materials after the revolution. Some educated fortune-tellers employ materials and knowledge imported from outside the country to construct their own divinatory authority. It is hard to determine whether their 'borrowed' knowledge represents a breach with an authentic Khmer tradition for it is likely that the circulation of texts and religious materials from neighbouring countries has been occurring in Cambodia for a very long time.

The post-socialist market economy may have been a mixed blessing in regards to the standardisation of knowledge and development of consensus in this field. After the Khmer Rouge, in the era of the socialist People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) Party, traditional religious practices were slowly revived. Then, with market-based globalisation, religious services such as divination and magic became broadly available in the commercial context. 'Elite' astrologers – who possess the capital, connections and know-how – commoditise divination by printing handbooks, publishing through online and social media, and setting up teaching/training courses for students. Such processes have promoted the widespread availability of certain familiar formats of knowledge. On the other hand, commercial competition also has led to intense contestation between rival 'elite' fortune-tellers.

The study of divination in Cambodia's contemporary urban context, I argue, can usefully apply Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) concept, "the invention of tradition" to understand the creative attempts made by Khmer diviners and their clientele, to ground their religious practice in relation to presumed traditions. Hobsbawm and Ranger explain that:

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. (ibid: 1)

Invented tradition, they argue, should not be considered as the product of “historical fact,” rather, it is the product of the present phenomena of class struggles, ideological movements, and conflicts, which are enforced by legitimising institutions bringing change through modern innovations. Following their argument, this thesis suggests that urban Khmer people experience “tradition” as “a living dynamic process” as it has been reinvented within the context of historical crisis and rupture occurring during and since the revolution. Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) notion of “invented tradition” inspires me to explore and reconceptualise Khmer urban religious practices involving divination, magic, and spiritual rites as forms of “experimental knowledge.” These practices have been reinvented in unstable circumstances, generated out of the rupture of tradition, uncertainties about the past and the present, unequal access to resources, and fragmented social relations, as well as the dynamic changes experienced during the urban life journeys of individual Khmer people. The improvisation and reinvention of “divinatory authority” that I discuss in this thesis will not cover the macro level like Hobsbawm and Ranger (Ibid) have emphasised in relation to social movements and political institutions. Instead, this thesis focuses on the micro level, specifically, the cultural experiences of urban Khmer people who draw on divinatory knowledge in their attempt to re-establish themselves in an unfamiliar city. In the course of city living, individuals experiment with and open up to improvised forms of divinatory authority that promise to help them cope with fragmented social relations and an uncertain world. Practices of divination, magic and spirit cults can empower marginal and insecure individuals to overcome vulnerability and uncertainty arising during their experiences of post-revolutionary urban life.

Fieldwork Setting: Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh is located in the south-central part of Cambodia, lying at the confluence of the Tonlé Sap, Mekong, and Bassac Rivers. The city has served as the national capital since the French colonial era (1863-1953) (Edwards 2007). The French colonial rulers modernised the city by promoting various construction projects that established an imaginary unbroken lineage to Angkor and the purity of the Khmer cultural tradition (ibid). French artists, scholars, and civil servants tried to establish and popularise and embed a “pure Cambodian style” into the local artistic design of architectural buildings in the communal space of Phnom Penh, such as government offices, *wats*, bridges, parks, gardens, and statues. Numerous “traditional” ceremonies and festivals were popularised to legitimate Khmer royal authority and strengthen Phnom Penh’s image as a “real” capital (Edwards 2007: 53).

After receiving independence from France in 1953, Phnom Penh became the centre of politics, economics, and education. Both Western and Khmer scholars see certain aspects of Khmer culture as persisting from early historical periods or, during the 1950s-1960s, as a representation of “traditional” Khmer society (Ebihara, Mortland, Ledgerwood 1994: 5). Wat Phnom is a prominent centre of religion in Phnom Penh. As mentioned earlier, the French colonial authorities attempted to build and embed the symbolic art and architectural design of Angkorean tradition into the capital city (Edwards 2007). They renovated Wat Phnom and installed a five heads of Naga stairway leading up to the stupa of the pagoda, which was known as a replica of the sacred Naga statues protecting the Angkor Wat (ibid). Most of my interlocutors introduced Wat Phnom as the “symbol of Phnom Penh” because it is a place where they usually visit to make merit and pay respect to various prominent religious figures. In addition to venerating the Buddha statue in the main Buddhist temple on the hill, they visit the Chinese temple and the spirit shrines for paying homage to “Lok Preah Chao” and “Lok Yay Penh,” the famous guardian spirits of Wat Phnom. Although Wat Phnom symbolises the cosmology of Buddhist tradition, locals from diverse ethnic backgrounds seem to share a similar form of religious tradition; for example, Khmers, Khmer-Chinese and Vietnamese ethnic groups all come to make offerings at Wat Phnom in keeping with their own religious traditions.



Figure 1 Map of Phnom Penh Location



Figure 2 Map of districts of Phnom Penh



Figure 3 Wat Phnom, a symbol of Phnom Penh

Phnom Penh encountered a critical transition when the city became subject to the rule of Democratic Kampuchea between 1975 and 1978. Milton Osborne (2008) calls Phnom Penh during the Khmer Rouge regime a “city of evil and rebirth.” The entire city was evacuated. More than a million people from the city were forced to work in rural areas in accordance with the regime’s radical vision of agricultural reform. The extreme policy to implement an agrarian economy with absolute self-sufficiency and ultra-nationalism led to widespread famine, execution and torture (Osborne 2008). The high school, Tuol Sleng, in Phnom Penh became an “extermination centre” where a large number of men, women, and children were tortured and killed (ibid).

Phnom Penh today still maintains memories of the past while also hosting new transnational developments. The city has become a hub for administration, embassies, NGO headquarters, elite schools, public and private universities, domestic and foreign company head offices, and various other modern developments. The flows produced by urbanisation and the capitalist economy create job opportunities, offering stable labour incomes that motivate rural migrant workers to move to the city. The increase in urbanisation and rapid growth of the population in Phnom Penh has become a new challenge for the country. Cambodian urban people now suffer from a shortage of

resources and liveable housing and land, poor quality schooling and health services, and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor (World Bank Group 2017; Sidgwick and Izaki 2013; Slocomb 2010).

Before I started my fieldwork, I chose Phnom Penh as a site due to its position as the hub of economic and government agencies, the centre of education, and a base for the royal court. In such a setting, urban-based divination can be explored at the institutional and individual level drawing on formal and informal perspectives. Moreover, conducting research on divination in the capital city would allow me to capture how people experience the reinvention of divinatory authority in post-revolution Cambodia. During the process of conducting field research, one of my fundamental questions: “who are the Khmer or the Cambodian people?” needed contextualising in terms of the flows of cultural hybridity, mobility and change in the urban setting. The nature of a city field site like Phnom Penh encouraged me to see the multi-dimensional experiences of places, and people and their practices.

The city has the highest population density in the country. Its neighbourhoods are diverse and pluralistic with people from multiple sub-cultures and ethnic backgrounds, leading to the hybridity of cultural ideas and practices. In addition to the ethnic Khmers, who are the majority of the country’s population, the city is also home to other ethnic groups like Chinese, Vietnamese, Cham, Thai, and Kuy (Schliesinger 2011). Even the urban residents who identify themselves as “Khmer,” through their ancestral line and cultural tradition, have significantly interacted with the other ethnic groups. Phnom Penh is also a popular destination for young migrants who decide to leave their villages to seek opportunities enabled by the new social circumstances.

According to one estimate, over 95 per cent of the population practises Theravada Buddhism, the official religion, with an estimated 4,400 monasteries in the country (World Population Review 2014). Although Theravada Buddhism has been accepted as the state religion, non-orthodox practices, such as animism, Brahmanism and magic, have also gained popularity among urban people, and religions such as Islam and Christianity are followed by a significant number of people (Harris 2005; Kent and Chandler 2008). According to Coggan (2015), Phnom Penh is home to various ancestral and territorial spirit cults (*neak ta*), such as Preah Ang DOUNG Kar [Brah’angg Dangkoa] (the Sacred Royal Flagpole), Daun Penh [Lok Yāy Penh] (the Wealthy Widow), and Neak Ta Preah

Chao [Neak Ta Brahcau] (Ancestral Spirit Sacred Commander). While the majority of Khmer people identify themselves as “Buddhist,” they also worship and venerate ancestral spirits related to their ethnic origins. A large number of the urban population identifies as of Chinese or Sino-Khmer descent and still follow certain rituals to worship Chinese gods and deities at their own homes.

Every year, after the Chinese New Year, Khmer people of Chinese descent always join the Chinese spiritual mediumship parade. Furthermore, various forms of divination magic and spiritual rites are well developed and widespread in both public and private areas of Phnom Penh. The clients usually seek fortune-tellers in Wat Phnom, the Central Market, the Russian Market, and the area near the Royal Palace, as well as engaging fortune-tellers in their private residences.



Figure 4 A card-reading consultation conducted near the riverside area of Phnom Penh

While building and expanding my social network with Phnom Penh’s urban residents, it became apparent that many people seemed sceptical about city-based cultural traditions including Buddhism, animism, magic, spirits, and divination. They tended to hold the view that the most authentic religious traditions, including those involving divination practices, are to be found in rural settings, rather than in the city. Their views in this regard

seem to be influenced by dominant discourses about cultural authenticity developed and propagated by Western and native scholars.¹²

As previously discussed, some scholars have developed the case that Khmer cultural traditions were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge and social relations have yet to be rebuilt (Ovesen, Trankell and Öjendal 1996) while others have argued that Khmer cultural traditions, customs, and religious practices from the pre-war era have been continued, preserved, and passed down to the next generation (Ebihara 1990a, 1990b; Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Ledgerwood 2002, 2008, 2011, 2012; Kobayashi 2008). Similar to the assumption of cultural continuity, numerous Khmer people I met in Phnom Penh reflected a nationalist ideology—for example, in the way they think about their cultural tradition, custom, and religion—which they contended have been passed down since the pre-war era and preserved until the present. Urban-dwelling Khmer passionately express their opinions about the need to study and preserve the “real” and “authentic” forms of the Khmer divinatory tradition. My urban interlocutors reflected that such authentic practices still existed, for instance, in the province of Siem Reap where the primary symbol of past glory, “Angkor Wat,” is located. In this way, certain features of Khmer cultural tradition are held to have remained pure, authentic, and homogeneous, despite the communist revolution and subsequent developments. Based on these local assumptions about Khmer cultural traditions, I realised that doing ethnographic research on divination in the post-war society, especially in the urban setting, would be challenging because urban residents held quite particular views about their cultural traditions.

In a similar manner, many of my interlocutors expressed the opinion that the authentic form of their cultural traditions, particularly those involving divination, magic, and the spirit cults, are to be found only in the countryside rather than in the city. Such assumptions, more or less, influence the anthropological fieldwork tradition in Cambodia as numerous scholars have tended to consider the countryside, or the village, rather than the city, as the field of cultural traditions. Following the discussion on a “hierarchy of purity” of field sites (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 19), I have queried, is it possible to know Cambodia through the lens of the urban realm? What is the state of the anthropology of

¹² These local perspectives may be influenced by colonial-era ideas about Khmer purity, particularly ‘the rural’, and the Angkorean civilization as symbols of Khmer culture (see Edwards 2007).

Cambodian urban society? What is the nature of Cambodian cultural traditions in the post-war urban society? What counts as an object of anthropological knowledge when an anthropologist conducts research on urban religious practice?

Methodology

Local reflections on my research project in Phnom Penh

In the course of field research, I positioned myself as a Thai PhD student eager to learn the Khmer language, knowledge, and culture. Further, I demonstrated that I was open to being corrected and instructed by my interlocutors in the event of my misunderstanding or misinterpretation. I remembered that before I started fieldwork in Phnom Penh, my Thai friends in Bangkok said that Cambodia was a suitable place for conducting research about divination and magic because Khmer people are skilful in “superstitious knowledge”—this perception had been gleaned from Thai movies. However, my Khmer friends—young scholars, university students, religious practitioners—expressed something that contrasted what my Thai middle-class friends in Bangkok had told me. They said that authentic divination and magic should demonstrate more complex development in Thailand than in Cambodia. They referred to the famous Khmer legend Preah Ko Preah Keo or the magic ox that was stolen by the Siamese in the sixteenth century (Kimly 2006). The stolen magical ox, according to my Khmer informants, was used to explain why Cambodia today is weak, undeveloped, and traumatised with many social crises. And, in turn, this becomes a reason why Thai people are more obsessed with divination and magic than the Khmers. Cambodia, therefore, given the theft of the magic ox so long ago, might not be the right place for doing research on such a topic. In spite of these local perceptions, I did not lose faith in my plan to conduct research on divination in Cambodia. In contrast, I appreciated my informants’ open mindedness and candour in telling me about local understandings, that is, how Khmer people would address and react to the subject of divination and magic.

Research interlocutors

During 14 months of fieldwork, I met and built rapport with fortune-tellers and their clients who came from different socio-economic backgrounds. I first explored the range of divination practices through a preliminary survey and observation in well-known *wats*, local markets, and famous tourist spots where fortune-telling consultations were available

for urban residents. I also used mapping as a method to visually represent the landscape of divinatory techniques in Phnom Penh.

After spending considerable time with them, I was able to obtain in-depth ethnographic accounts from nine fortune-tellers who specialised in different techniques and resided in different areas of Phnom Penh. This thesis focuses primarily on three fortune-tellers, selected on the basis of their insightful perspectives on their personal and professional lives.

Mid-way through field research, I realised that some fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh not only offer divining consultations but also magical services like cursing, sorcery, and healing. In addition, the fortune-tellers also apply a range of spiritual beliefs to influence a desirable outcome for satisfying their clients' expectations. As a result, my research shifted slightly from its original stance. Instead of focusing on the divination practice of a particular group of specialists, I aimed to unpack various forms of magical technology and spiritual beliefs that play different roles in the journeys of Khmer urban people.

I also developed relationships with fortune-telling clients, observing the fortune-telling consultation process, and following them to understand their daily activities at home and in the workplace. I interviewed 40 clients of different socio-economic status: university students, government officials, NGO personnel, market traders, housewives and taxi drivers. Most of them were "domestic migrants" who had moved from their villages to the city for educational and work purposes. Although they came from different socio-economic backgrounds, they expressed similar concerns about their traditions, everyday-life difficulties and uncertain futures. Spending time with my informants in their homes and working spaces allowed me to understand their limitations and possibilities. As a result of these insights, I adjusted my research topic to focus on rural-urban migrants and their religious lives in an urban Cambodian context.



Figure 5 The researcher and migrant university students at the Royal University of Phnom Penh

University students comprised a significant group of migrants with whom I engaged. I first built rapport with the students who studied Thai Language at the Royal University of Phnom Penh. They became my language partners and brought me to their world; a world in which their aspirations and ambitious dreams of mobility are challenged by insufficient resources as a result of corrupt political and educational systems. The students' self-reflections inspired me to pay attention to the concerns of urban Khmer people in different circumstances. Facebook and Instagram are the primary forms of social media I have employed to reach and keep in touch with research interlocutors in Phnom Penh, especially the migrant university students. Anthropologists have engaged this new technology to explore the imagination, lived-experiences, reflections, and identities of interlocutors (Alexander 2018). Following this current fashion, I consider social media as another social platform where urban Khmer people reveal their imagination about the society while also performing their identity. Students' social media posts allow me to understand and observe their everyday-life activities involving a wide range of religious activities, leisure and entertainment, education and career activities, as well as their self-reflections on failure, achievement, conflict and relationships with others.

In response to my queries, the young migrants expressed uncertainty about what propelled them to survive and strive to be successful. The new opportunities for education and work had initially motivated them to leave their home-village and resettle in the capital city, however, they encountered the reality that opportunities and resources are limited and unequal and subject to intense competition. Urban social relations and networks were unfamiliar, insecure and incoherent, contrasting to the familial affinity they had experienced in the village culture. People seemed to be anxious about their safety and security while living in their urban neighbourhoods due to the high number of resident criminals and various forms of corruption. Such perceptions and concerns came to the fore in the course of these migrants' consultations with fortune-tellers, as discussed in several of the chapters of this thesis.

Thesis Outline

This project proposes an approach to understanding Khmer divination as “experimental knowledge.” The thesis explores how migrants in Phnom Penh empower themselves and make sense of their lives by creatively drawing on their cultural repertoire in a post-revolutionary urban context shaped by intense flows of people, commodities and ideas, and major socio-spatial transitions. In the process of reconfiguring their religious traditions, the migrants fashion resources that enable them to transform an unfamiliar place into their home and to survive and prosper in the city.

Following this introduction, the thesis comprises five core chapters. I have developed my thesis chapters from the imaginations, experiences, perceptions, concerns, affects and emotions articulated by informants through informal conversations, interviews, and fortune-telling consultation sessions. Each chapter presents empirical and conceptual insights that draw on the experiences of urban Khmer residents who have engaged with divination, magic, and spiritual rites in different circumstances.

Chapter One examines how urban migrants re-embed into the city and overcome insecurities in their lives through embodied belief and ritual technology. The chapter highlights the experiences of two young female migrants who express uncertainty, insecurity and fear. This chapter aims to unpack the different tactics used by these young migrants to secure their fortune. The first, a student, cultivates her fortune through embodied moral behavior while the second secures her fortune by accessing spiritual patronage through ritual reciprocity and exchange. Their complementary technologies for

securing fortune are embodied and portable. The experiences of the two students thus illustrate how embodied ideas of fortune can be imagined, cultivated, secured, and drawn upon by migrants in a new context. The chapter argues that Khmer urban migrants have the means to cultivate and secure their fortune while away from home, and thus to make the unfamiliar city “home,” through a portable and embodied religious repertoire employed to domesticate their new environment.

Chapter Two explores how divination addresses the existential problems faced by migrant students in the city. Following Hardt’s (1999) concept of “affective labour,” this chapter argues that divination services can be seen as a form of affective service. The chapter examines a single fortune-telling consultation by a migrant student who seeks a solution to her concerns. During the consultation, the student expresses anxieties about the dilemma between her aspirations and moral responsibilities driven by social expectations

She is uncertain about her role and subjectivity and, given conflicting values and the multiple life scenarios on offer, her decision making becomes fraught. As a result, her “self” and “subjectivity” are in crisis. In the course of the consultation, the fortune-teller rebuilds the migrant student’s horizons of possibility and contextualises her imagination of her own life by proposing some possible life scenarios from which she might choose. The student is thus enabled to reprioritise her options, choose between her dreams, and to discover “*who*” she is. The chapter shows how fortune-telling consultations transact affect through an intersubjective encounter and deliver psychological comfort to clients by modifying their emotional experience.

Chapter Three aims to explore how Khmer market women cope with concerns and anxieties owing to their uncertain living conditions, economic difficulties, family burdens, and fragmented social relations in post-revolutionary urban society. This chapter pays attention to market women who explore multiple ways to secure good relationships with others. These women refer to “*nissāya*” when trying to make sense of how desired relations are forged and maintained. *Nissāya* can be conceptualised as “mystical affinity” because it is created by various mystical and uncontrollable factors, and influences an individual’s life in different circumstances. The chapter argues that individuals draw on four types of mystical affinity: astrological pre-destination, karmic affinity, spiritual interdependence and magical attraction. The ethnography shows that *nissāya* is a significant concept of abiding concern to people, especially female traders, who try to

understand and create mystical affinities in an unfamiliar market environment and in the context of fragmented social relations. Thus, the urban market women view *nissāya* both as an explanation for life circumstances and as a practical tool to influence, control, and manipulate outcomes and relationships while living in the unfamiliar social and livelihood networks of urban Cambodia.

Chapter Four focuses on a range of magical technologies at play in the different journeys of Khmer people in the city. The title of the chapter ‘Khmer Magic as a Weapon for the Weak’ was inspired by James Scott’s book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) which focuses on how powerless groups use low-key and non-overt tactics as “weapons” in their resistance to socially dominant groups. By taking this framework, I argue that magical and sorcery practices can be seen as weapons available for use by vulnerable social groups. The main ethnographic story sheds light upon the experience of a high-ranking woman who is the wife of a provincial governor. While her position is powerful, she is, in effect, weak and vulnerable because of dependency—on her husband’s position and on his affection, both of which are precarious—and because of the resentment of others in her kin network. She experiences affliction and a fortune-teller diagnoses that she is the victim of malevolent sorcery directed at her by enemies inside her kin network. The case shows that those in seemingly powerful positions in Cambodian society are also vulnerable to occult attack and fear retribution at the hands of those they have displaced. The chapter argues that sorcery affliction can be seen as a form of embodied morality since its diagnosis and healing implications reflect a number unspoken moral norms and assumptions embedded in social relations.

Chapter Five continues the main theme of the thesis in exploring how astrology and divination have been reinvented and improvised by urban migrants in Cambodia. The ethnographic data highlight the life-narrative of the lead Cambodian royal astrologer, an elite astrologer, who came from the countryside to improvise his divinatory authority in the city. Reflecting on his experience trying to reinvent astrological knowledge in Cambodia, this chapter asks: “How could a migrant villager become such an influential and recognised national authority on divination?” “Does his divinatory technique represent the traditional Khmer divinatory system or has he reinvented the astrological tradition?” The analytical focus of this chapter is to contextualise the individual improvisation and social mobility of this elite astrologer as one of several attempts to establish divinatory authority in contemporary Cambodia. The ethnographic account

shows that the elite astrologer has improvised his divinatory authority through hybrid resources and knowledge assembled in the context of cultural discontinuity and rupture with tradition occurring since the Khmer Rouge.

The thesis concludes with a concise statement of my main arguments about divinatory empowerment, improvisation and authority in the lives of migrants in contemporary Phnom Penh.

Chapter 1

Spiritual Home-Making

Placing myself in an unfamiliar city at the beginning of my field research was nothing like “peeling a banana,” as Khmer people might say, meaning it was no easy task. I was curious to know what kind of basic knowledge a newcomer like myself needed to survive in Phnom Penh. Asking my Khmer friends for survival tips in the city, they always advised me about various ways to protect my life from unexpected and dangerous accidents happening on the roads. My friends urged me: “you should be more careful when you are on the road in Phnom Penh [...] the city is so dangerous because of pollution, robbers, and corruption.” Nita, a university student from Battambang, suggested that I should wear a mask while travelling by motorcycle or Tuk Tuk on the street in Phnom Penh because of the high level of dust and air pollution from the hundreds of active construction sites. The student had to look out and protect herself while riding her motorcycle from her house to the university and the office where she did her part-time job. The reasons she was very careful on the street were not only traffic jams and pollution but also criminals that she may encounter every morning. She always urged me to carry my bag, purse, and cell phone with care because I could get robbed by the professional and skilful robbers. Her mother was robbed on the street many years ago. The unlucky robbery happening to her family member was a good lesson for Nita to be careful while travelling in the city. Moreover, my interlocutors also reflected that urban people are unreliable. Although the name of the roads, places, locations, and destinations in the city were unfamiliar to Mei-Mei, a university student from Kampot, she never asked help from “strangers” walking on the streets because they might be cheaters or robbers. She tried to avoid communicating with people she did not already know. Mei-Mei explained that most of the Khmer migrant students who moved from the provinces or the countryside have been taught by their parents about how to cope with such a dangerous and unsecure environment as Phnom Penh.

According to the young migrants, Mei-Mei and Nita, Phnom Penh is a very dangerous setting where criminal cases are recently increasing and may easily occur to anyone. Newcomers to the city like them are anxious and concerned they easily can be cheated

and exploited by strangers. So many of the relationships Khmer migrants experience in their everyday lives in the city are with unfamiliar strangers rather than family and social intimates, the situation they used to experience in their home villages. They find it hard to trust or believe the people they meet at the first encounter. While spending time with migrant students in Phnom Penh, I realised that safety and security are the main concerns of the Khmer youngsters who try to re-embed themselves into the city. They not only encounter the disorienting experiences of loneliness, stress, and uncertainty but also face risks and insecurity. In such uncertain and risky circumstances, I wonder how the migrant students find ways to secure their basic wellbeing while also finding the fortune they seek. And what kind of resources and technologies can the migrant students utilise to regain their sense of protection and security while living in the unfamiliar urban setting?

Alexandra Kent (2006) argues that traditionally Cambodian Buddhism has provided various mechanisms for Khmer people to ensure their security. The notion of security can be articulated within the aspects of materiality, cosmology, morality and political power. In the rural settings, Khmer people, especially the elite like to employ the Buddhist ideology of *dharma* (the righteousness and proper world order) and the concept of *bun* (merit) to accumulate their power, ensure their privileged status, as well as construct their authority and legitimacy within the dynamics of change undergoing the contemporary Cambodia.

In what follows, this chapter is inspired by Kent (Ibid) to explore the practical functions of religious tradition in relation to individuals' experiences of seeking security in the city. Instead of focusing solely on the Buddhist tradition, the ethnography explores the wider religious repertoire that young migrants utilise as they try to re-embed themselves in the unfamiliar city. Drawing on the experience of two female migrant students, this chapter highlights the multidimensional aspects of what might be called 'cosmological security', or fortune, in relation to the domains of materiality, morality and power.

The Khmer term *samṇāṅ* literally means "fortune, destiny, fate, luck, chance, blessing, success" (Sealang, 2018). This thesis, however, conceptualises *samṇāṅ* in a colloquial sense, in terms of the experiences of Khmer university students during the journey of migration. In the context of making the city "home," these migrant students perceive and conceptualise the notion of fortune as various forms of resources in the course of their journeys of education and migration. These resources of fortune will help them bring

about desirable outcomes, such as socio-economic success, spiritual blessings, as well as security and protection. Such desirable outcomes can be achieved through the distinctive moral repertoires of self-improvement and spiritual relations. These moral approaches to the cultivation of fortune are integral elements for the young Khmer migrants who attempt to re-establish their lives in the unfamiliar and dangerous urban environment. In this sense, the cultivation of fortune does not necessarily rely upon a mysterious fate or unpredictable destiny. Alternatively, fortune can be seen as a form of moral resource that individuals can implicitly and explicitly perform to secure and control an auspicious outcome.

The chapter uncovers distinct approaches to fortune that can be imagined, secured, and cultivated in relation to the process of place-making and within a context of unfamiliarity, insecurity and danger in the city. The chapter specifically examines how urban migrants re-embed into the city through the cult of spiritual patrons, their embodied repertoires of morality, and the ritual technologies they have brought with them into the city. This chapter presents its ethnographic findings in three sections. The first highlights a different idea of fortune in relation to the embodied morality internalised by one female migrant student from Battambang. Her approach to securing fortune in the city is to perform a repertoire of moral behaviours that she had internalised and embodied while living with family elders in her home village. The findings accord with much mainstream research on Cambodian morality by demonstrating the way religious morality shapes and influences individual identity and behaviour (Hansen 2007, Jacobson 2008, Kent and Chandler 2008, Smith-Hefner 1999, Ledgerwood 1990; 1996; 1998). However, this section also explores the pragmatic significance of the ritual discipline and moral education internalised by this young Khmer migrant as she endeavors to secure her fortune. In this case, the embodied morality of this urban female migrant student can be seen as a resource, allowing for the enhancement of her self-confidence, self-belief and autonomy.

The second ethnographic section depicts an alternative resource employed by the migrant student to bridge her way to the goal of achievement by tracing out the public realm of religious protection in Phnom Penh offered by well-known spiritual patron, “Brah’angg Dangkoa.” The student realises that self-reliance is not enough when confronted with a crisis in self-confidence due to indecision about continuing her journey. In this difficult moment, she believed that building a good relationship with an urban-based spiritual

patron could potentially bring her immediate benefits, such as relieving her stress, or enabling her a certain personal equilibrium to deal with difficult life choices. However, such benefits turned out to be temporary. While relieved of the negative emotions, she realises that a patron-client relation with a prominent guardian spirit of Phnom Penh is not the right way to facilitate the journey of educational self-improvement.

The final ethnographic section sheds light on the religious experience of a second migrant student, who hails from Kampot. She attempts to secure and sustain her fortune through maintaining good relations with various spiritual patrons that she has enshrined in her rental house in Phnom Penh. Her case sheds light on the great array of spiritual entities and forces that an individual migrant can call upon in different contexts. Drawing on the experience of this migrant student, this section suggests yet another approach to fortune, which is to see it as materialised in manifold symbolic forms and accessed in the context of ritual transaction. Disparate elements of fortune are concretised in diverse symbols and in ritual repertoires to appease the various spiritual beings upon whom, according to context, the student calls for assistance and support.

This chapter thus argues that urban Khmer migrants have a variety of ways to cultivate and secure their fortune while adapting themselves to the city. They make the unfamiliar city “home” through moral and religious repertoires that are portable and embodied. Based on the religious experiences of two urban migrant university students, the findings show that fortune in the city can be cultivated through embodied ritual discipline, or, alternatively the maintenance of ritual relations with either public or personal spiritual entities. In other words, the young migrants draw upon a variety of approaches to obtain fortune. The argument of this chapter supports the main argument of this thesis that Cambodian urban migrants approach their religious traditions including divination, magic, and spiritual cults, as an improvisational method by which they know the world and cope with uncertain circumstances. This chapter emphasises the agentive character of the religious experience of urban Khmer migrants who draw upon their religious tradition as a portable embodied resource.

Cultivation of Fortune through Embodied Morality

Nita is an eighteen year-old student from Battambang who migrated to Phnom Penh to study fine arts. When I met her, she had been living in Phnom Penh for four years. She lived there with her parents. Although previously her parents had separated, causing the whole family to scatter, they were now all living together again under the same roof as a family of migrants in Phnom Penh.

I first visited Nita's house in Burie Kila (Street No.211) area in March 2015 when she invited me for dinner. Before we arrived, the student explained to me that Burie Kila is one of the biggest slum communities in Phnom Penh, comparable in size to the Bodin and Beung Kak areas. Nita had lived in this temporary residence with her family for several years. I observed the apartment compounds to comprise of 4-5 old buildings tightly connected to each other. The ground floor of these buildings was bustling with people walking to and fro since it was used as a "mini-market." Some female market traders sitting on the floor sold vegetables, fruit, fish, meat, and bread. Apart from these market stores selling fresh produce, there were a few minimarts and hair salons. Numerous residents drove their motorcycles to the back of the buildings where a space had been set aside as a garage. Next to the garage was a vacant area where residents discarded all kinds of garbage. A lot of flies circulated around the garage and the market area. The circumstances made me feel uncomfortable due to the smell, dirt, and noise. Nita told me that she and her family lived in a tiny room on the seventh floor of the apartment building. Then we climbed the stairs together. On our way, I saw a lot of kids running around the hallway of each floor, ladies carrying and breastfeeding their crying babies, and a group of drunks yelling to each other in good humour while playing cards. At the time, I wondered how Nita could concentrate on her studies while living in that apartment. My wonder further increased after learning that she was coping with uncertainty as her family planned to leave the apartment soon. Hundreds of the residents, including Nita's family, had lived in Burie Kila apartment compounds for several decades, and were facing eviction because the property owner had a new real-estate development project. After the end of a rental contract, all Khmer families would receive some subsidy money but had to leave for a new place. Land grabs and forced evictions are controversial problems that affect the living condition of Khmer people across the country.

The more I hung out with Nita, the more of her unique character I observed. She tended to be very tough, talented, independent, and more confident than other female students I had met in Phnom Penh. She explained to me that she could still concentrate on her studies while surrounded by the conditions of the slum neighbourhood. Nita could tolerate these uncertain and insecure conditions, inspired by her late grandparents' wishes for her to become a successful woman.

Embodied Morality as Resource to Cultivate Individual Fortune

After their parents separated, Nita and her sisters were raised by their grandparents. They each had learnt how to behave like a good child and, later, like a proper woman. Every perception, manner and action is governed by a moral code of conduct. Nita and her sisters were expected to walk, sit, eat, and speak slowly, gently, and politely. Nita still remembered every morning when the three sisters were having breakfast together, they had to eat slowly by using a spoon to dig out little bite-sized pieces. The grandparents did not allow the three sisters to dress in short pants or mini-skirt because it was impolite and improper. Furthermore, Nita was taught to avoid building a relationship with, or trusting, a stranger, especially hanging out with a man, because she would be in danger. More strictly, having sexual intercourse with a boyfriend before getting married would be considered shameful behaviour which would destroy the dignity and honour of the family. Last but not least, the grandparents also valued displays of gratefulness—being “*kūn kātunyoo*”—as virtuous. To perform like a virtuous child, Nita and her sisters had to express their gratitude to their parents and, most importantly, repay them with love, care, as well as financial and moral support.

Nita understood that her relationship with her late grandparents resembled a kind of debt bondage whereby one is obliged to perform certain reciprocal action to ensure fair and equal treatment to the others. Instead of paying the moral debt with labour, money, or objects, she preferred to aspire to be an outstanding student. Her late grandparents believed that education could guarantee an individual's success. Nita believed this to mean that her good academic performance would potentially secure her an established job with high income in the future. When Nita migrated to the city, she continued to employ the moral code of her late grandparents, using it as a source of capacity to enable her success within the uncertain environment of the urban Cambodian society. The moral

education imparted by her grandparents underpinned her attitude and character as thoughtful, responsible, independent, and confident, as well as her self-discipline in relation to study and work. Nita never forgets what her grandparents in Battambang taught her about education securing a successful future career. Thus, Nita invested much effort into her studies. When she was a full-time B.A. student, she tried harder than other students to become an outstanding candidate, deserving of a scholarship. She tried to improve her Thai language skills to be more fluent by practising by herself every day at home. Watching Thai drama series every day significantly improved Nita's reading, speaking and listening skills. She also convinced me to be her language partner so that we could help each other develop our language skills. Nita viewed me as her inspiration to live an independent life through achieving a good education and advanced skills that would enable a secure career.

Nita's practical thinking can be observed when she made the decision to accept a job offer to work full time in a cosmetics company in Phnom Penh. Instead of following a life path like other university students, who might seek to achieve an ambitious dream or encounter new experiences by studying or working abroad, Nita acted against her own plans and social expectations by securing an income through accepting a work offer immediately. The full-time job forced Nita to leave the B.A. program in Thai language in which she was enrolled. Leaving the B.A. program at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) meant that her education was no longer "free" because her status as a university student financially supported by the Cambodian Government would be discontinued. With the unexpected outcome of losing the B.A. scholarship that she had previously won, Nita tried to compromise between education and work. She decided to use her own money from her work salary to support her own education. She considered that Thai language would still be relevant to her work as a graphic designer at the Thai cosmetic company in Phnom Penh. She then reapplied to the B.A. program in Thai language to undertake evening study, which allowed her to study after work. Self-funding her education meant that she had to restrict her monthly expenses so that she could save enough money to pay tuition fees. The way that Nita managed difficulties and negative outcomes arising from her decision making showed her self-discipline, responsibility, maturity, and practicality in her efforts to balance her work and study. Nita's response to the job opportunity not only showed her practicality but also her desire to be independent. Instead of following an uncertain dream by remaining a full-time, dependent student, the permanent income

from a salary allowed her to live independently without the financial support of her family. Nita further explained that she did not want to be a burden to her parents. Their income could be enough to subsidise basic costs like food, electricity, and gas but was insufficient to realise her ambitious dream to study in Thailand. When the full-time job was unexpectedly offered to Nita, she decided to take it because she saw that the opportunity might allow her to support herself, and later her parents.

I frequently wondered what might be behind this remarkable woman's capacity to embrace her goals and keep on moving forward in spite of knock backs. Looking at the arc of her short but eventful life, it seems likely that one source for the resolve and self-confidence that she displayed in making life decisions was the moral discipline inculcated in her by her grandparents.

Previous scholars researching morality in Cambodia have focused on how moral education, especially the moral education of girls, may tend to restrict individuality, demand conformity to traditional social norms, and even induce a sense of fatalism with respect to social hierarchies and cultural options (Smith-Hefner 1999; Jacobson 2008; Kent and Chandler 2008). Nita's experience shows that she was influenced by the strict moral education supervised by her grandmother. However, unexpectedly, I found that as a young woman, she seemed to act against social norms and traditions and demonstrate considerable confidence and individual autonomy when making life decisions. Rather than assuming that this represents a failure of her moral education, I wonder if in fact her confident, practical and autonomous streak might be traced precisely to the moral education she gained as a young girl. The moral training she endured appears to have given her the discipline and confidence to make her own decisions and make her own way. Embodied morality therefore might not necessarily always be seen as restrictive and constraining but indeed can be conceived as a resource upon which people, women particularly, can draw to overcome difficulties, negotiate dilemmas and act creatively and autonomously in the uncertain world.

Based on the discussion above, I would suggest that the embodied moral approach, including self-reliance and self-improvement, that Nita learnt from her grandparents has given her a certain fundamental resource to achieve her ambitions in relation to education and migration. This moral repertoire has enabled her confidence to study, travel, migrate or even to think and act outside what is considered socially acceptable. This fundamental

moral approach to life's challenges provides her with long-term benefit in the sense that she can control her fate without relying on others. As such, however, this moral sacrifice—the effort entailed in practising a moral repertoire, for example, in being self-disciplined—can be temporary suspended when the student encounters with in her self-confidence.

The next section will introduce an alternative spiritual resource undertaken by this migrant student from Battambang in the moment of crisis: she temporarily abandons her baseline morality and turns to rely on creating a good relationship with an urban spiritual patron in order to cultivate her fortune.

Finding Spiritual Patronage in the Urban Living Space

Brah'angg Dangkoa (ព្រះអង្គឥសានី)

Nita and her family pay obeisance to Phnom Penh's guardian spirit, Brah'angg Dangkoa, during every Khmer New Year and on other special occasions, to make merit and get some blessings. The shrine is located by the riverside on Preah Sisowath Quay, immediately to the north of the Royal Palace. The whole body of the statue is black, and his image resembles Lokeshvara, with six hands, each of which holds a different object (mace, lotus, sword, urn, book and prayer beads) which demonstrates his spiritual power.



Figure 6 Braḥ'angg Dangkoe's shrine in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh

I followed Nita several times as she visited Braḥ'angg Dangkoe. She was feeling confused and stressed owing to a major transition in her life. She could not decide whether to follow her dream to accept a scholarship to study for a B.A. degree in Thailand, or to accept a permanent job offer from a Thai cosmetics company in Phnom Penh. The student decided to abandon her dream to study in Thailand and take up the job, which was a better opportunity than she ever had expected. She considered the unexpected offer, which gave her a full-time job with a high salary to be a fortunate break for an 18 year-old university student who had not yet completed her B.A. degree. Typically, newly graduated university students in Phnom Penh tend to be offered only a part time job, offering a low income of as little as 50-100 USD/ month (Nita's estimation). Nita, therefore, saw the job offer as a short-cut to success, allowing her to earn an income as high as university graduates in Cambodia usually are offered. Nita could not expect or guarantee she could get such a high income even if she studied and worked in Thailand. In this regard, a high

salary from the full-time job was a fortune she actually could see and take, while the job opportunity in Thailand was still uncertain and difficult to foresee.

However, after the difficult decision had been made, Nita suffered and was very frustrated because she realised that full-time work stole freedom and happiness from her teenage life. She became preoccupied with the idea that she had made the wrong decision. She was angry with herself and everyone in her family who had discouraged her from studying in Thailand. One time I followed Nita to visit Brah'angg Dangkoa's shrine, I noticed her face was filled with sorrow, angst, and disappointment. She was very upset because her new boss was unsatisfied with her work performance. The job expectations placed on her as a graphic designer to create cosmetic catalogues were too demanding for a first-year university student and were too complicated for her to handle. The language instructor at her university in Phnom Penh also was disappointed to see a formerly outstanding student not getting a high score from the exams and always attending the class late due to the demands of her full-time job. Nita was unhappy with her bad performance in work and study as it showed that she could not balance her life.

Similar to what many Khmer people believe about the spiritual power of the guardian spirits (*neak ta*), Nita hoped that Brah'angg Dangkoa could bring about a resolution and bring new auspiciousness to her life. After praying to Brah'angg Dangkoa with an offering of incense and lotus flowers, Nita used a little bowl to scoop holy water from a large bowl which was placed on the ground at the feet of the sacred statue, then sprinkled it on her head, face, arms, and hands. She believed that the holy water could replace any bad luck she had encountered with a blessing of fortune.

After purifying her body with the holy water, she bought a small cage of live birds from the sellers who were standing next to the flower sellers in the front of the shrine. Nita hoped that the good karma earned from freeing the birds might mean that she would receive her own freedom in return. Nita further explained: "Brah'angg Dangkoa is a good place where I can make a wish in Phnom Penh." After making a wish at the shrine, we decided to walk another 150 metres along the riverside path. We stopped by the area where several fortune-tellers were sitting on the ground in serious discussion with their clients. Most of them were female card-readers who had a similar age-range around 40-50 years-old. I saw some clients smiling while talking with the fortune-tellers. I wondered if they had received news about fortunate opportunities expected to arrive in the future or

perhaps they simply were happy to share their concerns with another person. The whole area around Brah'angg Dangkoe's shrine appeared to me as a space of hope where Khmer people like Nita and the fortune-telling clients entertained expectations of improving their life fortunes.

Every day, I saw many Khmer people worship Brah'angg Dangkoe with offerings such as incense sticks, lotus or jasmine flowers, coconuts, bananas, candles and cooked chickens. The smell of incense filled my nose; the smoke stung my eyes and scented my body. I saw numerous young people visiting the shrine. Some of them explained to me that they were students who believed that the *neak ta* can grant them good fortune so they can pass their exams. When I visited the shrine in August 2015, I saw hundreds of Khmer students providing offerings of lotus flowers, incense and candles, and praying in front of the shrine. I was told they were grade 12 students who were making a wish to pass the exam of the last semester in their colleges so they could take the entrance exam to the university level.

Then a few months later, I revisited the shrine on a Buddhist holy day. A band of musicians from the Ministry of Cults and Religion was performing Khmer traditional music in front of the god's statue. On the platform where the performers were seated with their instruments, groups of worshippers, mostly middle-aged women, came in turn to sit and pray, paying the musicians for each piece performed for the god's benefit. The worshippers sat facing the shrine with legs tucked back to one side, showing their politeness, while also holding a bunch of incense sticks and mumbling with their mouths in the way of making a wish.

At that time, I met Mr. Mathea, the head of the international collaboration department of the Ministry of Cults and Religion, who first told me about the local narratives of Brah'angg Dangkoe. Various versions of such narratives can shed light on the spiritual dimension of the Khmer idea of fortune. The narrative told by the state representative emphasised the spiritual power of Brah'angg Dangkoe who safeguards the King, the Royal Palace, and travellers. The legendary story he related to me referred to a time hundreds of years ago, when Phnom Penh was still covered in water. At that time there was a *dang tung* (ដងតូង), which literally means "flag pole" floating on the river in front of the Royal Palace. At that time, Khmer people in Phnom Penh believed, the flag pole caused numerous accidents, because sailing ships from India, Malaysia, and Indonesia

carrying business travellers sank in the vicinity. The former King of Cambodia decided to arrange a ritual to worship the *dang tung* as it was believed that this sacred object possessed the spiritual power to protect and empower local residents and travellers.¹³ In the past, Khmer people worshipped the *dang tung* without the god's statue. In 1951, the Cambodian Government built the statue based on peoples' imagination of the spiritual figure related to the sacred *dang tung*. The god's statue was rebuilt after the Pol Pot regime and the sacred flag pole was reconstructed as a steel flag tower beside the shrine. These days, the *dang tung* is popularly referred to as Dangkoa and the legendary flag pole is evoked by the steel tower that stands beside the shrine to Brah'angg Dangkoa.

The second narrative was written up in a book by the local scholar Yee Thun (Yee Thun 2008). A long time ago, in front of the Royal Palace, there was a mound where was located a big tree with hundreds of branches, appearing like two human hands holding the Tonle Sap River. In front of the tree were hundreds of ships, containing different kinds of products from Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese businessmen. At that time, Khmer people believed there was a sacred object inside the mound, which could transmit spiritual blessings to the residents, businessmen, and travellers for happiness and success. Some witnesses saw sacred light balls in white and green colours flying back and forth between the mound and inside the Royal Palace.¹⁴ Then, people decided to build a shrine at the mound and near the big tree. The sacred shrine became famous for its connection to the Cambodian army, or militias, who were seeking additional moral support to enhance their self-confidence while fighting with their enemies at different locations on the land, the water and in the air.

The conclusion of the book also contains narratives reflecting the general understanding of the urban Khmer people towards the spiritual power of Brah'angg Dangkoa. They conceptualise *dang tung* or Dangkoa as a sacred object in which is embedded the spiritual power to protect Khmer people from danger and heal their sufferings from psychological illness or a physical accident. At the same time, some believe that the spiritual power of

¹³ Through informal conversation with Mr Mathea, I learned that some Khmer people believe that the steel flag pole represents *dang tung* (ដង្កោ), or a flag pole that is the mast of ship connects earth or human habitat to heaven (December 2015).

¹⁴ The historical accounts given by the Ministry of Cults and Religion (2008) confirm that Brah'angg Dangkoa and the steel flag tower standing by the Tongle Sap River, were built in the early 20th century, after the building of the Royal Palace (The Royal Palace had been built in the 1860s, during the French colonial period).

Brah'angg Dangkoe can help them solve family problems, heal women who suffer from difficulties giving birth, or trace lost objects.¹⁵

Although the local narratives are slightly different in regards to the details they provide about the origins and first appearance of the spirit, they share in common a conception of the spiritual power of Brah'angg Dangkoe as capable of delivering security and safety while also bringing prosperity to Khmer residents and travellers/newcomers in Phnom Penh. In analysing the local narratives, previous scholars conceptualise Brah'angg Dangkoe as a form of “neak ta” who protects the flagpole, a significant territorial landmark of the city, which symbolises a sense of security and protection (Bertrand 2001; Coggan 2015).¹⁶ My own study supplements this research with findings about the origins and spiritual identity of this urban *neak ta* along with ethnography that shows how beliefs about Brah'angg Dangkoe's spiritual power are embedded in Khmer people's everyday life experiences. As I engaged with long term residents and recent migrants in Phnom Penh, I not only witnessed the large numbers of people who daily made offerings at Brah'angg Dangkoe's shrine but also observed the great variety of requests they made to the guardian spirit, which demonstrated the range of hopes people invested in him. I realised residents of Phnom Penh consider Brah'angg Dangkoe to be a potent and respected god, who plays a key role in maintaining life-security, safety, and wealth.

Nita herself was unable to provide any details about Brah'angg Dangkoe's powers or biography. Additionally, she personally never had experienced a miraculous resolution to her problems at Brah'angg Dangkoe's shrine. Nevertheless, she believed in the protective power of the guardian spirit because of the wide dissemination of stories about the spirit's efficacy as well as her own observations of the large number of devotees paying respect to Brah'angg Dangkoe at his shrine. These experiences induced in her the sense of hope that she too might receive assistance from the spirit in resolving her disappointing decision.

¹⁵ See also *History of Brah'angg Dangkoe* (ប្រវត្តិព្រះអង្គដង្ហើ) (2008). Ministry of Cults and Religion, Cambodia [Khmer].

¹⁶ Those scholars spell the name of this urban-based *neak ta* differently. Bertrand (2001) calls “Dong Kaoeuk” as “neak ta of the flag” while Coggan (2015: 120) proposes “Preah Ang Doung Kar” (his Khmer transliteration) as “the sacred royal flagpole.” Although there is writing variation adopted among academics, I decided to use “Brah'angg Dangkoe” in this thesis since it matches to the way that the local people actually say it.

In addition, Nita's orientation to the spirit was informed by a familiar religious tradition in which she had engaged before coming to Phnom Penh. She grew up with a family and friends who venerated and worshiped a range of spiritual forces, including the tutelary spirits "neak ta" of her home village and the spiritual patron of Battambang province, "Lok Ta Tambang," known as the most powerful guardian spirit protecting the Khmer people who live in Battambang. Nita explained that the name of her province Battambang, which literally means, "lost stick," is linked to the local narrative of the spiritual patron Lok Ta Tambang. The narrative describes him as a local peasant who lost his magic stick in a contest with an adversary, but who today has magical protective powers. Nita always paid obeisance and made a wish to the guardian spirit whenever she drove her motorcycle past the shrine, which is located at the centre of the provincial capital.

Every time she made a wish at the shrine she would address the *neak ta* statue as "Grandfather Tambang", and refer to herself as "*kūn c"au*," which means "grandchild", before telling the spirit whatever it was that she wanted to achieve. This particular usage suggests that Nita's conception of Battambang's protective spirit is modelled on the type of hierarchal and respectful, yet personalistic, relationship that Khmer people typically have with their own grandparents. Reference to the spirit as "grandfather," also is suggestive of the moral expectations placed in Khmer grandparents, who popularly are deemed to have a responsibility to deliver protection and care to their descendants. The student generally asked the spirit Lok Ta Tambang to protect her life from danger and bless her with good luck and success. She recalled to me that the last time she visited the spiritual patron was the day before she left her home province and moved permanently to Phnom Penh to continue her high-school education.

When the student migrated to the city, she brought her belief in the protective powers of local guardian spirits. In the city, she soon adopted a habit of venerating Braḥ'angg Dangkoa. Like Lok Ta Tambang, whose power of protection is confined locally to Battambang, Braḥ'angg Dangkoa is regarded as Phnom Penh's guardian spirit. Similar to the way she addressed Lok Ta Tambang, she referred to herself as "*kūn c"au*", or "grandchild", when speaking with Braḥ'angg Dangkoa. Like others at Braḥ'angg Dangkoa's shrine, Nita credited the spirit with the power to protect those in his locality. In this sense, the migrant student maintains a relationship with the spiritual patron of the Phnom Penh locality that is similar in form to her relationship with the guardian spirit of

her home province. In other words, the student's religious repertoire is flexibly readjusted in the new urban milieu to fashion a new resource of protection in its religious landscape.

After leaving Brah'angg Dangkoa's shrine Nita was noticeably calmer. Her prayers to the city's spiritual patron seemed to allow a sense of respite when she felt down. After passing through the period of sorrow and hopelessness, however, she decided to return to her previous fundamental approach to dealing with life challenges, namely, self-reliance and self-improvement. She spent a lot of time alone in her room thinking and planning. She shared with me that she believed in her own capacity more than relying upon the assistance of spiritual beings.

Nita's reactions and thinking when dealing with this life problem were practical, realistic, and independent. Each time she experienced suffering or stress, she would stay alone in her bedroom and listen to music. It would be rare for her to cry in front of someone because she did not want to show her weakness to others, especially her family members. She told me that the first three months after she started working full time was the most difficult time of her life. But her sadness and sorrow at deciding to switch from study to work slowly faded. Six months later, Nita had started to recover. She told me that she had finally discovered a strategy to do her job effectively, which satisfied her boss. She also learnt, given time constraints, how to improve her academic performance. At that time when I saw Nita's emotional wellbeing improving, I projected that she would explain this improvement as being due to the power of the city spiritual patron she habitually venerated. Surprisingly, she did not attribute her wellbeing or ability to overcome her angst and suffering during a tough time to her spiritual patron, Brah'angg Dangkoa. Rather, she emphasised her own strategy and moral capacity as enabling her to resolve difficulties in her life. While the embodied belief in seeking protection and fortune from the spiritual patron is still part of Nita's repertoire, she later reflected and explained that the frustrations and disappointment that she had encountered had been relieved by her moral capacity rather than through any unseen power. The way she dealt with disappointment and dramatic problems in her life reflected her strength and capacity to create and apply a practical and effective strategy to resolve a problem. Instead of waiting for the assistance and support of a spiritual being, like other young people did, Nita resolved her angst about dilemmas or incidents by using her rational and practical thinking. She quickly moved on from her initial grief at losing her dream to study in

Thailand and, instead, set herself the new goal of becoming an outstanding graphic designer.

Looking at Nita's subsequent postings about her life on her Facebook and Instagram pages provides evidence of the success of her embodied moral repertoires of self-reliance and self-improvement. I learned through her social media accounts that she had received invitations from NGOs and human resource agents in Phnom Penh to share her experiences of how she had successfully managed study and work. She explained to her audiences comprising high-school students, about the suffering she had experienced upon losing self-confidence and doubting her capacity to achieve her goals. She persisted with her aspiration to work as a graphic designer even though she lacked sufficient knowledge and skill to work in this area. Nita explained that, rather, working in an unfamiliar field had inspired her to move out of her comfort zone. She went on to speculate that such challenges could lead a student to become a good candidate for a job in Phnom Penh where graphic designers are in high demand. Furthermore, the company had also offered her an opportunity to travel to Bangkok for graphic design training. This kind of self-improvement was something she could not have gained through the university's lecture. As Nita highlighted in her talk, working with an international company was very challenging and competitive but would benefit her in the long term—the improvement in her work skills would allow her to get a promotion and thus increase her salary. In all, Nita appeared to have rebounded strongly from her early-career crisis and was facing her future with apparent resolve and confidence.

As mentioned previously, this chapter aims to examine the diverse practices of young migrants in securing their fortunes in the city. In the next section, I introduce another way of securing fortune exemplified by Mei-Mei, a Khmer-Chinese student from Kampot province. This student attempts to secure her fortune in the city by sustaining good relations with various spiritual agencies. While Nita secures her fortune by performing the moral behaviours that she has embodied and deployed to the city, the second migrant student, Mei-Mei, attempts to secure her fortune through reciprocity and exchanges with various external spiritual forces, who are enshrined in different domains of her house. Following the goal of this Chapter exploring various ways the migrant students secure their fortunes in the city. While Nita attempted to cultivate and secure her fortune through internalised, embodied moral discipline, Mei-Mei, in contrast, formulates and assures her fortune externally, through ritual exchanges with multiple spiritual entities.

Cultivation of Fortune through Externalising Relationships with Spiritual Beings in the Urban Household

On a Buddhist Holy Day in December 2015, Mei-Mei invited me to observe how she venerated and worshipped gods, ancestors and spirits at her rental house in Bung Salang area (St. 344). She identifies herself as “Khmer-Chen” or “Khmer-Chinese” and is bilingual; speaking both Khmer and Chinese [Mandarin] with her family. At the time, she was studying two B.A. degrees in Business Management and Chinese language at two universities while also running a part-time business. She sold imported Chinese cosmetics at several local markets in Phnom Penh but most of her customers were market-traders at the Central Market. In addition to the responsibilities above, Mei-Mei also took care of her younger brother who had followed her to Phnom Penh to attend university. As a student, Mei-Mei had to act on behalf of her parents in supporting her brother financially while also taking the lead in performing Chinese religious traditions at home.

Although her life is always busy with her study and business, Mei-Mei strictly performed the ritual veneration at home every Buddhist Holy Day. On this auspicious day she can make contact with the spiritual world. Mei-Mei introduced me to the altars and images placed throughout her house, representing multiple forms of gods, angels, ancestor spirits, guardian spirits, and homeless child spirits. *Rāndevatā* or “the shelf of angels” and *mreṅkangvāl* or the homeless child spirit are located at the front yard of the house.¹⁷ The spiritual protectors of territory and the ancestor spirits are located in different areas inside the house, such as the living room, the bedroom and the kitchen. In this way, Mei-Mei fashions her living space into a shared territory inhabited by humans and non-humans. This complex realm reminds me of Bourdieu’s explanation of the Kabyle house (1990).

¹⁷ Because of the limitation of the Chapter, I decided to exclude Mei-Mei’s ritual repertoire venerating *rāndevatā* (រន្ទេវតា) or “the shelf of angels” and *mreṅkangvāl* (ម្រេងកង្វាល) or the “homeless child spirit.” Also, my ethnographic data on this subject cannot explain clearly to what extent the student cultivated her fortune through the relationship with *rāndevatā*. It is worth mentioning, however, that I considered the literal meaning of *devatā* as guardian spirit or lesser god in which contrasts to previous religious scholars. Tambiah (1970: 59) defined *devata* [*thewada*] as “divine angels” but his definition could be problematic. Angels, in Christian belief, play a key role as messengers from God. In contrast, *devatā* in Theravada Buddhist countries act as independent actors and thus they can make their own decision in offering power of protection to someone.

Bourdieu (ibid) explained that humans objectify the material world depending on the cosmological structure they have embodied. In the Kabyle house, the living space is divided into two parts: humans use one part while animals use the other. Following Bourdieu's explanation of the Kabyle house, the Khmer migrant student also conceives her temporary residence in Phnom Penh as a divided realm. The student's living space is shared with a wide range of spiritual entities.

The following section explores a second method to cultivate fortune through maintaining relationships with spiritual beings who possess potency in particular domains. Following High's argument (2006), this section considers the embodied religious repertoires deployed by the city-based migrant student as a portable spiritual technology, which facilitates her mobile journey. This section also discusses the process, symbol, narrative, and memory of the ritual obeisance habitually performed by the student to overcome the experience of disorientation and to make the unfamiliar city "home."

A Diversity of Guardian Spirits in the Urban Household

The God of Water and Earth

Mei-Mei still remembered what her late grandmother told her about the benevolent power of the guardian spirit to protect the house and safeguard the family's wellbeing. Around ten years earlier, an old friend of her grandmother's— a rich lady dressed in expensive clothes and wearing ornate jewelry—was sitting on a bus with five other passengers. Robbers entered the bus and used weapons to force the passengers to hand over their money and valuable objects. It was almost a miracle that the robbers did not notice the rich lady sitting on the bus. However, sadly, another passenger, jealous of her grandmother's old friend, drew the robbers' attention to the rich lady. Suddenly, the invisible passenger became visible to the robbers. The robbers demanded that the rich lady take them to her house with a view to robbing her. Surprisingly, when the robbers arrived at her house, the house suddenly disappeared. The robbers could see only large, mature trees standing on the rich lady's land, and decided to disperse before anyone could witness the incident. The rich lady was perplexed by the robbers' reaction and could not understand why her house had not been visible to them. Then she consulted the fortune-teller about this unbelievable situation. The fortune-teller told her that she was a very lucky person because two tigers had protected her house when the robbers came. The first

tiger was the god of water and earth and the second was the guardian spirit of the house or *jamnāngphdah* (ជំនាងផ្ទះ).

In light of this narrative, Mei-Mei always thinks of the spirits wherever she goes, and particularly when she visits a place for the first time. The guardian spirits can ensure her security and wellbeing while also protecting her from any danger. While she has relocated to an unfamiliar city, she still follows the family religious tradition in paying ritual obeisance to the ancestors and the guardian spirits of her house. I observed that Mei-Mei did not have the guardian spirit's altar in the front yard of the house like other houses in Cambodia. Because of the limited space of her rental house, she had located the altars of the multiple forms of guardian spirits in the living room—the place where she rested and ate meals after work and study.

The *ti chui iea* altar is located in the living room area of the house facing the front door.¹⁸ Two figures standing for the two Chinese gods were located at the left and right corners, in front of the altar. The altar was identically located in Mei-Mei's parents' house in Kampot.¹⁹ Some Khmer-Chinese people or Khmer-Chen²⁰ also call these god-representative figures as “Ju E-Pek E.” The one standing on the left side appears like a tall, elderly man with a long white beard, dressed up as a traditional Chinese official carrying a Chinese golden tael (ancient Chinese currency). The second statue on the right side sat on a large Chinese golden tael. He was shorter and chubbier than the first statue, with a big belly, and carried a Chinese hand fan.

Following the regional traditions of the Chinese Teochew, Mei-Mei explained that *ti chui iea* literally means “the god of water and earth.” Some Khmer people refer to the Chinese god of water and earth as *kungm"ā* (កុងម៉ា), which literally means “grandfather-grandmother.” In the colloquial sense, this term refers to “the god of water and earth.” Mei-Mei further elaborated that the Khmer people, who are not ethnically Chinese, also pay homage to *mcâsdyk-mcâsfi* which also refers to the Khmer god of water and earth.

¹⁸ The Khmer-Chinese in Phnom Penh use *ti chui iea* and *kungm"ā* interchangeably depending on the language dialect of the different regions.

¹⁹ Mei-Mei mentioned seeing a god of water and earth's altar *ti chui iea* in a Khmer-Chinese seafood restaurant in Kampot; she claims it to be bigger and more beautiful than the one in her house.

²⁰ This thesis follows Farib Sos' work which categorises the Khmer people who have inherited the Chinese ethnicity as “Khmer-Chen” (Farib 2015).

The Khmer term *mcâsdyk-mcâsīt* literally means “the owner of water and earth.” Based on popular belief, the terms *ti chui iea* and *Dai* have been similarly conceptualised as the patron god, who possesses and protects the water or the river and the earth territories. With the patron god’s power extending across a vast domain encompassing earth and river, Mei-Mei therefore considers *ti chui iea* as “the owner of the house.” Mei-Mei was told by her parents that the god of water and earth also plays a key role to protect the deceased grandparents or the ancestral spirits, who could otherwise be disturbed by malevolent spirits. The god has the authority to monitor and inspect any other spirits who seek to enter a human residence. This reunification between the ancestral spirits and the descendants depends on the permission of the patron of water and earth. Without their permission, the ancestral spirits could not return home to reunite with their descendants.

The student, Mei-Mei, demonstrated considerable knowledge in conducting the ritual to venerate the spiritual entities at her residence on the Buddhist Holy Day²¹; choosing the auspicious offerings and determining the order of providing such offerings to different spiritual beings. Mei-Mei further explained that she learnt how to make the offerings to different gods and deities from her parents in Kampot. Mei-Mei offered *ti chui iea* then some coffee, tea, and fruit including longans and oranges, as well as a bulb of garlic. She explained that Khmer people like to use *mian* (ម្នី) or longan as a primary fruit offering because the spoken word sounds the same as the word *mān* (មាន), which means “to have” or “wealthy.” Offering this auspicious fruit to the god can ensure that wealth and

²¹ In addition to Mei-Mei, another migrant worker from Kampong Cham also elaborated three important annual ceremonies held by the Khmer people to worship the gods of water and earth. The first occasion is *Saen Kbal Terk* (សែនក្បាលទឹក), held in June to thank the patron god of the river for giving life and fertility to human kind. The second occasion is the Chinese celebration known as *Qingming*. This festival has been defined in English using various terms, “All Souls Day, Clear Bright Festival, Ancestors Day, Festival for Tending Graves [...]” (Farib 2015: 191). It is a Chinese merit-making ceremony, held at grave sites to commemorate the ancestors through numerous food offerings, fake money, and other imitation goods (passports, cars, brand name bags, houses, etc.). Such offerings are also provided to the gods of water and earth in people’s houses. The third occasion is held on the last day of the Bchum Ben (ភ្ជុំបិណ្ឌ) festival. According to Ledgerwood (2012: 191), Bchum Ben [phchum ben] ceremony can be called as ‘festival of the dead,’ which will be held once a year during the lunar month of Photrobot (September-October). During a 15-day period, Khmer descendants will provide food offerings to the spirits of the dead, who have not gone on to rebirths as humans (Ibid: 193-194). As for Mei-Mei, however, she believes that the patron god in hell will release all spirits, enabling the Khmer people to return home to reunite with their ancestors. Family members must prepare food to worship the gods of water and earth who allow the deceased ancestors to enter the house and stay temporarily with humans before returning again to the spiritual world.

prosperity will return to her life. She offered coffee to *ti chui iea* because her parents told her that this beverage was her grandparents' favourite. The fruit and garlic also contain significant symbolic meanings. Garlic is considered an auspicious offering based on the Khmer traditional belief in the symbolic meaning of the object as safeguarding individuals from danger caused by a transgression. Mei-Mei believed garlic to be one of the prominent offerings for the gods of water and earth. She recalled hearing her parents say that individuals kept some garlic in their pockets when they ventured away from their house. Following this belief, garlic is considered to protect individuals from black magic or certain forms of anaesthetic unconsciousness.

Raw garlic contains various symbolic meanings and uses among Khmer people. Commonly, raw garlic can be consumed as food and/or medicine to heal harmful effects of insect infections, as well as for magical protection. Mei-Mei had also observed that market traders usually place some garlic near the products they sell in order to avoid misfortune as a result of criminal activity in the markets. She speculated that robbers may use black magic or narcotics to bring about a state of unconsciousness in the victim.

Mei-Mei further explained that the terms *ti chui iea/ kungm"ā* and *mcâsdÿk-mcâsṭī* are interrelated, and used by Khmer-Chinese to call for protection in a different context. Once a year, on the Chinese Ancestor Day (*Qingming*) the student and her Khmer-Chinese relatives worship and make offerings to deceased ancestors at grave sites. In addition to this annual occasion, the Khmer-Chinese family may pay their respects to their ancestors at home—given that the god of water and earth can protect them on behalf of the ancestor spirits. When Mei-Mei sought to compare Chinese and Khmer ancestor spirits, she chose the terms “*kungm"ā*” and “*tūntā*.” As Mei-Mei elaborated:

Me and my parents, we are ethnic Chinese, we usually pray and worship the ancestors at our house in Kampot, while the Khmer who are not related to Chinese ethnicity usually worship [*tūntā* (តូនតា), *meba* or ancestors] at the pagoda. My parents and I will pray and worship the *kungm"ā* at home as it also represents our ancestors. Besides the important annual religious occasion [*Qingming*], we pray to *kungm"ā* when we want to ensure our safety while living in our own place of residence. If we go outside, or travel to the forest or the mountain, we will think of *mcâsdÿk-mcâsṭī* who are the god of water and earth. *Kungm"ā* will protect us at home but *mcâsdÿk-mcâsṭī* will look after my family when we

travel outside the house...but I just have *mcâsdÿk-mcâsĭ* with me in Phnom Penh who can also protect me like my ancestors.

Mei-Mei's statement is similar to the explanations and understandings of other Khmer-Chinese in Phnom Penh about the altar of the god of water and earth as "the place of the ancestors and household gods" (Farib 2015: 190). Mei-Mei views the god of earth and land as her deceased grandparents or ancestor spirits, who always look after the house and the wellbeing of descendants. She strongly believes that the ancestors or spirits of her grandparents still watch over her from the spiritual world, protecting her wherever she goes. I also observed that some Khmer-Chinese in Phnom Penh placed photographs of their deceased ancestors on both sides, or nearby, their altar of the gods of water and earth. They locate these photographs in the common living space, facing the main entrance to the house. Mei-Mei explained that she could not put photographs of her own deceased grandparents in her house in Phnom Penh as it was a rental house, not her own house.²²

²² I should emphasise that Mei-Mei was the only migrant I encountered in Phnom Penh who did not display the photographs of her ancestors in her rental house. In contrast, I observed other ethnic Chinese migrant students place photographs of their deceased ancestors nearby or next to the altar of *ti chui iea* or *kungm"ā* (the god of water and earth).



Figure 7 The god of water and earth perform the function of ancestral spirits. This altar is located in the living room of Mei-Mei's rental house in Phnom Penh

The Cult of the Deceased Teacher

Inside her bedroom, I noticed objects that looked like lotus flowers placed on a tray. Mei-Mei explained this object as *grūpādhyāya*. The object stands for the *grū* which, in this context, refers to the spirit of the deceased teacher or the processor of knowledge. The object that represented *grū* was placed on a small table near the head of her bed. The miniature lotus was made from gold paper rolled into a triangle form. The foundation of the tray was made out of a coconut shell covered in gold paper, surrounded by candles and decorated with fake flowers (mostly pink and yellow).²³

²³ Grū Bun, the numerology fortune-teller, further explained to me that the triangular tray made from the coconut-shell symbolises the *lingam* (Shivalinga) and the Hinduist belief in Shiva (Brahīsūra: ព្រះឥសូរ). The Hinduist cult of *lingam* was very popular during the Angkorean Empire and persists until today.



Figure 8 The student from Kampot lights incense for enshrining her personal guardian spirit inside her bedroom at Bung Sala area, Phnom Penh.



Figure 9 Grūpādhyāya: the miniature lotus was made from gold paper rolled into a triangle form

On the same day after she venerated the Chinese gods and the ancestors, Mei-Mei provided the offerings to the *grūpādhyāya* with a plate of fruit and two vases of lotuses, a small glass containing some jasmine petals floating on the surface, two candles, and nine sticks of incense. After placing the fruit and flowers, she lit the incense and carried it in her hands while paying obeisance to the spirit. I observed Mei-Mei's mouth moving and making mumbling sounds, as though praying. I guessed that she may have been asking her personal guardian spirit to bless her cosmetic business, ensuring its profitability. This stage took around 1-2 minutes then she extinguished the incenses, one by one, in the small pot. She also putted some jasmine flowers into a little glass of water on the left side of the tray and beside the incense pot. Next she placed the jasmine garland on top of the tray and sprayed perfume on it. The student explained that the sweet fragrance from the jasmine and perfume not only satisfied the spirit but also enhanced her own attractiveness. After waiting until the incense sticks stopped burning, the student removed the fruit offerings and small glass of water with jasmine. She said: "The fortune-teller told me to splash this sacred water on my head, my face, my hands, and body as a way to bless my life...and the fruit will be kept for us to eat after lunch."

Mei-Mei started worshipping the 'spirit of the teacher' or *grūpādhyāya* around September 2015, at the suggestion of her friend and the fortune-teller. A female friend observed that Mei-Mei did not appear well due to some sickness and business problems. Mei-Mei's friend then shared her own experience of coping with a critical time in her life through worshipping the *grūpādhyāya*.

Mei-Mei reflected that her emotional and physical symptoms had improved after worshipping the *grūpādhyāya*. She believed that her allergy could be cured as a result of the spiritual protection and moral support given by her guardian spirit. Mei-Mei expressed:

"...I feel much better because my health and business are improving. I feel that my customers, who are the cosmetic sellers at the local markets, follow my business plan more. You know, before this time, I was so worried and concerned about my business, I always asked the fortune-tellers how I can

compete with other sellers because I am still young and have started this business without experience...”

Mei-Mei decided to double-check with the male card-reading fortune-teller if she should worship the *grūpādhyāya*. According to the fortune-teller’s explanation, a guardian spirit would protect Mei-Mei because she was born with a certain form of umbilical cord or “sangvara.”²⁴ Mei-Mei suddenly recalled her mother telling her a strange story: after giving birth, the doctor in Kampot said that Mei-Mei was born with the umbilical cord around her body—a phenomenon which has special meaning in Khmer traditional belief. Mei-Mei further explained that Khmer parents like to observe whether their babies are born with spiritual power by paying attention to the attachment point of the umbilical cord. According to local knowledge, the umbilical cord can be possibly located around the head, chest, wrist, and ankle of the babies. The appearance of an umbilical cord attached to one of these parts of the baby’s body is believed to guarantee that the spirit of the teacher will protect the baby forever.

While Khmer people have transmitted such belief over generations, explanations differ about the relationship between the spirit of *grū* and newborn babies. It is believed that the spirits come to protect and safeguard the babies due to a certain form of merit commitment carried forward from their past lives. The alternative belief is that individuals are permitted to worship the *grū* because they follow their parents or the deceased family members, who have paid respect and worshipped that guardian spirit before. The second explanation can be applied for the connection Mei-Mei had cultivated with the *grū*. The fortune-teller explained that Mei-Mei’s relationship with the *grū* had been inherited over generations within the family. Sometimes the fortune-teller can determine whether the client has inherited the *grū* from their father’s or mother’s side. In Mei-Mei’s case, the fortune-teller foresaw a possibility that the student’s deceased teacher came from her mother’s side. Her mother had asked her *grū* to bless her in order that she give birth to her daughter safely. As a result, Mei-Mei’s mother had to continue paying homage to the *grū*, and this obligation of ritual practice was transmitted to her daughter. In such a case, descendants are required to continue and sustain this spiritual affinity, which was initiated by previous generations of the family.

²⁴ Sangvara (សង្វារ) is also the term for a decorated band or a rope crossing the shoulders (Sealang 2018).

The student also reflected her own interpretation and understanding about the relationship she had cultivated with the deceased teacher. Mei-Mei agreed with her mother, and the fortune-teller's explanations, that the *grūpādhyāya* is a representative of her personal guardian spirit, who has protected her since birth. She was unsure herself about the character or the appearance of the deceased teacher. Even though she lacked clear information of the spirit, she strongly believes in its power to protect her from danger and sickness. The student tries to make sense of the relationship with the spirit of teacher in a temporal sense, influenced by Buddhist teaching of merit-making and rebirth. The spirit might be a former teacher of Mei-Mei, or an individual whom, in the past, helped family members solve problems.

The God of Luck and Prosperity

Mei-Mei was advised by a card-reading fortune-teller at the Central Market that, in order to increase her profits and fortune in the cosmetic business, she should worship *nāngpáknāngpoy*. The term *nāngpáknāngpoy* literally means “a female who beckons her hands.” The Khmer conceive the spiritual power of this goddess through her bodily action in beckoning her right hand—a symbolic way to call for money and prosperity to humans. Following the fortune-teller's advice, the student made an offering to the spirit comprising five incense sticks and three cups of tea with some fruit, and an eyeshadow pot and cosmetic make-up. The student considered the god of luck and prosperity, whose spiritual expertise was confined to increasing prosperity rather than protection, as one of many guardian spirits of the house or *jaṃnāngphdaḥ*.



Figure 10 The image of nāngpáknāngpoy located on the small terrace of the second floor of the house, facing the living room.

In sum, Mei-Mei's religious experience allows a second approach to be proposed: that fortune can be cultivated and secured through ritual transactions with a range of spiritual entities. The god of water and earth (*ti chui iea/kungm"ā*) embodies the protective power and moral responsibility of the ancestor spirits by assisting and protecting descendants when they are away from home. The god of water and earth and the ancestor spirits can also protect and safeguard the migrant student from any unpredictable dangers she might encounter in the city, including robbery and various magical attacks. The god of luck and prosperity also performs her role on behalf of the guardian spirit of the house when the migrant student calls for the certain form of empowerment to cultivate and ensure her material security.

The food offerings contain a range of symbolic meanings which have been externally decoded and concretised when the student ritually interacts with the spiritual entities. Symbolic theorists like Turner (1982) and Tilley (1999) argue that a symbol condenses a range of metaphoric meanings, which operate at the level of the individual's unconscious mind. Following such explanation, one can see that the ritual symbols embedded in the migrant student's cosmology are externalised and articulated in the ritual context. Such offerings as tea, coffee, fruit, and garlic condense multiple meanings, which symbolise

Chinese ethnic family, continuity, protection, wellbeing and prosperity. Providing the deceased grandparents with their favourite beverage, coffee, can be read as an effort by the student to reunite or ally with kin given her new circumstances, which she views as unsecured. In other words, the migrant student seeks continuity in tastes or preferences of the spirits while her own life has changed. Continuing her relationship with a deceased ancestor/s, through ritual reciprocity, also allows the student to renew her family alliance. Furthermore, an object standing for the *grū* (or deceased teacher or processor of knowledge) is part of the embodied tradition that the migrant student has carried with her to the city. In order to maintain her wellbeing in the city, the student must continue her spiritual relations with the *grū*. The student makes sense of her sickness through the notion of spiritual transgression: she had neglected to venerate the spiritual entity who was born with her.

Mei-Mei responds to the interpretations made by family members, and the fortune-teller, by arranging a certain form of ritual to overcome her sickness. She placed *grūpādhyāya*, a symbolic representation of the *grū*, in her bedroom (her personal territory) to ensure that her life would not be disturbed by any inauspicious occurrence. And, following the urban fortune-teller, the student must pay obeisance to the god of luck and prosperity. Through this new spiritual relation, the migrant student's notion of fortune expands to encompass material security. The urban ritual practice initiated by the fortune-teller in fact offers the student a means for maintaining her wellbeing and securing and cultivating fortune in the domain of material security. The fortune-teller also advises the migrant student how to obtain and enhance her attractiveness and charm through use of fragrance derived from flowers and perfume considered auspicious. The student's imagining of fortune is expanded, allowing her to accumulate magical power that enhance her attractiveness.

The migrant student does not only continue her family's religious tradition when she re-establishes herself in the city. She also opens herself up to exploring and readjusting to urban religious repertoires through consulting fortune-teller in the city. When the migrant student encounters critical problems related to her health and her small business, she decides to consult a fortune-teller who, while a stranger, is ritually capable of guiding her in certain methods to cultivate fortune.

Discussion and Analysis

When the young Khmer people are migrating from their villages to the city, they tend to make their own ways to cultivate and secure their fortune. In this context, fortune is used to refer to the moral resources required to undertake their journeys of education and migration. Nita, the university student from Battambang, cultivates the resource of fortune through internalising moral agency. Following the embodied morality of self-reliance and self-improvement, she drives the journey of education and migration with confidence and autonomy. While facing a crisis in confidence, she temporarily abandons her embodied morality and turns to the urban spiritual patron, maintaining this relationship for a short term benefit. When the migrant student copes with a disorienting experience, a relationship with a spiritual patron is one of many resources the migrant student employs to cultivate their fortune and ensure their security. Nita decides to pay homage to urban-based spiritual patron Brah'angg Dangkoa, who plays the role of founder and a protector of the urban territory. The student expects to obtain protection and security from the urban spiritual patrons similar to what she had experienced from local spirits in Battambang. However, the student later realises that she is conflicted in her reliance on spiritual support and protection as a result of it destabilising her character as an autonomous, decisive, and confident person. As long as the student can overcome her affliction and disorientation, she realises that it is the moral discipline she learnt from her late grandparents that will improve her capacity to achieve a long term benefit. We can see in Nita's experience, the internalisation of a theory of fortune: she has embodied a sense of debt to the elders and the deceased ancestors as the source of life, knowledge, and morality, which are integral elements of wellbeing and fortune.

The second migrant student from Kampot introduces a different approach to cultivate fortune. Mei-Mei reassures her fortune through externalising moral agency with a repertoire of various spiritual patrons. While Nita confronts all possible problems by domesticating a repertoire of embodied virtuous behaviours into the city, the second student Mei-Mei, in contrast, undertakes the spiritual resource to create and secure her fortune. The second student considers the ritual discipline to appease spirits as the primary resource to cultivate and secure her fortune. The magical power of the local spiritual beings not only relieve her concerns and anxieties about education and business, but also protect her from any unexpected danger she could encounter during the migrant journey

in the city. In this way, the moral agency of the second student is externalised in the ritual discipline she habitually performs to appease spirits and to make the unfamiliar rental residence “home.”

The two different ways of fortune’s cultivation—internalising and externalising— can be seen as the best available resources for the two migrant students to obtain security, certainty, and status, while also securing a good outcome for various problems including study, career, business investment, sickness, suffering, and so on. Although the two students establish different ways to cultivate their fortune, they both domesticate the embodied morality and ritual discipline into the city. This chapter illustrates that the portability of embodied morality and ritual repertoire are a significant dimension to understand the spiritual re-emplacement of the young urban migrants in Cambodia. In Lao PDR, Holly High discovered that the Laotian migrants will call upon a spiritual empowerment and protection from the ancestral founders known as *puutaa* when they are on the move or relocate to the new place (High 2006). High’s ethnographic study inspires me to look at the portable embodied repertoire of the migrants as part of their capacity and resources to cope with insecurity, uncertainty and unfamiliarity in the urban circumstance lacking resources and support from the family.

As for Nita, she deploys into the city the embodied moral repertoire taught by the family elders. She considers such embodied morality as a resource to enhance her capacity, self-confidence, and autonomy. The virtuous actions internalised and habitually performed by Nita in everyday life include paying obeisance to the spiritual patron, being a grateful child, and self-discipline. It could not, however, be assumed that Nita would continue to follow the moral repertoire taught by the family elders. In this way, being a virtuous Khmer enhances her confidence and individual autonomy for making her own way to secure her fortune. This chapter argues that the portability of embodied morality, therefore, might not be seen as restrictive and constraining like previous scholars have emphasised (Hansen 2007; Jacobson 2008; Kent and Chandler 2008; Smith-Hefner 1999; Ledgerwood 1990, 1996, 1998). In fact, embodied morality can be conceptualised as a resource for an individual, especially a woman, who attempts to overcome difficulties, negotiate dilemmas, and act creatively and independently in the urban circumstance.

In a similar way, Mei-Mei domesticates the portable embodied religious tradition involving the cult of guardian spirit and various forms of religious repertoires into the

city. She attempts to relate herself to the unfamiliar rental house through performing a familiar religious repertoire to continue and sustain the kin alliance while also accepting the agency of the spiritual entities, who have occupied the urban territory. In the case of Khmer-Chinese migrant students, the portable religious repertoires have diversely and hybridly emerged due to the intersection between Khmer and Chinese religious traditions. The Chinese god of water and earth *ti chui iea* is contextualised in the same cosmological territory of the Khmer *mcâsdÿk-mcâsĩ*. In a similar way, the Khmer ancestor cult known as *tũntā* and the territory's spiritual patron, the tutelary spirit *neak ta*, found their place in the Chinese cosmological worldview as they are compatible with the colloquial expression of *kungm"ā*. In the difficult process of making the city "home," the migrant students are capable of utilising various forms of resources and technologies to reduce risk and eliminate any unforeseen danger in the city.

Chapter 2

The Affective Labour of Fortune-telling

Sovanna, a 24-year-old student from Battambang, reflected that her life in Phnom Penh is like a bird. Living in the big city allowed her to fly anywhere she wanted, just like a bird, without the constraints of familial obligation. Living in her home-village could be compared to being in a nest where her mother always fed her, but where mobility was constrained. In the city she had more freedom, although she had to feed herself.

One afternoon in January 2016, I met Sovanna at a café nearby the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). I regularly met her there before she started her Thai language evening class at the university. She was one of many Khmer students who had migrated from their villages with the fierce ambition to transform their lives. On that day, Sovanna looked unhappy and anxious about something. She explained that she was still exhausted and tired from a recent trip to Thailand. She had to pick up her parents in Battambang then take the local bus across the border to the hospital in Bangkok where her parents had been having check-ups for several years. Physical exhaustion could not have been the only reason why the student's face was not as fresh and cheerful as usual. I observed that she was not in as good a mood as usual either, so I asked if there were any problems that concerned her. Then Sovanna expressed her feeling:

“I am really concerned about my parents in Battambang because they are sick.” The Thai doctor in Bangkok had tried to give some moral support to Sovanna, saying that her father would recover soon from lung disease, but her mother still needed further medical treatment. The student did not explain to me clearly the symptoms of her mother's sickness but I suspected that her condition was quite serious. It really was a critical time for the student as she had to take care of her parents and handle their situation, while also thinking about studying for an MA in a foreign country and investing in a coffee shop in Phnom Penh. Sovanna said: “It's very difficult for me to make a decision at this stage because I have to take care of my parents [...]”

In the process of making a decision, Sovanna thought that she may not receive a clear answer about her life options from her family members or friends. They may not fully understand the difficulties surrounding the different scenarios she faced. Owing to this constraint, the student had to experimentally navigate alternative options to aid her decision making. She decided to consult a Vietnamese card-reading fortune-teller at Psar Kandal, one of the popular markets in Phnom Penh. The student reflected that the card reading was quite accurate because the fortune-teller was able to identify that her emotional state at that time was very stressed, distressed and depressive due to her concerns about her parents' sicknesses and her uncertainty about what direction(s) to take in her life. There were several options: follow her ambitious aspirations to study abroad, return home to care for her parents, or invest in a coffee shop and aim to be a successful business woman. Sovanna's life experience can speak for numerous young migrants I met in Phnom Penh who have experienced indecision in the face of conflicting life options, thus leading to doubts about their identities and sense of self. When individuals face such a crisis due to indecision over difficult life choices, they frequently consider using a fortune-telling consultation service as a way to resolve their problems.

This chapter introduces the experiences of a migrant university student in Phnom Penh who seeks out divination services to resolve her identity crisis as well as anxiety and concerns about social mobility. The ethnographic data presented in this chapter highlights the inter-subjective encounter between a migrant student and an urban-based fortune-teller. During the process of a fortune-telling consultation, the client, who is a migrant student, expresses her sense of crisis by giving voice to a range of disoriented emotions, such as hopelessness, distress, concern and anxiety owing to her inability to choose between conflicting life scenarios. Consultation with a professional fortune-teller offers a safe and hopeful venue for a young Khmer migrant to air her emotions and explore different life-scenarios, giving her a resource to express herself and think in new ways about her dilemma.

This chapter applies the concept of affective labour proposed by Hardt (1999) to explore the affective and therapeutic dimensions of consultation in Khmer divination. To provide a clear explanation of how affective labour can be applied to understand the therapeutic significance of divinatory consultation, it is worth reviewing the general ideas of affective theory. According to Massumi's *The Autonomy of Affect* (1995), affect can be conceptualised as the product of the individual's unconscious reception and reaction to

external stimuli. Although individuals cannot consciously experience affect because it is physically invisible, the sensory perceptions allow them to feel its existence. Affect is different from emotion. According to Massumi, affect is operative in the context of intersubjective communication while emotion is considered as innate, subjective and personal due to its location in the domain of the self. Affect resides in any object and conveys an autonomy to move beyond fixed structures of personhood. The use of affect in transforming an individual's image or self can be considered as a source of power available in the post-modern era where people can take advantages of image- and information-based economies (Massumi 1995).

Massumi's (1995) theoretical conceptualisation of affect can shed light on dimensions of the self and subjectivity that are socially constructed and can be transformed through interactions that transcend any assumed boundaries or fixed domain of the individual self. Following the affect theory approach, the process of inter-subjective communication allows human or non-human subjects to create and manipulate affects. More importantly, affect can be used as a source of power to cope with the uncertain conditions characterising the immaterial and information-based economy of post-modern society.

Later scholars have applied the concept of affect to understand the post-modern capitalist market economy in which people increasingly produce and circulate various kinds of information-based services (Hardt 1999; Ahmed 2004). The post-modern economic system increases the demands for various forms of immaterial goods, such as services, knowledge and communication (Hardt 1999: 94). Within this new economic context, Hardt (1999) argues, affective labour is a form of immaterial labour that produces immaterial goods or services. Such immaterial products, including health services, maternal work, and the products of the entertainment industry, can deliver affective goods such as the sensual expressions of care, ease, satisfaction, excitement, and passion, as well as a sense of connectedness or community.²⁵ In other words, the service and its production based on affects manipulate and modify the emotional experience of an individual. The production of affective labour, therefore, requires human contact and interaction within a socio-cultural network. In this way, the production and circulation of

²⁵ Some scholars also include public employment services, hospitality work and fashion modelling as industries characterised by affective labour (see also Penz et al 2017; Farrugia, Threadgold, Coffey 2017; Wissinger 2007).

affects also can create and reconfigure individual and collective subjectivities. In her study *Affective Economies*, Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions—produced as affects for circulation— are an important element to create individual subjectivities and ally them together in communities.

Hardt's notion of affective labour has links to the notion of 'emotional labour' first analysed by A. Hochschild (1983). Hochschild examined the instrumental mechanisms of emotion that individuals can consciously manage, perform, and readjust while interacting with others in different social and cultural circumstances. The sincere smiles and anger management that flight attendants perform to satisfy their passengers are examples of the instrumental mechanisms of emotion. In this sense, individuals undertake emotional labour—by detaching from their own feelings and performing a sense of ease, friendliness, appreciation, and satisfaction— to secure their jobs. Instead of considering emotions as innate and pre-existing expressions hardwired to biological mechanisms (Freud 1926; Ekman 1971, 1983; Ekman et al. 1972), Hochschild argues that emotions are capable of being deployed and managed instrumentally within social interactions (Hochschild 1983).

However, unlike emotional labour, affective labour is not just a display or an expression of emotion for securing an individual's survival in the private and public sphere. While emotional labour can be instrumentally manipulated and consciously managed, the transaction of affect is unconsciously produced by the inter-subjective communication between different individuals. In this way, the formation of the self and subjectivity are socially constructed in a field of circulating affects (Ahmed 2004).

Sovanna's self-reflections, imagining herself as a little bird, a dutiful daughter, or a successful businesswoman, are clearly influenced by the moral expectations, social media representations and global criteria of success that circulate through the urban environment she calls home. In other words, the student's subjectivity is contextualised by the society. This is the argument that Hardt (1999) tried to make when he proposed that affective labour goes further than Malinowski's psychological functionalism, which considered emotions as pre-existing, fixed and innate to human beings. However, what is the state of affect in a society that is in the grip of unprecedented transformation and conflicts in value? Just how are crises and contradictions in selfhood experienced and reconciled in such turbulent conditions?

Applying Hardt's (1999) notion of affective labour, one could ask: How is divination involved in, or how does it support, the creation and circulation of affects? And to what extent might Khmer divinatory consultation be considered a form of affective labour? This chapter argues that Cambodian divination can be seen as a form of affective service because it allows clients to articulate desires, evaluate multiple life-scenarios and engage in the process of reshaping selfhood in the context of urban Cambodia's socio-cultural transition. The concerns and anxieties of the migrant student are caused by the dilemma between her own personal aspirations and the sense of moral responsibility shaped by social expectation. She seems to be in doubt about her role and the direction she could possibly take to achieve meaning and contentment in her life. It is possible to say that her "self" and "subjectivity" are in crisis. While encountering multiple choices and dilemmas in an unfamiliar city, the student found few means to express or sort through her conflicted feelings. The urban-based fortune-teller not only delivers emotional attentiveness and provides a venue for her to reveal her emotional distress in a time of life crisis, but also facilitates the reconstruction of her self and subjectivity by giving her the chance to explore a number of possible life scenarios.

The analytical discussion of this chapter can answer one of the research questions: how might divination and magical technologies address people's existential problems, concerns, affects, as well as tacit knowledge embodied in the Khmer worldview. The fortune-telling consultation allows the student to express her concerns and anxieties when poised on the brink of conflicting life-scenarios: whether to follow her own ambitious dream to study abroad or demonstrate her moral responsibility by taking care of her family. Divination, a type of psychic venting and processing service provided by fortune-tellers, is engaged and brought into play when "self" and "subjectivity" of an individual are in crisis. The argument of this chapter supports the primary arguments of this thesis in suggesting that divination and magic in post-revolutionary urban Cambodia comprise an experimental field. Such practices offer individuals a means to explore numerous scenarios through which they might understand themselves and the world.

One recent ethnographic study has examined the psychological function of Chinese divination. Geng (2015) illustrated that Chinese fortune-tellers can help clients relieve their states of emotional disorientation, such as anxiety or depression. It shows that divination offers a therapeutic function, allowing an individual to overcome such negative emotions. However, her research does not explain how it is that divination induces in the

client's positive feelings about themselves, or how it might contextualise the social circumstances that cause the clients to experience suffering. This thesis, therefore, fills a gap in the scholarship on divination by paying attention to the circulation and display of emotions and affects as well as the processes of diagnosis and healing that occur during divinatory consultations. Exploring the inter-subjective transactions of affects that occur within divination consultations might show why such services are sought out by urban residents in contemporary Cambodian society as a means of ventilating and addressing their concerns.

This chapter is structured in four sections. The following section will focus on the life dreams and disoriented emotional experiences of a migrant university student who encounters a crisis in her life and identity that leads her to seek assistance from a fortune-teller. The next section describes the beliefs, assumptions, methods and style employed by the numerological fortune teller whom she consults. The final ethnographic section describes in detail a single consultation session between the student and the fortune-teller. The account shows the consultation to be a flexible and open venue for intersubjective communication that facilitates the production, expression and exchange of affects.

Conflicting Dreams: Disoriented Experiences of a Migrant University Student

After our first meeting at a fund-raising activity at RUPP in 2015, Sovanna and I continued to communicate and keep in touch through Facebook and we frequently had dinner and coffee together after she finished her class. The students usually consulted me about their study, future careers, as well as family and love issues. I developed a special bond with Sovanna and, over the course of many meetings, I learnt about her life in some detail.

Four years earlier, Sovanna left her home village in Battambang to make her dream come true. Her plan was to complete a B.A. degree in Economics at a well-known university in Phnom Penh then return home to work in her family's small business. Similar to other migrant students, Sovanna saw Phnom Penh as a hub of educational resources where she could study international languages, computer skills, and modern technology. Living in the city also introduced Sovanna to a multicultural community where a large number of foreigners resided who were willing to interact and exchange their cultural ideas and practices with local people. Soon after she arrived in Phnom Penh, Sovanna was offered part-time work as a general manager in her auntie's electronics sales company. The

richness of knowledge, resources and social connections to which she was exposed stimulated the student's desires to stay in the city and build a career there instead of returning to the province.

The difficult living conditions in the city taught her a valuable lesson: to be self sufficient. Sovanna was proud of the independent life she had managed to carve out in the city; she adjusted quickly to the new environment and did not need to ask her parents for financial support. She also differentiated herself from the majority of urban university students whom she said were spoiled as a result of always relying on money from their parents while not applying themselves to their studies. Sovanna saw that a lot of her friends who had been born and raised in the city liked to spend their leisure time after school shopping at the malls. In Sovanna's case, she could not behave like the other city students since she had to work full time and study part time in order to save money to pay her school fees.

When Sovanna first moved to Phnom Penh, she learned how to use social media, especially Facebook and Instagram, which brought her to a new form of community where she could keep in touch and catch up with new friends when she felt lonely and lost in the city. Through the online interface, the student could keep up to date with ideas and knowledge shared and exchanged between people living across the country and around the world. Her Facebook explorations enabled Sovanna to learn about successful people including Jack Ma and Bill Gates. These two famous millionaires were, for Sovanna, the very representation of success. Bill Gates came from a prosperous background whereas Jack Ma came from poor living conditions and lacked a higher education degree. As such however, they became successful and achieved their ambitious dreams as a result of their intelligence and creative ideas as well as their work discipline. The life-stories of Jack Ma and Bill Gates inspired and encouraged the student to maintain a high level of confidence and the ambition to make her dreams come true immediately, instead of waiting until she had enough resources to invest in something. Sovanna explained:

Our dream will become true if we do it right now...we should set the goal that we want to achieve and go for it. Look at Jack Ma and Bill Gates, they didn't wait until they were rich to start their business; they started their business when they had a creative idea. Even though they started from zero or without a huge

budget, they could make their dreams happen and become successful. I think we can be successful like them if we have passion, dedication and connections.

Sovanna also expressed her opinion on the moral values of the Cambodian young generation whom, she claims, try to work hard and show consistent discipline towards their studies and view work as the vehicle to achieve their dreams. Most of the students whom I knew in Phnom Penh commented that they had to act as “smart students” since the urban lifestyle forced them to establish and follow a very tight schedule every day. Many students spent at least 6-7 hours per day studying in at least two universities in order to fulfil their plans to complete different majors as a strategy to cover different bases. Some of the students that I met in Phnom Penh also had to work part-time after university to save money for tuition fees.

Although many students believe in the values of hard work and discipline, and attempt to improve themselves through education, this alone cannot guarantee their recruitment into the job market. Students’ concerns about uncertain job opportunities have been discussed widely in the media and academic arenas. A recent survey found that 49 per cent of Cambodian youth aged between 15 and 35 expressed concerns about being unemployed due to the fact that their educational training and B.A. degree specialisation were mismatched to the demands of the job market in Phnom Penh (David and Rollet 2015). In explaining the problem, Peou (2015) applies the sociological perspective to understand the decision-making of young Cambodian people who navigate resources accessible to them for dealing with risks and uncertainties in the capitalist market economy. The factors motivating Cambodian students’ decision-making on study majors include trust in the suggestions made by family members, friends and acquaintances about their prospects; the students’ emotional inclination for desirable careers; and the students’ intuition inspired by individuals or their family (Peou 2015).

Sovanna explained to me that the reason so many young Cambodians who finish their B.A. remain jobless because they are too selective and have unrealistic expectations about their starting salary level. Sovanna suggested that students who have just finished their B.A. should begin by working in less-demanding jobs which they are capable of doing and utilise the opportunity to further develop their knowledge and skills. Sovanna had a female friend who wanted to own a coffee shop but was too scared to start the business by investing her own money. Instead her friend planned to open the coffee shop after

getting married so that she could use her future husband's money. Sovanna disagreed with her friend who, instead of taking the initiative and doing something with her life right away, sought to rely on financial support from an imaginary future partner.

The independence and freedom she experienced while living in the city allowed Sovanna to imagine she could make her own decisions about her future career and follow her desires and aspirations. In other words, the student considered herself free to choose whatever study majors and career she thought could best guarantee her future success. After four years living in the city, Sovanna realised that she had a strong passion to become a barista. As the student had learned from the stories of successful business icons, she had to think about her future career differently from other students since the pathway to becoming a business owner should be different from the process of becoming an employee working in an office. The student planned to open a coffee shop by the time she was 28, meaning within the next four years. But despite her strong passion and belief in her ability to realise her dream, she reflected that, to invest in a business, she needed to develop her knowledge and capacity through higher education in a foreign country and develop stronger social connections.

But for several reasons, the process of cultivating her dreams did not proceed as smoothly as the student expected. One reason was her family's intervention. Sovanna believed that her family had no role to play in her decision making about her study major or the career that she planned in the future. The student's parents had not studied at higher education level, therefore, she had to make such decisions independently. However, the student's decision making was not entirely free from family influence due to a certain moral conflict within her family. Sometimes Sovanna felt anguish at what she perceived as the negative opinion of her older brother, who disagreed with her plan to prolong her higher education in a foreign country. The student's parents and brother were concerned that a high income and/or a higher education would compromise Sovanna's marriage prospects. This logic was based on the traditional Khmer social norm that values male leadership in the family and society. However, Sovanna imagined the opposite life scenario believing that by attaining an M.A. in Thailand or the United States, or becoming a rich person ('nak mān'), she could more readily attract a marriage partner.

To this day, Sovanna still maintains her hope in education, but has come to realise that education in a foreign country will better improve capability and skills than a Cambodian

education. Through four years living in the city, Sovanna came to realise that her B.A. in Economics from a high-ranking university in Phnom Penh was not enough to cultivate herself and achieve her goals in the city. Cambodia's higher education system, particularly at undergraduate level, is compromised by two main problems which affect the depth of knowledge and skills imparted to students. The first problem relates to the narrow mind-set of the older generation of teachers/lecturers. Sovanna explained:

I want to study in a foreign country because I want to be trained in a better educational system that lets me express my ideas or discuss with my teachers without dealing with the old style of teachers who may not be satisfied with my ideas. You know some of the teachers in Phnom Penh, especially those who teach at my university, don't update their knowledge and don't open their minds for students. I can say it is part of our culture that students should pay respect to and follow their teachers or else we [students] will have troubles...Most Cambodian teachers don't want to see active students, they like passive students who always follow them without asking any questions. I don't want to be like those passive students

The second problem of Cambodian education is linked to the culture of corruption in the educational system. As a result of corruption, the quality of teaching at secondary and tertiary level has declined in Cambodian society. This is not only due to the low salary offered to teachers, but also to the culture of corruption which is deep-rooted in every professional sector. Sovanna said:

Corruption is normal in our country and I can see corruption happening in our educational system...I don't have direct experience of corruption in education, but I have friends who are involved in it...it happened at my high school where one of my friends was absent more than six times, meaning that he could not hope to pass the exams or even be allowed to take the exam, but he showed up on the exam day. The when the result of the exam was announced, I could not believe that he passed the exam with the highest score...I, and all of my classmates, knew what had actually happened. We knew that he [the student] bribed the teacher, but we could not ask him or our teacher. The reason why teachers or lecturers decide to be corrupt is not because their income is low....it's actually because corruption is their habit.

The migrant student's experience of corruption in the education system contradicted and challenged her moral belief in the need for Cambodian youth to try to work hard with strict discipline to achieve their goals. In her view, only by being skilful in a given subject could one become an outstanding candidate in the city job market while also surviving in the global economy. Sovanna's experience in education is an example of the many migrant students who see education as a form of capital to elevate their socio-economic status. However, the realities of education in the city were such that, of themselves, study and hard work could not provide a secure pathway for Khmer migrant students who aspired to gain opportunities and resources for elevating their socio-economic status.

After four years living in Phnom Penh, the student came to imagine for herself a future that was "longer and broader" than what she originally had dreamed of when she first arrived in the city to embark on her studies. Sovanna no longer dreamed of obtaining a B.A. degree in the city and then returning to her hometown to help her parents run the family business selling agricultural equipment. She came to realise that her B.A. in Economics was not enough to realise her new life dreams and goals in the city. Experiencing problems in the Cambodian educational system and the uncertain job market pushed the student to reconsider and readjust her dreams.

Sovanna's plans for studying overseas were already well in train when I first met her. She was investigating the possibilities of studying either in Thailand or the US and had already researched several school programs and scholarship schemes. However, it was also not long after I met her that she shared her concerns about her parent's grave and chronic health problems and the large obstacle that her parents' disability posed to her plans to continue her studies. If she proceeded with her plans to study abroad, her parents might suffer or, even die, when she was away, causing her lifelong regret. But if she stayed in Cambodia to care for them, she might entirely miss the opportunity to make a better life for herself.

The dilemma that Sovanna encountered, and her inability to decide which path to take, plunged her into a serious life crisis. I could imagine and understand why she sometimes seemed very disoriented and overwhelmed. She could not decide whether to study abroad or continue her life in Cambodia. Both options had positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, studying abroad may realise certain opportunities, but she would have to leave behind her parents who were severely sick. On the other hand, if she decided not to

leave the country and study locally so as to take care of her parents, her own self-development would suffer since she would have to endure both the corruption and insufficiency that characterised Cambodian education. She faced an identity crisis. It was very difficult for this young Khmer student to know whether to follow tradition and be a grateful and dutiful daughter, or enjoy her freedom and independent life, as a bird, or perhaps even a well-known billionaire, as she dreamed to be.

Sovanna went to a number of fortune-tellers whom she hoped would help her to reach a decision. In this way, she hoped to find a clearer direction for her life journey and resolve the conflict between her personal dreams and traditional expectations and responsibilities that she felt pressured by. Even after several fortune-telling consultations, however, she was no closer to resolving the conflict. It struck me when I met her one day that that she was experiencing a disoriented emotional state, along with a sense of crisis in her notion of self.

Methods of a Numerology Fortune-teller in Phnom Penh

Hearing Sovanna speaking about her life crisis and her attempts to consult with different fortune-tellers, I decided to share my recent personal experience of meeting the numerology fortune-teller, Grū Bun, who offered divination services at Chbar Ampov area in Phnom Penh. He could speak Thai fluently, since he used to be a monk in Thailand where he had learned Buddhist doctrine. I thought this fortune-teller seemed quite distinct from other fortune-tellers I knew in the city since he was only 36 years old but was already well-known and had a lot of clients relying on his services. When I showed the fortune-teller's Facebook profile picture to Sovanna, she was surprised and laughed, since she had never met a fortune-teller who was young and dressed in a hip-hop style. Sovanna then asked me to bring her to meet Grū Bun because she needed advice and assistance to solve the concerns in her life that were causing anxiety.

Sovanna arranged her appointment with the fortune-teller through Facebook. She invited me to accompany her. We took her motorbike to his house in a suburb of Phnom Penh. On the way to the fortune-teller's residence, Sovanna shared her experience when she had consulted with mediumistic fortune-tellers in Battambang and Banteay Meanchey. They claimed that they could divine her fate through their connection with spirits. The student reflected that some of them could predict their clients' lives accurately but the process of being possessed by the spirits was "dangerous and scary" for young people such as her.

The mediumistic fortune-tellers at her village in Battambang had explained that Sovanna's parents had not become sick on account of doing something wrong by her late grandparents or the ancestors. The advice was not specific enough to act upon, however. It did not result in a cure for her parents and did not relieve Sovanna of her sense that there was something more she ought to be doing to help her parents. This time, the student hoped things would be different. She intended to see whether the numerology technique could explain the reasons for her parents' sickness and the ways to cure them, as well as give her guidance about her own life.

Meeting the Fortune-teller

Sovanna and I arrived at the fortune-teller's residence at around 3 pm. While walking into the house, we saw a middle-aged woman wearing a Khmer traditional towel, sitting on the terrace of the house and regarding us with apparent suspicion. On the left side of the terrace we saw a mirror cabinet displaying for sale, various kinds of talismans and amulets made of fabric (see figure 11-12). The clients who arrived to consult with this fortune-teller could guess right away that his divinatory service also offered a range of magical technologies.

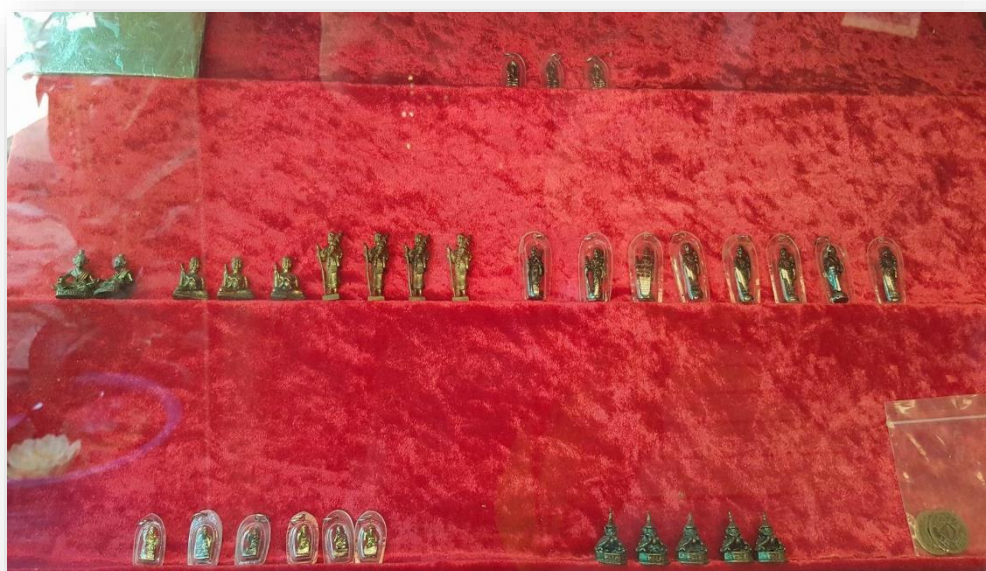


Figure 11 Various amulets offered (for sale) to clients



Figure 12 various kinds of talismans and amulets made of fabric

On the right side of the terrace, a picture of King Rama IX of Thailand was located next to a hand-made wooden tag with the Thai phrase: “People who live in this house are rich”²⁶ (see figure 13). This kind of house decoration is very popular among Thai people who believe that the auspicious blessing can bring wealth to the family. The object also informed clients that the fortune-teller was familiar with the Thai popular belief in cultivating fortune in particular circumstances.

²⁶ Some Thai middle-class families in Bangkok and in the provinces like to decorate their houses with hand-made tags which contain auspicious words or sentences like “people who live in this house are lucky and rich.” Clearly, the Khmer fortune-teller was influenced by this Thai popular belief.



Figure 13 Grū Bun standing to the right side of the terrace of his house in St. 271 located in a suburb of Phnom Penh.

Upon entering the front room of the house we saw a man sitting on a traditional mat on the left side of the room, which was, ordinarily, the place for keeping various forms of gods and spirits' images. I introduced Sovanna to Grū Bun and explained the reason for her visit. Before the consultation started, the fortune-teller explained that he was very busy that day helping a woman from Siem Reap, who had been attacked by black magic. The fortune-teller explained that the woman, whom we had just met on the terrace of the house, used to be a tourist guide and was fluent in five languages, but had lost her mind due to the malevolent power of black magic that had ruined her life for more than 10 years. The power of black magic had affected and transformed the personality of this woman so that, to outsiders, she appeared like a crazy person. The woman's mother had brought her to Phnom Penh in the hope that Grū Bun could make holy water to cleanse her daughter's body. The fortune-teller explained that the holy water could remove the black magic from her mind and body so that she could regain her consciousness and become "a normal person" again. The fortune-teller said that the healing treatment might be prolonged as her life had been affected by black magic for a decade.

Grū Bun also explained that he had just returned from conducting a ritual at a barbeque restaurant nearby Derm Kor Market in Khan Toulkrok, Phnom Penh. The owner of the restaurant had been the fortune-teller's loyal client for many years. This client recently had been trying to revive his business which was unsuccessful due to a decline in the

number of customers. Grū Bun explained the reason for decline to be due to the restaurant's location at a three-way junction, which symbolised inauspiciousness, and meant that bad luck would affect the wellbeing of the proprietors in many ways. The owner and his wife, whose family house was also located at the junction, were at risk of becoming separated and seeing their business collapse. Grū Bun first read the restaurant owner's fortune based on a numerological calculation of his birthdates. Then he suggested some solutions to help attract customers. The fortune-teller explained that the cause of his client's business problem related to a spiritual being. He could visualise the past, a sad incident happening many years ago, when a man was shot and killed in front of the restaurant due to a love affair. The dead man became a hungry ghost who always came to eat the barbeque meat and other kinds of food in the kitchen. The fortune-teller suggested that, for the first step, the restaurant owner hang an octagonal mirror in front of the restaurant with the purpose of protecting the occupants from bad luck and malevolent spirits. The fortune-teller also suggested that the restaurant owner change the colour of the light bulbs from dark-yellow to bright-white, to energise and refresh customers. The third, and most important, suggestion involved conducting a ritual by splashing holy water over some areas inside and around the barbeque restaurant to expel the spirit of the man who had died a violent death.

Every day, Grū Bun had to meet between ten and fifteen clients who came from different socio-economic backgrounds. In addition to the restaurant owners, there were also politicians, high-ranking military and police officers, jewellery-shop owners, market traders, members of the Khmer diaspora, and university students. Grū Bun explained to Sovanna and I that, unlike others, he did not exhibit pictures of Cambodian political leaders in his reception room because he distrusted them and did not believe that they were sincere about developing the country. He explained:

You see we [Cambodian people] are still living with poverty and uncertainty...I mean no one can protect us from insecurity or danger that we encounter every day on the street...I once saw a Western foreigner getting robbed on the street and I ran to the police asking them to help that unlucky person, but they did nothing and acted as if the incident was not actually happening. Most of the politicians and government officials in this country care only about their own interests, it's all about money...so we [Cambodian people] have to help ourselves...this is why I do not put up the pictures of my

political leaders...most of the Khmer people fear the political leaders, but I do not. Actually, some of my clients who are CPP members or have a strong connection with that party have asked me to display the political leaders' pictures but I refuse to do it.[even though] I know if I put up their pictures I might get a lot of clients who support the leaders[...]

Grū Bun did have some “VIP clients” who came from the upper class or were elites connected with high-ranking political leaders. The fortune-teller related that some of these clients came searching for ways to get promoted while some wanted to gain more benefit from their business. However, his client list was diverse and included many students and people of more humble social origins. Moreover, in his social criticisms and advice to his clients, he stressed that ordinary Cambodian people were on their own and needed to learn to fend for themselves. Most interesting to me, he advised that there were limits to what one should ever expect from divination and fortune-tellers such as himself.

Grū Bun said that most university students who came to consult him were concerned about their family, educational achievement and future careers. The fortune-teller said that he tried to correct the students' understanding by telling them that divination and magical practices are not enough to ensure that they will pass their exams. Instead of relying upon the unseen power, he encouraged these university students to concentrate on their studies with discipline and hard work so that they could pass their exams. His advice was similar to Sovanna's own approach to her studies. They shared a similar outlook which seemed, to me, like an auspicious beginning.

Spiritual Patrons and Moral Inspiration

Grū Bun started the fortune-telling session by lighting two tall candles that stood behind his chair. Looking at the different kinds of images and statues that were placed behind him, I asked him to explain about his religious beliefs and worship practices. He said:

As you can see on my asana [a set of altar tables], I have braḥ'angga with me...you see I place the Lord Buddha's photo image on the top level since he is of the highest rank of gods and deities. I also place the photo images of the famous Thai monks Somdet To [Somdet Phra Buddhacarya] and Luang Pu Thuad [Somdet Phra Ratchamunee Samee Ramakhunupacharya], who are so widely known for their supernatural power and religious skills that many Thai

Buddhists still follow their teachings until today. I also pay respect to Brahm"aeḡáṅs'ī'īm [ព្រះមែកង់ស៊ីអ៊ឹម-Chinese Bodhisattva Guanyin] because of her kindness and compassion. The statue of loktā isī [លោកតាស៊ី-hermit] is also worshipped here since I respect his persistent behaviour and you might know about this famous group of isī who live in Phnom Koulen. I also worship kumaradeba, or the child spirits' effigies,²⁷ who can protect me from black magic...they are just like my personal soldiers who can protect me from danger while I am doing a ritual to remove the black magic from my clients...it might be very dangerous for me if the black magic that I have removed from the clients comes to attack me instead...those kumaradeba can help protect me from the black magic so they are good child spirits...All of these sacred gods and spirits have their *pāramī* to improve my divination skill and protect my life from danger which may be caused by black magic...

In this context, the fortune-teller used the term braḥ'angga to classify various spiritual agencies which are represented in different forms of images and statues placed on a set of altar tables. The concept of braḥ'angga signifies the gods or deities in general, but could not be used to refer to the Lord Buddha who is called braḥbuddha (ព្រះពុទ្ធ). In addition, the fortune-teller also explained that his divination skill cannot work effectively without the gods or deities and their *pāramī*, which play an important role to protect him from danger during divination sessions. At this point, it seems timely to discuss the concept of *pāramī*, for it is one of the underlying power structures that make divination work in the Cambodian context.

Previous scholars have discussed and articulated *pāramī* as a key concept of contemporary Cambodian Buddhism. Ang (1988) sees *pāramī* as a malevolent spirit who can arrogate the supernatural power of the Buddha to themselves within the context of religious syncretism emerging from animism and Buddhism. Bertrand (2001, 2004) explains the concept of *pāramī* in the context of divination and spiritual healing practices as a benevolent supernatural power, which can be represented in the form of god or deity who respect and practise the Buddhist morality. By taking Bertrand's definition, the concept of *pāramī* can be considered as a kind of mystical potency, which depends on

²⁷ Sometimes the Khmer people call the child spirit(s) as *mreñkangvāl* [ម្រេញកង្វាល].

certain forms of morality including goodness and purity that individuals can perform under Buddhist precepts and the belief of karmic causation.

Broadly in line with Bertrand's (2001, 2004) definition, this project defines *pāramī* as the benevolent spiritual power which has been transferred bodily from the gods and spirits to the fortune-teller. The power of *pāramī* can enhance the fortune-teller's spiritual power while also protecting him from the danger of black magic during the divination context. In this case, Grū Bun believes that the power of *pāramī* can empower the efficacy of his divination since this benevolent form of power can re-affirm the accuracy of fortune-reading and its interpretations that he provides to the clients.

As the fortune-teller further explained, the proper way to sustain the capacity of *pāramī*, which can protect and support him, is for him to perform the embodied moral characteristics and actions that are associated with the respective gods and religious practitioners he venerates. These figures each inspire him with their particular moral characters, such as the sense of compassion exemplified by brahm"ægáŋsĩ'ĩm (Chinese Bodhisattava), the skills in practising Buddhist doctrine and ritual actions of the famous Thai monks, as well as the persevering and strict discipline of loktāisĩ (hermit). These moral qualities have been embodied in the fortune-teller's logic and actions.

In addition to sustaining the embodied moral actions, Grū Bun has to follow three moral principles: 1) eliminate the desire for taking property, money, or valuable objects from other people; 2) avoid the desire for having a sexual affair with married women; and 3) avoid consuming dog meat. Grū Bun commented that the first and second principles were adapted from the five precepts of Buddhism, which encourage individuals to avoid committing any transgression in order to prevent the negative impact and outcome of bad karma. The third principle, however, is not directly related to the karmic law in teaching people to avoid killing humans and animals. The fortune-teller explained that the third principle was generated from his personal belief and experience after he saw his grandfather, who used to be skilful in magic, killed by Khmer Rouge soldiers in Takeo province. Grū Bun personally believed that his grandfather was killed because he ate dog meat which was prohibited for religious and fortune-telling practitioners, since the dirt and inauspicious matter contained in the meat could deteriorate their spiritual power while also decreasing the sacredness and effectiveness of their skills.

In addition to the images and statues on the altars beside the divination area, the fortune-teller also said he paid respect to, and believed in, the late monk who was his preceptor, having taken primary responsibility for Grū Bun's care as well as teaching him when he was first ordained at the temple near his home village in Takeo province. Although the preceptor had passed away many years before, his spirit always communicated with the fortune-teller through his dreams, teaching him how to conduct rituals using herbal medicines to remove black magic from the human body.

The fortune-teller exercises his agency while he expresses the emotional attachment with the non-human agents including the sacred gods, spirits, and religious practitioners (astrological preceptor, monk). Such spiritual patronage is maintained and reaffirmed through the ritual veneration and the moral behaviours the fortune-teller has embodied and performed in everyday life. In this way, it can possibly be said that the fortune-teller's "divining agency" has been created through the inter-subjective communication with different forms of brah̥'angga or the spiritual beings that can transfer *pāramī* or the benevolent power to protect him from danger during the divining session.

Numerology as a Fortune-telling Technique

The principal technique Grū Bun used to divine an individual's fortune was the numerological calculation of their date of birth. The significant numbers required for this calculation are the day, month, and year of birth.²⁸ Grū Bun claimed that his numerological technique was unique and distinct from card-reading divination because the numerological calculation could tell the client exactly what will happen to them within a whole year, also indicating any occurrences happening on each month of the coming year. Grū Bun used to read the fortune of an old lady who was 87 years old. At the time, the old lady had been admitted to a hospital in Vietnam due to a severe illness. A doctor

²⁸ Although the fortune-teller did not explain to me in detail about the origin of the belief in the strength of an individual's date of birth, I discovered later from the famous Thai divination book *Sart Hang Hone* (Thai) (Parinya 2000) that the strength of seven days was influenced by the Hinduist legendary belief in grāha/ Navagraha; the traditional belief in nine angels who reside in the nine planetary domains including Surya (the Sun), Soma (the Moon), Mangala (Mars), Buddha (Mercury), Brihaspati (Jupiter), Shukra (Venus), Shani (Saturn), Rahu (Shadow), and Ketu (Shadow). The Sanskrit titles of the seven angels are deployed in the Khmer and Thai languages to name seven days of the week: āthit chān, angkhān, puth, phruhatsabōdī, suk, sao [Thai Romanisation]. The origins of each angel are associated with the different numbers associated with auspicious animals, and the fortune-teller/astrologist believes that those series of numbers signify the relative strength of each day, important to the numerological divination technique.

had diagnosed that the old lady would not stay in the hospital long and certainly would pass away due to the severity of her symptoms. However, Grū Bun diagnosed that the lady was sick because of spirit transgression. He saw that the guardian spirit of the old lady's house was displeased since a termite nest had been formed in the same area where the spirit had lived. The fortune-teller suggested that the relatives of the old lady clean up the house, removing the termite nest, in order to show respect to the guardian spirit. Soon after the family members followed Grū Bun's suggestion, the old lady improved, eventually recovering from the illness. The fortune-teller seemed very proud of this story since it demonstrated how his numerological technique could save peoples' lives.

Similar to the story of a well-known royal astrologer (see Chapter 5), Grū Bun also claims that his divinatory technique is established from kpuan or formal knowledge and its methodologies of divination and astrology developed from a range of document-based formulae or published handbooks. His numerological divination skill was derived through self-study and research into different sources including divination books, and based on his experience in conducting fortune-telling consultations to clients for almost ten years. He started learning numerology from different kinds of divination textbooks by himself after becoming ordained as a monk in Takeo Province of Cambodia then travelling across the border to Thailand and Lao. Grū Bun collected divination books written by different famous fortune-tellers, issued in Khmer, Thai, and Burmese. He claimed that the most reliable sources were the Khmer and Thai divination books. Although most of the Khmer traditional divination books were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge era, Khmer divination knowledge and practices have been revitalised through oral transmissions that rely on individuals' memories. Grū Bun primarily used a Khmer numerological divination book which originated from Siem Reap. Using only Khmer divination books was not enough to complete the whole process of numerological calculation and prediction of individual's fortune, however. He used, equally, the well-known Thai divination books (*see figure 14-15*) including Patithin Neung Roi Pee (100 year calendar), Tamra Brahma-chati, and Tamra Plu Luang.

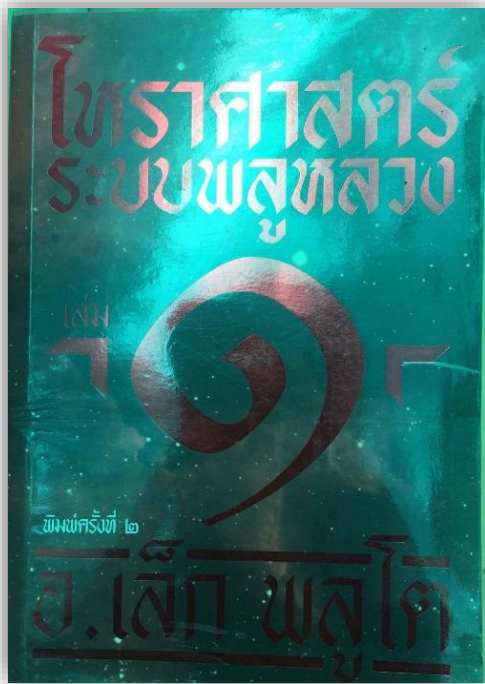


Figure 14 (left) Thai divination books: *Patithin Neung Roi Pee* (100 year calendar)
 Figure 15 (right) Thai divination books: *Tamra Plu Luang*

In addition to utilising various kinds of divination books, he also has learnt from his experience in reading fortunes and giving advice to clients who have reflected their life stories in the senses of happiness, suffering, success, failure, as well as out-of-control situations. Grū Bun said he tries to observe and memorise the biological information of his clients by focusing on their day, month, and year of birth in relation to the important situations in their lives. The fortune-teller had observed that clients who were born in the same day, month, and year might encounter similar social and economic situations. For example, Grū Bun had memorised the information concerning the birth date, month and year of all his clients who had suffered from debt and lawsuits. The fortune-teller was able to recall the fortune-reading and interpretations of former clients born in exactly the same day, month, and year as the new clients. The recalling of experience and memory is a very useful technique, saving the fortune-teller considerable calculation time while also guaranteeing the accuracy of reading clients' fortunes.

The Fortune-telling Session

Elements of a Numerological Method

As can be seen in the foregoing, Grū Bun's approach to his work as a fortune-teller was distinctive in its rigour and professionalism. He had a critical and reflexive understanding of his ethical responsibility as a fortune teller. The spiritual patrons he worked under empowered his practice and offered him protection, but also provided inspiration for enlightened and morally consistent action. And he had a rigorous intellectual system based in a combination of classical book learning and inductive experience. All in all, his practice was portrayed as professional, principled and methodical. Prospectively the appeal such an approach might hold for a client who was experiencing moral disorientation, or panic in the face of too much choice, was the potentially reassuring sense of ritual order, probity, stability and inevitability seemingly engrained in the very rigour of the approach.

I was thus keen to observe how he applied this approach in a consultation. Considering the methodical nature of his approach, I was expecting him to provide Sovanna with some definitive answers and perhaps even stern conservative advice grounded inescapably in first principles. And indeed, as shall be shown, his reading of her case was rigorous and principled. However, what also was notable about the consultation was the openness, flexibility and responsiveness displayed by the fortune-teller. As can be seen in the following ethnographic account, the consultation offered an interactive forum for Sovanna to vent her concerns and hopes that was respectful to her and gave her the space to express herself.

Grū Bun began by asking Sovanna to tell him the day, month, and year of her birth. Then the fortune-teller opened the Thai 100-year calendar book. (The 100-year calendar is used to assist the fortune-teller calculate the age of the client accurately.) Then he drew a small table with seven columns on the left side of a sheet of A4 paper and put a Khmer number in each column (*see figure 16*). Below this table I saw the fortune-teller write different Arabic numbers in each row. Then Grū Bun moved his hand to the right side of the paper and drew another table with three columns on the right side of the paper and quickly inserted the Khmer numbers in the right table.

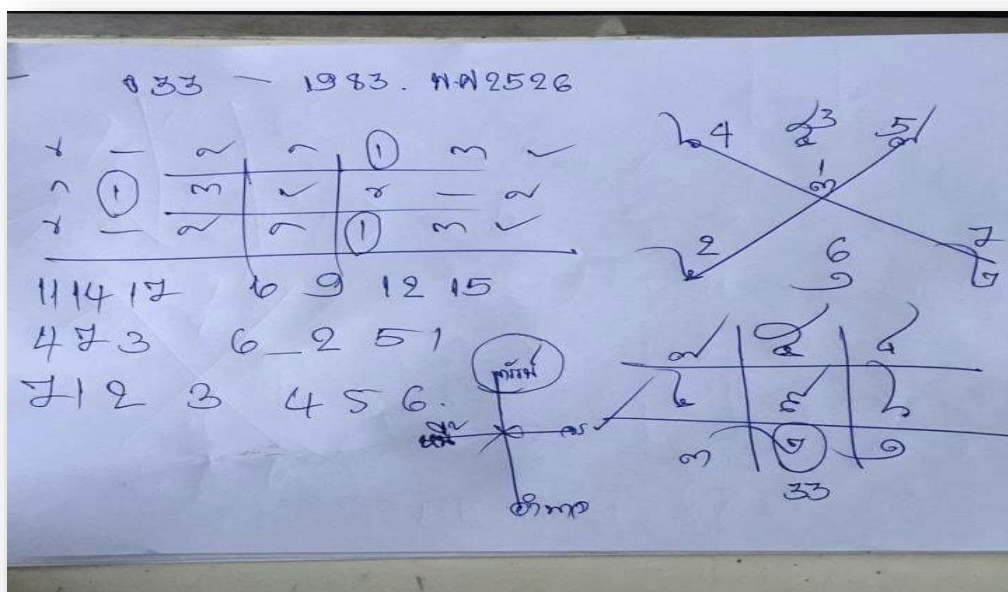


Figure 16 An example of the numerological tables and cross which were calculated from my own day, month, and year of birth. In order to communicate more easily with the researcher, Grū Bun wrote down the Thai words and explain the meaning of the numbers on each direction of the cross. Those words signify wealth (ทรัพย์สิน), power (อำนาจ), debt (หนี้) and transportation/travelling (จร).

After drawing a table, Grū Bun wrote the number 24 on the right corner of the paper, which equated to the age of the student, who had just turned 24 years old that year [2015]. Then he multiplied 24 by 3 and divided the result by 7. He explained that this method could help him diagnose the cause(s) of his clients' sicknesses.

Grū Bun further explained that the numbers derived in the final calculation symbolise different cases of spiritual transactions that harm individuals' bodies. The numbers 1 and 4 refer to illness caused by the interventions of guardian spirits, while the number 2 is linked to an attack from black magic. If the sum of the calculation is 3, individuals will fall sick because they do not keep their word to provide some offerings or do something for the gods or the spirits they had worshipped. The number 5 is associated with spiritual transactions with the grū kamnoet (the personal guardian spirit) or the spirit of an individual's former teacher. The presence of number 6 can be used to diagnose that individuals will get sick because they may be wearing inauspicious accessories made from the teeth of canines, snakes or tigers. And from number 7 can be predicted that the

cause of an individual's sickness is associated with moral infraction, for instance, they might have done something wrong with regards to their ancestors or grandparents.

The fortune-teller also gave details of the other form of numerological interpretation that can help him diagnose the symptoms of individuals' sicknesses. The number 1 signifies a hot body temperature due to a seasonal fever, and that an individual might feel queasy because a termite nest is located in the same area of the house where the guardian spirit resides. The numbers 2 and 6 represent stomach ache, while number 3 can relate to pain in the foot and hand. Numbers 4 and 5 are associated with chest pain accompanied by fever, particularly affecting the face. The numbers 2 to 6 signify different symptoms that result from the individual's transgression in building their house improperly. In some cases, individuals might build their houses across the tree stumps or water wells, which are considered inappropriate and unacceptable sites for a house in accordance with Khmer local belief.

This technique of calculation helped the fortune-teller diagnose the symptoms of sicknesses specifically. Grū Bun articulated how number 1 could affect Sovanna's life. Then, he diagnosed the reasons for her emotional and physical illnesses. Grū Bun said:

Now you are suffering a great deal from headache and foot pain because you are very stressed...I can see why you feel like this...from the number [number 1] there might be a termite nest in your house and the guardian spirits of your house displeased it because the termite nest is actually occupying their residence...this might be the reason why your mother gets sick but I have to see your mother's day, month and year of birth first so I can explain more[...]



Figure 17 Grū Bun reading Sovanna's fortune using his numerology technique

According to the ethnographic data above, one can observe that the fortune-teller applies his numerological technique as a tool to visualise the student's life journey, in which outcomes such as wealth, power, security, fortune, sickness and debt are not predetermined but are seen to be shaped in relation to morality, auspiciousness, spiritual power and obligation. A range of numbers has been decoded for their symbolic meanings in accordance with sophisticated calculation formulae, the knowledge of astrology, and the traditional belief in spirits.

Fortune-telling Consultation as a Transaction of Affects

For her own part, the migrant student used the fortune-telling consultation session as a way to express and articulate her experience of frustration and suffering that she could rarely express in everyday-life while living by herself in the city. After the numerological calculation, the fortune-teller started explaining the current situation of the student's life, while also suggesting the resources and opportunities she could access as he addressed her case:

Since you turned 24 this year, you will have more money and also the opportunities to study or work in foreign countries. Your future husband has a similar work interest or comes from the same career.

The fortune-teller then predicted what would happen each month in the coming year from January until December. He proceeded:

The first month [January 2016], you plan to do something? You plan to study abroad right? This month you want to do a lot of things but you cannot follow most of your plans because you are concerned a lot about your mother as she is sick now[...]

The prediction suddenly stopped as the student told the fortune-teller what she had planned to achieve that year. She said:

I'm planning to study an M.A. in business management in Thailand or the United States but I cannot make a decision right now because I am thinking a lot about my parents, especially my mother; as you said, it's correct, my mother is sick and I have to take care of her.

The student asked the fortune-teller to read her mother's fortune, hoping that he could say something related to the causes of her sickness and its healing treatment, but the fortune-teller wanted to continue talking about the student's life and read her mother's fortune later. The fortune-telling session continued:

Let me finish this first, from January to May, your fortune is in the middle—not too high and not too low and it will be good until June; you won't have much money that month but you must be patient until July. Your life will be good from July until December, and you will meet a man and start a relationship with him in November...a man born in the Dog year should be best for you but those who were born in Rabbit and Dragon are also good, and you should not get involved with the person who was born in Monkey, Goat, Horse, or Cow year [...]

Then, Sovanna replied to the fortune-teller:

Actually, there is someone who has been trying to approach me [for a relationship] but I think it's not a good time to think about a relationship or

married life. I just want to focus on my study, my work, and I still think a lot about my parents' wellbeing...that's all I want for myself right now...I just want to know when I can go to study abroad and open the coffee shop.

Grū Bun suddenly looked again at the numbers showing in the tables then explained to Sovanna:

Yes, I didn't say that you have to think about love and married life right now, your fortune told me that you will meet a real soulmate in five years from now...you don't need to be in a hurry because you still have plenty of time to think about that...

It was interesting to observe that, after the fortune-teller had laid out a highly specific scenario about marriage, the student responded by mentioning her experiences and expressing her own contrasting intentions in this regard. In response to her clarification, the fortune-teller refined his comments with more ambiguous ones about her taking her time to get married. The exchange was flexible and allowed the student to show the fortune-teller her priorities. He then addressed her plans to study and open a coffee shop in Phnom Penh:

As for the coffee shop, you can do it later this year, around March to May. You will see that a male relative gives some financial support to help you invest in the coffee shop. You will also have a chance to travel to a foreign country within these two months. I think that a good time for you to study in the United States would be in two year's time.

In the fortune-telling consultation context, the migrant student is open in revealing her various ambitious dreams, while the fortune-teller is equally open in affirming that it is possible for her to reach those dreams, forecasting a specific scenario that might allow this. Although the student's capacity to invest in her own business is still limited by her lack of experience, finances and connections (as a newcomer to the city), the fortune-teller does not belittle her chances. Instead he shows her that the plan to open a coffee shop in Phnom Penh is entirely possible, for instance, should she receive financial assistance from a relative. Although for her to realise both this plan and her plan to study in America would seem contradictory, the fortune-teller does not shut down the

possibility of her doing both, saying he foresees that a good time for her to study in the U.S would be in two years.

The student's concern for her mother's sickness was also expressed in the divination session. While Sovanna still wanted to know the details of her mother's sickness and the possible curing process, the fortune-teller preferred to read her mother's fortune separately. Then the student phoned her mother to ask about her date, month, and year of birth. I saw Grū Bun open the book and calculate a series of numbers, inserting them into the table that he had just drawn on the A4 sheet, then he spoke to Sovanna:

Your mother was born in the dragon year, right? She has had a congenital disease since she was young ...she should be careful with her health and I think she will get pain in her back. She will derive luck as a result of her respectful communication with people but her sickness will worsen in February and she will have a sleeping problem in March. She can make more money in April but she may feel increasingly uncomfortable [as a result of pressure due to swelling] in May. Her symptoms will worsen again in June and she will be admitted for surgery in July...I know the reasons why she gets sick...it is not only because of a congenital disease but also because she has worked very hard her entire life, but the most important reason is that the guardian spirit of her house gets angry and upset because of the carelessness of your mother. Recently, a small termite nest has formed where the guardian spirit lives. This has happened because your mother does not clean the house properly and so your mother's sickness is worsening ...

Sovanna listened to Grū Bun's diagnosis of her mother's disease attentively. She had not known about the termite nest located in her parent's house until the fortune-teller told her. Then she decided to call her mother to ask about the issue of the termite nest and her mother confirmed the fortune-teller's prediction. Sovanna was astounded; she would never have guessed that there was a termite nest in her parents' house in Battambang until the fortune-teller told her.

Sovanna then asked Grū Bun if there was anything that could be done to heal her mother from the severe sickness. The fortune-teller explained:

You need to release fish into the river to make merit for karmic retribution for your mother and to the guardian spirit of your house in Battambang. The number of fish should depend on your mother's date of birth. I think, for your mother, 17 fish should be released because she was born on Wednesday...the strength of Wednesday is 17. Apart from releasing the fish, I would recommend that your mother worships grūpādhyāya, an object representing her own personal guardian spirit[grū kaṃṇoet], in order to invite the guardian spirit to protect her. She must provide food and flower offerings to the guardian spirit on Mondays because she can communicate with the black side on that day. If your mother can worship grūpādhyāya every Monday and on the Buddhist Holy days, she will get better soon...

After the consultation session, Sovanna reflected that speaking with the fortune-teller about her mother's sickness had helped her to unpack worries and concerns that she had been dwelling on for several years. The interaction between the fortune-teller and his client directly addressed the afflicted experience of the migrant student, who had been living with suffering and anxiety due to the dilemma of her conflicting desires. What made her suffering acute was that, instead of being with her mother when her mother most needed care, the student was away studying in Phnom Penh and, moreover, was planning further educational travels abroad. The fortune-teller reminded the student about her moral responsibility as a daughter in looking after her parents, especially her mother who suffered from a severe cancer. However, the fortune teller also alleviated Sovanna's sense of responsibility by affirming that her mother had her own personal guardian spirit, grū kaṃṇoet, with whom she could interact and maintain ritual relations of mutual care. He also prescribed specific ritual actions that Sovanna herself could take, the fish-releasing rite, which would give her a tangible way to satisfy her desire to help her mother.

After the consultation session, the student said that the numerological fortune-teller's diagnosis of the causes of her mother's sickness was similar to what the fortune-tellers in her hometown, Battambang, had told her before. Although they applied different divinatory techniques, all of them had explained that her parents had gotten sick because they had done something wrong by the late grandparents and/or the ancestors. What was different about Grū Bun's diagnosis was its specificity and the unexpected relationship he drew between the termite nest and the guardian spirit that affected her mother's physical and psychological health problems. Sovanna smiled when she recalled this part

of the consultation. Cleaning the house offered her family a tangible way to overcome the affliction caused by the spiritual transgression. .

From the ethnographic discussion above, it can be seen that the fortune-telling consultation offers an “affective service” in which the provider delivers a sense of comfort to his client, and overcomes or relieves the student’s concern and anxiety, while also redefining and reconstructing her knowledge and experience of health and illness. The fortune-teller utilises his “immaterial labour” deriving from his numerological skill to deliver “affective service,” demonstrated as a form of informative communication and consultation in order to help the client identify problems and suggest alternative ways to relieve her anxiety about her uncertain future. Moreover, the fortune-telling consultation did not only give opportunity to the student to express her anxiety about her future, but also redefines the concepts of health and illness on the basis of connection between mind and body in relation to the spirit transgression. The student thus employs such informative explanation for understanding what causes her mother’s illness. With this, the fortune-telling service not only relieves the afflicted experience of the young client, it also encourages her with some hopeful solutions to help relieve her mother’s suffering.

Two months after the fortune-telling session, I met Sovanna again at the coffee shop near her university. She told me that she felt more positive about her life. All concerns and anxieties had been relieved because the fortune-teller had helped her to find a better way to make a decision, while also predicting what would happen in the future. The advice and suggestions given by the fortune-teller could help the student prepare her mind for the next steps that would result from her decision making. Sovanna explained:

I feel much better since the fortune-teller helped me get rid of my stress. You know, before consulting him I was so worried and stressed about my problems. I could not handle it [my problems] until I met him. I think I can find a better way to solve my problems...I can say that the fortune-teller’s prediction is approximately 70 per cent correct, especially in relation to my mother’s sickness. Although I had decided to do my Masters in the U.S. this year, instead of waiting until 2018 as he predicted, I was still surprised that I managed to obtain a visa to go there. I have just booked the ticket and plan to leave for the U.S. in March. You remember that the fortune-teller also told me

that I may travel to a foreign country around March to April this year [2016] I think he is correct about this point [...]

Sovanna also brought her close friend to consult Grū Bun about her problems. Sovanna decided to follow the fortune-teller's suggestion to release fish to make merit for her mother. She also accompanied her friend, who was similarly advised to release fish to enhance her merit and eliminate bad luck. Grū Bun diagnosed Sovanna's friend's symptoms to be identical to Sovanna's mother, therefore, the healing solution was also the same. In addition to merit making, Sovanna also encouraged her mother to remove the termites and clean the house in Battambang in order to satisfy the guardian spirit. Sovanna observed her mother getting better day by day after the termite nest was removed from her house.

Discussion

As can be seen from Sovanna's positive feedback on the fortune-teller's prediction and diagnosis, divination is an affective service offering a therapeutic treatment that enables a person facing a moral dilemma and a time of indecision to air her concern with a trusted stranger and articulate her conflicting desires. The affective encounter between the fortune-teller and the student not only address the problems of the Cambodian migrant students, but also overcome the suffering and anxious experience due to the dilemma between conflicting self-images and life plans. During the fortune-telling consultation, the student expresses and articulates her frustrating and suffering experience, something that she rarely expresses in her everyday life in the unfamiliar city. In this sense, the form of affective service offers an effective emotional release therapy which brings about certain affective outcomes, such as emotional support, psychological comfort, or stress relief. After the consultation, concerns and anxieties experienced by the student are overcome, replaced by insouciant calmness.

In addition to this psychological treatment, the student also receives certain flexible advice and solutions for solving the student's dilemma. The fortune-teller does not prescribe a fixed menu of advice. Instead he manifests an attentiveness to the dilemma faced by his client between the obligations imposed by family membership and her ambitious dreams of mobility inspired by internet business celebrities. His advice is based in solid principles and supernatural laws, however, it is also flexible and accommodating in response to his client's own interjected clarifications and interpretations.

The fortune-teller reaffirms the student's desires by pointing out a means by which she could achieve her ambitious dream, while also advising her about the resources and opportunities a new comer migrant like her could access in the city. While the student encounters numerous limitations including inexperience and insufficient resources to open a coffee shop in Phnom Penh, the fortune-teller is able to relieve her anxieties by predicting that her plan is still possible because she will receive support from a relative in the future.

At the same time, the fortune-teller articulates traditional social values by reminding the student about her role as a daughter who must demonstrate moral responsibility by looking after her parents, especially her mother who is suffering from a severe illness. The fortune-telling consultation allows the student to consider her choices and reflect on whether she should follow her desire to study abroad or look after her parents in Battambang. Moreover, the fortune-teller proposes a way around this dilemma by suggesting that the student's overseas study can come later. His fortune-reading also keeps open a space between her dream of mobility and traditional expectations in suggesting that, although she will meet a prospective husband in the near future, her real soulmate may not arrive for several years.

According to the ethnographic discussion above, this chapter agrees with Hardt (1999) in suggesting that affective labour has the potential to create life and subjectivities. In this chapter, the immaterial service based on numerological fortune-telling consultation has the potential to reconstruct individual subjectivity. In other words, the affective service produced on the basis of the fortune-telling consultation can empower the young urban migrant by intersubjectively reflecting on a range of resources and opportunities that she is capable of assembling. While listening to the fortune-teller giving predictions and diagnosis, the student seems to be open-minded about other possible options that might be suitable for her life. The student's final decision shows her agentive intention to be liberated from familial obligations and social expectations, while also revealing her desire to transform herself into a successful person. After the consultation, the student confidently asserts that she can improve her socio-economic status through overseas education.

Following Hardt's concept of affective labour (1999), this chapter suggests that the inter-subjective communication between the fortune-teller and the migrant student can be

considered as a process of formulating agency and subjectivity. With this said, the chapter further argues that divination process, as a form of affective production, creates and enhances the agency of a Cambodian migrant student who is coping with indecision in relation to her future. In other words, divination in this context does not promote fatalism but, rather, it boosts agency since it creates a platform to negotiate between desire and moral action before making a decision in a particular situation.

Chapter 3

Market-Based Divination and Mystical Affinities

The moto-taxi dropped me in front of the main entrance of *Psar Tmey*, or new market, but also known as the “Central Market.” It is located at the centre of a cluster of famous shopping malls, the National Bank of Cambodia, interprovincial bus depots and local stores. Observed from outside, one can see the imposing colonial-era building consists of a dome with four arms branching out in different directions. The brightness of its egg pastel paint and the unique architectural structure makes the market charming and outstanding. The origin of the market can be traced back to 1937 when the French protectorate established the market as the centre of trading activities in the capital city (Callebaut and Prigent 2011). At present, the market can be considered as a hub of the small-scale economy in the capital city where a large number of migrant labourers find job opportunities and re-establish their lives.

The market is always crowded with hundreds of customers walking around and shopping for different types of services and products. There are more than a thousand stalls selling various types of goods and products, such as jewellery, clothes, textiles, souvenirs, electronic goods, cosmetics, beauty service salons (nails, makeup and hair), flowers, food, restaurants, and fortune-telling stalls.²⁹ Urban Khmer people go to the market to purchase various goods, products and services that fulfil their physical and spiritual needs. In February 2015, around 10-12 fortune-tellers were offering their services at the Central Market. Most of their divination services relied on the card-reading technique or *moelpia* (ម៉ែលៀប). The fortune-telling stalls were located separately from the fresh food, situated nearby the stalls selling cosmetics and jewellery products and nail and hair salons, which usually attract a large number of female customers. Urban Khmer residents from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds go to the market not just for purchasing fresh food, fashionable clothes, or electronic equipment but also a range of religious

²⁹ Urban Khmer people usually consult card-reading fortune-tellers in various local markets. In addition to the Central Market, Khmer people also visited other markets, such as Bung Keng Kong Market, and Orithsey Market.

technologies including card-reading divination and magic. Such religious technologies are managed as a ‘package’ available to those urban Khmer people taking a break from shopping by stopping by the fortune-telling stalls.

The fortune-telling stalls inside the Central Market usually shared their space with a nail-painting service. I was surprised to see how Khmer people could put these two different services together in a tiny area. While I was looking around the fortune-telling stalls, I suddenly heard a female voice hail me: “Fortune-teller, Madame?” The voice belonged to a young-looking female card-reading fortune-teller, who was sitting on a chair. The way she called me was similar to how other market-traders in the Central Market would call out to attract their customers. I sat down at the stall, owned by “Miss Davy”³⁰ and introduced myself. She showed her interest and excitement when she knew I came from Thailand and was interested to learn Khmer language and culture. She wanted to introduce me to her husband because he used to work in the border provinces so he could speak Thai fluently. Davy responded in a very friendly way from the first day we met. She allowed me to visit her stall and ask questions regarding the card-reading technique and general questions related to Khmer culture.

Smiling, Davy tried to speak English with me saying that she was willing to answer if I had any question regarding the card-reading service. I also volunteered to be a language partner with her. She wanted to improve her English language skills in order to communicate with foreign clients. Through this opportunity, I could also improve my Khmer language and could observe her daily activities, especially when she conducted the card-reading consultations. Davy explained the quick development of our friendship to be due to sharing the same birth year (1983).

For Davy, the Central Market is like her home where she has grown up and learnt the card-reading technique by observing her mother reading the cards for many clients every day. Her divination stall is the place where family members reunite every day. Davy shared the fortune-telling stall with her mother who offered the same card-reading service. Although Davy and her mother sat separately in different corners, they would chat and share some food while observing how many clients they received that day. I was interested to observe how efficiently Davy and her mother utilised their stall’s small space

³⁰ a pseudonym.

allotment: not just providing their twin fortune-telling services there, but also allocating some space for Davy's youngest sister to operate a nail painting service.

After meeting Davy, I decided to choose the Central Market as one of my key ethnographic fieldsites in Phnom Penh and resolved to explore the card-reading divinatory technique which is offered as a service to mostly female clients in the market. The religious practices in this urban market also inspired me to examine how ideas about fortune, mystical dependencies and magical causality may inform people's experiences of market relations in Cambodia's post-socialist economy. Kirsten Endres has observed how Vietnamese people experience notions of luck and fortune under conditions of market-socialism (Endres 2015). She applies the term "cosmoeconomics," which articulates the marketplace as a place where commodities, human effort, sacred objects and notions of fate circulate and interact, shaping unique conceptions of value and theories of how to attain fortune (Ibid). The Vietnamese market traders/stallholders studied by Endres applied different ways to cultivate and sustain their luck, secure "fortune bestowed by heaven" (*lộc*), and profit from unexpected fortunate situations arising in the course of market trading. The idea of fortune bestowed by heaven also refers to a belief in moral responsibility, enforcing an ethic of individual self-cultivation through hard work and dedicative performances (Endres 2015). Following Endres, this chapter looks at the Cambodian marketplace as a cosmological realm where individuals are exposed to and apply a variety of theories and techniques to comprehend and gain control over the forces and factors that influence their lives. This chapter specifically asks to what extent the Cambodian urban market allows a female trader to influence her fortune through understanding and cultivating relations with a range of human and non-human agents. Through the quest for knowledge, the cultivation of relationships, and application of magical technologies, Khmer people attempt to comprehend and control the unknown factors and conditions that influence fate.

Card-reading consultation services are very popular in Cambodian urban neighbourhoods where people seek to know what determines or affects their uncertain lives. Underlying many of these inquiries is the desire to know what factors determine one's relationships with others. Many people were convinced that their relationships were influenced by mystical factors, and I commonly heard interlocutors use the term *nissāya* (និស្សាយ), or mystical affinity/ predestined affinity, suggesting that such relationships are predetermined by unknown forces. As such, only specialists such as fortune-tellers could

tell what truly influenced their lives. However, I realised that although talking about destiny or mystical affinity, people were not necessarily resigned to the idea that they lacked agency in their dealings with others or had no ability to influence their own fate. To the contrary, as I observed in the market, Khmer people have several agentic strategies for improving their own circumstances.

Existing scholars of Cambodian religion have discussed the unknown factors that influence and determine an individual's life under the concept of *nissāya*. Following Headley (1977), the Southeast Asian Languages Online Dictionary (Sealang 2018) defines *nissāya* (n) as “support, aid, assistance, gift, talent, resource, and determination.” In a different context, *nissāya* can be understood as “desire, understanding, something in common, association relationship, refuge, help, existence, stop, station, rest, relaxation, destiny character, disposition, trait of character, aptitude” (Sealang 2018). In a functional sense, Khmer people consider *nissāya* as a primary concept for fate and destiny as well as mystical dependency that influences an individual's future action (Chuon Nath 1967.; Headley 1977; Davis 2008).

From a range of such definitions, Davis (2008) argues that *nissāya* can be articulated from the Buddhist karmic cycle. From this perspective, *nissāya* is a fundamental element of an individual's life, which is formulated by that person's karma. Such karmic logic explains that an individual can influence good outcomes in her current life through her moral actions. As a result, *nissāya* gives rise to “the guidance, educative advice, and authority of an ideal patron” (Ibid: 235). Following Davis' definition, *nissāya* is not only a simple form of fate or dependency but, also, a destined factor that influences the relationship of human and non-human agents. Such a definition seems to accept the existence of a mystical destined affinity, which is constituted by the karmic causality. This form of *nissāya* can apply to the moral relationships between mother and child and between guru/teacher and student. In this way, individuals can sustain dependency and loyalty through physical and spiritual nourishment (Ibid).

Based on the above definitional discussions, for the purposes of this chapter I use a condensed definition of *nissāya* as mystical affinity. This definition amply captures the notion of karmically constituted mystical affinity cogently analysed by Davis (Ibid). However, my research into Khmer folk theories about relationships makes me realise that, when dealing with the realm of lived popular religiosity at least, there is a need to broaden

the scope of *nissāya* to include affinities shaped by mystical factors beyond the Buddhist karmic domain. Other mystical factors that might be seen to predetermine relationships and outcomes include astrological affinities, the laws of spiritual reciprocity, and magic. I found that in discussions with interlocutors, the concept of *nissāya* was deployed liberally to explain how these factors too determined relationships in some mystical way. While karmic explanations for the mysterious factors that shape people's fates and relationships indeed are prevalent in Cambodia, my ethnographic research leads me to conclude that an adequate definition of *nissāya* needs to cope with the reality that a diverse range of forces, relations and entities are believed to exist within the domain of mystical factors that influence relationships.

This chapter aims to unpack the Khmer notion of *nissāya* by giving ethnographic examples of its use within a range of contexts in which *nissāya* has been comprehended and experienced by market women, who call themselves *grūdāy pia*, or card-reading fortune-tellers. The card-reading fortune-tellers offer insights into the deep factors that influence life and, perhaps, predetermine life outcomes. For example, the notion of *nissāya* comes into play when a fortune-teller attempts to make sense of a coincidental relationship among strangers which may result in new opportunities from which an individual can benefit. *Nissāya* can provide an explanation why an individual might dislike or fall in love with someone at first sight. This type of mystical relation can explain why a fortune-teller can deliver an accurate fortune reading for some clients but an inaccurate one for others. In some cases, *nissāya* can motivate and inspire the fortune-tellers to choose a specific divinatory technique, which is suitable to their capacity or resources determined by the karmic ideology.

Based on research into the lives and worldview of market-based fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh, this chapter examines four distinct facets of *nissāya*, each representing a different way that mysterious affinities between individuals are understood. One is the notion that fortune in one's life is inexorably tied to continuities or change in the status of one's relationships. The second aspect is that cosmic laws such as karmic dependency are believed to be among the predestined factors that shape relationships and possible outcomes. The third aspect is that success in business is dependent on the maintenance of relationships of reciprocity with spiritual beings. The last to be addressed is the belief in certain magical technologies that influence the will of others and bring people together. In addition to representing theories about relational factors that mystically influence lives,

these approaches also each outline strategic solutions that female market-traders might utilise for bettering their lives in a competitive urban marketplace.

This chapter is structured in four sections. The first aims to explore the significance that a market-based fortune-teller attaches to social relationships as a means to sustain life and transform one's fate. It introduces the idea of *nissāya* as predestined affinity which is utilised by Davy, the fortune-teller both to explicate her clients' fate and to cultivate relationships to the advantage of her own personal prospects. The second section examines how card-reading fortune-tellers understand fortune through ideas of Buddhist karmic dependency. When this interpretation is applied, individual clients can learn from a card-reading session that their lives are determined by moral actions undertaken in present and previous lives. The third section describes the relations of spiritual patronage and mutual care that market-based fortune-tellers attempt to cultivate with the spiritual entities in their marketplace in the hope that such beings can ensure wellbeing and deliver protection. The final section highlights the power of attraction embedded in various forms of Khmer love magic. The ethnographic data show how a female individual may use such magic to enhance her charm and sexual appeal for strengthening her bond with her husband. In a more general sense, Khmer love magic can be used as a resource to secure and enhance an individual's social capital. The conclusion succinctly summarises the four theoretical aspects of *nissāya* which are the distinctive contributions of this chapter.

This chapter argues that the notion of *nissāya* as mystical affinity is widely used in Cambodian market-places as a means to understand the mystical or magical implications of social relationships. Through the mediation of fortune-tellers, *nissāya* is potentially knowable, prospectively allowing individuals to understand and influence their relationships with people and various non-human agents and thereby secure better life outcomes for themselves. In this way, *nissāya* is a concept of abiding concern to people, especially women, who trade in urban markets. The market women in this extended case study view *nissāya* as a practical tool which can be utilised to know, control, and manipulate relationships which are seen as central for survival in the uncertain living conditions of the Cambodian urban sphere.

Fate and Relationships in the Life of a Market-Based Fortune-teller and her Card-Reading Technique

My daily visits at Davy's fortune-telling stall allowed me to conduct a preliminary observation concerning the character and techniques of the market-based fortune-tellers and their clients. The majority of the fortune-tellers were middle-aged women around 40 to 60 years who offered a card-reading service. The clients were mostly teenage and middle-aged females who were studying at the university or buying or selling goods in the local markets. Some of them carried shopping bags, showing they had just come back from shopping. Having their fortune read might not have been their main purpose in coming to the market. The card-reading consultation often seemed to be just one stop during an extended shopping expedition in the market, however, I saw that some clients came to the Central Market just to consult with Davy. A small number of male clients also consulted her.

At Davy's fortune-telling stall, I saw a box of cards placed on a small tray in the centre of a small table in front of where she sat. A large glass cabinet, which was used as a partition, separated her stall from those of other fortune-tellers. Various images (in the form of metal figures) of gods, goddesses, and deities were placed on the display shelves where the fortune-teller kept her personal things like a cell phone, wallet, cosmetics, and some indiscernible objects. When I visited Davy's fortune-telling stall in the Central Market, I often encountered her whole family who were busy reading cards and painting nails while Davy's older sister, Sony lay down on a mat to feed her two-year-old daughter. The fortune-telling stall at the Central Market was like Davy's second home because the whole family could stay together and help each other run their businesses.

Davy, then 32 years-old, had offered the card-reading service at the Central Market for more than 10 years. She explained that she had *nissāya* with the card-reading technique: it was not her dream to become a fortune-teller but predestined factors that led her life journey. Davy was born and raised in the province of Prei Veng. In her teenage years, she followed her parents and sisters to settle in Phnom Penh where they sought new opportunities. She then continued her study at a high school near Toul Tompong Market (Russian Market) where her mother bought a small house for the whole family to live together. When Davy was in her first year of studying an English Major at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), her father passed away from cancer. At that time, her

mother asked her to withdraw from the B.A. program due to the family's financial crisis. Davy suffered greatly as a result of her mother's decision for it forced her to leave university at an early stage, meaning she lacked sufficient knowledge and qualification to apply for a high-salary job like her fellow Khmer university students. Davy took the lead role in caring for her younger sisters and nephews, keeping the whole family together by working hard and generating more income to support them. With her limited educational background, she struggled greatly to find a high-income job in the city. The lack of family support and her limited educational background did not allow her to follow her ambitious aspiration to improve the financial situation of her family by taking a professional job. At that time Davy turned to fortune telling, employing a skill she had learnt from her mother.

She saw card-reading as her only option for survival, taking up at the Central Market where her mother had a fortune-telling consultancy and nail painting service. Davy used her card-reading skill that she had learnt from her mother who had been reading the cards since Davy was 12 years old. Davy emphasised that her fortune-telling skill came from her independent study but in fact most of what she learnt came from observing her mother reading the fortune for her clients every day. Davy's sister eventually similarly followed in her mother's footsteps to become a professional card-reading fortune-teller working in the same corner of the market as her sister and mother. Intriguingly, Davy's child also seemed destined for this occupation. Davy told me that once when her daughter was between two and three years of age, she was able to foresee the future. At the time, people ignored her because she used only a short sentence without providing any context. But later Davy realised with amazement that everything her daughter had said had turned out to be accurate.

My relationship with Davy developed quite fast. I considered Davy as one of my new Khmer friends with whom I could share and exchange information about my personal life while adjusting myself to life in the city. We became friends on Facebook and met often in person. We talked and shared our feelings about what we had experienced almost every day. Davy sent voice messages on a daily basis via Facebook, updating me about her wellbeing, clients and family members. Davy explained to me that we had liked each other at first sight and our relationship had developed so rapidly because of the *nissāya* or destined bond we have with each other. In some cases, two people have conflict and become enemies, or a married couple does not get along and divorces due to the absence of bond relations. In this way, *nissāya* can be conceptualised as a “predestined bond” or

“fated attraction” embedded into friendships, familial relationships and other relations. In a broader sense, Khmer people ordinarily use the term *nissāya* when they try to make sense of a situation or a circumstance that is predestined, uncontrollable, and unpredictable.

For the first three months of my fieldwork, I tried to observe Davy’s card-reading consultation from an outsider’s perspective. Davy asked me several times if I wanted her to read my fortune but I refused, since I was concerned about my positionality as a researcher plus I was unsure whether I could produce a satisfactory ethnographic analysis that drew on my subjective experience. As an ethnographer, I believed that I should eliminate any bias that might affect the interpretation of the ethnographic data. However, I came to see how participating in the divinatory activity by taking a role as a fortune-telling client could be used as a research method to understand the intersections between divination and life experience. Through undergoing a card-reading session with Davy, I could explore her cosmology and beliefs as applied to life circumstances—my own with which I was intimately familiar. Several months after we first met, I accepted her offer and allowed her to read my fortune. I hoped that this opportunity would allow me to observe the system of knowledge and symbolic interpretation utilised by the card-reading fortune-teller.

After shuffling the deck, Davy laid out the cards on the table in a half circle. Then she asked me to choose two cards—one from the right hand arc of the circle and one from the left. As Davy explained, the right hand symbolises the body of the client and their present life, while the left refers to the client’s spouse (husband/wife) and their future life. After choosing the two cards, I was asked to give them to her so she could interpret the meanings. The features on each card would be used to generate a description of the general character of the clients and that of their current or future partners. A second round of card-reading to predict the general situation of the clients and their family members followed a set pattern in Davy’s practice. First, Davy would start the second round by shuffling and place the cards on the table one by one in four rows until she had just five to six cards left in her hands. Next, she would ask the clients to choose one card from her hands while she also chose one and the two cards were turned up at the same time. After shuffling again, in the third and final round, Davy would ask her clients if they had any questions to ask her. I saw the pattern that Davy laid out the cards for reading to answer the questions of the clients was different from the first and second rounds. She turned up

the cards—one by one—in different positions on the table, grouping the cards in nine groups. Finally, Davy would ask the clients to choose two groups of cards and open them, and she opened the rest by herself (see figure 18-19).



Figure 18 shows the first patterns of the cards laid on the table.



Figure 19 shows the second patterns of the cards

Davy explained to me that each card symbolises a different meaning. For example, “King” and “Queen” symbolise male and female orientations. If the client is a woman, the symbol “Queen” is her representation. Hearts can be understood as “love

affair/relationship” while the black spade means “difficulty, suffering and discomfort.” Although each card is unique and leads to a different meaning, Davy preferred to interpret the whole group of cards instead of just reading a single one. I observed that she interpreted the meaning of the single cards by integrating the multiple meanings of the cards within the same group. Those multiple meanings were analysed and processed into a simple statement delivered to the clients. This was the case when she read my fortune on the third round of shuffling. When I asked her when I would complete my Ph.D., Davy opened the group of cards I had chosen. The cards were 5 diamonds, 3 hearts, 3 spades, 10 hearts and 2 clubs. Davy read these cards and said “You can finish your Ph.D. in two year’s time, then you will be lucky because someone will give you 100,000 US dollars and you will have a successful job so your life will get better after you finish your degree.” Davy also decoded the symbolic meanings for Jack, 10 Spades, Ace, Jack, and Queen then made a prediction about my love life. She said that I would have a big headache because many guys would be interested in me. From the last group of cards, including: 3 hearts, King, 9 spades, 7 diamonds, and 2 diamonds, Davy predicted that I would get married in two year’s time.

During the card-reading session I wondered about the underlying meanings of the card symbols. I noticed quite often that the notions of sickness, sadness, bad luck, loss and death would be mentioned when spades were laid on the table.³¹ Less clear was why particular combinations of diamonds, hearts, spades, and clubs were associated with “positive” outcomes like finishing one’s Ph.D. in two year’s time, being given a large sum of money and receiving a good job offer. Davy herself could not give me a clear explanation for how she arrived at such interpretations. When I asked her how the combination of Jacks, Spades, Ace, and Queen could be used as evidence to say that a lot of guys would be interested in me she simply pointed to the presence of the Queen and Jacks together in the second group of cards. A Queen symbolises myself while two Jacks referred to the guys who are interested in me. The explanation that hearts represent love, marriage and relationships is a common one, often given by Davy and other card-reading fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh.

³¹ In addition to attributing enlightenment and intellectuality to clubs (also power, money, resources) and diamonds (support and popularity), the card-reading fortune-teller who predicted the 2017 Cambodian Communal Election result also associated spades with sickness, unluckiness and death (Mech and Handley 2017).

Although many aspects of Davy's card-reading system are unknown, the predictions and interpretations which are mediated by Davy suggest an important idea about life. Her card-reading consistently comes back to the notion that it is relationships that influence life outcomes. This pattern is particularly clear in questions posed to her by clients about love and business. The outcomes in these arenas, as divined by Davy, invariably turned on the status of the clients' relationships: be they existing or prospective relationships. The card- readings almost always refer to changes in, or maintenance of, a relationship, or the formation of a new relationship that will bring opportunities to the client. Hence, in addition to articulating a range of possible outcomes and fortunes that individuals might attain, the card-reading imagines a variety of prospective relationships statuses. In this way, the readings allow the clients an opportunity to speculate on a variety of prospective socially mediated fortunes.

Davy sometimes applied the idea of "life fate," *vāsanā*, when referring to clients' ability to achieve desirable outcomes or create effective relationships with other people. Some clients are lucky and rich while others are unlucky and poor because of their *vāsanā*. Davy conceptualises *vāsanā* as fate that destines individuals' fortune, achievement and relationships with others. According to Davy, Khmer billionaires or successful businessmen like Kith Meng are "*saṃṇāṅ*" (fortune/resource) because they could attain a "*vāsanādham*" (lit. big [prosperous] fate) and "*vāsanāl 'a*" (lit. good fate).³² In contrast, Davy characterised the clients who have lower income including farmers and factory workers as "*kro*" or "poor." Their lives are poor, unfortunate, and blighted by unhealthy conditions because of their fates. Drawing on the idea of destined life, Davy assumed that I had "*vāsanā dhammatā*" or "normal/moderate fate." I was a Thai student who was living by myself in Phnom Penh, and was able to travel around the city and across Cambodia and Thailand but, apparently, had a low income (according to her assumption).

When I asked Davy about the factors that cause inequality of fate among individuals, she referred to the operation of factors such as karma and merit in accordance with Buddhist ideology. However, I never heard Davy explain to clients in detail how their past actions affect their present livelihoods and outcomes, nor did I hear her clients ever discuss their

³² Khmer people use the colloquial term *saṃṇāṅ*, which can be defined as "fortune" and "luck."

circumstances in such a way. Neither did she have a very sophisticated understanding of astrological causality. Instead, her readings dwelt largely on how a particular alignment of social relationships, be they existing or prospective relationships, was fated or, in turn, had the capacity to influence fate or bring about a change in fortunes. This was why, the market-based card reader explained to me, we could relate to each other so well. It was because we had *nissāya* with each other. It was also why she had *nissāya* with the card-reading technique, because she had inherited it from her own mother. This explanation suggests that individuals who have something in common do so because their lives are controlled by certain predestined factors. Here, the notion of *nissāya* could be conceptualised as “destined affinity” or “entwined fates.” I found it was quite common for Khmer people, even in casual conversations, to make reference to the efficacy and potentiality of *nissāya* as the factor that causes people, whether they are familiar or unfamiliar to each other, to be related, associated, attached, and allied.

But even here, the notion of *nissāya* as a mystical bond does not necessarily mean such bonds are unalterable. In addition to the card-reading technique, Davy also employed other spiritual and magical technologies to assist clients to change their fate by influencing the nature of their relations with others. For example, she suggested that a ritual blessing service which she offered could be used as an option for clients to elevate and increase their fates to a higher level.³³ The ritual, which operates to enhance the attractiveness of a person to others by sprinkling the client either with perfume or water, seems to open a short-cut for anyone who wants to reach or sustain *rāsīl’a*: a “good livelihood” or a “good living.” The efficacy and ability of this ritual in attracting and binding people together is similar to what Khmer people see as inherent in the idea of *nissāya* as a mystical bond.

I also came to realise that the market-based fortune-teller articulated *nissāya* as a form of mystical affinity which she could draw upon agentively to seek opportunistic advantage in her relationships with others. She experienced such relations as a strategic resource that she could utilise to rebuild her socio-economic status and overcome uncertainty while

³³ During our conversations, Davy did not explain the details of such a ritual.

living in an unfamiliar city. This dynamic was evident in the way that Davy assertively built on the claim that I had a bond with her. According to her, our friendship was formulated and controlled by fate, which is predestined, and wedded into our mutual experiences. And given the bond, the card-reading fortune-teller asked me to be her business partner to open a language school in Phnom Penh. Davy was very enthusiastic to talk about her business plans every time I visited. She asked if I could approach an acquaintance to help her and her husband get a permanent paid job in Thailand or in the Thai-Cambodian border area. An alternative ambitious dream she floated was for us to invest in the import of clothes and costumes from Thailand for sale in Phnom Penh. Another plan was for me to use my connections to send her husband, who was fluent in Thai, to do business in the Cambodian-Thai border area. Based on these examples, it might be possible to say that Davy tried to leverage our bond of fate to her advantage. She attempted to manipulate our friendship and reinterpret it as a business relationship to facilitate her social and livelihood aspirations. She saw our relationship somewhat instrumentally as a resource and a form of capital which could ensure her survival in the market and open up new job paths. In other words, she attempted to convert the relations she had established with me into new opportunities, thereby using a destined bond to remake her destiny.

Davy used the card-reading technique to convince her clients to comprehend that their lives are tied to significant others in mystical and unknown ways. Underlying this technique is a view of life as destined by the relations one has, or may have, with others. As a result, the card-reading consultation service is in high demand by urban residents who live in an urban context marked by significant unpredictability, complexity and flux in their social relationships. On the one hand, the card-reading predictions offer a lesson to the clients to comprehend that their lives are entwined with those of others in certain destined ways. On the other hand, the card-reading fortune teller provides clients with understandings, resources and solutions that enable them to imagine, create and sustain effective relationships with others.

Card-reading Fortune-telling as the Discovery of Karmic Affinity

In Phnom Penh, the card-reading technique is very popular among young Khmer people, especially university students. Some migrant university students explained that they favour and believe in card-reading more than other divinatory technique because they can

directly be involved and participate in the entire divinatory process. In this way, the students can select the cards and see the symbols of the cards for themselves.

The card deck (*pia*) is the essential tool among the fortune tellers who, unlike the royal astrologers or elite numerological fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh, cannot access *kpaun* or formal knowledge of divination (See Chapters 2, 4 and 5). The cards for reading a fortune are the same type as people use for playing the game of poker. In the context of divinatory consultation, the fortune-tellers use the card deck as a mediumistic channel to circulate notions of fortune, fate and morality to their clients, who seek clarifications, suggestions, and advice about their lives. In this way, the card deck for reading a fortune can be seen as sacred because the fortune-teller will use it as a mediumistic tool to communicate with spiritual entities and their clients. As a result, the fortune-telling card deck must be kept properly. Most of the Khmer fortune-tellers usually store the card decks on a small metal or plastic tray resting atop a pedestal.

Most of the Khmer card-readers I met in Phnom Penh did not use or rely on any astrological handbooks, unlike the numerological fortune-tellers or the astrologers. They read the cards from their experiences, intuition and spiritual connection with invisible entities. This was the case with Davy, who claimed that her fortune-telling skill was based on the skill of *toul dāy* or “guessing,” which means she had to predict possible situations or outcomes without knowing very much about her clients’ circumstances. It was a matter of routine for Davy to guess at the fortunes, obstacles, or problems of her clients who came from different classes and family backgrounds in the city.

Davy explained that most of her clients tended to consult her about love, business, family, children, and study. Through my observations of consultations on such various issues, however, I noticed that love and business were the most popular topics for them. Davy’s prediction and reading provided some advice and direction for how people could make sense of their love and relationship. The example questions directed to her included: Have the clients found their soulmate? When will they find the right one? Should they continue their relationship with the one they have been dating? When should they get married? How to maintain the relationship with their partners? What are the physical and behavioural characteristics of their prospective partner? Most of the questions concerning love and business can reveal the expectations of the clients who see the cards as a means to enlighten themselves on how to influence business outcomes or sustain relationships

with others. To answer such questions, the clients choose the cards and comprehend the symbols by themselves. But interpretation of the cards is conducted solely by the fortune-teller.

Davy explained that she had been able to increase the number of clients from the two markets where she worked on account of her being a Buddhist fortune-teller who believes in the law of karma. This meant she could not lie to the clients and, as a result, she thought clients trusted her more. She also expressed her ideas about virtue in the course of card-readings, suggesting to clients that they should stop gambling or playing the lottery. According to Davy, gambling and the lottery are immoral, unproductive, and risky. Although gambling and the lottery are not against Buddhist precepts, such forms of leisure show the element of greed, which is considered as an obstacle to reach nirvana. Davy also emphasised her role in preserving Khmer moral traditions in relation to the Buddhist concepts of merit and karma. She claimed that she could help her clients avoid making demerit. She encouraged her clients to avoid playing the lottery or gambling “like the Vietnamese like to do.” She once made the personal comment during a reading that having an affair with someone who is already married is “not good” and thus she encouraged her client to avoid it. She also once helped a female client who was thinking of committing suicide to resolve the intractable difficulties of her life. The positive interpretation and moral support that she offered in that particular card-reading was intended to help her client regain her sense of self and reject the idea of killing herself. Davy told me that she thought the moral code of conduct on which she relied was a point of difference from other fortune-tellers in the local markets of Phnom Penh.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, Mei-Mei, the migrant university student from Kampot, strongly believed in divination, especially the card-reading technique, which is available in different local markets in Phnom Penh. The first time she consulted a fortune-teller occurred in January 2015 when she started operating her cosmetic business in Phnom Penh. Mei-Mei decided to run her own business because she wanted to help her parents reduce their living expenses. Mei-Mei further expressed: “I don’t want to be a burden on my parents, but as a result I feel like a 44-45 year-old, since I have so many things to think about in my business.”

As a newcomer to the city, Mei-Mei did not yet have many friends. However, the cosmetics business network connected her to people who became friends in the city. “You

know, my business is not too big but it introduces me to a lot of people since I have to meet many clients at the markets by myself,” Mei-Mei elaborated. Most of the fortune-tellers she met in Phnom Penh were introduced to her by her cosmetics customers. While living in the city, Mei-Mei was always aware of strangers, but she did not consider as strangers the fortune-tellers whom she had just met for the first time. She reflected that the card-reading fortune-teller could mitigate risk and overcome the uncertain circumstances she had encountered in the city. The first card-reading fortune-teller the student had consulted lived near the Central Market. The student was quite impressed with the first divining session due to the accurate interpretations of the card-reading fortune-teller. She also tried the mediumistic fortune-teller (*nakcūlrūp*) at highway no. 3 on the way to Kampot, but had been unsatisfied with his service because she felt that the mediumistic forecast offered was not as accurate as the card-reading interpretations.

I had a chance to observe closely when Mei-Mei came to Davy’s sister Sony for fortune reading. At that time, in mid-2015, Sony had just become a professional card-reading fortune-teller. Mei-Mei had decided to consult with Sony on the day of an appointment with her clients at the Central Market, including those who planned to open a shop at that site. On the appointed day the student was very disappointed because her clients did not go ahead with the plan to open the shop and she also received some negative feedback from one of her clients about the inadequate number of cosmetic products available for distribution. Mei-Mei explained:

My feeling was not good because I was really concerned about my business. Then I walked around the market while asking myself: what should I do? But suddenly I stopped by the fortune-telling stalls, and I thought I should consult one of them. Most of the questions I asked concerned my cosmetics business[...]The fortune-tellers were able to help me solve some problems related to my clients, my brother, my relatives, and my boyfriend.

The questions Mei-Mei asked of the card-reading fortune-teller reflect the various dilemmas that preoccupied this migrant students. Mei-Mei was very concerned about her family, family business, and love. She felt insecure in relation to some of her family members in Kampot whom she believed were jealous of her because she was operating her own business at such a young age. When she returned to Kampot, she always saw her relatives smile in front of her but then they always gossiped about her later when she had

left. Furthermore, the card-reading consultation was able to explain the love-hate relationship she had with her younger brother. Such conflict occurring between sister and brother had started when they were young and had become more intense when they stayed together in the city. Mei-Mei had been compelled to act as father and mother for her younger brother since he moved to Phnom Penh about a year ago to continue his education. They lived together in a rental apartment but had separate bedrooms. Mei-Mei was disappointed at his laziness, unproductive life, and self-centred actions while living in the city. The fortune-teller reflected Mei-Mei's concern: "Your brother is not good and not bad, he will have a job soon in the future." Mei-Mei was very concerned about her brother's careless attitude since he thought that all jobs were easy, even though he could not do any of them. The fortune-teller further explained to the student why she did not get along with her brother, saying: "This is because you [Mei-Mei] were born in the year which conflicts with your brother's year..."

In reaching this explanation about this conflict, the card-reading fortune-teller applied the Chinese zodiac system as a guide to reading and interpreting the client's fortune. The Chinese zodiac system is similar to the Western zodiac in being centred on a 12-year cycle of animals. Each type of animal represents unique characters that could be applied to differentiate human behaviours, perceptions, emotions, and self-reflection. This system can also predict the likelihood of friendship or hostility between humans who were born in different years. For example, a person who was born in a pig year might be friendly with a person who was born in a tiger year but might be hostile towards a snake-year person.

In addition to the conflict within the family, Mei-Mei was also concerned about her cosmetics business. The card-reading fortune-teller at the Central Market could tell her when and how she could accrue more benefit and fortune from the cosmetics business in the city. In order to secure and increase her benefit and wealth, the card-reading fortune-teller suggested that Mei-Mei pay obeisance to the god of luck and prosperity with some offerings and propitiate the guardian spirits of the rental house in Phnom Penh (see Chapter 1). The fortune-teller also told Mei-Mei about the auspicious times to collect money from her clients, the possibility of expanding her business, and the ways to gain benefit and fortune. The fortune-teller tried to convince Mei-Mei that she could sustain her wealth and wellbeing if she followed these Khmer traditions. The fortune-teller proved such logic by sharing her own experience of struggle while living in the city. The

fortune-teller said she had been able to survive because she had followed her mother's teachings. Actually, she used to be jobless but her financial status had improved because she had followed in her mother's footsteps to become a fortune-teller. A dutiful daughter should show respect and gratitude for her parents. In a similar way, Mei-Mei should follow her parents' teachings as well.

Last but not least, the card-reading also shed light on Mei-Mei's love life. The fortune-teller explained that the student had fallen in love with her Chinese boyfriend at first sight because they had been a couple in their past lives. The fortune-teller asked the student to select the cards then she read the signs and interpreted the meanings. The fortune-teller explained what she found from reading the cards and tried to use the Buddhist belief in past lives to explain why the student had met her boyfriend. They had a karmic bond with each other which transcended life incarnations.³⁴ The student had a flexible plan for marriage, probably after the completion of her B.A. The fortune-teller reconfirmed that she ought to get married as soon as possible because she would have good luck and become wealthy after getting married.

Following the above discussion, the two migrant sisters Davy and Sony, followed their mother's footsteps to become professional fortune-tellers at the Central Market. They used the card-reading technique to convince their clients to understand that their lives are determined and destined by unknown and uncontrollable factors. The Buddhist law of karma is integral for market-based card-reading fortune-tellers like Davy and her sister, who lack formal knowledge in divination like the elite fortune-tellers. In addition to the card-reading technique, they attempt to make sense of the factors determining the lives of their clients by referring to the karmic cycle. Based on the ethnographic data, the two card-reading fortune-tellers employed the Buddhist karmic ideology to cultivate their moral character as Khmers and as Buddhists who would always deliver the truth to their clients. Following the Buddhist karmic teaching, they can make sense of unexpected

³⁴ The essence of this belief is the conjecture that the two lovers, having first met long ago in a past life, were tied in a relationship of reciprocity, debt and mutual affection. When the abrupt end of life left them with debts unpaid or unfulfilled promises to each other, they were reunited again as lovers in the next incarnation, through a karmic force of necessity, for they had unfinished business to complete with each other. And so it went on through successive incarnations.

outcomes or relationships, which are the consequence of actions taken earlier, in this or former lives.

Considering the karmic aspect of *nissāya* as pre-destined relations confirms what Erik Davis (2008) has articulated. As Davis argues, the element of dependency in *nissāya* is closely associated with the karmic cycle which allows that individuals might receive a good outcome in return for their moral cultivation. This notion of karmic dependency implies that outcomes and relations are influenced by the moral relationships that individuals have cultivated in their past and current lives (Davis 2008: 235). My ethnographic account supports this interpretation of karmic dependency, demonstrated in the practices of Phnom Penh's card-reading fortune-tellers. This karmic-oriented form of *nissāya* is formulated by fortune-tellers who shed light on unknown or mystical causes of events, which are seen to be the result of an individual's acts in the past.

Cultivating Spiritual Patronage at a Fortune-telling Stall

In this section, I explore a third element of *nissāya*, which relates to the cultivation of spiritual patronage. The market-based fortune-tellers in Psar Thmei maintain relationships with a range of spiritual patrons that can protect them from danger and bad luck. There is little sense that relations with these entities are ascribed by fate or predestined. Rather as spiritual guardians or occupants closely associated with specific professions or places, relations with them are entered into by virtue of an individual's involvement in the activities of a given profession or place. Relations with these entities are also actively cultivated with regards to mutual benefit. Among the multiple forms of spiritual beings venerated by migrant market traders, the child spirit plays an important role in domesticating the unfamiliar space of the urban market.

Most of the fortune-tellers I met in Phnom Penh seem to share a belief that maintaining a good relationship with gods and spirits can reaffirm and strengthen their divinatory authority. From the royal astrologer to the market fortune-teller, various forms of spiritual affinity always come into play in the process of improvisation of divinatory authority, even if the ways Khmer fortune-tellers speak about how spiritual beings determine their lives are diverse and depend on individual religious preferences. Many give a high level of respect to the *grū* or the teachers, who originally created or established the knowledge

of divination and astrology. Those teachers passed away long ago but their spirits are still active and come back to protect their followers.³⁵

Grū Bun, the numerology fortune-teller whose practice was discussed in the previous chapter, said that he has *nissāya* with *loktāisī* or hermits. Grū Bun considered an unknown hermit as his astrological teacher, and venerated his spirit because he followed the traditional belief about the high moral character of hermits. Khmer people believe that a group of hermits has practised meditation persistently in Phnom Koulen (a range of hills behind the royal complex at Angkor) since the pre-Buddhist period, while also devoting their knowledge to teaching the Khmer people (see Marston 2004: 180). The identity of Grū Bun's astrological teacher, however, remained mysterious and unknowable. It could be that he was one of Grū Bun's ancestors who had learnt different kinds of knowledge in the time before Buddhism and before universities offered education for Khmer people. Another possibility is that the hermit might have been Grū Bun's teacher in Grū Bun's past life.

In a similar manner, Davy, the card-reading fortune-teller at the Central Market, always emphasised that her card-reading knowledge and ability to predict peoples' fortunes were reinforced by spiritual forces. In addition to her card-reading skills, the ability of guessing or predicting an individual's fortune came to her from an invisible source of power derived from the maintenance of good relations with the gods and deities. The spiritual beings seemed to support and strengthen Davy's divinatory skill. Davy expressed a deep respect and gratefulness to a class of spiritual entities called *braḥ'angga*. Typically, Khmer people use *braḥ'angga* as a colloquial term to refer to "gods," the Lord Buddha, or the King. In the divination context, however, Khmer fortune-tellers tend to use the term *braḥ'angga* when they refer to a range of spiritual entities who help them accumulate the power to see or forecast people's fortunes. According to Davy, *braḥ'angga* refers to a range of sacred figures including Lok Yāy Deba, Lok Braḥcau, and Lok Braḥkaev.³⁶ She

³⁵ The belief in *grū* or the deceased teacher of knowledge of divination and astrology, as discussed here, is similar to what Mei-Mei, the migrant student from Kampot, believed in and worshipped *grūpādhyāya* or *grūkamneot* to maintain her wellbeing (see Chapter 1).

³⁶ Davy could not elaborate further about, especially on the origins, spiritual power or how these entities can make contact with her. Davy tended to introduce the names of gods and goddesses as "the famous gods," whose magical power can assist her to deliver accurate card-reading fortune for her clients. Such spiritual entities are the source of spiritual power "making the cards to become sacred" (Interview, April 3 2015).

further articulated that she was familiar with the divine female ancestor's statue known as Lok Yāy Deba as it was located in her hometown in Prei Veng province.³⁷ In addition, she used the term *braḥ'angga* in referring to the deceased teacher(s) who originally established and developed the card-reading technique.

There are specific procedures that the fortune-tellers believe are mandatory to conduct before reading the cards. First, they ensure that the incense for venerating the spiritual entities is lit. Most of the fortune-tellers view incense as an essential element for communicating with the gods and deities. Davy also conducts certain ritual actions in order to sustain her relationship with the deceased teachers of her occupation. While she was shuffling the cards several times, her lips were moving like she was chanting or whispering to someone in a gentle manner. I learnt that such ritual action is part of the process of paying respects to the deceased teachers of the card-reading divination technique. Davy showed her respect to the unknown deceased teachers even though her card-reading skill was self-taught and came from observing her mother. I had a chance to observe Davy reading the cards from the beginning of a session. Davy started by lighting incense to invite to the table the *braḥ'angga*—the various gods and deities who assist her divination capacity. She believed that she would not be able to conduct her card-reading successfully or deliver an accurate prediction to the clients without the spiritual presence and assistance of these gods and deities.

In addition to her spiritual affinity with the *braḥ'angga*, Davy also cultivates relations with benevolent local spirits who are invited to reside in her card-reading stall at the Central Market. Every morning, before starting the card-reading divination, Davy provided food offerings like candies, fruit, chiffon egg, and water to those spiritual figures and placed lit incense in front of them. I recognised that the statues and images of gods and deities enshrined by Davy at her stall were similar to those enshrined by my Khmer friends in their residences in Phnom Penh. These various gods and deities included the Chinese god of water and land, the goddess of luck and prosperity, the angel cat, and the child spirit.

³⁷ I should emphasise that Khmer people have built and worshipped the statue of *Lok Yāydeba* in various provinces of Cambodia; Hang (2004) documented the existence of the statue of *Lok Yāy Deb* in the centre of Siem Reap.

A picture of the Buddha was placed next to the gods of water and earth, which were represented by a pair of statues depicting old Chinese males, both seated, one with a long white beard, the other with a turban and a pot belly. These god images are similar to *Ti Chui Iea*—the Chinese god of water and earth that Mei-Mei usually venerated and worshipped in her house in Phnom Penh (see Chapter 1). In the market stalls, the traders did not have enough space to store the shrine of the god of water and earth. Davy called these gods *tābukmâtvaeng* (តាពុកមាត់វែង) or “long beard uncle” and *tākrapong* (តាគ្រូបោង)³⁸ or “big-belly uncle.” Although there is some variation in the names given to these gods, people explained their spiritual roles and efficacy in a similar way. *Tābukmâtvaeng* and *tākrapong* and *Ti Chui Iea* act as the protectors or guardians of human territories which are comprised of land and water. Davy believed that *tābukmâtvaeng* and *tākrapong* are especially relevant to businesses and can ensure the wellbeing of shopkeepers or traders.



Figure 20 The card-reading fortune-teller worships the images of gods, goddesses, and deities with offerings every day at her stall inside the Central Market.

³⁸ Some scholars use the spelling *Kombaong* (Callebaut and Prigent 2011).

The fortune-teller also prayed to *nāngpáknāngpoy* (នាងបកនាងបោយ), the goddess of luck and prosperity. There were two different forms for *nāngpáknāngpoy*'s statues. The first represents the deity as an adult female who is depicted kneeling, in a gold robe and tiara, and beckoning with her left hand to call for luck and prosperity. Another one personifies the deity as a pair of children, a chubby boy and a girl, dressed in a traditional Khmer style, and beckoning with their hands. Another sacred deity with a similar role is the *chmādeba* (ផ្កាទេព) or *chmāpák chmāpoy* which can be translated into English as “angel cat.” Davy believed that this sacred cat, a small image of which was enshrined in her stall, possesses a magical power to attract people/clients to her stall.



Figure 21 *nāngpáknāngpoy* in the form of a boy and girl, with beckoning hands in a symbolic action calling for money, as a sign of wealth and prosperity.

In addition to such gods and deities, Davy also maintained a shrine to the child spirits, a miniature house made from bamboo hanging on the wall of the fortune-teller's stall. She

explained that this little house was a temporary residence of the child spirits known as *mreñkangvāl*, which refers to the child spirits who are “homeless” and move around different places. Davy said that the residence provided temporary shelter to the child spirits and that she also provided them, on a daily basis, incense and sweet offerings such as fruit, candy and biscuits for nourishment. In return, she said, they protect her from bad luck and attract opportunities. The way she explained the names and characters of the child spirits indicated that they are identical to the child spirits that Mei-Mei, the Khmer-Chinese student venerates at her house in Phnom Penh (see Chapter 1). I have noticed that child spirits are very widely venerated in both private and public spheres in Phnom Penh, including in individual residences, shops and marketplace stalls. They are especially prominent in business premises where miniature bamboo houses placed for the child spirits’ benefit can usually be found hanging at the front entrance.

None of the Khmer traders at the Central Market could describe for me either the number of child spirits that roamed its precincts or their bodily images and characters. The only material symbols standing for the child spirits were the miniature houses made from bamboo hanging from the walls of the market stalls. Neither did traders disclose to me knowledge of the identity of these spirits. It is possible that they were the spirits of unknown predecessors who once lived and perished in the precincts of the market. It is not uncommon for Khmer people travelling through unknown parts to hear the sound of a child crying and to imagine that they may be in the presence of the ghost of a child who perhaps died at that site.³⁹ The housing and feeding of such spirits suggest that they are homeless and hungry: bereft beings who are needful of basic subsistence care. This conception of the child spirits resonates with Chinese and Vietnamese folk beliefs in wandering ghosts or hungry ghosts. They are the spirits of people who are believed to have suffered untimely deaths or who lack any descendants to venerate them and, therefore, need to be regularly supplied with offerings of food lest they wreak havoc on the property and homes of the living (Leshkovich 2014).

According to some, the child spirits residing in the market stalls are under the tutelage of the territorial spirit of the market. Sok Kim Heng, the former Director of the Central

³⁹ See, for example, the memoir by Bun T Lim (2006: 87-91) who describes an unsettling encounter with child spirits while undergoing forced labour in an unfamiliar rural area during the Khmer Rouge era.

Market (on duty in 2000) explained that it was the “Lok Ta Thom Phsar Thmey,” the highest *neak ta* or territorial spirit, of the Central Market, who sent the child spirits to protect and look after and secure the fortunes of the traders (Callebaut and Prigent, 2011). All market traders must venerate the guardian spirit of the market with some offerings. And from the ritual exchange, the market guardian spirit(s) treat the traders as their grandchildren (Ibid). This recalls what Leshkowich (2014) observed about B  n Th  nh market’s metaphorical wandering ghosts which, for some, symbolise the market officials that Vietnamese small scale entrepreneurs are forced to appease with money in order to maintain their security in the uncertain socialist market economy. In Cambodian urban markets, however, the reciprocal relationship between traders and spirits is not only metaphorical in form. The Khmer market women in Phnom Penh’s Central Market habitually feed and house the child spirits as an integral technique to secure support for their economic endeavours.

The market traders at the Central Market tend to characterise the child spirits using terms such as “homeless,” “mobile,” and “independent.” Nevertheless, the child spirits can be controlled by humans and non-human agents who have resources like food offerings, residences, and the ability to extend care and protection. Over the course of my research, I discovered that Khmer people believe in and propitiate various forms of child spirits which are made in the form of amulets and images. One popular version of the amulet was traditionally made from a preserved foetus while others were produced using the grilled or desiccated body of a deceased baby (*k  nkrak*) (See Chapter 4). Alternatively, child spirits are represented in the images of angel babies (*kum  radeba*) or baby/child likeness dolls (see next section). However, *mre  nkangv  l* lacks a concrete form. Khmer people who host them can imagine the child spirit dropping by or visiting their house or the market stalls temporarily to take the candies and longans in exchange for the “watching and blessing” service they provide for their human caretakers.

The practice of venerating child spirits in Cambodia also draws on the socio-cultural meanings of children and childhood. Megan Sinnott (2014) argues that the beliefs and practices of childhood spirits in Thailand reflect instrumental and sentimental constructions of childhood in agrarian societies. The child can be seen as labour as they can protect the home and assist in general tasks of the household. Additionally, they can provide affection and companionship for their parents or caretakers. These observations are of relevance to Cambodian agrarian society, where having children could be seen as

an increase of labour. Producing more children provides wealth for a household and maintains the continuity of the family. Some Khmer married couples believe that their relationship will be secured if they have children. Child spirit beliefs resonate with this construction of childhood. The child spirits in the Central Market offer material and financial assistance and physical protection to those who venerate them. The spirits also expect to receive care, attention, compassion, love, offerings, and resources in return.

In this context, the bond between the child spirit and the humans is not one of predestined affinity but is activated through relations of reciprocity. The relationship that individual care-takers/propitiators maintain with the child spirits consists of an exchange of mutual care. The caretakers or propitiators refer to themselves as older sister/brother (*pūng*) or mother/father (*m"âk/ p"ā*) while addressing the spirits as sister (*'ūn*) or child (*kūn*). Living in the absence of familial relations, the child spirits would not be able to survive without the emotional and material support from their adopted parents or siblings. In turn, to maintain the relationship and establish the loyalty of the child spirits, market traders have to provide the offerings to them every day. Stall-keepers like Davy tried to show their gratitude to the child spirits by providing some food offerings, such as candies, snacks, or toys that a child likes to consume. In this regard, the protective power could not be activated without an exchange that makes the two agencies satisfied with their benefits. The magical protection which is provided by the child spirit therefore requires constant tending. It is temporal, dependent, conditional, contractual, and thus uncertain and risky.

Davy explained that such spiritual entities are not actually associated with her card-reading divinatory skill, but rather are venerated to protect her business. The patron-client relations Davy creates with these spiritual beings through ritual exchange have the purpose of securing her fortune, wealth, and prosperity while also giving protection from danger or unlucky incidents. The consistent nourishment to the spirits can guarantee that her life cannot be harmed by any malevolent spirits.

In the context of my study, we can see that a range of spiritual patrons is cultivated, sustained, and maximised by a market woman, who is uneducated and lacks resources, financial/social support, and authority. Through such limitations, however, she attempts to domesticate space and emplace herself into the urban market circumstance by agentively assembling different allies and strategies to assist her in her tasks. Although the foregoing description analyses these relations of spiritual affinity using the case of a

single female informant, I think that her case enables us to understand how an individual comprehends and attempts to control uncertainties in her fate, fortune, and life in relation to an unknown realm of spiritual forces.

The daily sacrifices that Davy made to the gods and spirits enshrined at her stall were similar to those habitually practised by market traders all over Phnom Penh. I observed that market traders and stallholders working in different urban marketplaces throughout the city also place statues and images of similar deities around their stalls. The market traders provide offerings to the gods and spirits on Buddhist holy days and on important religious ceremonies as they believe that those sacred entities can look after their lives and ensure their fortune. In this way, they sustain relationships with multiple spiritual patrons in order to achieve success in their businesses in the urban marketplace. As for Davy, her attempts to communicate and interact with the spiritual entities can be seen as the formation of an alternative affinity which potentially brings about fortunate outcomes and eliminates undesirable situations in her life and work in the market.

Replacing Fragmented Relations with Magical Bonds: The Efficacy of Khmer Love Magic [sneh ស្នេហា]

I observed that Khmer fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh supplement their divination service with magical offerings in order to attract clients. This was the case with Davy, the card-reading fortune-teller at the Central Market: some clients came to see her not only for the card-reading service she offered but also because of the magical objects she sold that could support, protect, and bless their lives. Although individuals have different levels of fortune which are controlled by their predestined affinities, the Buddhist law of karma, and relations of spiritual patronage, Davy tended to suggest to clients after a card-reading session that there were alternative ways to secure, protect, and enhance their fortune. A range of magical objects were introduced to the clients as auspicious tools for empowering their lives with “protection” and “attraction.” Davy sold to her clients various forms of magical objects, such as *yantra* (*yānta*) and the waistband amulet (*saekathā*). These magical objects had been made and sacralised by a famous Buddhist monk “Lokta Bunlee” who resided in a temple in Kandal and/or Kampong Spue

provinces, but travelled constantly around the country distributing his magical wares.⁴⁰ Before delivering these objects to her clients, Davy prayed and chanted in Pali and Khmer in order to activate their magical power.

Most of my Khmer youth informants expected to assemble power of protection and attraction from the *yantra* and the waistband amulet. They believed that such magical objects can chase away bad luck, prevent accidents during travelling, while also delivering good fortune in love and work. These magical objects were very popular among male and female clients. However, the two groups of clients held different expectations of the objects' magical efficacies. In Chapter 5 (as discussed later), the male clients largely believe in the efficacy of magic and see it as a tool to protect and safeguard them from bad luck, malevolent spirits, and sorcery. Some of them conceptualise *yantra* and various forms of amulets as a symbol of protection and invulnerability. However, I discovered that the female clients are more likely to emphasise the power of magic to attract others.

In this section, I specifically highlight the power of attraction embedded in various forms of Khmer love magic that are employed by female clients in Phnom Penh. In addition to *yantra* and waistband amulets, they utilise other types of magical objects, such as perfume spray and sheets of gold leaf to enhance beauty and attractiveness. In line with Philip Taylor's (2010) definition of "love magic," this chapter suggests that perfume spray and pieces of gold sheets can be considered as love magic because they induce love, attract attention, stimulate desire, and promote positive feelings towards the individuals who wear or use them. The female's obsession with love magic also addresses their concerns relating to mistrust, love, fragmented family relations, and uncertain economic conditions.

Miss Dara, a loyal client of a mediumistic fortune-teller in Bung Kak, Phnom Penh, believed that the power of love magic could help strengthen the bond with her husband, build trust, and overcome financial crisis. She believed that it was not the mediumistic fortune-teller who helped her resolve such problems. Rather, it was a child spirit who

⁴⁰ Some confusion exists regarding the name of the province where Lok Ta Bunlee stayed. The first time I interviewed Davy (Feb 25, 2015), she Davy said that his temple was located in Kampong Spue Province. However, the second time she mentioned the location of his temple as being in Kandal Province (Interview, March 13, 2015).

entered the mediumistic fortune-teller's body (*cūlrūp*) that helped her resolve a life crisis related to her business. In 2014, she had opened a salon at a local market in Phnom Penh but it was not successful. She decided to sell her salon so she could raise the funds to start a nail spa business. Dara waited for a long time and was losing hope in finding someone interested to buy the salon from her. She asked the child spirit possessing the mediumistic fortune-teller in Beung Kak to help her. Amazingly, a few days after consulting the fortune-teller, a potential buyer contacted Dara and made a good offer. Dara received 2500 USD from the buyer but she did not keep all the money to herself. She explained:

Because the child spirit helped me, I have to pay back 100 US dollars to the medium [*'nakcūlrūp*] to show that I am grateful for the spirit's help...and to thank the medium who used her magic to help me.

The magical power of the child spirit also helped Dara collect money back from a Vietnamese debtor. A few years ago, she took the mediumistic fortune-teller's advice to put *yǎnta*, a small piece of red fabric amulet, inside her shoes as she believed that this could bring her luck with every step she walked. With this walking magic, she was able to collect the money from a Vietnamese debtor who had owed her 1000 USD.

On the day I first met her at the fortune-teller's residence, she allowed me to listen while she was consulting “*'ūn*” (younger sister/brother), the child spirit who was possessing the fortune-teller's body. I observed the whole process of spiritual possession. The fortune-teller changed her costume from a traditional Khmer-style costume, comprised of a white cotton t-shirt and sarong, to a yellow shirt and a pair of bright red pants. Her face was made-up with a thick white powder and bright red lips. To me, her dress and make-up resembled the Chinese soap-opera actors whose performances I often saw on T.V. She told me that she could not allow me to take any pictures when she conducted the ritual and was in a trance state. The fortune-teller then walked to the ritual altar and sat in front of the images of gods and goddess standing on a small table on different levels. I saw an old doll (appearing like a baby) sitting next to the ritual altar where the mediumistic fortune-teller conducted the rituals. As Dara explained, the fortune-teller conducted the ritual to invite the child spirit inside the “doll baby” to possess her own body. While sitting in front of the altar, she held bracelets which were made of black string beads in her two hands. After spraying perfume onto her hands and over her whole body, she prayed and chanted in front of the ritual altar then closed her eyes and moved her hands

and arms in a half-circle, from right to left, like a child's dancing action. The fortune-teller moved her hands and arms around while bouncing on a pillow placed in front of the altar then raised her head up and expressed her voice. Dara and I recognised that the fortune-teller's voice had changed from an old lady's to that of a young child, which showed that she was already possessed by the child spirit. Although a middle-aged woman, around 45 years of age, she acted like a 10-year-old child due to her high-pitched voice, her body language, and facial expressions.

Dara advised me the proper way to address the fortune-teller while she was in the trance state should be '*ūn*' or younger sister/brother in Khmer. After Dara noticed that the child spirit already possessed the body of the fortune-teller, she started telling her story of affliction.



Figure 22 The ritual altar at the mediumistic fortune-teller's house in Monivong Rd, Phnom Penh.



Figure 23 Images of the child spirits and the baby/child likeness dolls placed next to the ritual altar. The mediumistic fortune-teller provided offerings to the child spirit every day.

The first problem she consulted the fortune-teller about related to her robbery encounter. Earlier that day she had been robbed and lost all of her credit cards and some cash. The most serious item taken was her driver's license and identity cards because having them reissued was both time consuming and costly. The fortune-teller told Dara that this month (September 2015) was not an auspicious time for her to arrange the reissue of such important documents. As Dara would be disturbed with unlucky situations throughout the month, it was advised that she wait until October to get her documents reissued. Dara also suggested to me that if I wanted a driver's license for myself or if any Khmer friends wanted their ID cards reissued, I should consult the fortune-teller because her husband is a police officer. Through the powerful connection of her policeman husband, the fortune-teller advised Dara that she (Davy) could reissue her documents the following month at a discounted rate.

After the first problem had been addressed, Davy continued talking about the second problem, which related to her relationship with her husband. She asked the fortune-teller how she could convince her English husband to trust her more than his friends. Currently, Dara assisted her husband to look after his property investments in Cambodia and in

neighbouring countries. Dara planned to invest in her own nail spa business in a local market. However, her husband did not trust her enough to give her the financial authority to do so. Dara hoped that the magical power commanded by the child spirit could help her influence her husband's mind and convince him to trust and believe in her words.

While listening to Dara speaking about her unlucky experience, I saw the mediumistic fortune-teller start to spray some water on Dara's face and clean it with pieces of cotton. Then the fortune-teller placed thin pieces of gold sheet in different spots on Dara's face—the forehead, two cheeks and her nose—as well as on her chest. Later, the fortune-teller scrubbed the gold sheets from her face and then, using the stem of an incense stick, drew something on Dara's forehead, after which she cleaned those spots with wet tissue paper that she had dipped in sacred water. Dara explained to me that this ritual action was known as a form of love magic or *vedamanta sneh* (វេទមន្តស្នេហ៍)—a popular ritual which is favoured by the Khmer people who aim to enhance their sexual power and attractiveness. The mediumistic fortune-teller showed that she was not willing to explain to me the meaning of her magical practice. However, Grū Bun, the numerological fortune-teller who is also expert in magical enchantment, further explained that the purpose of putting the gold sheets on the woman's face is a ritual for transforming and changing “the facial appearance” of the female clients to become more beautiful, cheerful and bright. Sometimes, female clients, especially those who work in night-clubs, pubs, and Karaoke restaurants, prefer to put sheets of gold leaf on their breasts or other private parts of their body since they feel that this ritual can build their self-confidence to attract male customers by enhancing their sexual appearance and body. The magical power of the gold sheets is not only sought by women for enhancing their power of attraction, but also by men who seek for their everyday communication with others to be considered favourable and trustworthy. The ritual of putting gold sheets on different parts of the human body for the purpose of transforming individuals' desire into magical embodied communication is called “*mettāmahāniyama*” (Pali-Sanskrit); it is considered to embrace the senses of compassion (*mettā*) and popularity (*mahāniyama*) and enables individuals to be seen and gain attraction from others.

Additionally, Dara also consulted a Grū Cham, a Cham ritual specialist, residing in a suburban area of Phnom Penh. The Grū Cham suggested that she put small diamonds under her skin around the area of the kidneys. He conducted the ritual while chanting in Cham language. He used a long needle tip to penetrate her skin and then inserted two

diamonds under her skin. Dara did not feel pain and did not see her own bleeding during the ritual conducted by the Cham specialist. The magical diamonds inserted under her skin could, reputedly, enhance her sexual capability and attract men to be interested in her. Through undertaking these various forms of bodily ritual actions, Dara felt that she could magically enhance her sexual attractiveness and reaffirm the unforgettable sexual pleasure she gave to her English husband, which could control his mind to love her forever and trust in her words more than his friends.

After the divination process ended, I had a chance to interview Dara. I was wondering if love magic was seen as an essential element in maintaining the relationship between the couple. Could they still love, trust and feel attraction for each other without magic? Reflecting on Dara's life-experience, attraction and trust were the primary qualities that she expected to elicit from her husband. A Khmer woman who had divorced, she had been struggling with the burden of being a single mother of two daughters. Her second marriage, to an English husband, had brought a new life to her and her children. She started practising English and her increased fluency in the language granted her the opportunity to help her husband look after his rental houses in Thailand. She reflected that by marrying a foreign husband she had transformed her life to become "modern", for example, it had taught her how to do business in a foreign country. However, she needed to invest more in a business of her own in order to increase her profits, generating a surplus to support her daughters and maintain her business. She saw her foreigner husband as a symbol of economic capital and hoped he would help her to secure and improve her own financial status. A strong relationship with her husband was thus, for her, an economic resource and she sought to increase its value but was uncertain how to do this. Love magic could help achieve her desires. In her view, the attractiveness, charm, and appeal it promised could be used as a resource to build and secure the trust and loyalty of her husband.

Dara's experience of using love magic is common among many Khmer residents in Phnom Penh and across Cambodia who utilise various forms of magic to create, strengthen or rebuild bonds between family members and with other people more broadly. Many residents of Phnom Penh—housewives, market traders, factory workers, business investors, and government officials—travel to Wat Komsan, expecting the monks in that temple to incant love magic into their bottles of perfumes, make-up powders, lipstick, incense, and bottles of water. I observed that enchanted perfumes, powder, hairspray,

lipstick and other cosmetics are common make-up accessories for Khmer women who want to be beautiful and attractive. These enchanted accessories can transform the users to become more attractive, desirable, charming, and appealing than others. The application of love magic through these media is believed to create an emotional attachment and a magical bond that attract strangers' attention and binds together members of the family.

The power of Khmer love magic is familiar to the Viet people in the Mekong Delta. Philip Taylor (2010) observed that landless wage labourers, people with insufficient family income, anxious wives, frustrated mothers, or grieving widows believe that the powerful magic love potions issued by a Khmer monastery can help to relieve their concerns, anxieties, and uncertainties resulting from the economic and social transformations in rural southern Vietnamese society. The efficacy of magically empowered scented all-purpose medical oil, perfume, and air freshener can overcome family conflicts, detect lost family members, pacify unruly children, heal illness, and revive love and attraction in separated couples. In essence, the substances of Khmer love magic promote familial "healing" and "reintegration" (Taylor 2010: *ibid*). Love magic heals sensorial and bodily afflictions while also repairing fragmented relations among individuals.

Following Taylor (2010), I argue that Khmer female clients who utilise "love magic" can overcome the concerns and uncertainties arising in their disorienting encounter with market-economy relations in Cambodia's post-socialist society. In urban contexts like Phnom Penh, Khmer people detach themselves from their familial networks in their villages of origin and try to make the city "home." However, the capitalist market-economy in the city formulates different patterns of social relations. Similar to what Taylor has observed (2010), I discovered that multiple forms of love magic are in high demand among Khmer females, who use love magic to relieve their anxieties associated with insecure economic conditions while also restoring fragmented relationships within the family that occur in the urban setting.

Considering the nature of Khmer love magic or *sneh* as a mystical technology that binds people together brings us back to the discussion of *nissāya*, conceptualised in this chapter as various kinds of destined affinity. The domain of love magic fits within the framework of *nissāya* as a specific case of mystically determined relations between people. Although the notions of *sneh* and *nissāya* are often formulated and conceptualised differently, they

result in a similar outcome. *Nissāya* is articulated as a kind of mystical affinity that establishes bond relations between individuals without the latter's rational intent. Khmer people mention *nissāya* when they try to make sense of unexpected personal compatibilities or the inexplicable attraction happening at first sight among strangers. In a similar pattern, *sneh* or love magic also creates a “magical bond” which stimulates desire, promotes attraction, and arouses or rekindles love between individuals. Through these means, strangers can be induced to love and trust, and be attracted to each other beyond the operation of their consciousness, intentions, or rational thinking. This resonates with the experiences of Dara and Davy, who utilise various spiritual and magical technologies in the belief that these technologies enable them to attract and assemble available resources while also reformulating their relationships with others.

Conclusion: Reconceptualising the Khmer Theory of Mysterious Affinities (*Nissāya*)

This chapter has explored the Khmer idea of *nissāya*, or mystical affinity, and its practical implications for women in an urban Cambodian marketplace. The idea of *nissāya* gives expression to the view—and folk observation of social practice in Cambodia—that relationships between individuals frequently are subject to mysterious influences. The concept of *nissāya* as mystical affinity can be understood as an emic Cambodian notion of social relationality and hence provides an alternative to a variety of more established social theories which hold that relationships between individuals may be, variously, rationally pursued, prescribed by tradition, socially or culturally determined, or coincidental or random. People in relationships subject to *nissāya* are bound together by the operation of mystical factors, be they spiritual forces or entities, cosmic laws, or magical substances and objects. *Nissāya* predisposes Khmer people to think that many of their mundane relationships are mystically determined while also opening room for people to attempt to influence their own fates. The notion of *nissāya* thus can come into play when an individual goes in search of strategies for knowing and improving their social circumstances. The ambiguity of the concept of *nissāya* and its related connotation as a domain of mysterious factors, mean that Khmer people frequently consult with fortune-tellers who attempt to identify meaningful patterns in their clients' lives through a range of theories and techniques.

The chapter illustrates these points ethnographically by showing the part played by *nissāya* in the consciousness and lives of urban Cambodian women. It takes as its core ethnographic example the professional practices of Davy, a market-based fortune-teller in Phnom Penh. The life experience of this market-based fortune-teller can shed light on the concerns of urban Khmer people who are coping with uncertain living conditions in Cambodia's globalising post-socialist society. Davy could not continue her university education and became a professional fortune-teller at a moment of crisis in her life. From a series of failures and disappointments in her personal and business life, she learnt that life is uncertain and uncontrollable. Davy's various difficulties and her attempts to comprehend and control them in her fortune-telling practice opens a window onto the fragmented relations and uncertainties encountered by many Khmer people in the city.

Davy's practice portrays how an individual comprehends life's ups and downs by reference to notions of relatedness, mystical affinity and fate that arise out of the experience of living in a rapidly transitioning urban market society. Using techniques learnt informally from her own mother, she does not employ a rigorous method but is open to exploring different factors that have the potential to influence the outcomes of her clients' lives and businesses. As a card reading fortune-teller, she can be viewed as an intuitive folk sociologist discerning how her clients' relationships, and changes in relationship status, prospectively may have a huge bearing on their fortunes. Some relations are seen to be predetermined by unknown factors or cosmic laws, but Davy also demonstrates that it is possible to exploit or manipulate the relations one maintains with a variety of human and non-human agents in order to press a personal advantage. She and her fellow fortune-tellers conceptualise their cosmos as a complex and potentially knowable field of fated relations, mysterious laws, magical forces and spiritual entities that in their practice they seek to know and influence, and from which they hope to derive benefits.

Davy's case enables us to explore ethnographically the notion of *nissāya* as it operates in her life and that of her peers. The chapter uncovers four dimensions of *nissāya*, or mystical affinity, which are revealed in different categories of affinities and relationships and implicate a variety of actions and agents. The first aspect of *nissāya* is captured within Davy's sense of the significance of social relationships in determining prospective outcomes in her clients' business and personal lives. Her card readings open, for her clients' contemplation, a plurality of possible social destinies, while her personal practice

embodies a strategy of taking advantage of available relations and cultivating new alliances to create new opportunities for herself. The second aspect of *nissāya* revealed in the practice of market-based card-reading fortune-tellers is the Buddhist belief in karmic predestination. Fortunes read according to this notion of *nissāya* enable individuals to comprehend that their lives and relationships are determined by potentially knowable karmic laws. The card-reading can enlighten clients as to how, through moral action in their past or present lives, their relationships are shaped by cosmic laws.

The third aspect of *nissāya* uncovered in this chapter is the maintenance by traders of relationships of mutual care with spiritual beings of the marketplace. Since these spiritual beings typically are associated with a specific occupation (market trading) and place (the marketplace) the mystical affinity that traders have with these beings is not inherently one between individuals as such, but comes about in consequence of the traders' profession and connection to the places where they practise it. Maintaining relations with the spiritual beings that prevail in these domains is seen to be essential in order for traders to continue to prosper in their business practice. The final aspect of *nissāya* discussed in this extended case study is reliance upon the efficacy of Khmer love magic. This practice is explored through the experience of a market woman who applies a range of magical technologies and substances to attract her partner. The magical affinity created by love magic can influence the will of others, bring people together, and strengthen their relationships with others. Furthermore, the magic can help heal or overcome the sense of anxiety, risk, mistrust, and insecurity that market women confront, owing to the fragmented social relations of post-socialist society. Like the other iterations of *nissāya* discussed in this chapter, inherent in the idea of love magic is the belief that mystical affinities created through such processes are not inalterable; rather they reveal that through understanding and purposive actions, one's fate can be changed.

Chapter 4

Khmer Magic as a Weapon for the Weak

In Cambodia, magic and sorcery are embedded in people's everyday experiences. Over the course of a year spent engaging with fortune-tellers and their clients in Phnom Penh, I found that the fortune-tellers not only offered divining consultations but also magical services which were popular among their Khmer urban clients. Khmer people refer to "magic" as *manta akom*⁴¹, which literally means "to come," or [a form of] "*gambīra*" a scripture referring to a traditional form of knowledge which has been inherited from previous generations (Chuon Nath 1967). In colloquial speech, the terms *manta akom* and *vedamanta* are interchangeably used in referring to magic, depending on individual preference. Through interviews and informal conversations with research interlocutors, I found that Khmer people categorise magic as part of supernatural beliefs, or '*apiyajamnya*, which literally means "invisible belief." Based on the local explanation, magic is embedded in Khmer folk belief which has been inherited and reproduced over generations.

In Phnom Penh, it is very common to see high-ranking officials (*mantri*) and rich people (*ouknha*) relying on different kinds of divination and magical practices to buttress their power and oppose their political enemies. In early December 2015, I visited Grū Bun, a numerology fortune-teller who offers his service at his residence in Mean Chey district, in the south-eastern part of Phnom Penh. His "VIP" clients included politicians, military officers, state workers, and celebrities. They shared a common purpose in consulting him: to attempt to sustain their financial benefit, status, fame and power. From the fortune-teller's perspective, high-ranking officials associated with state power are attracted to

⁴¹ Originally, the word *akom* (transliterated as *āgaman*) is Sanskrit *āgama* and *manta* means mantra. These terms come from the Hindu/Vedic tradition. Although such magical beliefs and practices have been with Buddhism since its inception and dissemination to Southeast Asian countries, they are not canonically Buddhist. This distinction between religion and magic is common in the Theravada world of mainland Southeast Asia (Craig Reynolds, personal communication, 26 April 2018).

divination and magic because they live in a state of fear about losing the benefits they have accrued as a result of their position.

Grū Bun, the numerological fortune-teller told me the tragic story of a high-ranking married couple who frequently consulted the fortune-teller and relied on certain forms of magical technology because they had encountered misfortune caused by the power of black magic. The high-ranking couple had been caught up in a magical battle in which magic, sorcery and spirits were used as powerful weapons to attack their status, security and wellbeing. Grū Bun introduced me to Direk,⁴² the Khmer teenage son of the provincial governor. Direk had been a loyal client of Grū Bun for many years. I saw that he held in his two hands, high-tech, luxurious cell phones, while around his neck he wore different kinds of amulets. He believed that the magical power from *kumāradeba* (child spirit amulet), and *yānta* (magical tattoo or magical amulet) could protect him from malevolent spirits or sorcery. The traumatic memory of seeing his parents suffer from the effects of magical power still haunted him. He said: “what’s happening in my family is just like the dramatic story we can see in *lakon*” [a Khmer soap opera genre serialised on TV].

As he spoke, Direk was looking at a middle-aged woman lying down on a mat, surrounded by many people. I saw that her eyes were open wide, while her facial expression showed both fatigue and frustration. Direk explained that the woman was his mother. Then he described how magic and sorcery had caused misfortune in his family. His father recently had been dismissed from his position while his mother had suffered from the effects of sorcery for more than ten years. The dramatic plot twists he had viewed in Khmer soap opera series and experienced in his real life situation had taught him the dark side of humanity. Although his family situation was more comfortable than average, he feared that everything he took for granted in his life could be undone by the power of magic, used as a weapon by ill-intentioned people motivated by desire, hate or jealousy.

This chapter explores the role that magical technologies play in the different life journeys of Khmer people in Phnom Penh. The selected historical evidence and ethnographic data suggest that divination and magical technologies are popular among Khmer elite groups, especially high-ranking officials, who seek refuge in magical protection when they

⁴² A pseudonym.

encounter uncertainty or insecure situations. This chapter also highlights the psychological and emotional experiences encountered by people when they are affected by various forms of magical assault. The ethnographic data have been drawn from the life-experience of a provincial governor and his wife who were attacked by black magic due, in part, to a “love triangle” which intensified conflict between the members of their family. Their life-stories reflect how magical technologies affect people’s lives and motivate individual actions, while also creating certain forms of relationship between humans and spiritual agents. The multiple roles of the fortune-tellers—as diviners, spirit mediums, exorcists or healers—respond to the different concerns of Khmer people who live in an uncertain and risky environment like Phnom Penh. The urban fortune-telling clients like government officials consider magical practices as a powerful mechanism to protect their lives from danger while also securing their wealth, fame and success. Those magical technologies, however, can be used as an instrument to achieve a negative outcome, causing harm and physical illness.

This chapter is inspired by James Scott’s book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), particularly, his analytical discussion of powerless groups who use various low-key and non-overt tactics as “weapons” in their resistance to socially dominant groups. By applying his framework, however, this chapter utilises the concept “weapons of the weak” somewhat differently to that originally proposed by Scott (1985). The first innovation of my analysis is to point out that Khmer magical and sorcery practices commonly serve as weapons for people in marginal social positions, such as women, dispossessed villagers, and ethnic minorities. Those powerless and struggling groups frequently deploy magical and sorcery practices in certain situations to gain power or protection, or achieve other outcomes. A second innovation is to reflect on the meaning of “weakness” or vulnerability in a society such as Cambodia’s, characterised by social mistrust, weak state institutions and the power of money to corrupt those in office. In this context, even the powerful are vulnerable to losing their position as a result of bribes, conspiracies and other subterfuges used by social competitors motivated by greed, envy or revenge. Depending on context, in certain situations both Khmer elites and the downtrodden alike can be regarded as “weak” and uncertain of their capacity to maintain their social status and security. Both of these groups are thus motivated to search for alternative ways to secure their power. The main ethnographic story of this chapter concerns the experiences of a high-ranking official and his wife who are in a

comparatively powerful social position. However, despite their elite status, they experienced a social downfall, which was attributed to a malevolent sorcery attack launched by enemies inside their kin network. The suffering unleashed by the occult attack laid bare the fragility of the power, status and wellbeing they enjoyed as members of the nation's elite. They subsequently sought refuge in a set of magical technologies that served as defensive "weapons" to counteract their powerlessness and ease their suffering.

Although I use the English term "magic" to explore a range of magical technologies and beliefs in a Buddhist country like Cambodia, I am aware that this term is problematic due to the negative view of such practices as "false belief" in the Christian and Western modernist traditions. Craig Reynolds (2016: 338) notes that magic, or "certain beliefs and practices for mastering the physical world by appealing to supernatural forces, and religion, the pursuit of existential meaning, salvation, or awakening, do not sit easily together." Benavides (2006) suggests that the magical realm is animated by supernatural power which appears in opposition to institutionalised and conventional religion. In many case studies, scholars refer to the term "black magic" in order to highlight the illegitimacy of supernatural power which is manipulated by individuals for destroying their opponents (Benavides 2006; Granoff 1985). However, in a general colloquial sense, the term "magic" is used to refer to those non-orthodox practices associated with the spirits or supernatural forces that humans utilise for mastering their desired outcomes. The efficacy of magical power is obtained through "speech acts," such as spells and curses, as well as ritual gestures and dance. The supernatural effects of magic can transform the human body into an immortal or invulnerable state while also increasing sexual attraction or manipulating desire (Benavides 2006). Drawing on Reynolds (2016) and Benavides (2006), this chapter rejects the mainstream doctrinal approach that sees magic as erroneous or inauthentic. The chapter instead focuses on the multiple dimensions of magic and how magical belief and practices affect individual lives in specific circumstances.

Magical Technologies, Power of Protection and Invulnerability

The clients of urban-based fortune-tellers —high-ranked government officials or political elites (*mantrī*) and rich persons/millionaires (*ouk nha*)—pay great attention to fortune-telling consultations and demonstrate strong belief in different kinds of magical practices.

This section discusses the powerful Khmer magical practices utilised by clients who work as government officials and who seek assistance in maintaining their success, fame, and wealth. In a world where political connections and patronage networks compete and cross-cut each other it is easy for officials to lose the high benefit they gain from their positions, and they risk being replaced by someone who possesses more influential power from their political connections. Many high-ranking officials, therefore, try to find additional ways to preserve and reaffirm their power through various forms of magical technology and spiritual forces.

Many Cambodian officials believe that *yantra*, amulets, and spiritual forces can protect them from enemies during warfare. This belief can be traced back to the time of the Angkor Empire, such as in the mid-tenth century when Khmer artists engraved a lotus blossom with forty-eight syllables of *yantra* on the foundation stones of Bat Chum temple (Harris 2005:60, Codés 1952). The Chinese emissary to Angkor, Zhou Daguan, also noted that arrows and swords could not injure or kill the Khmer King because of a sacred amulet implanted under his flesh (Harris 2005, 60; Harris 2007). Cambodian soldiers and the police strongly believe in various forms of magical technologies including *yantra* and amulets engraved with *gāthā* or a sacred verse/stanza written in Pali and Khmer scripts (Harris 2005, 258). They usually carry the sacred object in the mouth or in the hair since it is believed to generate magical protective power and invulnerability (ibid.).

In some cases, the magical power can be activated and rejuvenated through the embodied collective memory related to the morality and reputation of the Angkorean kingship. For example, Khmer people remember Jayavarman VII as their historical hero based on his reputation derived from building Angkor and governing the great empire. Ashley Thompson (2004) argues that the iconic role of Jayavarman VII can be seen as the “leper king” or “scapegoat king” who devoted his natural body to stabilizing the wellbeing of the whole nation. This approach—conceiving Jayavarman VII as substitute body of the nation—plays a significant role in the concept of healing in a Khmer context. Thompson (2004) proposes that the process of healing involves “the reintegration of the past into the present, through the body of the king, or substitutes thereof.” Similar to Thompson’s (2004) discussion on embodiment of the moral character of the Cambodian king in relation to the concept of healing through cultural memory, I observed Khmer high-ranking officials emulate the Angkorean king’s moral authority to secure their political power in keeping their positions in the government. The ethnographic data reveal that the

fortune-teller advised officials like military officers and politicians to worship and pay respect to Jayavarman VII due to his status as heroic icon for people seeking power, fame, and success.

I observed Grū Bun advising his high-ranking clients—soldiers and politicians—to worship king Jayavarman VII using a seven-layer banana leaf tray or *pāysī*. The mystical body of the late ancient Khmer Empire is represented in the form of a seven-level banana leaf tray. The seven levels of the tray symbolise the reign of Jayavarman VII. From the first to the seventh level of the tray, one can discern a triangular form suggestive of a top-down structure which represents the patron-client relationship between the king and his subjects. The fortune-teller guaranteed that, in offering the banana leaf tray, politicians or high rank-military officers could gain assistance to sustain their power and position. In addition to the vital historical connection, the literal meaning of Jayavarman refers to a sword—a powerful weapon for killing enemies. In this way, the figure of the Angkorean king can be used and understood as a symbol of success, protection, and healing. As Thompson (2004) argues, the image of the “leper king” and the idea of the substitute body of the king, performed through the moral action of Jayavarman VII, not only heal physical illness or memories of suffering but also assure the wellbeing of the whole country. In my own research I found that the ritual worship of King Jayavarman VII is based on the belief that the reintegration of the king’s body (in the form of banana leaf tray) and the embodiment of the social memory of the clients (referring to the symbolic role of the king) can be seen as a process of rendering secure those who feel uncertain and insecure in their current position.

Historical evidence since the Angkorean period until the post-revolutionary era indicates that divination and magic persist in Khmer everyday life, especially among those seeking power to protect and support themselves in uncertain and risky situations. Several years ago, a newspaper reported that soldiers, policemen and fighters (boxers, martial artists) placed enormous store in the magical powers of their elaborate tattoos (Kounila 2009). A Cambodian soldier who was stationed at a disputed area near the Thai border said that he and most of his comrades kept magic tattoos for protection; he had experienced protection from a shower of bullets as a result of the Sanskrit patterns tattooed on his back and chest (ibid.).

Grū Bun and other Khmer people still believe that Gen. Lon Nol, the former Cambodian prime minister in pre-Khmer Rouge times, avoided the Khmer Rouge genocide because of his skilful knowledge in magic. The fortune-teller also met a retired soldier, a former assistant of the late Lon Nol. Out of appreciation and gratitude for Lok Grū Bun's accurate prediction, the soldier gave Grū Bun an old book titled "Magical Rites for Self-Protection." This book was issued and sponsored by Gen. Lon Nol's government with the purpose of applying Khmer magical knowledge in the context of the military's strategic plans. The fortune-teller was also given a red fabric *yantra* that the former soldier always kept inside his hat during his several decades of exile in Europe following the Khmer Rouge rise to power.

The Governor's Magical Protection

Grū Bun also told me about the story of Governor Suk, of Sima Province,⁴³ who had become his loyal client since his wife recovered from an affliction caused by black magic. From his magical sense, the fortune-teller discerned that the governor was also skilful in the use of black magic, which was not a surprise to him as he had met a lot of high-ranking military officers skilful in different kinds of magical knowledge and practice.

For over a decade the governor had been trying to use his magical specialisation to cure his wife from the effects of the black magic. However, his attempts were never successful. The first time he met Lok Grū Bun, the governor had showed an interest in learning black magic from the fortune-teller. However, the fortune-teller had insisted that his magical knowledge was only for helping his clients remove black magic from their minds and bodies. He did not want to encourage people to learn and practice any technique of magic because he knew very well the potential negative impact of this knowledge. Dangerous consequences could result for those who used such magic without the capacity to control or handle the unseen power they encountered.

Suk had also, reportedly, survived the mass killings under the Pol Pot regime because of his knowledge of magical forces and devices. On witnessing many high-ranking officials from the former regime being killed in Phnom Penh in 1975, the governor decided to hide from the Khmer Rouge army on a densely forested mountain. The governor's son narrated his childhood memory about his father, including the almost unbelievable way his father

⁴³ The names of the governor and of the province are both pseudonyms.

had been able to survive the genocide. Because of his father's possession of *akom* or magical formulas and various forms of sacred tattoos, he was protected from all weapons, fierce animals or danger that he encountered in the forest. The governor had learned *akom* from a monk who had lived on the mountain during the time he was hiding from the Khmer Rouge. The enemy could not kill the governor because of the various tattoos on different parts of his body— his head, arms, back, and legs. The tattoos rendered the governor's physical body invulnerable to wounds. Grū Bun further explained that most officials, especially military and politicians, have different patterns of body tattoos and also carry fabric *yantra* (sometimes made from a metal sheet) inside their pocket wherever they go. The portable *yantra* are usually drawn in various animal figures like birds, monkeys, and tigers encircled by the sacred formulas in Khom (𑄎𑄓) script.

The governor experienced that the magical power of the sacred tattoos not only saved his life during the genocide but also protected him from magical attacks by his enemies. One day, the governor had come to consult with Grū Bun about the uncertain situation in his position since the government leaders were not satisfied with his work performance and planned to dismiss him. The assistance from the fortune-teller could be the last hope for the governor to sustain his position. The fortune-teller suspected that the governor's misfortune encountered in his career and family life was the result of a magical attack. The fortune-teller observed that the physical body of the governor was affected by black magic: his eyelids were black, there were scratches on his palms, and he had a lot of black spots on his back. In addition to these suspicious physical symptoms, the fortune-teller also discovered twelve eggs hidden in the joss stick pot placed on the altar table in the governor's office. The fortune-teller further observed a black spot inside each egg— something he considered as an inauspicious sign of a magical attack. Meanwhile, the former governor's wife was suffering from physical weakness— her face was very pale while her eyes were wide open as through she was startled. The fortune-teller therefore diagnosed that someone who was close to the governor was attempting to attack him by using black magic.

The fortune-teller proposed many reasons why the governor was attacked by black magic. For example, since the governor had studied magical practices, it was possible that when he turned 59 in 2015, he could no longer control that magical knowledge like he had done before. Khmer people believe that when individuals enter a new decade of the age range cycle, when they are 19, 29, 39, 49 or 59 years-old, they will encounter misfortune or bad

luck. It may have happened that the governor was attacked by black magic because he had lost his spiritual power in accordance with his age. Moreover, Grū Bun surmised that the governor may have done something improper relating to moral transgression, such as breaking a promise or contract he had made with the possessors of the magical knowledge. Or he may not have paid respect to his magical masters/teachers or forgotten to venerate the spirits who activated his magical power. The magical power, therefore, returned to attack him when he broke his promise to pay respect to the prominent agents who had helped protect him.

Grū Bun was quite sure that the black magic ruining the governor's career was created by a certain Cham ritual spiritualist, the governor's old friend since the Khmer Rouge period. The first wife of the governor felt jealous to see that the second wife (Direk's mother) was wealthier than her and was treated as the formal wife. As a result, the first wife hired the Cham ritual specialist to make a black magic potion to transfer bad luck to the governor. This was the reason why the governor was pulled from his position.

However, the fortune-teller admitted that he was not able to protect the governor's position. He had actually met with the governor about a month before the official announcement of dismissal was made. While the fortune-teller was, therefore, in a position to help the governor retain his post, he had chosen to heal the governor's wife. The fortune-teller was not able to help both of them at the same time because to heal or rescue this couple from such a magical attack he needed to generate a high level of spiritual power from meditation, which would consume much time and energy to produce. Since his magical power to heal clients was limited, the fortune-teller had to use his own judgement in choosing who most deserved his help. Grū Bun had read the couple's fortunes and realised that if he did not help the governor's second wife, she could die soon from the physical and mental afflictions caused by the black magic.

Yantra: Symbol of Protection and Invulnerability

Despite his inability to save the governor's job, the fortune-teller and some of the governor's family members thought that the power of black magic had not much affected the governor's physical body because of his magical skill or *akom*, as well as the magical protection on his skin through “*yǎnta khluan*” or body tattoos. As a result, the governor was able to maintain his fame and political connections working as a consultant for the

new governor who replaced him. On the basis of the fortune-teller's decision, a full healing treatment was offered to the governor's wife. Although the governor did not obtain the healing treatment, the fortune-teller gave him *caryānta*,⁴⁴ an inscribed *yantra* or a thin sheet of gold inscribed with a sacred *yantra* and rolled around a cord. The governor put a small piece of *caryānta* inside the golden amulet frame connected to his expensive gold necklace to carry everywhere as it was believed the sacred object would protect him against any magical force. The fortune-teller inscribed on a metal sheet the sacred formulas in an abbreviated form of Pali reading “*namo buddhāya*” which refers to the myth of the five Buddha (see figure 1-2).

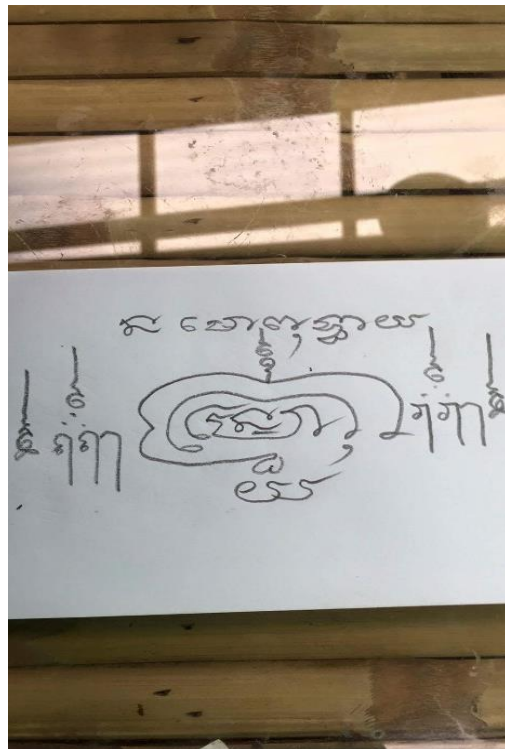
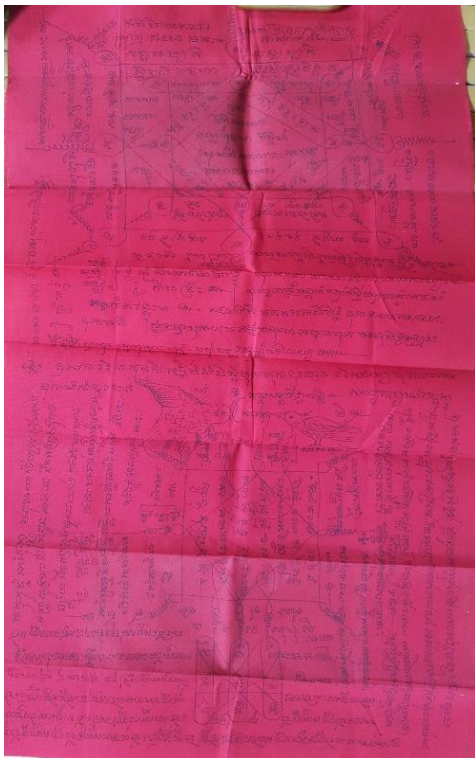


Figure 24 (left) The red *yantra* (*yānta*) is the magical fabric amulet given by the former Khmer soldier of the Lon Nol regime.

Figure 25 (right): An example of a fabric amulet drawn and written by Grū Bun in Pali script “*namo buddhāya*” which represents the five incarnations of the Buddha.

⁴⁴Grū Bun explained that the term *car* (ចារ) in Khmer means “to inscribe or to write” while *yānta* (យន្ត) refers to *yantra*. In this context, “*caryānta*” (ចារយន្ត) thus refers to “written/inscribed *yantra*.”

Grū Bun further explained to me that the myth of the five incarnations of the Buddha has been narrated among Buddhists throughout Southeast Asia. In Cambodia, the five Buddhas include: Braḥkukasandho, Braḥkonākumano, Braḥkāśapo, Braḥgoṭama, and Braḥse'āryametrāya, known in Khmer as “Braḥprāṃ Braḥ'angga.” In the Cambodian context, the monks or ritual specialists like to inscribe the *yantra* using the five Pali letters to represent the five Buddhas with the purpose of embracing the good power of the Buddha into this magical object (Eisenbruch 1992). The five Pali letters also stand for the five parts of the human body including the head, the two arms and two legs which are considered the fundamental body parts in embryological development (Eisenbruch 1992; Bizot 1988).

In the divination context, the sacred symbol of the five Buddhas generates magical power to protect humans from danger, misfortune, and magical attack. The fortune-teller recommended that the former governor always keep this *yantra* inside his pocket whenever he travelled. This belief in magical tattoos is also held by different generations of the governor's family. His son, Direk, showed me several special magical tattoos on different parts of his body. He had tattooed the names of his parents on his two wrists. Direk believed that the two wrists were connected to his heart, symbolizing his life originally given by his parents. Five rows of sacred scripts tattooed on his back embraced auspicious power: safety, success, fame, and honour.

The Child Spirit Amulet

In addition to the protection afforded by the magical tattoos and fabric *yantra*, the governor also paid great respect to the child spirit effigy called *kumāradeba* or “angel boy” who can safeguard one's life and enhance one's financial status. The belief in the magical power of the child spirit is very prominent in Cambodia and has gained popularity in different countries across Southeast Asia. In Thailand, people refer to the child spirit effigy as *kumara thong*. Typically, *kumāradeba* are referred to as either male or female by their adoptive ‘parents.’



Figure 26 A *kumāradeba* amulet was wrapped in a cloth (like swaddling a baby) and laid down on a miniature bed provided by a female care-taker



Figure 27 A residence and different kinds of food and toys were offered to *kumāradeba*

At the fortune-teller's residence, I met a lady who explained that her life had improved after worshipping the angel boy. Her husband had a dream about a *kumāradeba* asking for a little house and toys. He decided to follow *kumāradeba*'s request, buying different kinds of toys, such as robots, car models, footballs, and baby clothes to satisfy their angel baby (see figures 26-27). The lady had also created a small bed made from small pieces of towel and a little house for her little angel. Later, she saw that the *kumāradeba* effigy

laying on the little bed gave a pretty smile to her. Her angel baby might have been satisfied with the couple's offerings. Magically, good fortune rewarded the couple: the wife, a graphic designer in a clothes studio in Phnom Penh, was excited to see her salary increase while her husband not only obtained a promotion but established other successful sources of income as well.

In some cases, *kumāradeba* also help resolve domestic conflict within a family. Grū Bun elaborated that the angel boy is able to help some of his female clients watch and observe whether their husbands behave properly. In this sense, *kumāradeba* plays a key role in discouraging or guarding against transgression in a married relationship because the man may limit his behaviour in the knowledge that his wife can monitor his behaviour through the spirit. Moreover, *kumāradeba* can also protect a man from any possible danger encountered in their workplace.

Once a *kumāradeba* has been magically animated, it must be treated, like a baby or child, with love and care from its parents. Grū Bun introduced the child spirit effigy to the governor and his wife by explaining that such a spirit functioned as a helpful assistant, providing protection while also delivering good fortune to worshippers. In this case, the clients of fortune-tellers who wanted to worship *kumāradeba* should play the role of "father" or "mother" by calling themselves "mom" or "dad" while also giving a proper nickname to their angel boy/girl. To strengthen the magical power of the effigy, worshippers should talk to their angel boy/girl every day as often as they can since this reaffirms the relationship and promotes the *kumāradeba*'s attachment to the family. Additionally, the worshippers should make merit for their *kumāradeba* by offering food to the monks' alms bowls, for this action could generate a benevolent form of power for them.

The original idea for making a *kumāradeba* effigy involved extracting magical power from the sacrificed foetus of a dead pregnant woman (Cornwel-Smith 2005). In Cambodia, some religious scholars have shed light on the prominent local Khmer practice of ritually transforming a human foetus into the powerful amulet "*kūnkrak*", which is considered to possess the most powerful protection (Harris 2005, 61). It is known among local people that a husband or a father of a baby deemed to be unlucky will remove his wife's foetus after a few months of pregnancy. In other words, the process of making *kūnkrak* involves sacrifice by violently killing the mother (Ledgerwood 1990, Ang 1988,

Davis 2015). However, Grū Bun provided additional significant details: a husband must obtain his wife's approval before taking a live baby from her uterus. The body of the foetus is grilled in a fire and its magical power multiplied after leaving it for a period of time in front of the Buddha image (Harris 2005, 61; Ang Chouléan 1986, 157-158). The spiritual potency of *kūnkrak* is greatly enhanced when the ritual process is held in seven monasteries. Khmer people believe that those who wear or carry a *kūnkrak* will hear it whisper words of advice and assistance when they encounter dangers or problems.

In some cases, the magical power of *kūnkrak* has been used to ensure the security of the Khmer people who encounter danger and risk during warfare. The well-known Khmer anthropologist Ang Chouléan (1986, 160) identified that the religious quest for the foetus amulet usually becomes more popular when Khmer people fear national instability. The anti-colonial independence movement “Issaraks” are known to have venerated *kūnkrak* during political warfare (ibid.). Grū Bun further informed me that his own teacher, who was a skilful Buddhist monk, had previously joined the Issarak independence movement. The fortune-teller learned that those persons who make magical foetus amulets are amoral on the basis that they commit violent murder in order to do so. The most well-known person skilled in making *ūnkrak* and various forms of magical objects is Rasmad, a famous thief in Cambodia during the 1990s. Rasmad is also known as the most scandalous ‘*nakleng*’—a term which refers to a type of Cambodian political figure whose power has been gained through amoral actions. Befitting the title ‘*nakleng*, Rasmad enjoyed unregulated power, killing his own babies with fire, drying them and then sacralising them into powerful *kūnkrak*. Grū Bun recalled that the famous thief usually tied two *kūnkrak* amulets onto his arms in the belief that the child spirits could guide his escape from the police or enemies. Rasmad seemed to be a heroic thief among the poor since he usually robbed and kidnapped the rich (*ouk nha*), or state officials who were corrupt or engaged in financial transgressions. Most corrupt officials, Rasmad's favourite victims, worked as official tax collectors or *kuy* (កួយ) stationed at the border area. Rasmad became more popular in the late 1990s since he offered some of the money and assets gained through robbing the corrupt, to the poor people living in his neighbourhood. Rasmad's actions seemed accepted by Khmer local people who had suffered exploitation by those corrupt state officials. Since he was very skilful in different kinds of magic, while also possessing various sacred objects, the state had to deploy great force to hunt him down and kill him.

Although the ethnographic data does not indicate whether the governor ever manufactured or collected a *kūnkrak* of his own, his strong belief in the child spirit effigy, represented in the form of an angel boy, was used by him as a buffer against magical attack, possibly giving him a means to maintain his political position. In a similar manner, the governor's eldest son was also influenced by family members to pay respect to the child spirits. He went to great lengths to find the most powerful effigy-amulet he could. An expensive car and cellphone could reaffirm his social image but unlike the child spirit amulet hanging around his neck could not allay his fears of magical attack. Direk bought his amulet from a well-known Thai temple "Wat Phukhao Thong" [Wat Saket] while holidaying in Bangkok. Direk believed that the child spirit accompanied him wherever he went. He also reproduced his parents' image and placed it into a small locket, making a sacred amulet with special powers that could give moral support and protect him from danger.

After stepping down from the position, the former governor still consulted Grū Bun about his business plan to sell his house, as well as his idea to buy and sell imported second-hand cars and real estate. The fortune-teller advised him to buy and sell cars but not for his personal use on account of the inferior condition of the vehicles. The governor promised the fortune-teller that if he made a profit from his business plan, he would give him 1000 USD for his services.

Magical Technologies for Healing

In contemporary Cambodian society, Khmer people accept two ways of healing known as *ayok* and *akom*. I spoke about this to Dr. Yem Sobotra, director of the psychiatric clinic at the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital in Phnom Penh, who has direct experience with both modern and traditional ways of healing. He explained that *ayok*, or "the white side of knowledge," refers to scientific medical treatments provided by doctors trained in modern forms of healing knowledge.⁴⁵ In contrast, *akom* or "the black side," refers to knowledge supported by unseen and invisible power. In addition, he expressed his personal belief that, while patients with serious mental illness require a psychiatric

⁴⁵ The word "ayū" (អាយុ) is a Pali/Sanskrit word which refers to "age, life and to be aged or to be years-old" (Sealang 2005). Therefore, *ayū* does not mean "white side of knowledge" in the literal sense. In this context, the Khmer psychiatrist intended to contrast the magical healing "akom" (អាកម៌) with the "ayu" which originated from Ayurveda, a system of medical treatment comprising certain form of principles to diagnose, heal and prevent the illness.

treatment regime or modern treatment offered in hospital, those patients suffering mental illness with low levels of anxiety and depression could recover by seeking help from traditional healers or fortune-tellers.

The healing practice of the psychiatrist contrasts with that of the fortune-teller who applies his exorcism skills to heal clients from unnatural symptoms due to supernatural forces. Grū Bun claimed that he discovered and developed the healing treatment through his own experience. Some of his clients had been disappointed in modern medical treatments when doctors could not find the actual causes of their sickness, especially when they encountered strange symptoms that Grū Bun said were caused by the mystical power of black magic. While psychiatrists or psychologists usually use a scientific approach to diagnose patients—explaining their mental disorder as a consequence of conditions such as stress, depression, brain injury or chemical imbalance—they lack treatments to heal the victims of magical attack or to resolve the side effects of magical injury.

High-ranking Officials as the Weak in a Magical Battle

Direk showed me a photograph of his mother on his Facebook page—she was standing in front of her luxurious house in Phnom Penh wearing an elegant gown and make-up, with a lively smile on her beautiful face. I could not believe that the lady in that picture was the same one I had met in person. I wondered how magic and sorcery could transform a high-class lady into a strange person who had lost her mind and self-control. Her story reminded me about the local narrative in Cambodia whereby magic and sorcery are believed to be used by people whose minds are blinded by jealousy.

If we look back over the last few decades in Cambodia, many criminal cases were publicised in which the wives of officials were exposed for masterminding corruption and exploitation which destroyed peoples' lives. The local media in Cambodia profiled dramatic stories suggesting that the officials' wives used curses and sorcery rites as their weapons to fight over their husbands—who could guarantee their social status and economic resources. Most Khmer people still remember the assassination of Phisit Pilika, a famous Khmer actress who was shot in a crowded market; no suspects were ever identified or arrested by the police. The rumour spread widely that the wife of a Cambodian government leader was the mastermind in this murder.

This plot becomes even more dramatic when those poor victims decide to use cursing and sorcery in revenge against those high-rank ladies behind the dramatic magical battle. One such case occurred when the villagers in Kompong Chhnang province arranged a traditional cursing ceremony against the wife of the Mines and Energy minister and her allies in an action against her land development project. The villagers were happy to see that the allies of the minister's wife—six local officials who assisted the project—had died over the past three years and still hoped that the spirits would kill the minister's wife soon (Titthara 2014).

In the case explored in this section, the role of female mastermind in relation to magical attacks arises in different circumstance in which magic and sorcery are used by individuals who are caught up in a “love triangle.” In this case, the use of magic and sorcery actually reflects the weakness of those females who lack power to control their status and desire or protect themselves from the power wielded by the governor's first wife.

Direk claimed that the mastermind behind the curses and sorcery used to attack his mother was actually one of his family members. He said:

She is my stepmom who is always jealous of me and my mom because my dad accepted my mom as his official wife and spent a lot of money buying an expensive car and properties for me...and because my dad tries to ignore her, she is angry and tries to get rid of my mom...

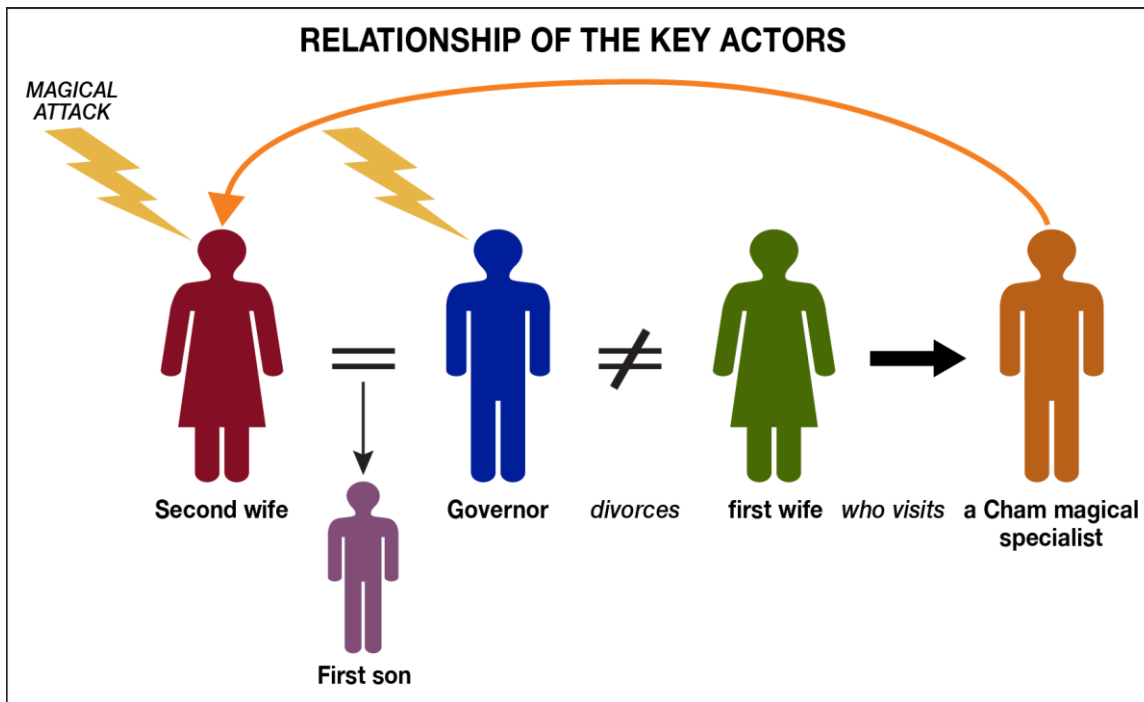


Figure 28 Diagram indicating the relationship between the provincial governor and his two wives in relation to the magical attack made by the Cham/Muslim ritual specialist

The relationship between the key actors in this story can be understood from a simple diagram (see figure 28). The governor was originally married to a woman in his province but separated from her because he found a better woman who was prettier and richer. The second wife was subsequently accepted as the official wife of the provincial governor. She was happy and proud when people called her “*lokjamdāv*,” which is an honorific female title acquired through marriage to a high-ranking official.⁴⁶ While her husband worked as a state official in the province, she resided in a very luxurious house in Phnom Penh. Being a wife of the provincial governor seemed perfect but she had endured suffering for a decade because of the magical power of sorcery. The day I met the governor’s wife was the same day she received her second magical treatment from Grū Bun. The older brother of the governor’s wife asked the fortune-teller to “rescue” his sister as soon as possible because her condition was more serious than the governor’s. The recent magical attack made her suffer headaches, insomnia, and lack of appetite. The

⁴⁶ In Cambodia, high-rank officials like ministers, representatives or the provincial governor are titled *ae kuttama* (ឯកឧត្តម) and their wives should be called *lokjamdāv* (លោកជំទាវ). This Cambodian tradition of conferring prestigious social titles upon the wives of high-ranking officials is revealing of the position of women in Khmer society.

magical attack, strengthened by feelings of hate and jealousy, intensely affected the physical and emotional wellbeing of the governor's wife.

Diagnostic Process

The fortune-teller still remembers the first time he met the governor's wife; she was very weak and unusually agitated. She was shaking and screaming out loud in front of the Buddha image at the divining altar area in the fortune-teller's house. The fortune-teller further explained that the first step of diagnosis is to identify the origin of the magic. According to Grū Bun 's experience, the producers of magic in present day Cambodia come from three main ethnic groups: Khmer/Cambodians; Cham/Muslims (a lowlands minority in Cambodia who live along rivers and the coast); and *bhnang* or minority upland peoples, also the name of one specific upland group in Mondul Kiri province who speaks Phnong.

The fortune-teller said he can diagnose the type of black magic attacking his client by observing their physical symptoms. Those attacked by Cham/Muslim black magic will manifest general weakness and, on Fridays, they will experience headaches, crying, and sweating on account of Friday being the auspicious day for Muslim people's prayers at the mosque. The victims of black magic made by Khmer/Cambodian ritual specialists will scream out loud—revealing their hunger and unhappiness—on the weekly Buddhist Holy Days. The worst symptoms happen to those who are violated by the black magic of the minority upland people, since they will be afflicted by worms coming out of their skin and this magical effect cannot be healed easily.

To provide an accurate diagnosis, the fortune-teller had to read the client's fortune by using his numerological technique focusing on seven numbers which rely on the calculation of the date, month, and year of birth. After reading the governor's wife's fortune, the sum of her numbers was 8—a number standing for the spiritual potency of ancestors and Cham magical power. From the numerological technique, the fortune-teller was able to diagnose from the outset that the governor's wife was attacked by Cham/Muslim magic. Besides using his divination technique, the fortune-teller also observed the character, daily actions, and physical symptoms of the governor's wife. The fortune-teller told me that the general character and actions of a person attacked by black magic are that they will appear sensitive, lonely, depressed and lacking warmth. He also

checks obvious physical conditions in those disturbed by black magic; their skin will not be bright while their eyes will remain open, rarely even blinking.

In the case of the governor's wife, her skin was not bright and her eyelids were black and both eyes open and seldom blinking. Another clue to help the fortune-teller confirm his diagnosis of the Cham Muslim origin of the black magic was that the governor's wife's mental state would deteriorate on Fridays—the auspicious day for Muslim people's prayers at the mosque. Besides her physical and mental problems, her daily diet had changed; now she avoided consuming pork as if following Islamic dietary laws. Grū Bun explained that the governor's wife's mentality, character and food consumption habits had been altered as a result of a malevolent spirit “*brāy*”⁴⁷ controlling her mind and body. According to local explanations, *brāy* are the spirits of people who have experienced violent death, such as through suicide or car accident. The Cham and Khmer ritual specialists usually use these malevolent spirits as their instrument to strengthen the power of black magic since they can send *brāy* to attack and destroy their clients' enemies. In the case of Direk's mother, she was screaming out in front of the fortune-teller because the *brāy* spirit that possessed her was panicking when confronted by the magical skill of a person who knew how to expel it.

The fortune-teller diagnosed that the governor's wife was affected by black magic through food consumption, stating: “the Grū Cham [the Muslim ritual specialist] might have put some magical objects into the food that she had taken [pause] so, it's a good lesson for all of us that we should not have a meal at the house of a person we don't know or are not familiar with.”

Healing Process

The fortune-teller uses three important methods to remove the black magic from the client's mind and body: herbal treatments, holy water shower, and sacred spells. Before starting the first step of healing treatment, the clients should remove all sacred objects from their bodies to guard against the possibility that these objects may attract or cause a magical attack. The first step of healing involves taking a holy water shower. Before

⁴⁷ Ang Choulean (1986: 135) and Ledgerwood (1990: 50) explained that *bray* are the spirits of the virgin women who died by suicide, accident or violence or the spirits of the women who died during childbirth. These spirits are considered evil and dangerous due to their characteristics: voracious, greedy, hungry for food and sexually voracious.

splashing the holy water onto the client's body, the fortune-teller lights nine incense sticks, using the handle part of the incense to draw *yantra* on the body in Pali words "*namo buddhāya*" referring to the five incarnations of the Buddha. While drawing the sacred words with incense, the fortune-teller uses a magical spell to sacralise the water. The magical rites generate supernatural power in the water which will be converted into fire—at a high temperature equal to the sun. Therefore, the holy water does not make the client feel cold. Rather, the holy water can be transformed into a fire, burning the malevolent spirits fiercely until their magical power is destroyed. The nine incense sticks symbolise the fortune-teller's respect to the five incarnations of the Buddha, as well as his parents, teachers/the possessors of his divining/magical knowledge, and the respected gods of his worship.

At this point, I must emphasise that the myth of the five incarnations of the Buddha is significant to understand the Khmer ideology of magical power and healing. This myth is narrated throughout mainland Southeast Asia. Maurice Eisenbruch (1992) further notes that the monks or ritual specialists like to inscribe on the *yantra* the five Pali letters to represent the five Buddhas for the purpose of embracing the good power of the Buddha into this magical object.

In the divination context, the sacred symbol of the five Buddhas generates the magical power to protect humans from danger, misfortune, and magical attack. The fortune-teller also made a *yantra*, engraving the symbol of the five Buddhas for the provincial governor who was also affected by the sorcery caused by his former wife. The fortune-teller also encouraged clients to drink herbal water made from black and yellow zingibers (ginger), kaffir lime peel, pork and dog meat (the breast part) and milk. He boiled these ingredients together, refining them into a liquid suitable for drinking. The bitter herbal-meat drink can detoxify the stomach and cause the magical poison to be excreted from the client's body. The fortune-teller also offered a herbal steam treatment which helped clients to absorb the herbal essences through their skin. The hot steam reduces the body's temperature, helping to balance the physical and mental state of the client. While undergoing these ritual treatments to remove the black magic, the governor's wife was not allowed to go to the temple because it was considered as a "dangerous area." The Buddhist temples or *wats* are centres of the spirits since they store the ashes of numerous dead persons. Grū Bun explained that the governor's wife had attempted to make merit to help her fight the magical power by drinking and showering in the holy water sacralised

by the monks. However, she still suffered and her symptoms intensified because other spirits living in the temple disturbed her as well. The fortune-teller stated that “black precepts should be solved by black precepts.” In his view, pure merit could not be effectively deployed as an instrument to fight against impure magical power. One could interpret from the fortune-teller’s statement that Buddhist monks are therefore excluded from performing magical rites.

The fortune-teller advised that, since the governor’s wife was attacked by Islamic black magic, she should avoid consuming beef, water melon, and milk, since the Khmer believe these foods are favoured by Muslim malevolent spirits. The fortune-teller recommended that the lady consume those meats considered “dirty” by Muslim people including pork and dog, especially the breast and penis of the dog. Consuming pork and dog meat can destroy Islamic magical power. Beside those food restrictions, he advised that if the lady weakened as a result of the magical removal treatment, she could have boiled rice and orange juice to enhance the body’s energy.

After administering the holy water shower and herbal treatment, Grū Bun visited the house of the governor’s wife and splashed holy water inside and around her residence in an effort to expel the malevolent spirits and black magic. That night, after the fortune-teller had left the house, some family members dreamed that different ghosts—with ageing, female, and child-like features—left the body of the governor’s wife one by one. In addition to the holy water shower and herbal treatment, the fortune-teller also used sacred spells to ensure the effectiveness of the removal ritual. The fortune-teller used harsh words and spoke in a rude manner to frighten away the malevolent spirits. An example of a spell translated from Khmer follows: “my right hand will burst into flame to burn the evil, to kill the malevolent spirits who are living inside this person.” In this process, the fortune-teller or the ritual specialist must exhibit a strong and tough character while conjuring the sacred spells, otherwise they may be disturbed or attacked by the spirits causing, for example, physical illness or insomnia.

I noticed that family reconciliation played an important role in the healing process. While the lady’s husband may have been aware of a domestic war between the two sides of the family, he had to maintain his silence because the victim and the mastermind are both his wives. The governor’s reaction showed that he tried to reconcile the domestic conflict within his family. Buddhist karmic doctrine was also utilised to reconcile the anger and

suffering embedded in the magical experience of that high-ranking family. After seeing that his mother was recovering physically and emotionally, the governor's son reflected that he and his mother were still angry with the cruel first wife but they would not seek revenge as they believed in the law of karma. He further mentioned "my mom always says that god has eyes, we don't need to do bad things back to her (the first wife), for one day she will get bad things in return..."

Sorcery and Magic as "Weapon of the Weak"

This chapter has examined a range of magical technologies at play in the life dramas of elite Khmer people in the city. James Scott in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) focuses on how powerless groups use low-key and non-overt tactics in their struggles against socially dominant groups. Similarly, inspired by this framework, I argue that Cambodian magical and sorcery practices can be seen as weapons by some groups—such as women, dispossessed villagers, and ethnic minorities—who are considered weak and vulnerable in different situations. As observed by Philip Taylor in his studies on the Cham and Khmer ethnic groups in southern Vietnam (2007, 2014), the occult power and magical potency these vulnerable groups are reputed to possess is in inverse proportion to the actual power and prestige they have in reality. However, even powerful people like officials and their spouses can be considered as weak in certain contexts and may make recourse to occult magic to further their interests.

The chapter illustrates the use of "magical weapons" through the experience of a high-ranking woman who is the wife of a provincial governor. While her position is powerful, she is, in effect, weak and vulnerable because of dependency—on her husband's position and on his affection, both of which are precarious—and because of the resentment of others in her kin network. She experienced affliction and a fortune-teller diagnosed that she was the victim of malevolent sorcery directed at her by enemies inside her kin network. She had hopes of recovering from a long period of mental suffering after a session of magical healing with the fortune-teller, who used enchanted sacred water and other means to banish the sorcery.

The case of the governor and his wife shows that those in seemingly powerful positions in Cambodian society are also vulnerable to occult attack and fear retribution at the hands of those they have displaced. Other examples of magic being used as a 'weapon of the

weak’ are when dispossessed villagers use magic and curses to act against officials who exploit their resources. A particularly strong kind of magic is said to come from the minority Cham, who are a medium-sized group living on the rivers and coasts. The majority Khmers in Cambodia usually stereotype the Cham people as “superstitious” and skilled in black magic. The most powerful and feared magic is said to come from minority groups in the mountains, who, in contrast to their status as possessors of potent magic, are politically weak and have the lowest socio-economic standing in Cambodian society.

Sorcery Affliction as Embodied Conscience, Efficacy and Justice

The findings from this chapter can answer one of my research questions: “How might divination and magical technologies address people’s existential problems and concerns as well as tacit knowledge embodied in the Khmer worldview?” This chapter argues that sorcery affliction can be seen as a form of embodied experience since its diagnosis and healing implications reflect the unspoken knowledge embedded in Khmer ideology.

Through the processes of diagnosis and healing, the magical victim experiences suffering as punishment or revenge as a consequence of committing wrongful actions. Thus, the diagnosis of sorcery implies that one has harmed another; that one’s advancement has come at someone else’s cost; that one has acted immorally. In this sense, sorcery affliction can be seen as a form of *embodied conscience* since in the process of treatment, individuals come to recognise that they have done something wrong. Affliction is also experienced as *embodied justice* since we can see the governor’s wife is physically and mentally punished for something she has done that is considered a transgression. The governor’s dismissal from his position also can be viewed as a punishment from his first wife for his unfaithful actions.

Conscience, efficacy and justice are significant issues in a society like Cambodia’s which has very weak social ties and weak state institutions. It is also a place where the judiciary is weak resulting in the strong not being punished for their crimes and where impunity is said to flourish. In the case of the governor and his wife, the magical healing process seemed to bring about efficacy and justice, as well as a certain conscience-raising. While the healing process acted to disarm the magical technology, it also brought into the open—through discussions between the healer and his clients—an awareness that something was ‘wrong’ in the social relationships of the sorcery victim and her family. The healing process thus directs the client’s attention to the consequences of their actions

and has the potential to cause those who are cursed to modify their behaviour for their own safety.

The last point that I want to make is that embodied affliction might also be an attempt by the magic victim to assert power. For example, the second wife's affliction as a result of sorcery produced by his first wife, communicated to the husband that his attention and care was not sufficiently focused, constant and equal. It also communicated to him that his first wife—the victim's competitor—was capable of evil and dangerous behaviour. This could be seen as an attempt to blackmail the husband into devoting more attention to his spouse. Reflecting the idea of magic as a “weapon,” I also propose that the sorcery attack orchestrated by the first wife might too be seen as a weapon of the weak, that is, as an effort to influence a stronger person—her husband— in a way advantageous to her. Here we see magic as an idiom expressing the vulnerabilities of subordinate members of the Cambodian elite. Although the governors' two wives each gained status and wealth through their connection to a powerful figure, their status was vulnerable for it depended on the maintenance of that relationship. Their case demonstrates that in some situations, even for the elite, magic can be seen as a weapon of the weak.

Chapter 5

Improvising Divinatory Authority in Cambodia

This chapter continues with the main theme of this thesis in exploring how divination has been reinvented and improvised by urban migrants in Cambodia. The ethnographic data revealed throughout this study suggest that knowledge and practices of divination in Cambodia have been developed in relation to the experiences of social mobility of urban migrants in the city. While previous chapters pay attention to how the divinatory practices of market-based fortune-tellers and some of their clients enmesh with their experiences of social mobility, this chapter highlights the life narrative of one elite astrologer who came from the countryside to improvise his divinatory authority in the city.

This chapter comprises four significant parts. The first explores how Khmer people in the city encounter and reflect on divinatory authority. The ethnographic stories include comments, evaluations and criticisms made by urban clients and general readers who purchase and use the astrological handbook of Im Borin, the head of the royal astrologers in Cambodia. Some of the readers believe that Im Borin's divinatory predictions have the potential to impact their lives and the wellbeing of the country.

The second section presents the life narrative related by Im Borin. His life narrative can be used as a basis for understanding how he overcame the challenges faced by many urban migrants to establish himself as a person of authority and reinvent divination knowledge and practice in the post-war era. Im Borin's experience of social mobility is told through his personal background, experience of crisis, life transition, and self-establishment together with his self-belief, faith and achievements. This section also pays attention to the crisis experienced by the royal astrologer in the process of reinventing/reintegrating divinatory knowledge after the Khmer Rouge. The ethnographic data show that the head of the Cambodian royal astrologers improvises his divinatory authority through accessible resources including hybrid astrological knowledge and ritual skills, and patron-client relationships with the royal family and political elites.

The third section focuses on the hybrid divinatory system which is revealed in Im Borin's astrological manual and unique forms of ritual practice. His hybrid form of divination, referred to as Kpuan Mahasongkran, merges traditional Khmer calendar systems, Thai numerology, Chinese geomancy and Western divinatory techniques. Im Borin assembled his divinatory technique from a range of accessible knowledge and resources. His attempted reassembly of divinatory knowledge takes place in the wake of ruptures in the transmission of divination knowledge occurring under the Khmer Rouge and in the context of urban Cambodia's new climate of globalised exchanges.

The final part of this chapter highlights the contestation between divinatory authorities in Cambodia. In addition to the head of the royal astrologers, this chapter selects another well-known fortune-teller—a man who tried to establish an astrological course for training Khmer religious practitioners and people seeking to become professional fortune-tellers. However, his attempt to re-establish a formal astrological discipline was criticised and contested by the head of the royal astrologers who claimed to be the most accurate astrologer in the country.

Based on the experiences of one highly successful migrant astrologer, this chapter argues that the process of reinvention of divinatory authority has been contested and improvised by individual agents rather than by government institutions. However, it shows that the divinatory authority who comes closest to acting as a representative of the state—the head of the royal astrologers—has played a key role in reuniting the fragmented discipline, which experienced a severe blow in the Khmer Rouge era. The analytical focus of this chapter is to contextualise the individual improvisation and the social mobility of this elite astrologer as one of several attempts to establish divinatory authority in contemporary Cambodia.

The chapter also sheds light on the assumptions made by Khmer people in Phnom Penh when they attempt to locate true sources of traditional divinatory authority. Local reflections on divinatory authority can be linked to a primordial historical narrative that locates original and authentic forms of this Khmer cultural tradition preserved in pure form only in rural areas or ancient royal centres like Siem Reap, rather than the cosmopolitan city of Phnom Penh. In this sense, the way Khmer people idealise divinatory authority resembles what Khmer cultural nationalists have long said about authentic Khmerness. This chapter applies insights drawn from Penny Edwards' (2007) study on

the historical construction of Khmer nationalist ideology to understand the various ways Khmer people in the city try to reconnect to and re-imagine the Cambodian tradition.

Encounters with an Elite Astrologer in Phnom Penh

Khmer people in Phnom Penh still follow their traditions in celebrating *cūl chnāṃthmī*, the New Year Festival, which was revitalised after the Khmer Rouge era. Members of the Khmer young generation join their parents in going to the pagoda to make merit and to receive an auspicious blessing for their lives. Besides the religious ceremony, they also seek to know what will happen to them in the coming year.

On 8 April 2016, a week before the New Year, Khmer people in Phnom Penh who were working, driving, eating, or shopping in different locations of Phnom Penh tuned in to the RFI Khmer Radio channel. Instead of expecting to hear the usual political news or Khmer love songs they were looking forward to hearing the trusted head of the royal astrologers, Lok Grū Im Borin, deliver an important message. The radio host introduced his special guest who greeted the listeners, “Hello, people of the Khmer nation.”

The radio host told his audience that he would interview the head of the royal astrologers about the astrological system used to calculate the Cambodian calendar and to estimate the duration of the Khmer New Year. The royal astrologer assumed that Khmer people were confused about the impending four-day celebration for Khmer New Year in 2016 (13-16 April). This duration contrasted with the traditional and popular understanding of Khmer New Year as a three-day celebration. Im Borin explained the change due to the Sun’s movement from Pisces to Aries after 12 am—which can be counted as the beginning of the new day according to the universal timing system.⁴⁸ Based on the astrological explanation, the Sun moves from one zodiac (*rāsī*) to another in each month and moves twelve times during one year. The movements of the Sun determine the timing and duration of the New Year celebration. In 2016, the New Year celebration would start from 8 pm, but this changes each year depending on the movements of the Sun.

⁴⁸ The Khmer New Year in 2016 was not the first time that Khmer people celebrated Songkran over four days. With his astrological calculation, Im Borin claimed that Khmer people had experienced a four-day Songkran five times, most recently in 2001, and would do so again in 2024, 2028, and 2032 (Interview with Im Borin, 8 April, 2016).

The radio host also asked the royal astrologer about the proper way to conduct a ritual to welcome “Thewada Songkran” or the New Year angel.⁴⁹ Im Borin explained that Khmer people carried out the ritual for welcoming the New Year angel in order to obtain spiritual blessings from the angel. Actually, the idea of this ritual had been influenced by Chinese tradition. In some cases, businessmen/women make substantial offerings of food and flowers to the angel in order to increase their business success in the new year. By this means, the size of the ritual offering should be relative to the business scale and profit margin.

The royal astrologer further explained that the year of 2016 was to be the year of the monkey in the Chinese zodiac. For the Khmer New Year celebration in 2016, the angel’s name would be Monthea Thevy, a beautiful lady who rides a donkey and wears a royal bangle and chrysoberyl on her body. Her right hand carries a sharp needle while her left hand carries a cane. Since Monthea Thevy likes to consume milk and butter, Im Borin suggested that Khmer people provide milk as an offering for her. Im Borin also predicted what would happen in the New Year based on the New Year angel’s food preferences. He explained: “Since Monthea Thevy likes to drink milk and everyone knows that milk is usually consumed by newborn babies, children and old people, I would predict that this year [2016] new born babies and kids will get sick and the death rate among this age range will increase[...].” The head of the royal astrologers predicted that the year of the

⁴⁹ In Mainland Southeast Asian countries including Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand, people celebrate the New Year between 13-15 April every year. Khmer people generally call this festival Songkran or Maha Songkran. According to local folktales, seven New Year angels live in the lower level of heaven: Thungsa, Khoraka, Rakasas, Monthea/Montha, Kirinee, Kimitha, and Mahothara. They are the daughters of the Hindu god of creation “Lord Brahma” also called “Thao Kabilabrama.” The seven angels also work as a personal servant for Indra. They have different names, perform different roles, carry different flowers, accessories, and weapons, use different vehicles and consume different kinds of food. The seven angels perform different actions while riding their animal vehicles—normal riding, standing and opening eyes, lying down with open eyes, and lying down with closed eyes.. These actions represent different times of day (e.g. morning, afternoon, evening) when the Sun moves from Pisces to Aries. The origins of this story began when their father, the Lord Brahma, had to cut his head due to losing a betting question with a billionaire’s son who was very clever and had special powers to understand the language of birds. Since the billionaire’s son could answer all of the questions, the Lord Brahma had to keep his word by cutting his head. The Lord Brahma’s head is very dangerous since it has a powerful flaming power which can burn and destroy the world. The seven angels decided to keep their father’s head inside a cave in Krailad, a sacred mountain in which Indra resides. Every year, when the Songkran festival begins, one of the seven angels brings Lord Brahma’s head out of the cave and carries it, walking clockwise around Sumeru Mountain. See also Sathian Koset (Phraya Anuman Ratchadon 1986).

monkey would be a tough year for Khmer people because many inauspicious things would happen. Many children would fall ill and die, and old people would die in large numbers, labourers or workers would have more problems, the number of animals used as vehicles would also decrease. Additionally, agricultural production would drop. Some political conflict would occur but this would not pose a significant issue. Although it would be a challenging year for Khmer people, Im Borin convinced listeners to have hopes for the coming year; Khmer people could have an auspicious year if they followed the five Buddhist precepts during the Khmer New Year.

Im Borin claimed that all of his predictions about the New Year primarily came from “Kpuan Mahasongkran,” a portable printed astrological handbook. Entitled “*Horasart*” or “Astrology,” with its subtitle indicating the Chinese zodiac “monkey year,” the book contained four systems of calendars including *pho.so* (Buddhasasakaraj-B.E.), *kho. so.* (Kritasakaraj- A.D.), *mo. so* (Mohasakaraj) and *cho. so* (*Chulasakrat* or Khmer solar calendar).

The handbook cover exhibits a female figure which I assumed to be the New Year angel “Monthea Thevy.” She wears a traditional golden headdress while her body is wrapped in a silk shawl fitted to her sarong. In keeping with what the Khmer tradition mentions about the legend of the New Year angels, Monthea Thevy rides a donkey while in her hand she carries a traditional form of bludgeon. She is followed by the rest of her sisters, who share the responsibility of taking their father Lord Brahma’s head out of the cave and walking clockwise with it around Sumeru Mountain. Next to Monthea Thevy, a demon in the Ramayana rides a monkey while his hand also holds a bludgeon and a flag captioned “Year of the Monkey” Those angels and the demon fly in the sky above Angkor Wat and a pair of Naga, the powerful serpents taking the lead in building the Angkorean Empire. The background of the picture shows fireworks—a scene familiar to Khmer people in the context of cultural performance and recent national festivals organised by government agencies.



Figure 29 The front cover of the 2016 astrological handbook entitled “Horasart” or “Astrology,” publicising the name of the New Year angel “Monthea Thevy” and the monkey zodiac.



Figure 30 The rear cover features an image of author, Im Borin; a summary of his works and achievements; and a circle chart representing the Khmer 100 year calendar.

When I looked at the cover of this astrological book, I reflected that the book’s author intended to introduce readers to a traditional form of Cambodian astrology. The Theravadin legend of New Year angels was blended with a Chinese horoscope system heralded by two powerful figures – a monkey and demon – both also associated with the Ramayana legendary tradition. And the picture of Angkor Wat, in my view, represents the concept of the modern nation state which has been historically developed and culturally invented through local narratives. The combination of such symbolic figures may inspire readers to reflect on traditional forms of Khmer astrology. However, the fireworks placed in the background may represent Cambodian astrological traditions reinvented in the context of modern cultural technology.

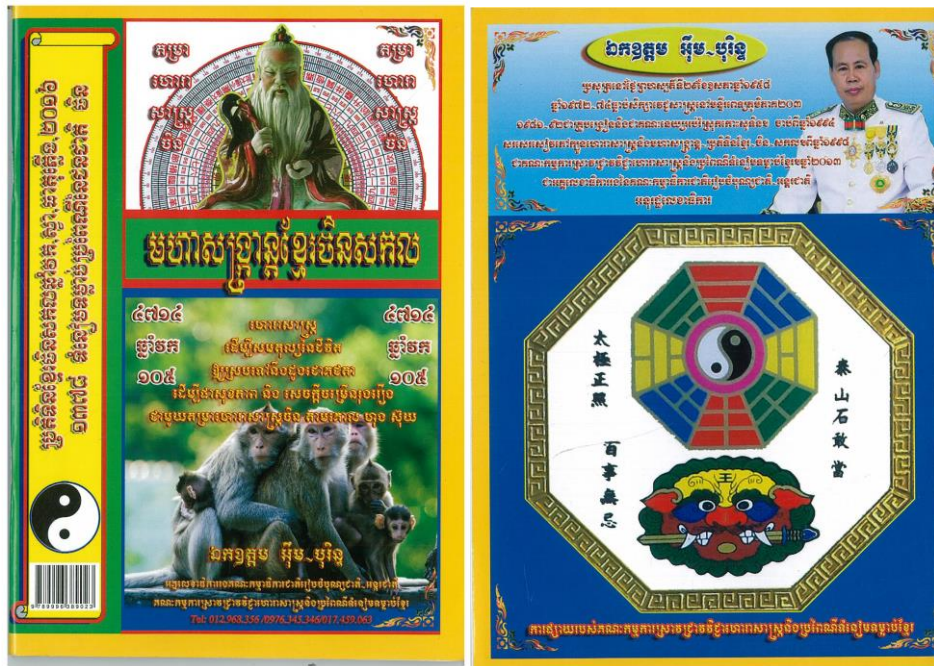


Figure 31 The covers of a second astrological handbook entitled “Horasart Khmer Chen Sakol” or “Khmer, Chinese, and Universal/Western astrology.”

Figure 32 The rear cover features a picture of Im Borin and a summary of his works and achievements while the bottom part exhibits the symbol of the feng shui octagon mirror.

Im Borin’s astrological knowledge not only relied on the Khmer astrological tradition Kpuan Mahasongkran but also Western, Chinese, and Thai astrological systems. A second handbook, also composed by him, features a hybrid astrological system that draws on Khmer, Chinese, and Western traditions. The title of the second handbook “Horasart Khmer Chen Sakol” or “Khmer, Chinese, and Universal Astrology” and its graphics may hint to readers that the author is specialised in various divinatory techniques and seeks to integrate such techniques into his own unique divinatory style. Each year, the royal astrologer presents information and predictions based on these combined traditions in compressed handbooks, such as these, that are widely sought-after, particularly in the lead-up to the New Year.

Reflecting on the symbolic meanings embedded in the covers of these astrological books inspired me to propose the following questions: How could a migrant villager become such an influential and recognised national authority on divination? Does Im Borin’s divinatory technique represent the traditional Khmer divinatory system or has he reinvented the astrological tradition? And is his authority uncontested?

I first heard about Im Borin when I started developing my research proposal in 2014. His name appeared in many reports on divination in local newspapers. The Khmer reporters introduced his official position as (head of) “the National Committee of Khmer Customs and Horoscopes of the Ministry of Cults and Religion.” One reporter described his official job as “a researcher studying Khmer astrology” (Leakhana 2009). The local media also called Im Borin a “traditional fortune-teller” (Sokheng and Miller 2010), “a royal astrologer” (Sokheng and Chivoan 2008), and “the almanack writer” (Shelton and Piseth 2009).

From the outset of fieldwork, I sought to make contact with Im Borin as a potential research interlocutor. I hoped to understand the system of Cambodian astrology from the perspective of elite fortune-tellers/astrologers who had strong connections with the royal court and government officials. During the first few months I tried to make contact with the royal astrologer. First, I asked my other research interlocutors if they knew anything about Mr. Im Borin or other royal astrologers. Most of the university students I knew had not heard his name and did not know who the current royal astrologer was. Some government officials and local NGO staff had heard about Im Borin and his reputation as the royal astrologer whose role it was to predict the future situation of the country every Khmer New Year (April). However, none of them had ever met him in person. They told me that, in any case, it would be very difficult to meet the royal astrologers because their work involved giving fortune-telling consultations to the royal family and government officials inside the royal court.

Im Borin was well-known to many people in Phnom Penh who remembered what he had written in the 1997 volume of his astrological manual, three years before a serious situation occurred. In this book he had written:

[...] there will be “a civil war” occurring in Phnom Penh and after Khmer people celebrate New Year for four days, they may encounter the violent situation again.

In November 2000, a political paramilitary movement, the CFF (Cambodian Freedom Fighters), challenged the government—in an event which some claimed to show the accuracy of Im Borin’s prediction on political conflict in Cambodia. The group led by Chhun Yasith, a Khmer-American, entered Phnom Penh and tried to overthrow Hun Sen’s

government. Due to the challenge, a hundred suspected members of CFF were arrested and charged with terrorism (Ledgerwood and Un 2002).

In 2010, Im Borin's fortune-telling abilities were widely discussed in the newspapers. In his manual that year he predicted: "many people will be tragically killed in a year filled with famine, conflict and pestilence." The prediction appeared to foretell the tragic accident that happened later that year on the Diamond Island Bridge where 353 people were killed in a stampede. Im Borin further said in an interview with a reporter that his prediction had turned out to be accurate considering the Koh Pich Bridge (Diamond Island Bridge) stampede which caused the deaths of hundreds of poor people, many of whom were factory workers (Sokheng and Miller 2010). Im Borin's accurate predictions were also said to include those relating to the agricultural productivity of the country. 2010 was not only a tragic year for the nation but also an inauspicious year for farmers and the beginning of a moral crisis for Khmer people due to decreasing crop yields and a number of social problems, seen by some as an effect of declining social morality (ibid.).⁵⁰

In addition to people's familiarity with Im Borin's accurate predictions about the 2001 CFF political rebellion, the 2010 tragic accident, and the agricultural and moral crises, I observed that urban Khmer people knew and recognised Im Borin's divinatory reputation because of his astrological handbook. For example, Sodany, a young government officer working for the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication in Cambodia, was inspired to buy Im Borin's astrological handbook as a result of her passion to learn about astrology. She reflected that Im Borin is like "a government officer": working with the government in researching the subject of astrology while also preparing national festivals in Cambodia.

Im Borin is thus understood locally to be a representative of the government—an official assigned the role of "state astrologer." His astrological handbooks are often the only reference source for urban Khmer people interested in learning about astrology. The acknowledgement section of his astrological handbooks mention the names of authoritative agents, such as King Norodom Sihanouk, King Norodom Sihamoni, Queen

⁵⁰ Based on the local newspaper's interview with Im Borin, I think it is worth considering the prediction of crop failure as testable or provable, whereas predictions related to the decline of morality can be considered as general assertions.

Norodom Monineath, Say Chhum (President of the Senate of Cambodia), Heng Samrin (President of the National Assembly) and Prime Minister Hun Sen. As the head of the royal astrologers, he expressed his gratitude to those people who had stabilised and ruled the country. While the book's front cover represented the authoritative agents of the state, the rear cover was used to depict the diviner who was dressed in a formal state official uniform with many royal insignias attached to his chest. Such an image may be an attempt to convince readers of his authority to speak or predict about the country.

Life Narrative of a Royal Astrologer

Ven. Khy Sovanratana, Vice Rector of the Sihanouk Buddhist Institute, introduced me to Im Borin. He explained that Im Borin's position as royal astrologer involved working for the royal court and the national government to organise national ceremonies in Cambodia. Ven. Every year, Khy invited Im Borin as a guest lecturer for training religious practitioners in astrology. Ven. Khy also commented that what Im Borin had predicted from his astro-numerological technique had more impact on the entire society than the divination services offered in the local markets. While Im Borin could suggest auspicious times and dates for conducting national ceremonies, and forecast annual weather and rainfall affecting natural resources and agriculture, the *grū dāy* or ordinary fortune-tellers could only help individuals solve their problems.

I watched Ven. Khy take his cellphone from his pocket and call someone he had known for many years. While the call was being placed, Ven. Khy said: "Yes, I know Lok Grū Borin, we work together, and his office is just next to my office...you can just walk to his office..." He informed Im Borin that a Thai PhD student from Australian National University interested in astrology in Cambodia wanted to interview him. A week later, I met Im Borin in his office at the National Committee located at Sisowath Quay near the Riverside, not too far from the Ministry of Cults and Religion office. My moto-taxi dropped me at the statue of Preah Ang Dongkal, the urban-based guardian spirit which is very famous among urban Khmer people and tourists. I headed away from the crowded tourist attraction to the fourth level of the building where the head of the royal astrologers waited for me in his office.

When I first met Im Borin, I thought his face was not different from the picture I saw in the newspaper. His blue safari suit made him look like the other charismatic government

officials I had met in Phnom Penh. He looked different from the other fortune-tellers I had met in the local markets in Phnom Penh. His welcoming smile made me feel comfortable to ask him about his personal life and how he became the most well-known astrologer in the country.

From Kampong Cham to the Head of Royal Astrologers

From a villager who was born and raised in Kampong Cham, Im Borin was appointed as *Ek-udom* (ឯកឧត្តម) or “His Excellency” due to his reputation and skill in applying sophisticated divinatory techniques in his divinatory services offered to the royal family and government officials. His primary roles include: head of the royal astrologers; official at the Ministry of Cults and Religion; and adviser to the king and government leaders. He is also a member of the National Committees for Organizing National and International Festivals. The primary role of this organization is to provide suggestions to government about the festival calendar—date, time and duration of festivals such as the Water Festival (Punya‘Umdūk- បុណ្យអុំទូក), the Khmer New Year (*Puṇcūlchnāṃthmī-* បុណ្យចូលឆ្នាំថ្មី), the Royal Ploughing ceremony (Brahṛājabidhī Punyaocrābrahṇanggāl the King’s birthday celebration, the Buddhist religious ceremonies and other national events.

The life experience of the 58 year-old royal astrologer reminded me of the experiences of upward mobility of other Khmer domestic migrants I had met randomly in the city. Im Borin was born and raised in a village in Kampong Cham Province. People in his village called his father, in Chinese, *Thao-Kae* or “boss” since he was the owner of a small tobacco factory. Im Borin was the only child in the family who had an ambitious dream to become prime minister of the country because he liked to think about “big things.” Im Borin smiled when he explained: “I wanted to do something important for the country since I was eight years-old.” He was a passionate, outstanding and diligent student but political instability in Cambodia became the biggest obstacle for his educational achievement. He was always curious about the natural environment surrounding him, especially the astronomical system. The young boy’s curiosity later inspired him to independently explore astrology.

The ambitious boy was forced to leave school as a thirteen year-old due to the political instability of the country unleashed by Lon Nol’s 1970 coup d’état overthrowing Prince

Sihanouk's government (on this event, see Chandler 2008: 249-54). While other friends from rich families continued their preliminary schooling in the city, Im Borin's family was unable to support him to obtain a modern education in the city. Therefore, he left formal education and started exploring knowledge by reading a lot of his father's books. Subsequently he passed the exam to become a preliminary school teacher in his home village for one year. His life in the village was peaceful but things changed after the Khmer Rouge took power. However, Im Borin did not think that the Khmer Rouge committed all of the mass killing. Rather, the political violation and conflict were also produced by the intervention of Cambodia's neighbours. At that time, he saw a lot of his villager friends injured by massive weapons like guns and bombs as a result of the conflict. Im Borin then decided to work as a volunteer assisting the doctors treat the injured victims of the war. Im Borin reflected that this volunteer job gave him an opportunity to help the nation as he had dreamed of doing when he was young.

The First Encounter with Khmer Astrology

Late in the Khmer Rouge period, in 1978, Im Borin started learning traditional Khmer astrology or Kpuan Mahasongkran from textbooks which were written in Pali and Sanskrit scripts and from the old manuscripts. Im Borin had been familiar with divinatory technique from a young age for his grandfather had been a professional fortune-teller before the Khmer Rouge. Im Borin explained that his late grandfather had a skill to "*toul dāy*" or "to guess" by applying different fortune-telling techniques including *lekha'atta*—a numerological method to calculate and read a person's fortune from seven digits taken from an individual's date, month and year of birth. Besides numerology, his grandfather also read people's fortunes through doing meditation. His grandfather also used to record the method of how to conduct a fortune-reading on palm-leaf texts. However, these invaluable documents were burnt and destroyed during the Khmer Rouge era.

Im Borin's grandfather learnt fortune-telling skills from *grū*, which in this context means deceased fortune-telling teachers. Im Borin's grandfather believed that he had a *grū* or personal guardian spirit who embodied divinatory power to him through a spiritual connection. Im Borin still remembered that his grandfather paid respect to his *grū* through offering *pāysī* or a banana leaf tray. Although his grandfather had been a professional fortune-teller, Im Borin had not learned from him directly, since his grandfather had

passed away when he was seven years-old. He was too young to inherit divinatory knowledge and skill from this family member. However, the childhood memory of seeing his grandfather practise divination introduced him to the world of divination.

Im Borin started learning systematically about Khmer astrology as a result of his own personal experiences of intuitive revelation. He noticed that whenever he sensed and predicted something would happen, it always came true. Then he started guessing what had happened and what would happen in the lives of the people he knew. And his predictions were usually accurate. Since that time he realised that, like his grandfather, he also possessed *nissāya* in relation to divination. As I have noted in a previous chapter, in their everyday life conversations Khmer people conceptualise *nissāya* as something equivalent to the idea of “mystical affinity.” Khmer people usually explained that if they fell in love with a person upon first meeting them, it was due to *nissāya*. Others believe *nissāya* to be associated with Buddhist karmic ideology and the belief in determination by past life actions. According to this perspective, someone has an emotional attachment with something or someone because this relation existed in a past life. In a divinatory context, use of *nissāya* refers to an individual who is “predestined” to become a skillful fortune-teller or astrologer, or has a special affinity with a particular technique. In other words, *nissāya* is very important for learning or teaching divination or astrology. It seems to be the primary requirement for individuals who want to learn or be trained in divination and astrology. In the course of interviewing fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh—specialised in different techniques including card-reading, mediumistic divination, and astrology—they usually claimed to possess *nissāya* which enabled them to learn and use divination and astrology to predict people’s destinies accurately.

Re-enchanting Astrology After the Fall of the Pol Pot Regime

During the 1980s, after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese government acted as a temporary state agency controlling the country. Im Borin observed the country slowly recovering from the suffering caused by the regime. He enjoyed working as a volunteer doctor’s assistant until 1993 when Cambodia held its first national election. He was assigned by the village head to work as an accountant to manage the expenditure for the election campaign in Kampong Cham province. He worked in the village administration office until 1995 when his first book was distributed through local bookstores in Phnom Penh.

Im Borin's first book was not exactly related to astrology. Rather, the book provided advice and guidance on how to raise and teach children in relation to Khmer social expectations. The book also proposed new knowledge for couples who were encountering infertility or sought to choose the gender of their child. Im Borin applied his basic knowledge in astrology to calculate the auspicious time for the couple to conceive their child and provided some tips on conceiving a male or female child. It could be said that he was the first Khmer person in the post-revolutionary period to apply numerological knowledge to support family planning and social norms in raising children.

After the book was launched, His Excellency Min Khin, Minister of Cults and Religion and President of the National Committee of Khmer Customs and Horoscopes at the time, offered him a position in Phnom Penh and encouraged him during the period of his initial transition to his new job and to urban life. But his first experience of relocating to the city was not as easy as he had expected. Im Borin still recalled the "bitter-sweet memory" of that time—before he became the city's most established astrologer. He recently posted to Facebook a note about his hardship of living in a city such as Phnom Penh which in the 1990s had very few amenities. He wrote:

Back in the 1990s, when I first moved to Phnom Penh, the city was so dirty, ugly, and did not have many facilities like today. Many areas were still occupied by forest and ponds and a lot of robbers...and there were a lot of old houses and buildings in the city....peoples did not suffer from the traffic like today because of not many cars at that time. They could only just afford bicycles and motorcycles[...]

After the collapse of the Pol Pot regime, he had nothing. He started from zero: no property, no resources, no money from his parents. The political crisis in which the country was embroiled inspired him to work hard to improve his life. In 1994 he moved from his home village in Kampong Cham province to Phnom Penh to find a job to support his five children. At the time he was willing to do any job that would support the education of his children. But his earnings waxed and waned; at one point he had only 5000 Riel in his pocket.

With the assistance and support of a member of the CPP Party, Im Borin's life changed overnight. On H.E. Min Khin's recommendation, Im Borin was introduced to the

representative who worked for the Cambodian Royal Court. As a result of this meeting, the young migrant from Kampong Cham entered the Royal Palace and contributed his knowledge to the preparations for the Songkran celebration. Im Borin reflected that his role at that time was not to directly advise the King but rather to assist government leaders in conducting or arranging different national ceremonies or cultural events. Nor did he provide services for the Cambodian royal family because it was the role of *‘ācārya* (expert ritual masters) and *braḥgrū* (Brahman ritual masters) to advise the King. However, the Cambodian ritual masters *‘ācārya* and *braḥgrū* were not skilful in astrology like the *horā*. The royal court’s representative therefore, accepted Im Borin on the basis of his reputed knowledge of astrology. Im Borin was appointed to work as a general official at the Cambodian royal court. A few years after his appointment as a general official, Im Borin was appointed as a member of the Cambodian royal astrologers.

Im Borin’s reputation as an astrologer was publicly unacknowledged until his first astrological handbook was published and distributed to city bookstores and markets. He commenced writing astrological handbooks around the same time that he started working as a general official of the royal court. The books were prepared on his own initiative, for sale in the city’s markets. Im Borin claimed that he was the first non-government agent to write and sell an astrological handbook. Previously the Cambodian Ministry of Cults and Religion had assigned its astrologers to publish and circulate astrological handbooks to officials in different government departments. Im Borin published his first astrological handbook with commercial purposes in mind.



Figure 33 From the cover of a recent astrological book, the photograph shows Im Borin dressed in the formal uniform of a Cambodian government official; the text on the left hand side provides a short description Im Borin's works and achievements.

Routine Activities

outside the office. His practice of updating his daily activities on Facebook has enabled me to observe and follow his daily life activities. He likes to use social media as a platform to express his views on social and natural phenomena from his astro-numerological perspective. On some occasions, like the Khmer New Year, he has been invited by RFI Khmer Radio and Apsara TV to give an interview about the New Year calendar and the future situation in the coming year.

Private Consultancy for Elite Clients

In addition to these regular activities, Im Borin also offered personal consultations for clients at his private residence in Phnom Penh Tmey area. However, he did not provide this service to ordinary clients, only to a small group of clients comprising officials (ministers, politicians— *‘naknayopāya*) and wealthy businessmen/billionaire (*oknha*). These clients asked him to conduct a ritual to eliminate bad luck. Sometimes, he read the fortune of university students. Not all students believed in astrology and divination and those who did not believe consulted him at their parents’ request. Some clients sought advice about the character of their soul mate. Young couples sought advice about auspicious days to arrange their engagement and wedding ceremony and other details related to their future life as a couple such as moving into a new house. Im Borin also applied his astro-numerological skill to help his clients make decisions about family planning such as the number of children. During a private consultancy, Im Borin would address the concerns and problems of individuals while also relating these to the economic, social, and political conditions of the country. He applied his divinatory knowledge to assist Khmer clients to eliminate or protect against negative consequences that they may encounter.

Sources of Divinatory Authority

Im Borin presented himself as an educated astrologer who applied standard and formal knowledge of divination. However, the divinatory discipline that he reinvented combines multiple forms of techniques originating from other countries. He claimed to be an expert in the practices of Kpuan Mahasongkran, Astro-numerology (seven digits), Geocentric Planetary astrology, Chinese *feng shui* prognostication, and magical rites.

In fact, it was curiosity about the natural environment from a young age that first aroused his passion in astrology. As a teenager in the village, Im Borin wanted to know more

about the world, especially about the Sun, the Moon and the stars. However, despite being a passionate student, he could not find the answers that he sought about the world from his classroom due to the effect of civil war on public education. The only way to advance one's education was to undertake independent study. Im Borin had directed his own learning since that time.

Kpuan Mahasongkran and the Khmer calendar system were the first divinatory techniques learned independently by Im Borin. One day his brother showed him an old sheaf of sutras which had been kept for many years in the pagoda near his home village Kampong Cham. Im Borin immediately realised that the sutras featured the legendary and astrological perspectives on the Khmer New Year and the traditional calendar system of Cambodia. Im Borin claimed that this technique was “the traditional Khmer divinatory technique” since he assumed that the sutras probably had been written at the time of King Ang Duong (1847-1860).

He mentioned that the first Khmer astrological book in print was written by a French scholar named “Faraut,” the first person to publish an astrological handbook in Cambodia. This book was the second primary source Im Borin had used since the early stage of his astrological learning. The book features what he asserted to be the authentic form of Khmer astrology and is still available in the National Library of Cambodia in Phnom Penh.

From these works in traditional Khmer astrology, Im Borin's divinatory passion then shifted to what he called a rational form of numerology using a seven digit number system. In the early 1990s, he decided to study some numerological subjects from Thai textbooks. Although he could not speak Thai nor understand the grammar, he read those Thai astrological textbooks by using a dictionary. Learning other languages from scratch enabled him to explore other astrological approaches such as Western culture's “Geocentric Planetary” astrology and Chinese geomancy “*feng shui*.”

Astro-numerology in Cambodia

In addition to the Kpuan Mahasongkran, numerology was the primary technique applied by Im Borin to read a client's fortune. The numerological reading is based on the calculation of seven digit numbers derived from the day, month, and year of birth. Im Borin applies the astro-numerological “*lekha 'atta*” (លេខអត្ត) or “*lekhaprāmbīrtua*” (ឬ

លេខសត្វ) which involves a series of numbers with seven digits, or nine digits (*prāmbuan than: ស ថាស*). The numerological information for this system is taken from the individual's date, month, and year of birth; from their name; and even from the time of the consultation with the client. The numerological knowledge alone, however, is not enough to read the individual fortune. By following the Thai tradition, Im Borin combines the general knowledge of astrology and numerology. Im Borin referred to the astrological handbook written by a well-known Thai astrologer “Sor Dusit” (2007). This book explains that the seven digits comprising the numbers 1 to 7 represent the celestial objects. Number 1 stands for the Sun, number 2 stands for the Moon, number 3 stands for Mars, number 4 stands for Mercury, number 5 stands for Jupiter, number 6 stands for Venus, and number 7 stands for Saturn. The seven digits (1-7) contain different meanings that can explain the personalities of individuals. Number 1—Sunday—refers to rank/title/status, greatness/mightiness and hot temperature. Number 2—the Moon—refers to gentleness, delicacy, and service. Number 3—Mars—refers to bravery/courage, diligence, acting hastily, tendency for aggression, and strength. Number 4—Mercury—refers to adaptable, changeable, words/speech, information, and wit. Number 5—Jupiter—refers to morality, academic prowess, adulthood, supporter, and intelligence. Number 6—Venus—refers to liveliness, art, beauty, love and money. Number 7—Saturn—refers to suffering and anxiety, stinginess, prudence. This system of astrological knowledge enables the Khmer astrologer to explain how a wide range of human actions and characteristics are influenced by the relative positions of the Sun, Moon, stars, and planets.

The Influences of Thai Astrology in Khmer Astrology

Based on my personal conversations with the head of the royal astrologers and government officials who have an interest in Khmer divination, it seems that Thai astrology has influenced astrology in Cambodia since before the Khmer Rouge times. *Tamra Brahma-chati* appears to be one of a few astrological books published in pre-revolutionary Cambodia that was reissued after the Khmer Rouge. The original version of *Tamra Brahma-chati* was written in Thai by a well-known Thai astrologer. This book is an essential astrological handbook for those who have just started learning Thai astrology. The book was translated into Khmer in 1953, around the time of Cambodian independence from France and well before the Communist revolution. In a conversation with Sodany, a Cambodian official interested in Khmer divination, she expressed her

understanding that *Tamra Brahma-chati* was originally developed from the Thai astrology system and, that Im Borin relied primarily on Thai astrological books. Sometimes he asked me to buy some astrological handbooks from Thailand when he knew that I planned to visit my parents. Those Thai astrological handbooks included *Tamra Brahma-chati*, the Thai 100-year calendar, and Chinese *feng shui* handbooks (written by Thai fortune-tellers). Im Borin's interests in astrology and divination are varied and include astrology, numerology, palmistry, healing, and magical rites. Besides astrological handbooks, Im Borin is also interested in instructional books about acquiring magical invulnerability and doing acupuncture and palm-reading.

Chinese Geomancy: Feng Shui

Besides the calculation of numbers, Im Borin also applies Chinese divination techniques including *feng shui*, the 12 animals zodiac, and the Five Elements (Wu Xing). The most influential Chinese tradition towards his divinatory techniques is *feng shui*. This technique relies on the philosophical system of harmonisation between natural components including heaven, earth, and humans (Mak and Ng 2005). *Feng shui* combines three important aspects including astronomical phenomena, natural phenomena, and human behaviour (ibid.). Im Borin applies this concept to read people's fortune from their faces and the decorated interior of their residences. The practice of Chinese geomancy is very important to an individual's daily life because it offers various useful guidance to improve one's life. For example, where a house has been decorated and designed appropriately, the residents may experience persistent happiness, and their lives will be successful.

Some of his clients invited Im Borin to visit their house and read the *feng shui* of their house. He told me he has applied this technique to help numerous clients achieve their goals while also resolving their obstacles and problems. Some clients had obtained a promotion after they decorated their houses following the directions of *feng shui*. Business people could make a lot of profit from their investments due to following the directions of *feng shui* and right combinations of the Five Elements of earth, metal, water, fire and wood. The representation of these elements can be applied to understand individuals' characters and behaviours. The Chinese divinatory system of the Five Elements is very important to individuals' daily lives, for example, in the context of buying a new house or land, making a decision about a business investment or finding a

solution for a significant transition, The *feng shui* approach is also used to guide a client about auspicious colours, directions, location of residence, their soul mate's character, and business investment.

Im Borin further explained that Khmer astrology is different from Chinese divination in several ways. Chinese divination does not rely on the astrological order or “thiek sa” like the Khmer divinatory system. Thirachai Phuvanatanarubala (2010) in “Know Your Future through “daksā” or “taksa” (in Thai) similarly explains Thai astrology as reliant on a particular order and set of relations between the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, and Rahu. With this astrological order, astrologers can predict their clients' future and provide useful advice in relation to a particular case.

Improvising the Traditional Form of Cambodian Astrology

Im Borin usually claimed in public that he was expert in the traditional form of Khmer astrology (Kpuan Mahasongkran). However, I came to realise that the divinatory discipline that Im Borin had reinvented was not as authentic as he claimed. In fact, it was hybrid with respect to both the variety of techniques he wrote about in his astrological handbook and those he used when he conducted certain forms of ritual.

Astrological Handbook: Khmer-Chinese-Universal Astrological System

Every Khmer New Year, Im Borin publishes an astrological handbook giving the details of the situations that could be encountered by individuals whose biographical backgrounds are represented by the 12 animal zodiacs. He claimed that his book was the first astrological handbook to be originally published in Khmer—the national language of Cambodia. Im Borin's astrological handbook was, from my observation, the only Khmer-language astrological handbook being sold in local bookstores and markets in Phnom Penh. Since the astrological handbooks are sold in local markets such as the New Market, Orithsey Market and Olympic Market, Im Borin guessed that people who were interested to buy his handbooks were businessmen/women and market traders. They expected that the useful guidance and tips derived from Chinese geomancy and detailed in the astrological handbook could improve their business or resolve certain problems. The businessmen/women and market traders were also interested in Chinese *feng shui* because they considered *feng shui* to be very important to their lives. Sodany, a female government official, first bought Im Borin's astrological handbook many years ago from

a local bookstore. She thought that the book was widely used and very popular in Phnom Penh. She emphasised that she read Im Borin's astrological handbook "just for fun"; the book helped her relieve some stress and anxiety from work and family problems.

Im Borin's book is entitled "*Kpuan Horasatre Khmer-Chen-Sakol*" or "*Khmer-Chinese-Universal Astrological System*." Mandarin and English equivalents for Khmer terms appear on every page. Based on this alone, one can guess that the astrological knowledge utilised by Im Borin has come from three different astrological systems. And indeed, the astrological models that the head of the royal astrologers introduces in his book come from the integration of three astrological and calendrical systems. In what follows, I show that the handbook applies the three astrological and calendar systems including the Universal/International, Chinese and Khmer lunar calendars.

The subsections of the handbook published for 2016 contains details of multiple divinatory systems without a clear structure, context, chronology or common theme to help readers understand how such techniques are connected and related. The first section refers to the legend of Khmer New Year, the Khmer calendrical system, and the ways to conduct rituals/ceremonies to welcome the New Year angel in the Year of the Monkey. The author also predicts the rainfall for the current year, planting time, weather conditions, agricultural production, rice yields, political situation, and social relations in general. Also provided in this section is a table indicating the auspicious and inauspicious times for doing any activity during the year. Next, the author introduces some general predictions based on reading signs appearing in the sky followed by some astronomical reports on "Total Eclipse of the Sun," "Penumbral Eclipse of the Moon," and "Annual Eclipse of the Sun."

The second part of the book describes the astrological tradition of the Chinese New Year plus the date, month, and year of those individuals who were born in the Year of the Monkey in 2016. The author provides a table of dates and years for each animal zodiac from 1908 until 2016. Next, the author elaborates about the characters, behaviors, problems, obstacles, luck and achievements for male and female people born in the Year of the Monkey, as well as providing detailed predictions for other animal zodiacs. The author then advises Cambodian parents, who were born in the year of the monkey to be aware of the impact of the different characters of the animal zodiacs on their child. Without a predictable structure, the handbook's content suddenly shifts to the Sino-

Khmer tradition in worshipping New Year angels for eliminating individuals' bad fortune. After that, the author describes the characters and personalities of individuals who are encountering inauspiciousness or bad fortune and offers some solutions to resolve such adverse situations. Next, the book shifts abruptly to the subject of meanings embedded in household registration numbers followed by a brief history of the Chinese ancestral worship tradition "Qing Ming", outlining the purpose, benefit, and pattern of the ceremony.

The next section exhibits a lunar calendar table in three languages—Khmer, Chinese, and English. Following the calendrical table, the author gives guidance on how to choose a soul mate based on the approach of Chinese animal zodiacs. His guidance is based on the Chinese divinatory belief that some animal zodiacs are perfectly matched with others. In this sense, they could have "good friendship/companionship." However, some animal zodiacs are not able to get along due to the inherent hostile/opponent relationship between the animals. Khmer people called the year considered to be in opposition to the Year of the Monkey as *chnāmchung*. The Chinese term *chung* means "clash." For example, people who were born in the Year of the Tiger will clash with people born in the Year of the Monkey. Couples born in clashing years are not, therefore, real soul mates.

After the section on the Chinese divinatory system for choosing a soul mate, the content of the book suddenly shifts to auspicious days for Chinese-Khmer people to clean their house before Chinese New Year, followed by auspicious days for conducting the ritual to send the Chinese New Year angels back to heaven.

Hybrid Forms of Ritual Service

In addition to providing a fortune-telling consultation service and writing astrological handbooks, Im Borin also applied a range of divinatory techniques that he had researched and reinvented in his own style to conduct rituals to eliminate bad luck for his clients. I never realised or noticed the hybrid forms of Im Borin's divinatory technique until I experienced them myself. One day in late 2015, Im Borin suggested that I should conduct "*bidhikâtgroah*" or the ritual to eliminate bad luck. It was advisable, since I was born in the Pig Year, which was considered hostile to the Monkey Year (2016). If I ignored his advice, I was concerned that I might encounter problems that would make me moody, confused, and uncomfortable for the entire year. At the time I personally thought that what he predicted was an accurate insight into my anxiety when I was in the field. I finally

accepted his offer to conduct the ritual for me because I wanted to learn how he reintegrated a traditional form of Khmer astrology into a magical ritual. And I hoped that the outcome of the ritual would make me feel better and that my life would run smoothly and happily without encountering obstacles.

The ritual was conducted in early October of 2015 at Im Borin's luxurious house in Phnom Penh Tmey. While Im Borin took the lead in conducting the ritual, I had to provide the food offerings to the gods and deities. The offerings comprised a peanut bar (called Tai Leo—a Chinese snack), fruit (pomegranate) and sacred water. Although I had already prepared some fruit as an offering, it seemed that most of what I had bought from the local market was not as good as what he had prepared for me. I was served Chinese tea from an elegant teapot and little cups. Different kinds of fruits—oranges, apples, and pomegranates—were served on a yellow paper tray (popular among Chinese people) decorated with jasmine flowers. . The offerings constituted a gift in exchange for spiritual blessings from the Chinese and Khmer angels as well as from my parents.

Typically, Im Borin will charge his rich clients a fee for conducting the ritual of around 80-100 USD. However, he charged me only 20 USD. On the day that the ritual was to be conducted, I went to his house in Phnom Penh Tmey in Stung Meanchey district, Phnom Penh. I observed many astrological handbooks in his book cabinet. Most of the books were bought from Thailand and some books from Western countries. Im Borin's young wife prepared the ritual offerings, arranging the fruits and candies on the plates before delivering them into the room where a range of spiritual shrines was located.



Figure 34 Im Borin conducting “*bidhikâtgroah*” (ពិធីកាត់ត្រោះ) or the ritual to eliminate bad luck at his residence in Phnom Penh Tmey in October 2015

In the process of conducting the ritual I learned that Im Borin worshipped different kinds of gods, which can be classified from the highest to the lowest level as follows: the Lord Buddha, Brahma, and the three Chinese deities including Chinese Bothisatava/Guanyin (菩薩), Fu Lu Shou (福祿壽), and Tai Sui Ye (太歲爺). At certain points in the ritual, his divinatory authority relied on the spiritual power from those gods to arrange the ritual to eliminate bad luck for his clients. To arrange this ritual, Im Borin explained that he also utilised his knowledge in numerology (calculating the individual date, month, year of birth) and the Chinese Five Elements concept.

Before the ritual started, Im Borin requested my permanent address. Then he wrote down my name and address on the paper. After that he lit the candles and incense batons and asked me to hold the plate of offerings and start chanting by following what he said. I could translate that he first invited the gods and goddess, to which he paid respect, such as the Buddha, Brahma, Chinese Bodhisattvas, and the 60 Chinese angels (individual guardian spirits corresponding to a full 60-year cycle of birth years) to come to the altar to bear witness and support me. Then he gave them my full name and address. After

calling the names of all these beings, Im Borin let me know that I should carry the plate holding the teapot and little cups and offer these to the gods and angels. Then he asked for permission and blessing from those gods and goddess to conduct the ritual. Next, he asked me to remove the drinks and fruit offerings from the shrine and place them in front of me. Following that, I had to drink the tea, eat the fruits that I had offered and pack some candies to take home. Im Borin also suggested that I should take the paper tray to Wat Phnom, the temple on the sacred mound in central Phnom Penh. When doing so, I had to pray to the Chinese deities while holding the tray to get the spiritual blessing from them. Then, the final step was burning the tray to get rid of my bad fortune. Such rites were evidence of a strong Sino-Khmer influence in his astrological practice.

Contestation between Divinatory Authorities

Local Reflections on Divinatory Authority in the City

From an early stage in my fieldwork, I learnt that many Khmer people in Phnom Penh had particular assumptions about city/urban and village/rural fortune-tellers and the locations where authentic forms of divinatory practice are believed to have been preserved. As many people immediately commented, it was “wrong” or a “misunderstanding” for me to conduct research about Cambodian divination practice in an urbanised capital city like Phnom Penh. According to local assumptions, real and authentic astrology and divination are decentred, and true divinatory authority can be found only in villages in the countryside, or in provinces where Khmer traditions and heritage have been preserved.

Ven. Khy Sovanratana, Vice Rector of Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University in Phnom Penh, and an interlocutor for this research, explained that the traditional monks (*boran loksanggha*) who know how to read horoscope/fortune and conduct magical rituals tend to reside in rural parts of provinces like Siem Reap, Kampong Cham, and Kampong Thom, while it is mostly modern monks (*samay loksanggha*) who stay in “the big and more developed cities” like Phnom Penh, Kampong Speu, Battambang and Takeo. Ven. Khy’s comment supports the claim made by many other urban research interlocutors that trustworthy and reliable fortune-tellers can be found mainly in the historically important province of Siem Reap. It is because of Siem Reap’s historical development, during and since the Angkorean Empire, that people have preserved their

cultural traditions including divination. This assumption reflects Khmer people's view of Phnom Penh city as an urban setting where people experience a cosmopolitan lifestyle, and encounter different cultural influences and globalization. According to this assumption, it is difficult to find, in the capital city, any authentic and real cultural practice, especially in the fields of astrology and divination. Based on such local explanations, it seems that many Khmer people do not see Phnom Penh as a valid centre of divinatory authority.

Khmer people also classify urban fortune-tellers into two groups. The first group refers to fortune-tellers who offer their service in the market while the second group is considered elite due to its high-ranking clients. The second group usually specialised in numerology—calculating the individual's date, month, and year of birth with reference to astrological books. Khmer people in Phnom Penh see astrologers or fortune-tellers skilled in numerology to be more worthy of respect and trust than the mediumistic and card-reading fortune-tellers in the markets. Urban Khmer people also position the royal astrologers or *horā* as “high-ranking” because they offer their divinatory services to the royal family and government officials. In a similar way, numerous state officials and local numerological fortune-tellers trust and respect Im Borin's divinatory authority. Mr Mathea, a government official in the Ministry of Cults and Religion, claimed that he never trusted the ordinary fortune-tellers in the markets since they lacked skill and did not rely on methods and formal knowledge of divination used by Mr Im Borin and other royal astrologers. Mathea also expressed negative feelings about mediumistic fortune-tellers (*'nakcūlrūp*). He personally neither respected nor believed mediumistic fortune-tellers because he observed them pretend to be possessed by spirits during the annual religious festival's “mediumship parade” (*neak ta parade*) in Phnom Penh. While they were dancing and performing actions on the street, they laughed as though it was humorous to make people believe they were possessed by spirits. Admittedly, some of the spirit mediums who attended the parade demonstrated their possession by spirits through such acts as wounding themselves with sharp weapons like knives or cutters, stabbing their cheeks and other parts of their bodies. However, most of the mediumistic fortune-tellers were unreliable and claimed mediumship for the purpose of cheating people to make money.

I also met a 60-year-old numerologist and former monk who was disrobed during the Khmer Rouge regime. He believed that numerological fortune-tellers and royal astrologers were different from ordinary fortune-tellers in terms of the impact of astrological prediction. While the *horā* aims to predict the future of the whole country including important incidents like a disaster or social crisis, ordinary fortune-tellers can only predict some general issues or the future occurrences of individuals.

Self-Reflection on the Royal Astrologer's Divinatory Authority

In a similar manner, the head of the royal astrologers, Im Borin, tried to distinguish himself from the ordinary fortune-tellers in the marketplace by referring to his sophisticated knowledge in divination practices. Im Borin differentiated himself from the *grūdāy* or 'street-level' fortune-tellers in many ways. The *grūdāy* just read the fortune without any background knowledge and without reference to an astrological handbook. For example, mediumistic fortune-tellers and market-based fortune-tellers merely "guess" at people's fortune, risking the possibility of a wrong prediction. Im Borin emphasised that his fortune-telling/divination skill was more reliable and trustworthy compared to ordinary fortune-tellers. He also distinguished himself from *ācārya* or religious masters/practitioners, who usually conduct rituals/ceremonies at *wats*. Sometimes these ritual masters conducted religious ceremonies and rituals without paying adequate attention to auspicious timing because they were in a rush to service other clients. Im Borin claimed that he always spent a long time to calculate the auspicious time to conduct religious ceremonies. He also judged that his astrological service was more reliable and trustworthy than the mediumistic fortune-tellers'. Instead of using "the invisible form of power" (*apiyajamṇya*-អបិយជំនឿ) to foresee a client's future, Im Borin carried out research in various astrological handbooks published in Thai and Khmer languages before advising clients. He called the sophisticated astrological knowledge that he formulated and applied as "*kpuan*." The term *kpuan* variously means "theory, doctrine, theoretical analysis, body of principles, examples, model, sketch, formula, textbook, instruction, manual, line, parade, possession, train, trick" (Sealang 2018).⁵¹ In the sense used by Im Borin, *kpuan* refers to formal knowledge of astrological divination, whose methodologies are derived from the study of astrological handbooks and other texts. Im

⁵¹ <http://sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm> (accessed 16 April 2018).

Borin claimed that his book-based expertise and specialisation made him distinct from ordinary fortune-tellers in the markets. His self-reference as *kpuan* also likely reflected Im Borin's status among government officials as a diviner for the educated power elite.

Criticism of Prophetic Divinatory Authority in the City

In Phnom Penh, certain forms of prophetic divinatory authority—like mediumistic fortune-tellers/spirit mediumship and some religious practitioners—who claim non-human agency and are considered to act against Buddhism, have been discredited and criticised by state officials. Mr Sokny Sor, Director of the Buddhist Institute in Cambodia, criticised a controversial case that occurred in 2014. Khmer people in Phnom Penh went to the streets to protest against a well-known spiritual leader/fortune-teller Thean Vuthy. He claimed to be the fifth reincarnation of the Buddha “Sriariyamettrei” or “Maitreya.” Vuthy also allegedly claimed that his spiritual power came from a hidden wise person who lived in the mountains in Champa (Sou 2014). Vuthy's proclamations about his spiritual power also involved memories of his past lives, which supposedly included Ven. Chuon Nath, Cambodia's revered early twentieth century Buddhist patriarch and famed major reformer national (ibid.). Presenting himself as a lay ascetic by wearing a white robe and keeping his hair long, Vuthy used his spiritual wisdom to perform something deemed beyond ordinary human capacity, such as predicting people's past and future lives or speaking to animals. However, Vuthy was accused of misconduct in claiming to be the next Buddha. Mr Sokny Sor noted that the media reported on Vuthy's controversial actions, for example, “sitting upon a high pedestal and attracting vast crowds who lay on the ground to be blessed as he stepped over them,” and, in another incident, “sitting on a throne reserved for the Buddha”.

The Director of the Buddhist Institute also emphasised Vuthy's strong connection with Cambodian officials including Deputy Prime Minister Men Sam An, the first female deputy minister in Cambodia. He also obtained financial support from foreign clients, such as Thai and Laotian wealthy businessmen. Many Khmer people, however, criticised him via social media like Facebook or Youtube. While a group of laymen joined the demonstration, the monks expressed critical opinions on Facebook. This white robed fortune-teller resided in a luxurious villa. Some of his clients allegedly consulted him when they wanted to sell houses or land, and would donate a lot of money if their wishes were accomplished. Mr Vuthy is said to have spent that donated money building the big

Buddha image and pagoda in Kandal Province. Mr Vuthy was criticised by the Ministry of Cults and Religion, and ordinary people, for his “misbehaviour” including making and selling “fake products” like amulets and jewelry. Although clients knew Vuthy sold such fake products, they still bought them because they want to be blessed and protected by Vuthy. The Ministry of Cults and Religion also asked Vuthy to change the Buddha image he had built since the image was at odds with Khmer tradition.

The controversial story of Vuthy represents the case of an ordinary person who claims to be a spiritual leader but is opposed by government agencies and some officials because he acts against mainstream religious morality. Despite such criticism, however, Vuthy’s strong connection with some government officials and the support received from wealthy clients enabled him to maintain his career.

Challenges of Re-establishing Divinatory Authority

During my fieldwork, I expected I might come across a formal institution which played a guiding role in standardising and popularising astrological divination practices across the country, such as the Astrology Association of Thailand.⁵² With the co-operation of royal family members and elite state officials, this association has been established in Bangkok since 1947. I expected that a similar, formal astrological association may have existed in Cambodia but, surprisingly, a national astrology association had never been established. While the Ministry of Cults and Religion as a powerful state agency has authority over Khmer religious beliefs and practices, it primarily focuses on organizing and supporting Buddhist ceremonies and rituals. The ministry does not provide an astrological curriculum or training course for practitioners drawn from the general community. This lack of an institutionalised divinatory authority helps explain the lack of standardization in the Cambodian astrology field. There is no unity in astrological authority in Cambodia and no agreement among the elite fortune-tellers and astrologers as to how authentic divinatory knowledge is to be transmitted. Given this situation, individual endeavors to establish their own divinatory authority would appear at best experimental and tentative. Available evidence suggests that the field of astrology in

⁵² Further details regarding the historical development, roles and responsibilities of the Astrology Association of Thailand can be found at their website: www.interastro.org.

Cambodia has not been united since the fall of the Khmer Rouge revolutionary government.

In the past, Cambodian royal astrologers played a key role in supporting royal ritual duties. Based on Khmer tradition, royal astrologers assisted the king or royal families to interpret the symbolic meanings elicited through royal rituals or ceremonies such as the Royal Ploughing Ceremony or “*Brahṛājābhidhī Puṇyacrátbrahṇanggāl*,” held annually in May—the rainy season in which Khmer people start planting their agricultural products (“Royal Ploughing Ceremony in Cambodia,” 2016). The highlight of this ceremony would occur when the Brahmans/astrologers applied their divinatory knowledge to predict the outcome of the harvest that year from whatever items the royal oxen chose to eat from a selection of substances laid before them (Tiang 2015).

The historical evidence suggests that the royal astrologer (*horā*) served to buttress the traditional institution of kingship by acting as the sacred mediator between humans and the natural world. Traditional Cambodian divination made reference to a vision of the cosmos illuminated by Hindu and Buddhist myths and philosophy, by which the kingdom’s rulers and ruled interacted with peculiar intensity with a host of potent natural entities and forces (Mabbett and Chandler 1995; Bizot 2013; Taylor 2014). As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, royal patronage of the rites of divination relied on, and reproduced, a vision of order which located the king in a paramount position at the interface with the natural world (Dyt 2017). Hence divination was used to build the king’s legitimacy. As per Katie Dyt’s argument for Nguyen Vietnam, Southeast Asian kings could increase their legitimacy among their subjects by demonstrating a deferential attentiveness to any signs of change in nature that might impinge on the fortune of the people or the kingdom (Dyt 2017). The processes of the royal Khmer ploughing ceremony support this interpretation. The divinatory ritual utilised in the Khmer ploughing ceremony enabled the king dramatically to display attentive responsiveness to potential signs of auspiciousness or disaster in agriculture, a realm of utmost importance to the Khmer people. The ceremony reflected the king’s imperative to know what may affect the agricultural fertility of the whole kingdom and the astrologer’s advice to the king helped to achieve that aim (“Royal Ploughing Ceremony in Cambodia”, 2016). In this sense, and following Dyt (2017), the king was accepted as the leader of the society by virtue of the respect he demonstrated towards the unpredictability of the natural world. Not only considered important to the success of agricultural activities, royal divination therefore is likely also

to have enhanced moral support for the king among the Khmer people. The prediction from the royal oxen's food consumption illustrates the uncertainty of humans—especially of the king as leader—who are not able to predict or foresee natural phenomena such as climate variability or disaster. Therefore, the task of meaningfully answering the questions: “what, when and how might events unfold” was left to the astrologers who could apply their knowledge to prepare a response towards unpredictable natural and supernatural forces.

Drawing on this interpretation of the traditional role of Cambodian astrologers, this chapter argues that traditionally, astrologers established their astrological authority by playing the role of privileged mediators between humans and the natural world. This model inspired the next generation of astrologers and fortune-tellers to continue in the role of mediator for the Khmer people in light of the range of new circumstances they confront. However, the current situation characterised by the absence of a formal body like an astrology association and the inability of any institution to impose authority over divination has led to contestation among elite and ordinary fortune-tellers.

Until today, Khmer traditional practices including divination and astrology have been centrally preserved by the royal family and government officials. The Cambodian royal family has been engaged with the occult sciences, especially astrology, since the Angkorean Empire. The Khmer kings usually consulted their ritual masters (*‘ācārya*) and/or astrologers (*horā*) about many issues concerning politics and the wellbeing of the country. The royal astrologers have played a significant role in preserving and reinventing traditional astrology, however, such knowledge has been limited to the royal court and a small group of elite people. The members of the royal family also have been interested to learn and transmit the knowledge of astrology within their family lineage. For example, Prince Ravivaddhana Minoring Sisowath claimed publicly through the media that he is an astrologer and has inherited astrological skills and knowledge from his mother, the late Princess Norodom Daravadey (Jackson 2014).

The ethnographic evidence discussed above suggests that the transmission of astrological knowledge is very limited in Cambodia. Many urban fortune-tellers have tried unsuccessfully to establish their divinatory authority based on fragments of knowledge they have acquired through family transmission, personal observations, charismatic inspiration and research into limited textual materials. Contestation and mistrust are rife

within the field of astrology. Even the Ministry of Cults and Religion as purported central divinatory authority has never conducted a survey of the actual number of astrologers and fortune-tellers and their multiple techniques in Cambodia.

Contestations among Urban Divinatory Authorities

Despite the lack of hegemonic divinatory authority, one individual has attempted to re-establish and reinvent the astrological discipline. A well-known Cambodian astrologer, Long Bora was the first individual to set up an astrological school and operate a short course in astrology for ordinary people who want to become professional fortune-tellers (Muong 2015). Long Bora also has been active in popularizing himself on TV. At the time of research, he was a regular guest on the TV horoscope show called Kae Vesna and Lek Reasey or “Change Destiny and Bring Luck,” while also offering horoscope services for major businesses like the Cellcard mobile network provider.

Bora attracted people’s attention again when he talked about his ambitious plan to offer a course “Divination 101,” for beginners who wanted to be professional fortune-tellers (Muong 2015). At that time, he criticised the fortune-tellers in the market as “the most unqualified fortune-tellers” since they never learned the rules of horoscope; their predictions were derived from guessing; and some of them simply used “the easiest technique of divination” (Muong 2015, 9). Bora, therefore, decided to offer a six-month program in Cambodian astrological techniques which would be distinguished from the “unstructured education in divination” of those market-based fortune-tellers.



Figure 35 Long Bora photographed during an interview with a Phnom Penh Post reporter (23 May 2015 Phnom Penh Post)

Bora's astrological technique was similar to Im Borin's seven digit number technique. He taught participants to read people's fortunes by using a complex calculation which allowed them to understand and rationalise the whole system of the horoscope. He said his course might not be suitable for ordinary participants but rather for 'ācārya or religious masters who lead Buddhist ceremonies in the pagoda. Bora further reflected that the main problem of astrological training in Cambodia was the lack of formal and standard discipline. As a result, none of the institutions, schools, and universities were able to train people to a professional level. The second problem of re-establishing the astrological discipline in Cambodia was the limitations of the method of oral transmission from one generation to the next. In response to these problems, Bora sought to invent a standardised, systematic and structured astrological knowledge in Cambodia. Even the primary authoritative agency, the Ministry of Cults and Religion, had only offered short training courses in horoscope or astrology for traditional ritual masters—not ordinary people. Bora personally believed that learning horoscope and fortune-telling techniques was simply a case of learning facts. According to Bora, fortune-tellers and astrologers in Cambodia could build trust in their professional career if they applied the right form of astrology and divination. In other words, accurate and formal astrological knowledge was what was required to produce reliable fortune-tellers.

Bora said that his idea to open the horoscope training school was supported by the National Committee for Organizing National and International Festivals. However, his plan was criticised by the most established authoritative astrologer, Im Borin. As head of the royal astrologers, he emphatically disagreed with setting up an association to unite all the fortune-tellers in the country. While Im Borin was invited to be an instructor at Bora's horoscope school, at the time of my research the school had been shut down due to low student numbers as a result of the expensive registration fee. The head of the royal astrologers further criticised Bora's divinatory technique, saying:

He [Long Bora] was just talking without any knowledge base while my horoscope reading and prediction are always based on astrological knowledge and textbooks [...] I know the way he predicted just trying to please the clients with positive readings like 'you will be lucky in your work, but you may be unlucky in love'[pause]... My astrological knowledge is more accurate and realistic than his on this point because I will tell my clients about the positive and negative factors that affect their lives.

Im Borin supported neither establishing astrological training nor setting up an astrological association for the benefit of local astrologers and fortune-tellers across the country. He claimed that setting up such an association would require a lot of money and would therefore need financial support from rich patrons or the government. While Im Borin intended to continue publishing his astrological books and circulating them for a general audience, these books only provided guidance and solutions for everyday life problems and did not function to educate or train readers in professional fortune-telling.

Im Borin had once accepted as students, two clients who wanted to learn astrology. However, his style of astrology which focused on the seven digits seemed too complicated for the beginners. The two clients managed to learn the astro-numerology technique, but they could not grasp the deep concepts of Khmer astro-numerology and Kpuan Mahasongkran. While they sought to acquire multiple techniques, they were unable to apply what they had learnt to make New Year predictions. Im Borin reflected that the main problems experienced by ordinary people who wanted to learn astrology were lack of passion for the discipline and ineptitude in mathematics. If they do not have a good knowledge in mathematics, they cannot calculate a year calendar or indicate the start and end of the Buddhist holy days or the full moon days. Numerous fortune-tellers did not

possess adequate understanding of the background of astro-numerology nor could they comprehend the logic as to why Khmer people should celebrate New Year for four days in April 2015.

:Discussion Reinventing Divinatory Authority, Re-imagining Khmer Tradition

This chapter continues the main theme of the thesis in exploring how astrology and divination have been reinvented and improvised by urban migrants in Cambodia. It highlights the life narrative of the lead Cambodian royal astrologer, an elite astrologer who came from the countryside to improvise his divinatory authority in the city. Reflecting on his life and reputation in Phnom Penh and his attempt to reinvent astrology knowledge, this chapter asks: How could a migrant villager become such an influential and recognised national authority on divination? Does his divinatory technique represent the traditional Khmer divinatory system or has he reinvented the astrological tradition?

The analytical focus of this chapter is to contextualise the individual improvisation and the social mobility of this elite astrologer as one of several attempts to establish divinatory authority in contemporary Cambodia. The ethnographic account shows that the elite astrologer improvises his divinatory authority through resources and knowledge assembled in the context of cultural discontinuities and rupture with tradition occurring since the Khmer Rouge period. His attempts at improvising divinatory authority by threading together diverse cultural influences have recreated and transformed Khmer astrological knowledge and practice as diverse, hybrid, and dynamic. The significance of these findings is to challenge two dominant discourses on Cambodian/Khmer culture. The first is that destructive exogenous forces from the civil war, communist revolution and foreign rule, to, more recently, globalisation, have overwhelmed and destroyed Khmer cultural models of traditional knowledge; the second is that contemporary Khmer religious practices and moral actions are rooted in an ancient tradition that has been preserved and transmitted over generations (for discussion on these discourses, see Ebihara 2002; Ledgerwood 2002, 2008; Edwards 2007; Kent and Chandler 2008).

The life narrative of Im Borin, the migrant astrologer, reveals another cultural dynamic at play, which is demonstrated by his impressively creative and successful attempt to reinvent himself, and the divinatory tradition, by improvising divinatory authority. The chapter describes his efforts to invent and establish his astrological authority through various means such as self-study and self-publication; making connections with the royal court

and government officials; and open-ended assimilation of multiple divinatory traditions and techniques. Im Borin has assertively promoted his improvised divinatory authority in many contexts. One is his use of media to communicate with readers and radio audiences and deliver divinatory predictions for “Khmer people of the whole nation”, stamping his authority on the field of astrology nation-wide. His predictions for the future, publicised at the time of the Khmer New Year, address not only individual concerns, but also problems related to economics, society, and politics that affect the whole country. In this sense, the head of the royal astrologers performs himself as a national divinatory resource and spokesperson, delivering “news” about the nation’s future to the people, while avoiding sensitive issues that could discredit the government or politicians.

Another of Im Borin’s contributions to improvising divinatory authority involved establishing a formal divinatory technique. His technique seems to reflect the concept of “East meets West”, and indeed of “North meets South.” What he refers to as the Khmer astrological system (*Kpuan Mahasongkran*) is used alongside Thai numerology and is also blended with Chinese geomancy (*feng shui*), a Western divinatory system and magical/supernatural connections. In this way, his divinatory discipline is very open-ended since the astrologer does not appear constrained to rely alone on the so-called “Khmer astrology tradition.” Rather, he borrows certain forms of astrology and divination from Thailand, China and other countries. While his astrological discipline is characterised by hybridity, such hybrid divination is justified by his claim that it is “the most accurate and reliable technique.” Im Borin believed that his divinatory authority was more established and acceptable than that of other fortune-tellers providing their services to clients “in the markets” and other public spaces in the city. Im Borin also distinguished himself from traditional local diviners and fortune-tellers by referring to his practice as “*kpuan*.” The term *kpuan*, improvised by Im Borin, is used by him to refer to formal knowledge and methodologies of divination and astrology derived from different astrological handbooks. Additionally, the client-patron relationships established with the royal family and government officials have helped Im Borin establish and sustain his divinatory authority. Relying on such patronage links he also criticised and discredited another fortune-teller who tried to contest his authority by establishing more regularised forms of divinatory authority.

The life narrative of the head of the royal astrologers and local reflections on his divinatory authority enables the analysis in this chapter to extend beyond an investigation

of the improvisation of Cambodian divinatory authority. In fact, attention to the process of improvisation can reveal how urban Khmer people are tentatively re-inventing and reconnecting to what they imagine to be the Cambodian tradition. The attempt to reinvent the central authority of divination in Phnom Penh also reflects the endeavour of Khmer people who are trying to reconnect with the national ideology of cultural traditions. The reimagination of divinatory authority in terms of an idealised, normative “real Khmer divinatory tradition” can be possibly understood as the heritage of nationalist discourse—as discussed by Penny Edwards (2007). The ideology of “real Khmer” or “authentic Cambodian” divination is reminiscent of the Khmer Rouge’s significant political ideology of purifying Khmer people to become “the Original Khmer” (ibid.). In order to enact this nationalist ideology, members of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK, 1975-1978) actually eradicated a whole range of cultural traditions, ‘superstitions’, religions, and locally distinctive ethnic-linguistic variations while also controlling individuals’ speech, behavior, dress, and actions.

To concretise Khmer national sentiment, the Khmer Rouge also used Angkor Wat as a primary symbol in convincing peoples to reimagine and reconnect to the glorious historical narrative of the ancient nation-state. Almost four decades after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, the historical narrative of “Original Khmer” or “Pure Khmer Tradition” still exists in the main urban city of Cambodia. Such nationalist ideology has been embedded in people’s everyday life experiences, including in relation to the improvisation of divinatory authority.

The ethnographic and historical evidence presented in this chapter suggests that there is no hegemonic divinatory authority in Cambodia. In fact, divinatory authority is fragmented; no formal institution or association has ever been established, and specific claims to divinatory authority are highly contested. It is also difficult to trace or define the formal or traditional form of astrology in Cambodia due to the field’s own complex and fragmented lineages of transmission. This situation undoubtedly can be traced in part to the devastation caused by Cambodia’s communist revolution and other major ruptures to the Cambodian cultural milieu before and since that period. It also speaks to the inherent limitations to knowledge transmission within a cultural and religious field that, for a century at the very least, appears not to have had a high level of institutional support and guidance comparable to that devoted to the cultivation of national cultural fields such

as Buddhism, the performing arts and the Cambodian language, to name some prominent examples.

But instead of idealising, or lamenting the loss of, Khmer cultural practices involving astrology, divination and magical beliefs as “pure,” “homogeneous,” and “authentic” traditions, Khmer people in Phnom Penh experience and reproduce these realms of practice as “experimental knowledge fields” due to the diverse, and hybrid resources they have access to and deploy. This chapter, therefore, argues that Khmer urban people improvise their cultural practices, especially divination, as experimental knowledge rather than reproducing them in unaltered form as faithful transmitters of a “cultural tradition.” In this way, they experience “divinatory tradition” as a living dynamic process which has been reinvented within the context of momentous social change, intellectual flows, cultural exchanges and uncertainty about the future, and the transformations in personal lives and fortunes that have occurred since the communist revolution.

Conclusion

This thesis examines religious life in contemporary Phnom Penh which is conceptualised as one of Cambodia's significant spiritual localities. While building rapport with urban Khmers of different socio-economic backgrounds, and especially with migrants, I came to realise a strong demand existed for various forms of divinatory service and magical technology. Khmer people in Phnom Penh draw upon a wide range of occult technologies for multiple purposes. The popularity of divination, magic, and spirit cults in Cambodia's capital city supports the case made by scholars who have argued that local religious practices in Southeast Asian countries are not fading into oblivion but, rather, are continuing and changing in response to modernisation, industrialisation and the capitalist market economy (Jackson 1992; Taylor 2007; Pattana 2012). Revived and reinvented religious traditions including Buddhist rituals and non-orthodox repertoires such as spirit veneration, divination and magic, scholars argue, are strongly associated with the experience of market development, the neoliberal order, modern technology and processes such as migration, urbanisation and industrialisation (Mills 1999; Taylor 2004, 2007; Hefner 2010).

The thesis investigates the improvisation of Khmer religious traditions, including divination, magic, and spirit cults, in the context of contemporary Cambodia's dynamics of secularisation, urbanisation, migration and globalisation. Such religious repertoires have been revived and reinvented in the form of technological resources utilised in the journeys of urban migrants who relocate from their home villages to the capital city for educational and working purposes. Exploring Cambodian religion through the experiences of urban migrants sheds light on the creative ways that migrants experience and re-enchant the urban world. It also demonstrates how urban migrants agentively grapple with uncertain and insecure circumstances and attempt to improve their lives through their use of mystical resources, affinities, entities and forces.

Based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Phnom Penh, this thesis focuses specifically on the multidimensional strategic functions that urban migrants seek from religious technologies in different circumstances. The ethnographic data draws upon the

experiences of young female migrants, university students and market vendors along with a range of religious practitioners who apply such technologies to overcome vulnerability, maintain security and ascertain the nature of the world they live in. They attempt to repurpose their cultural traditions involving divination, magical technologies and spiritual beliefs to the best of their abilities, in the context of precarious circumstances, uncertainties about their lives, and a limited knowledge of traditions.

While divination, astrology, and magic appeal to migrants as a means to alleviate their anxieties related to security, relationships and trust in urban society, such practices are also subject to significant reinvention in the very process of being utilised by migrants. In light of concerns about the authenticity of traditional knowledge in Cambodia's post-revolutionary society, this thesis challenges the dichotomy reflected in existing scholarship on Cambodia by which contemporary Cambodian cultural practices are viewed as either continuous or discontinuous with past tradition (Ovesen, Trankell, and Öjendal 1996; Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Ledgerwood 2011, 2012). The thesis argues that Khmer traditions are in fact being creatively improvised by various urban agents in the context of being put to new uses. In other words, such religious traditions are experimentally modified by urban migrants in the course of their own experiments with Cambodian urban living.

This conclusion highlights the main findings of this thesis and analyses them in relation to two key sub-themes. The thesis demonstrates that Khmer urban religious forms, especially divination, are a means by which urban migrants visualise and experience the urban world and how they cope with change and seek empowerment in an unfamiliar urban setting. The thesis also proposes approaching the religious practices of Khmer urban migrants as an "experimental field" through which they creatively understand themselves and the world, while also offering experimental directions for adapting to and coping with the challenges of living in the city.

Urban Religious Technologies as a Form of Empowerment

As the administrative, economic and educational centre of Cambodia, Phnom Penh is a magnet for hundreds of thousands of migrants from all over the country, who have moved to the city to improve their lives and make their fortunes. This thesis explores the religious lives of these urban migrants, especially university students, small-scale traders and people working in a range of fortune-telling professions. It documents their numerous

struggles to establish themselves in the city; improve themselves financially and educationally; start businesses and build new relationships; maintain links to their family in their home villages; reconcile traditional expectations with modern aspirations; and cope with problems in their study, work and family lives. Settling in the city throws up a host of uncertainties, frustrations, dilemmas and risks that trouble the young migrants and lead them to seek help from diviners and various spiritual and magical technologies. The thesis shows how divination and other religious practices serve these migrants in their efforts to comprehend, control and emotionally handle the demanding process of settling in the city. The urban migrants seem to have spiritual and magical solutions for every problem they encounter; utilising multiple forms of religious tools when they experience confusion, lack confidence, and fail in their attempts to receive attention or influence others.

This thesis argues that religious traditions involving various occult technologies can be viewed as a form of empowerment that helps vulnerable people to reconcile themselves to uncertain and unsettling circumstances while also securing their lives in an unfamiliar urban setting. In other words, divination, magic and spiritual beliefs have been used by migrants to re-embed themselves into the city. The urban migrants utilise and adapt such traditions to advance their interests and maintain security and power. This thesis thus considers the Cambodian religious repertoire as a set of resources and methods of coping for urban migrants who have been dislocated and feel disempowered by the socio-economic transformations resulting from globalisation and modernisation.

On migrating to the city many students and workers leave behind established kin and communal networks and lack the social resources that would enable them to obtain information, work and mutual support. They have few local acquaintances and no-one to trust or rely upon when in a crisis. Some are self-reliant and draw upon resources of moral self-discipline or practical knowledge and other techniques passed down to them within their family. Others seek the assistance of spiritual patrons in the city: developing new relations of patronage and mutual care with the city's guardian spirits, upon whom they rely for protection. Some migrants bring their familiar spirits along with them, enshrining in their homes and workplaces spiritual entities upon whom they relied whilst at home and continue to interact with in their new urban environment. As such, this thesis uncovers examples of 'religious portability' (Reid 1993: 132; Taylor 2007: 107; High 2008: 262), showing that migrants frequently carry with them from their home villages

familiar religious resources that aid them in their quest to find spiritual security and emplace themselves in the city.

Many migrants consult fortune tellers when they encounter an unexpected obstacle, indecision related to a dilemma, or crisis believed to result from mysterious relations in urban society. Making one's way in a new city is emotionally troubling and fortune tellers provide an affective service to their clients, helping them to deal with incertitude and anxiety with regards to their past, present and future circumstances. Both vulnerable people such as migrant students and members of elite groups regularly patronise market-based card-reading services, seek private numerological consultations, consult mediums and utilise other spiritual technologies to ascertain their situation. Fortune-tellers' examination of the unknown and unseen informs these urban people about how to prevent or eliminate undesirable situations, resulting from one's past actions, inauspiciousness or malign influence. The fortune-telling consultation not only provides information to urban migrants about factors and forces determining their fate, but also consists of an emotional service that enables clients to vent concerns, gain in confidence, and imagine a range of prospective scenarios that cast their situation in a new light.

Each divinatory technique is considered to contain different efficacy and affects. The card-reading services based at Phnom Penh's markets offer insights into the deep factors that influence social relationality and predetermine outcomes. As such, reading someone's fortune from the cards gives rise to understandings, resources and possibilities that enable that person to re-imagine and potentially reconstruct their relationships with others. Using a different approach, numerological fortune-tellers inform clients that their fortune can be calculated and forecast through certain formulae. The numerological technique can be used to predict what will happen and what individuals will encounter for the forthcoming year, while also suggesting the auspicious times to conduct events such as life-cycle rituals, wedding ceremonies, house-moving, or opening a new business. Each number contains a different symbolic meaning which reflects a certain experience for the client who seeks an alternative way to make sense of their problems, be they illness, negative emotions, indecision, failure or uncertainty.

Migrants face a particular challenge in developing effective relationships in the city, establishing trust and promoting themselves to others as worthy people. While in their home setting, their personhood and social identity and the roles assigned to them within

the social cosmos were known, and could often be taken for granted: for better or for worse. However, in the city they are surrounded by strangers and are frequently puzzled by what it takes to build effective relationships, gain respect and influence others to their advantage. In consulting with fortune tellers, migrants are eager to learn about the mystical forces that determine compatibility, compel attraction, and create bonds. Some fortune-telling clients seek out magical technologies that they hope will create loyalty, trust, and attraction, while also ensuring a sense of security and protection. In the urban setting, people try to heal their sensory and bodily afflictions and overcome fragmented relationships in their family and within their economic network by employing love magic (*sneh*). This form of magic has practical benefits for it can stimulate desire, secure relations and increase attraction between individuals, such as urban housewives and their husbands, or market traders and their clients. However, the use of magic to advance one's social interests is thought to have a dark side, for it is believed that desperate people will make recourse to 'black magic' in order to destroy relationships and cause harm to their social competitors.

The religious experiences of migrants shed light on the continuation of Khmer healing traditions, which draw upon spiritual beliefs and patron-client relations between human and non-human agencies. The findings thus reconfirm and support scholars like Eisenbruch (1992) and Oversen and Trankell (2010) who propose that Khmer people still follow healing traditions performed by healing ritual specialists with the assistance of spiritual patrons. In this thesis, I argue that Khmer people use their tacit transmission of religious repertoires as an alternative way to overcome their illness and suffering while also securing their physical and mental wellbeing. Strong relations with deceased ancestors and territorial and guardian spirits can overcome individuals' experiences of illness and suffering. The diagnosis and healing that take place through a divinatory session engage the relationship between human and spiritual agents. The fortune-tellers will diagnose the cause of illness as the result of spiritual transgression. My findings support the argument that even in the unfamiliar urban setting, Khmer cosmology conceives of the process of healing as a collective rather than individual experience. Utilising magical healing techniques and processes, fortune-tellers and ritual masters try to convince the urban Khmers, especially young migrants, to reintegrate themselves into their family and ancestors through remembering the deceased ancestors and continuing the rituals to venerate and worship them.

Some scholars have paid attention to the individual's agentic capacity demonstrated in their decision-making to cope with change and transition in Cambodia's post-revolutionary society (Ledgerwood and Vighen 2002; Öjendal and Sedara 2006; Derks 2008; Peou 2016). Following their argument, this thesis proposes that the use of divination, magic, and spiritual technology does not reflect fatalism in individuals but, rather, it expresses the agentic capacity of urban Khmer individuals who attempt to rebuild and reimagine their religious traditions within a context of historical rupture and uncertain knowledge. In other words, the current improvised reinvention of divination, magic, and spiritual cults reveals Khmer people's capability to creatively deal with transitions taking place within Cambodian society. In this way, urban Khmer migrants are the agents of change rather than the passive subjects of tradition.

Continuity, Rupture and Creativity in Urban Divinatory Traditions

During the research for this thesis, I realised that the divination field in Phnom Penh was marked by contestation over what was authentic. Even before embarking on field research, some Cambodian people told me I was mistaken to research Khmer fortune-telling in Phnom Penh because the mediumistic fortune-tellers who embodied the authentic form of this tradition were to be found only in the countryside. However, once in Phnom Penh, I met urban diviners who told me that rural mediums lacked a textual knowledge-base or system to ensure that their predictions were accurate. One *horā* or elite astrologer with an official position and reputation as royal astrologer was introduced to me as a real expert in and exponent of the Khmer tradition. When examined closely, however, it turned out that his system was based on a mixture of Thai, Chinese and Western systems. This apparent inconsistency did not deter him and other practitioners from criticising commercial fortune-tellers who offered services in the markets and other public venues as opportunists who practiced an inaccurate and inauthentic form of the tradition. When one diviner suggested that a program be established to rectify this problem by formally teaching and certifying an approved version of divination knowledge this initiative was shot down by other established fortune-tellers possibly because it would undermine their own status.

I think such contestations can tell us something about the state of religious knowledge and authority in Cambodia's post-revolutionary era. When offering a divination, fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh provide a service that they and their clients experience as authentic

and sincere, while frequently also expressing doubts about the state of knowledge, authenticity and good faith in their entire field. Although divination as a set of practices in Cambodia probably always has been marked by individual innovation, local improvisation and contestation, the problem of establishing religious authority has been particularly acute following the massive devastation to religious practitioners and cultural traditions that occurred under the Khmer Rouge. As a result, urban Khmer people are anxious and uncertain about their knowledge of traditions. The post-Khmer Rouge capital city lacks consensual narratives to indicate or identify the truth about divination traditions, with urban people uncertain about their cultural knowledge which prevents them from contextualising or locating the “authentic” traditions. Urban fortune-tellers possess knowledge which is the subject of secretive preservation or transmission; they are either self-taught or their knowledge has been inherited from other family members, rather than learned through institutionalised or formal training.

As such, this thesis proposes that we should understand the resurgence of Khmer divination traditions in relation to the uncertainties and limitations engendered by historical crises in Cambodian society. The thirst to reconnect with such religious traditions in the Cambodian capital city takes place in the wake of profound social and cultural upheavals that occurred not only under the Khmer Rouge regime, but also during the subsequent decade of ‘quasi-socialist’ rule under Vietnamese occupation (Slocomb 2003) and the decades, post-UNTAC, of experimentation by the Cambodian government with developmentalism and neoliberalism (Brinkley 2011; Springer 2010). Although each of these regimes has made a conspicuous attempt to revive and restore aspects of Cambodian traditional culture, in the interests of seeking legitimacy (Ebihara and Ledgerwood 2002; Edwards 2007; Kent and Chandler 2008), none of them has focussed on patronising or reconstructing Cambodian divination traditions. This has left the task of reviving and reconnecting to lost divination traditions in the hands of enterprising individuals who have laboured alone at this project in the absence of historical records and documents such as textbooks or palm leaf manuscripts. This thesis employs the term “improvisation” to explain the in-progress process of creative reinvention of urban religious authority and knowledge within the context of this historical rupture and ongoing turbulence and profound change in the socio-cultural world of the capital city.

The current resurgence of divination and magic in the Cambodian urban setting reflects the aspirations of Khmer urban people who want to establish a reliable way of knowing

the world that enables them to secure and control their lives within uncertain circumstances. Their predicament is illuminated by scholars of post-modern and post-revolutionary societies who have argued that people in such societies frequently make use of, and remake, traditions in order to establish meaning, control and authority in settings that are quite different to the situation that existed in the past (Taussig 1987; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Although the urban fortune-tellers I met are diverse in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds, they share the predicament of striving for authority in the absence of a unified and consensual, or 'canonical', tradition. Some migrants to the city make use of and creatively adapt for use in the city practices, dispositions, symbols and techniques that they gained access to through their family or village networks. Some pick up new practices such as reading cards or placating local spirits from observing and interacting with their neighbours in the urban setting. Many elite and well-regarded fortune-tellers utilise texts and knowledge acquired from outside of Cambodia. Some use magical technology that protected them in an earlier period of military conflict. In other words, Cambodian religious traditions are adapted and reinvented by different individuals who attempt to improvise their own religious authority with the limited resources they can access in the city.

A few elite fortune-tellers and astrologers have improvised their authority by assembling a range of divinatory techniques from traditions that are well-established in other countries. Their proficiency with foreign languages and practices has given some individuals access to high-status Thai and Chinese textual traditions, which in turn secures them an elite status and high-class clientele in the urban Cambodian divination 'market'. The cases of the royal astrologer and the numerological fortune-teller, who both employ a hybrid divinatory technique, show how enterprising Khmer migrants from the countryside can leverage their advantage in a competitive market. However, those fortune-tellers unable to access this 'high form' (*kpaun*) of divinatory knowledge, such as market based card-reading and mediumistic fortune-tellers, attempt to establish their authority and reputation by claiming certain forms of spiritual or predestined affinity for their own practice. Some card-reading fortune-tellers at Phnom Penh's central market alternatively emphasised a Buddhist moral code of conduct in the course of fortune-reading. Performing their role as Buddhist fortune-tellers was part of their strategy to attract more clients.

This thesis thus highlights the reinvention of Khmer religious traditions in the context of their use as resources by urban migrants. The urban migrants creatively reconceptualise traditional religious concepts and repertoires to advance their interests or achieve their material desires, while also navigating the unfamiliar social terrain of the city. For some urban Khmer fortune-tellers, the notion of *nissāya* or “mystical affinity” has been broadly rearticulated in terms of its social, karmic, spiritual and magical dimensions. While previous scholars (Davis 2008; Hedley 1977; Chuon n.d.) define this concept somewhat narrowly as “fate” or “dependency,” for some Phnom Penh market women, *nissāya* is conceptualised diversely in terms of the notions of social relatedness, karmic predetermination, obligatory relations with spirits of place, and connections secured through magical attraction. Such a view of life as shaped by mystical affinities, however, does not always imply that life is predetermined by forces or factors beyond one’s control. The mystical element embedded in *nissāya* also gives rise to agentive strategies that urban Khmers can employ to influence and control their own fates, improve their circumstances, manipulate outcomes and control relationships.

In a similar way, young urban migrant women have their own ways to assemble and secure their fortune. Fortune is secured by drawing on moral repertoires taken with the young migrants on their journeys of education and migration. Migrant students imagine, cultivate and secure their fortunes in different ways. One migrant university student from Battambang cultivated her fortune through a repertoire of embodied moral disciplines, such as self-improvement, self-reliance, self-discipline, hard work, responsibility and gratefulness. In a situation of crisis, this student turned to create a relationship with an urban spiritual patron. However, she soon realised that such a spiritual resource could not bring her long-term benefit. As a result, she continued to drive her life journey guided by her own moral resources instead of waiting for spiritual assistance. In contrast, the religious experience of a second migrant student suggests an alternative approach to securing fortune. This migrant student displayed moral agency through her ritual discipline of maintaining good relations with a variety of spiritual beings that she had brought with her and enshrined in the city. The student knew how to conduct and arrange complicated rituals to appease the spirits in order to secure good outcomes for particular problems. Although the two students demonstrated different approaches to cultivating and sustaining their fortune, they both were similar in terms of the portable nature of the morality and belief they carried with them when they were on the move. They

domesticated the city with their embodied morality and ritual discipline that enabled them to make the unfamiliar city “home.”

Newcomers to the city can make up for deficiencies in their social and spiritual resources by improvising patron-client relationships with local spiritual beings. Khmer migrants pay respect and venerate various types of protective gods and spirits in the city in order to ensure their fortunes. The urban-based cults include guardian spirits of the land and house, patron spirits of occupations and techniques, and homeless child spirits, which each perform a different moral function in the journey of urban migrants. A good relationship with such non-human agents can maintain a sense of security for those young urban migrants who lack familial connections in the city. The urban fortune-tellers who cannot access formal knowledge of divination and astrology refer to their own spiritual affinity with *braḥ'angga* and *grū*. The urban fortune-tellers interchangeably use the terms *braḥ'angga* and *grū* when they want to refer to the deceased teachers who originally established the knowledge of divination and astrology in Cambodia. This practice reflects the Khmer traditional belief in the implicit transmission of knowledge and power between the moral spiritual patrons and the clients which, in this context, refers to the fortune-tellers. In the context of the marketplace, Khmer migrants, especially women, consider *mreṅkangvāl* or homeless child spirits as gatekeepers and allies who act to mitigate risk and maintain their wellbeing.

Although gender is not the central analysis of my thesis, the ethnographic detail as demonstrated in various chapters has important gendered implications, including how female students and market sellers seek to “attract” others/ create connections to strangers, and how male astrologers compete in seeking to link themselves to and serve the powerful. Furthermore, transformations in gender relations can be observed through the life-experiences of fortune-telling clients, especially young urban migrants. The experiences of young female fortune-telling clients support the argument of some scholars about the shift and transformation of gender roles and the identity of Cambodian women (Ledgerwood 1990, 1996; Derks 2008). The young female migrants have embodied the proper or virtuous habits from their parents and the socio-cultural environment of their village of origin. However, they also learn and readjust themselves to the cosmopolitan culture through the use of social media and modern technology that connect them to the global arena and its particular cultural values and material consumption. Instead of exploring how individuals are subjected to gendered traditions,

this thesis aims to focus on the agentic capacity of the young female migrants in relation to their experiences of social mobility. The findings also support Peou's argument that young male and female migrants attempt to navigate resources and opportunities in coping with the uncertainty and risks encountered in the city (Peou 2015). In relation to this, when migrant students experience an identity crisis or dilemma, they are primarily concerned about the effect on their survival and success rather than the expectations of their family or the society more broadly. As demonstrated in this thesis, young female migrants learn to maintain a relationship with ancestral spirits or local territorial/guardian spirits not simply because it conforms to traditional expectations but because to do so can deliver a certain form of spiritual protection to them as vulnerable individuals in the city.

The key findings of this thesis therefore challenge existing conceptualisations of cultural practices in contemporary Cambodian society, such as divination, as either continuous with longstanding Khmer traditions (Bertrand 2001, 2004; Ang 1988) or, on the other hand, as discontinuous with the past (Trankell and Öjendal 1995). My analysis is in line with the view that cultural practices from the past have been reimagined and repurposed in contemporary Cambodia (Ebihara 2002; Ledgerwood 2002, 2008, 2011, 2012; Kobayashi 2008). This thesis conceptualises present-day divinatory traditions as experimental traditions that have been creatively reinvented within a context of historical rupture and dynamic social changes taking place in urban Cambodia's post-revolutionary society. This thesis argues that urban Khmer religious traditions, especially in the divinatory field, have been reinvented in the process of being used to cope with contemporary urban circumstances. Looking at the process of traditional reinvention in the urban context, I have learnt from Khmer interlocutors engaged in this research that urban divinatory traditions are globalised and hybridised through interaction with other traditions. In this way, divination and magic in contemporary urban Cambodia can be described as experimental knowledge or an experimental tradition rather than evaluated as "authentic" or "inauthentic" traditions. Considering urban divination as an experimental phenomenon emphasises the creative capacities of Khmer people who utilise and transform divination as a means to know and control their world.

Research Implications

This thesis expands and broadens the territory of the anthropology of Cambodian religion with its investigation of urban and migrant religiosity. Previous scholars have considered the village or the countryside as the primary anthropological fieldsite for exploring continuities and change in Cambodian religious traditions (Ledgerwood 2002, 2008, 2011; Kobayashi 2008; Bertrand 2001; Marston and Guthrie 2004; Kent and Chandler 2008; Beban and Work 2014; O’Lemmon 2014). This thesis argues that Phnom Penh is also a significant “religious field” where researchers can observe Khmer people deploying their complex and diverse religious repertoires while contributing to the reformation of contemporary Cambodian society and culture. This thesis fills a gap in the anthropology of Cambodian religion as it is the first ethnographic study that explores religious traditions of urban migrants and the process of urban re-enchantment involving occult technologies in the city.

This thesis can be used as a preliminary study for subsequent researchers interested in various unexplored aspects of Cambodian studies. It contributes to the anthropology of Cambodian religion by uncovering the multidimensional aspects of religion in urban settings and lives. It offers a new lens to understand the dynamics of change in Cambodian urban society through its exploration of revival and reinvention in urban divination, magic, spirit cults. The experiences of the fortune-tellers and their clients might enable urban sociologists, for example, to unpack the various problematic scenarios and dilemmas encountered by urban Cambodians from different social backgrounds. It contributes to the anthropology of migration by showing how, through religion, migrants experience and adapt to life in the city. The findings of this research also can be of use to researchers interested to contextualise political and economic relations in relation to the cosmology and beliefs of contemporary Cambodian actors. In addition, as a Thai anthropologist attempting to understand Cambodian society and culture, I believe that this thesis can increase dialogue and provide tools for other scholars from Southeast Asia interested in conducting research which promotes cultural understandings among people in neighbouring countries. This ethnographic research was conducted during a period when many scholars within ASEAN were interested in discussing and debating commonalities and differences between ASEAN countries and explore the possibilities for collaborative research. Reflecting on my research project, I think that one aspect of

the cultural links between ASEAN countries that could be further explored is how divination and associated religious practices feature in the lives of the millions of migrants who move between the countries of ASEAN.

Although the thesis attempts to cover a range of divinatory and astrological practitioners and their techniques in the Cambodian urban context, there are some gaps in the ethnographic data due to limited access to interlocutors' networks and gender difference between the researcher and interlocutors. In addition to the urban fortune-tellers discussed in the thesis, Buddhist monks also offer divination services. This thesis, however, does not include in-depth reflections by urban monks who practice divination. Some high-ranking monks in Phnom Penh did, however, explain that the city is not the right place to find "real" and "authentic" divining monks. They said that it is the rural monks who practise an authentic form of divination while the city monks are more interested to improve their lives through education. Furthermore, clearly, my findings mainly reflect the experiences of female clients as I was unable to build rapport with male clients who also strongly believed in divination and magic. In this way, gender difference creates a particular slant to the ethnographic data which emphasises Khmer women as the loyal clients of different divinatory techniques.

Based on my research, communication through a medium seems to be uncommon in Phnom Penh. I observed the mediumistic fortune-teller (*nakcūlrūp*) to be quite rare and less popular than numerology and card-reading techniques, and not available in the local markets. Some interlocutors did not seem to trust the practice of spiritual divination in the city, reflecting that the mediumistic fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh are not as reliable as the ones in their home village. The question of why spiritual divination is rare in Phnom Penh recalls my discussion in previous chapters on the problems of unfamiliarity and mistrust that characterise relationships between urban Khmer people. The ability to communicate with the spirits of deceased ancestors and relatives implies the existence of certain forms of information and knowledge that draws upon intimate and familiar social relationships of the kind that exist in village settings. In urban society, where many people do not know each other, it would be difficult for clients to communicate with their departed relatives through a mediumistic fortune-teller who knows neither the deceased nor the clients who seek to contact them.

Finally, the ethnographic data presented in this thesis cannot articulate the role of the divinatory system in relation to the Cambodian King, the royal family or highly-placed government officials in contemporary society. While understanding the divinatory authority of the *horā*, the reader might further ask: “what is the political role of the *horā*” and “what is their role beyond co-ordinating official ceremonies?” or “how can the *horā* possibly influence policy-makers or decision-making in the important projects of the government?” However, my ethnographic data could not answer such questions because the *horā* with whom I built rapport sought to avoid speaking about his alliance with the King or any particular government official. It is not, however, because such alliance does not exist. As Khmer people have observed, the traditional role of the *horā* was to advise on mysterious knowledge and forces, on behalf of the Cambodian King, in order to maintain his legitimate rule over the country (Jackson 2014). In my view, responses to these questions can be developed from a longer period of ethnographic study and from in-depth perspectives reflected by interlocutors who have strong networks and connections with government officials.

Bibliography

- Alexander, Jenifer. "Migration, Imagination and Identity in Modern Sarawak." Anthropology Seminar Series. Department of Anthropology, The Australian National University, Canberra, March 21, 2018.
- Ang Chouléan. 1988. "The Place of Animism within Popular Buddhism in Cambodia the Example of the Monastery." *Asian Folklore Studies* 47(1): 35-41.
- Anuman Rajathon, Phraya (Sathiankoset). 1986. *Thetsakan Songkran* (in Thai). Bangkok: Kurusapha.
- Aymonier, Etienne-François. 1900. *Le Cambodge*. Vol. 3. Paris: E. Leroux.
- Baker, Chris, Pongpaichit, Pasuk. 2013. "Protection and Power in Siam from Khun Chang Khun Phaen to the Buddha Amulet." *Southeast Asian Studies* 1(2): 215-242.
- Beban, Alice, and Courtney Work. 2014. "The Spirits are Crying: Dispossession Land and Possessing Bodies in Rural Cambodia." *Antipode* 46(3): 593-610. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12073>.
- Bellah, Robert, ed. 1965. "Epilogue: Religion and progress in modern Asia." In *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia*. New York: Free Press.
- Benavides, Gustavo. 2006. "Magic." In *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. David A. Segal, 295-308. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bertrand, Didier. 2001. "The Names and Identities of the Boramey Spirits Possessing Cambodian Mediums." *Asian Folklore Studies* 60(1): 31-47.
- Bertrand, Didier. 2004. "A Medium Possession Practice and Its Relationship with Cambodian Buddhism: The Grū Pāramī." In *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, 150-169. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Bizot, François. 1988. *Les traditions de la pabbajja Asie du Sud-Est. Recherches sur le bouddhisme khmer*, IV. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Bizot, François. 2013. "L'horoscope perdu des devins du Cambodge [The lost horoscope of the soothsayers of Cambodia]." *Extrême-Occident* 35: 171-97. doi:10.4000/extremeorient.286.

- Bou Saroeun. 2001. "Wat Phnom, the capital's most important temple." *Phnom Penh Post*, December 7. Accessed 14 September 2017.
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/wat-phnom-capitals-most-important-temple>.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Brinkley, Joel. 2011. *Cambodia's Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land*. New York: Public Affairs Books.
- Brickell, Katherine, and Simon Springer. 2009. *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*. Routledge Handbooks: London and New York.
- Bun T Lim. 2006. *Surviving Cambodia, The Khmer Rouge Regime*. USA: Trafford.
- Bullentin De Soit Communiqué. 1934. [Khmer archive, no title], January 10.
- Callebaut, Corinne, and Steven Prigent. 2011. *Marché Central: Historie d'une Rénovation* [Central Market: Story of Renovation]. Phnom Penh: Melon Rouge.
- Carsten, Janet. 1997. *The Heat of the Hearth. The Process of Kinship in a Malay Fishing Community*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Chandler, David P. 1983a. *A History of Cambodia*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Chandler, David P. 1983b. "Seeing Red: Perceptions of Cambodian History in Democratic Kampuchea." In *Revolution and its Aftermath in Kampuchea*, eds. David Chandler and Ben Kiernan, 34-56. New Haven: Southeast Asian Monograph Series.
- Chandler, David P. 1984. "Normative Poems (*Chbap*) and Pre-Colonial Cambodian Society." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15(2): 271-79.
- Chandler, David P. 1991. *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War and Revolution since 1945*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Chandler, David P. 1996. "The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge." Review of *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979*, by Ben Kiernan. *Journal of Asian Studies* 55(4): 1063-1064. <https://search-proquest-com.virtual.anu.edu.au/docview/230424867?accountid=8330>.
- Chandler, David P. 2002. "S-21, the Wheel of History, and the Pathology of Terror in Democratic Kampuchea." In *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*, eds. Judy Ledgerwood and Kheang Un, 60-90. DeKalb: Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University.
- Chandler, David P. 2008. *History of Cambodia*. 4th edition. Boulder, Colorado: Westview.
- Chandler, David P. 2008. "Cambodia Deals with Its Past: Collective Memory, Demonisation and Induced Amnesia." *Totalitarian Movements and Political Regions* 9 (2-3): 355-369.

- Chandler, David P., and Ben Kiernan, eds. 1983. *Revolution and its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University.
- Chandler, David P., Ben Kiernan, and Chanthou Boua, eds. 1988. *Pol Pot Plans the Future. Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976-1977*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University.
- Chuon Nath Ven. 1967. *Vochânanukrâm Khmaer* [Khmer Dictionary] Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute.
- Coedès, George. 1938. *Littérature Cambodgienne*. Hanoi: G. Taupin and Cie.
- Coedès, George. 1951. "Les règles de la succession royale dans l'ancien Cambodge." *Bulletin de la Société des Études Indochinoises*. 26(2): 117-130.
- Coedès, George. 1952. "Un yantraa récemment découvert à Angkor." *Journal Asiatique* 240(4): 465-477.
- Coedès, George. 1968. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. Honolulu. East-West Center Press.
- Coggan, Philip. 2015. *Spirit Worlds: Cambodia, The Buddha and the Naga*. Oxford: John Beaufoy Publishing.
- Cook, Nerida M. 1989. *Astrology in Thailand: The future and the recollection of the past*. PhD. diss. The Australian National University.
- Cornwel-Smith, Philip. 2005. *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture*. Bangkok: River Books.
- Darwin, Charles. (1872) 1955. *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- David, Sen, and Charles Rollet. 2015. "Youth Fear Jobless." *Phnom Penh Post*, August 10. Accessed July 5, 2015. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/youth-fear-joblessness>.
- Davis, Erik W. 2015. *Death Power, Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Davis, Erik W. 2008. "Imaginary Conversations with Mothers about Death." In *At the Edge of the Forest, Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, eds. Anne Ruth Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, 221-248. Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asian Program Publications.
- De Bernon, Olivier. 1997. A Propos du Retour des Bakous dans le Palais Royal de Phnom Penh. *Renouveaux Religieux en Asie*. Paris: EFEO.
- Derks, Annuska. 2008. *Khmer Women on the Move: Exploring Work and Life in Urban Cambodia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i.
- Desjarlais, Robert R. 1992. *Body and Emotion: the aesthetics of illness and healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

- Dyt, Kathryn Louise. 2017. *The Nguyen Weather-World: Environment, Emotion and Governance in Nineteenth-Century Vietnam*. PhD. diss. The Australian National University.
- Ebihara, May M. 1966. "Interrelations between Buddhism and social systems in Cambodian peasant culture." In *Anthropological Studies in Theravada Buddhism* (Cultural Report Series Issue 13), eds. Nash, Manning et al., 175-96. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies.
- Ebihara, May M. 1968. *Svay: a Khmer Village in Cambodia*. Ph.D. diss. Columbia University.
- Ebihara, May M. 2018. *Svay: a Khmer Village in Cambodia*. Andrew C. Mertha, ed. Southeast Asia Program Publications: Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Ebihara, May M. 1971. "Inter-Village, Village-Town, and Village-City Relations in Cambodia." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 220(6): 358-375.
- Ebihara, May M. 1974. "Khmer Village Women in Cambodia: A Happy Balance." In *Many Sisters: Women in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Carolyn J. Matthiasson, 305-347. New York: Free Press.
- Ebihara, May M. 1977. "Residence Patterns in a Khmer Peasant Village." *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* (293): 51-68.
- Ebihara, May M. 1984. "Societal Organization in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Cambodia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15(2): 280-295.
- Ebihara, May M. 1990a. "Revolution and reformation in Kampuchean village culture." In *The Cambodian Agony*, eds. David A. Ablin and Marlowe Hoods, 16-61. New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Ebihara, May M. 1990b. "Return to a Khmer village." *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14(3).
- Ebihara, May M., Carol A Mortland, and Judy Ledgerwood. 1994. *Cambodian Culture since 1975: Homeland and Exile*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Ebihara, May, and Judy Ledgerwood. 2002. "Aftermaths of Genocide: Cambodian Villagers." In *Annihilating difference: the anthropology of genocide*, ed. Alexander Hinton. 272-291. Berkeley: University of California Press,
- Edwards, Penny. 2007. *Cambodge, the Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- E.E. Evans-Pritchard. 1937. *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Eisenbruch, Maurice. 1992. "The ritual space of patients and traditional healers in Cambodia." *Bulletin de l'école Française d'Extrême-Orient* 79 (2): 283-316.
- Endres, Kirsten W. 2011. *Performing the divine: mediums, markets and modernity in urban Vietnam*. Denmark: NIAS Press.

- Endres, Kirsten W. 2015. "Lộc Bestowed by Heaven: Fate, Fortune, and Morality in the Vietnamese Marketplace." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 16(3): 227-243. doi:10.1080/4442213.2015.1024718.
- Ekman, Paul. 1971. "Universals and cultural differences in facial expressions of emotion." In *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, ed. J.K. Cole, 207-283. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ekman, Paul. 1973. *Darwin and Facial Expression*. New York: Academic Press.
- Ekman, Paul, Wallace V. Friesen, and Phoebe Ellsworth. 1972. *Emotion in the Human Face: Guidelines for Research and an Integration of Findings*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Farib Sos. 2015. Khmer-Chen in Contemporary Cambodia: Suppression, Revitalisation and Emulation. PhD diss., The Australian National University.
- Farrugia, David, Steven Threadgold, and Julia Coffey. 2017. "Young Subjectivities and Affective Labour in the Service Economy." *Journal of Youth Studies* 21(3):1-16. doi:http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/13676261.2017.1366015?scroll=top&needAccess=true.
- Ferguson, Jane M. 2014. Terminally Haunted: Aviation Ghosts, Hybrid Buddhist Practices, and Disaster Aversion Strategies Amongst Airport Workers in Myanmar and Thailand. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 15(1). 47-64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2013.872698>.
- Forest, Alain. 1992. *Le culte des génies protecteurs au Cambodge: Analyse et Tradition d'un corpus de textes sur les 'Neak Ta'*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1926. "Inhibitions, symptoms, and anxiety." In *Hemmung, Symptom and Angst (Eng)*, Vol. 14, ed. James Strachey, 77-76. London: Hogarth Press.
- Frings, Viviane 1994. "Cambodia after decollectivization (1989-1992)." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 24(1): 50-66.
- Geng Li. 2015. *Fate calculation experts: diviners seeking legitimation in contemporary China*. PhD diss., The Australian National University.
- Granoff, Phyllis. 1985. "Scholars and Wonder-Workers: Some Remarks on the Role of the Supernatural in Philosophical Contests in Vedānta Hagiographies." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (105): 459-67.
- Groslier, Bernard-Philippe. 1957. *The Arts and Civilization of Angkor*. New York: Frederick Praeger.
- Groslier, Bernard-Philippe. 1958. *Angkor et le Cambodge au XVIe Siècle, d'après les sources portugaises et espagnoles*. Paris, Annales du Musée Guimet, Presses Universitaires de France.
- Groslier, Bernard-Philippe. 1960a. "Our Knowledge of Khmer Civilization: a Re-appraisal." *Journal of Siam Society* 49:1-28.

- Groslier, Bernard-Philippe. 1960b. "Ourages Récents sur le Cambodge." *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 50(1): 191-228.
- Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson, eds. 1997. "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology." In *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, 1-46. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hansen, Ann Ruth. 2007. *How to Behave, Buddhism and Modernity in Colonial Cambodia 1860-1930*. Bangkok: Silkworm Books.
- Hansen, Ann Ruth, and Judy Ledgerwood. 2008. *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History, and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University.
- Hang Chan Sophea. 2004. "Stec Gamlang and Yāy Deb: Worshipping Kings and Queens in Cambodia Today." In *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, eds. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, 113-126. Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press.
- Hardt, Michael. 1999. "Affective Labour." *Boundary 2* 26 (2): 89-100.
- Harris, Ian. 2005. *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Harris, Ian. 2013. *Buddhism in a dark age: Cambodian monks after Pol Pot*. Bangkok: Silkworm Books.
- Harris, Peter (trans.). 2007. *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Headley, Robert K., Jr. 1977. *Cambodian-English Dictionary*, Vol I- II. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Thoreau, Henry David. 2016 [1862]. "Walking." In *The Making of the American Essay*, ed. John D'Agata, 177-78. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.
- Hefner, Robert. 2010. "Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Asia: Southeast Asian Perspectives on Capitalism, the State, and the New Peity." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 69(4): 1031-1047. doi: 10.1017/S002191181000291.
- High, Holly. 2006. "Ritualising Residency: Territory Cults and a Sense of Place in Southern Lao PDR." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 7(3): 251-263.
- Hillier, Jean, and Emma Rooksby, eds. 2005. *Habitus: A Sense of Place*. Vermont: Ashgate.
- Hinton, Alexander Laban. 1996. "Agents of Death: Explaining the Cambodian Genocide in Terms of Psychosocial Dissonance." *American Anthropologist* 98(4): 818-831.
- Hinton, Alexander Laban. 1998. "Why Did You Kill?: The Cambodian Genocide and the Dark Side of Face and Honor." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57(1): 93-122.

- Hinton, Alexander Laban. 2002. *Annihilating Difference. The Anthropology of Genocide*. London: University of California Press.
- Hinton, Alexander Laban. 2005. *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hinton, Alexander Laban. 2008a. "Songs at the Edge of Democratic Kampuchea." In *At the Edge of the Forest: Essays on Cambodia, History and Narrative in Honor of David Chandler*, eds. Anne Ruth Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood, 71-91. New York: Cornell University
- Hinton, Alexander Laban. 2008b. "Truth, Representation and the Politics of memory after Genocide." In *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David Chandler, 62-84. Copenhagen: NIAS
- Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger, eds. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 1983. *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Holbraad, Martin. 2012. *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Holt, John Clifford. 2012. Caring for the Dead Ritually in Cambodia. *Southeast Asian Studies* 1(1): 3-76. doi:[10.20495/seas.1.1_3](https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.1.1_3).
- Hughes, Caroline, and Joakim Öjendal. 2006. "Reassessing Tradition in Times of Political Change: Post-War Cambodia Reconsidered." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37(3): 415-420.
- Individual De Note. 1902-1903. [Khmer archive, no title].
- Intangible Cultural Heritage. "The Myth of Phra Chao Ha Phra Ong [the Five Buddha]." Accessed April 25, 2016. <http://ich.culture.go.th/index.php/en/ich/folk-literature/252-folk/221-the-myth-of-phra-chao-ha-phra-ong>.
- Im Borin. 2016. *Horasart Khmer Chen Sakol* [Khmer Chinese Western/Universal Astrology]. (Khmer language). Phnom Penh
- Im Borin. 2016. *Horasart* [astrology]. (Khmer language). Phnom Penh
- Im Borin's Facebook Page. Accessed September, 20 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/sreynear.pov>
- International Astrology Association of Thailand*. Accessed Aug 18 2016 <http://www.interastro.org/>.
- Jackson, Michael 1983. 'Knowledge of the body'. *Man* 18(2): 327-45. doi: 10.2307/2801438

- Jackson, Peter. 1999. *The Enchanting Spirit of Thai Capitalism: The Cult of Luang Phor Khoon and the Postmodernisation of Thai Buddhism*. Southeast Asia Research: University of London.
- Jacobsen, Trudy. 2008. *Lost Goddesses, the Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Jackson, Will. 2014. "7 Questions with Prince Ravivaddhana Sisowath." *Phnom Penh Post*, April 4. Accessed June 14, 2015.
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/7days/7-questions-prince-ravivaddhana-monipong-sisowath>.
- Jones, Graham M. 2017. *Magic's Reason: An Anthropology of Analogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kapferer, Bruce. 1979. Emotion and Feeling in Singhalese Healing Rites. *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 1: 153-176.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23159679>.
- Kent, Alexandra. 2006. "Reconfiguring Security: Buddhism and Morality in Cambodia." *Security Dialogue* 37(3): 343-361.
- Kent, Alexandra, and David Chandler. 2008. *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Morality in Cambodia Today*. Copenhagen: NiAS.
- Keyes, Charles F. 1994. "Communist Revolution and the Buddhist Past in Cambodia." In *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, eds. Laurel Kendall, Helen Hardacre, 43-73. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Khouth Sophak Chakrya, and Alessandro Marazzi Sassoon. 2016. "Royal oxen predict a good harvest for rice." *Phnom Penh Post*, May 25. Accessed 4 Dec, 2016.
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/royal-oxen-predict-good-harvest-rice>.
- Kiernan, Ben. 2008. *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979*. 3rd ed. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press.
- Kimly Ngoun. 2006. *The Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo and Its Influence on the Cambodian People's Perception of the Thais*. MA thesis, Chulalongkorn University.
- Kobayashi, Satoru. 2005. "An Ethnographic Study of the Reconstruction of Buddhist Practice in Two Cambodian Temples: With the Special Reference to Buddhist Samay and Boran." *Japanese Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42(4): 489-518. https://doi.org/10.20495/tak.42.4_489.
- Kobayashi, Satoru. 2008. "Reconstructing Buddhist Temple Buildings. An analysis of village Buddhism after the era of turmoil." In *People of virtue: reconfiguring religion, power and morality in Cambodia today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David Chandler, 169-194. Copenhagen: NIAS.

- Kounila, Keo. 2009. "Vanishing act: Cambodia's magical tattooists fade away." *Phnom Penh Post*, November 16. Accessed November 15, 2016. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/lifestyle/vanishing-act-cambodias-magical-tattooists-fade-away>.
- Leakhana, Khoun. 2009. "In Brief: Committee to Study Khmer Astrology." *Phnom Penh Post*, August 24. Accessed March 7, 2017. <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/brief-committee-study-khmer-astrology>.
- Leclère, Adhémar. 1889. "Superstition and Magic in Cambodia." *Popular Science Monthly*. vol. 53, August. Accessed August 14, 2014. <http://en.wikisource.org>.
- Leclère, Adhémar. 1899. *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge*. Paris: E. Leroux.
- Leclère, Adhémar. 1904. "La fête des au eaux au Phnom Penh." *Bulletin de l'école Française d'Extrême-Orient* 4:120-130.
- Leclère, Adhémar. 1916. *Cambodge, les fêtes civiles et religieuses*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale.
- Ledgerwood, Judy. 1990a. *Changing Khmer Conceptions of Gender: Women, Stories, and the Social Order*. PhD diss., Cornell University.
- Ledgerwood, Judy. 1996. "Politics and Gender: Negotiating Changing Cambodian Ideas of the Proper Woman." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 37(2):139-152.
- Ledgerwood, Judy. 1998. "Gender Symbolism and Culture Change: Viewing the Virtuous Woman in the Khmer Story 'Mea Yoeng'." In *Cambodian Culture since 1975, Homeland and Exile*, eds. May M. Ebihara, Carol A. Mortland and Judy Ledgerwood, 119-128. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Ledgerwood, Judy. ed., 2002. *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays*. Southeast Asian Publications. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University.
- Ledgerwood, Judy. 2005. "Obituaries: May Mayko Ebihara." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64(4): 1079-1080.
- Ledgerwood, Judy. 2008. "Buddhist Practice in Rural Kandal Province 1960 and 2003: an Essay in Honor of May Ebihara." In *People of virtue: reconfiguring religion, power and morality in Cambodia today*, eds. Alexandra Kent and David Chandler, 147-168. Copenhagen: NIAS.
- Ledgerwood, Judy. 2011. "A Tale of Two Temples: Communities and their Wats." In *Anthropology and Community in Cambodia: Reflections on the Work of May Ebihara*, ed. John Marston, 105-128. Caulfield: Monash University Press
- Ledgerwood, Judy. 2012. Buddhist ritual and the recording of social relations in Cambodia. *South East Asia Research* 20(2): 191-205. doi:10.5367//sear.2012.0100.

- Ledgerwood, Judy, and Kheang Un 2002. "Cambodia in 2001: Toward Democratic Consolidation?" *Asian Survey* 42(1): 100-106.
- Ledgerwood, Judy, and John Vijghen. 2002. "Decision making in rural Khmer Villages." In *Cambodia emerges from the past: eight essays*, ed. Judy Ledgerwood, 109-150. DeKalb: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University.
- Leshkovich, Ann Marie. 2014. *Essential Trade: Vietnamese Women in a Changing Marketplace*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1979. "The Effectiveness of Symbols." In *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, eds. William Armand Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, 318-327. New York: Harper & Row.
- Lindquist, Galina. 2000. Not my will thine be done: Church versus magic in contemporary Russia. *Culture and Religion* 1(2): 247-276.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01438300008567154>
- Mabbett, Ian W, and David Chandler. 1995. *The Khmers*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mak, Michael Y, and Thomas, S Ng. 2005. "The art and science of Feng Shui—a study on architects' perception." *Building and Environment* 40: 427-434.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1948. *Magic, science and religion and other essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Marston, John. 2004. "Clay into Stone, A Modern Day Tāpas." In *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, eds. John Marston and Elizabeth Gunthrie, 170-192. Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press.
- Marston, John. 2008. "Reconstructing 'ancient' Cambodian Buddhism." *Contemporary Buddhism*. 9(1). 99-121.
- Marston, John, ed. 2011. *Anthropology and Community: Reflections on the Work of May Ebi-hara*. Caulfield: Monash University Press.
- Marston, John, and Elizabeth Gunthrie, eds. 2004. *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*. Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press.
- Martin, Marie Alexandrine. 1994. *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Martini, François. 1955a. "Le Bonze Cambodgien." *France-Asie* 12: 114-115: 409-415.
- Martini, François. 1955b. "Organisation du Clergé Bouddhique au Cambodge." *France-Asie* 12: 114-115; 416-424.
- Martini, François. 1955c. "La Langue Cambodgienne." *France-Asie* 12: 114-115: 427-435.

- Martini, François. 1955d. "La Cuisine Cambodgienne." *France-Asie* 12: 114-115: 399-402.
- Massumi, Brian. 1995. "The Autonomy of Affect." *Cultural Critique: The Politics of Systems and Environments* (Part II), 31: 83-109.
- Mech Dara, Erin Handley. 2017. "City Seers Provide Their Poll Forecasts." *Phnom Penh Post*, May 31. Accessed: October 13, 2017.
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/city-seers-provide-their-poll-forecasts>.
- Mills, Mary Beth. 1999. *Thai women in the Global Labor Force: Consuming Desires, Contested Selves*. New Jersey, U.S.A.: Rutgers University Press.
- Milne, Sarah, and Sango Mahanty, eds. 2015. *Conservation and Development in Cambodia: Exploring Frontiers of Change in Nature, State and Society*. London: Routledge/ Taylor & Francis Group.
- Ministry of Cults and Religion. 2008. *History of Brah'angg Dangkoa* (ប្រវត្តិព្រះអង្គដង្កោ). Cambodia [Khmer]. n.p.
- Muong, Vandy. 2015. Divination 101: teaching horoscopes by the boo *Phnom Penh Post*, May 23. Accessed May 23 2015. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/fortune-telling>.
- NyoNyum.2015. *Cambodian Life Navigation* [Japan and English]. n.p.
- Öjendal, J., and Kim Sedara. 2006. "Korob, Kaud, Klach: In Search of Agency in Rural Cambodia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 37(3): 507-526.
- O'Lemmon, Matthew. 2014. "Spirit Cults and Buddhist Practice in Kep Province, Cambodia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 45(1): 25-49.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1987. *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Osborne, Milton. 2008. *Phnom Penh, A Cultural and Literary History*. Oxford: Signal Books.
- Ovesen, Jan, and Ing-Britt Trankell. 2010. *Cambodians and their Doctors: A Medical Anthropology of Colonial and Post-Colonial Cambodia*. Copenhagen: NIAS.
- Ovesen, Jan, and Ing-Britt Trankell. 2014. "Symbiosis of Microcredit and Private Moneylending in Cambodia." *The Asia pacific Journal of Anthropology* 15(2):178-196.
- Ovesen, Jan, Ing-Britt Trankell and Joakim Öjendal. 1996. *When every household is an island, social organization and power structures in rural Cambodia*, Department of Anthropology, Uppsala University, Uppsala. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:71286/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.
- Oxford English Dictionary. 'Fortune-teller.' *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press, 2018.
https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fortune_teller

- Parinya Nimprayoon. 2000. *Sart Hang Hone 1* (in Thai). N.P. Chomrom Phayakon Sart. Pattana Kitiarsa. 2012. *Mediums, Monks, and Amulets: Thai Popular Buddhism Today*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Pelliot, Paul. 1951. *Mémoires et coutumes du Cambodge de Tchéou Ta-Kuan*. Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve.
- Penz, Otto, Birgit Sauer, Myriam Gaitsch, Johanna Hofbauer, and Barbara Glinsner.. 2017. "Post-bureaucratic encounters: Affective labour in public employment services." *Critical Social Policy* 37(4). 540-561.
- Peou, Chivoïn. 2015. "On Cambodian higher education and skills mismatch: young people choosing university majors in a context of risk and uncertainty." *Journal of Education and Work* 30 (1): 26-38.
- Peou, Chivoïn. 2016. "Negotiating rural-urban transformation and life course fluidity: Rural young people and urban sojourn in contemporary Cambodia." *Journal of Rural Studies* 44:177-186.
- Peou, Chivoïn, and Jens Zinn. 2015. "Cambodian youth managing expectations and uncertainties of the life course- a typology of biographical management." *Journal of Youth Studies* 18(6): 726-742.
- Porée-Maspero, Eveline. 1962, 1964. *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens* [Study of the Agrarian Rites of the Cambodians], Vol. 1-3. Paris: Mouton.
- Prasert Rangkla. 2012. *Vernacular Refugees: Displaced Karen, Self-settlement and Non-institutional Protection in the Thailand-Myanmar Borderlands*. PhD diss., The Australian National University.
- Prasert Rangkla. 2014. "Karen ethno-nationalism and the wrist-trying ceremony along the Thai-Burmese border." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 45(1):74-89.
- Reid, Anthony. 1993. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680, Vol. Two: Expansion and Crisis*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Reynolds, Craig J. 2016. "Magic and Buddhism" In *The Buddhist World*, ed. John Powers, 338-348. London and New York: Routledge.
- Reynolds, Craig. 2018. Personal Communication, April 26.
- RFI Khmer Radio. "Interview with Im Borin," YouTube video, 10:47, April 8, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIfKQ9ktYt4&t=121s..>
- Salemink, Oscar. 2010. "Ritual efficacy, spiritual security and human security: Spirit mediumship in contemporary Vietnam." In *A World of Insecurity: Anthropological Perspectives on Human Security*, eds. Thomas Hylland, Ellen Bal and Oscar Salemink, 262-289. London: Pluto Press.
- Schliesinger, Joachim. 2011. *Ethnic Groups of Cambodia*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.
- Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasants Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press. SEAlang Library Resources.

- ‘Ayū (អយុ).’ *SEAlang Library Resources*, 2005.
<http://sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm>
- SEAlang Library Resources. ‘Nissāya (និស័យ).’ *SEAlang Library Resources*, 2005.
<http://sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm>
- SEAlang Library Resources. Kpuan (ក្បួន). *SEAlang Library Resources*, 2005.
<http://sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm>.
- SEAlang Library Resources. ‘Saṃṇāṅ (សំណង).’ *SEAlang Library Resources*, 2005.
<http://sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm>.
- SEAlang Library Resources. ‘Sangvara (សង្វារ).’ *SEAlang Library Resources*, 2005.
<http://sealang.net/khmer/dictionary.htm>.
- Sidgwick, Eric, Hiroshi Izaki. 2013. “Urbanisation and growth.” *Phnom Penh Post*, November 28. Accessed April 15, 2016.
<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/opinion/urbanisation-and-growth>.
- Shelton, Tracey, and Tha Piseth. 2009. “Eclipse a Mixed Blessing” *Phnom Penh Post*, July 23. Accessed March 7, 2017.
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/eclipse-mixed-blessing>.
- Slocomb, Margaret. 2003. *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Slocomb, Margaret. 2010. *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century*. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Smith-Hefner, Nancy J. 1999. *Khmer American, Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Sor Dusit. 2007. *Lek Chet Tua Mahatsachan* (in Thai). Bangkok: Matichon.
- Sou Vuthy. 2014. “In his hometown, mysteries abound about fake ‘Buddha.’” *Phnom Penh Post*, August 9. Accessed Dec 4, 2016.
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-weekend/his-hometown-mysteries-abound-about-fake-%E2%80%98buddha%E2%80%99>.
- Springer, Simon. 2010. *Cambodia's Neoliberal Order: Violence, Authoritarianism, and the Contestation of Public Space*. London: Routledge.
- Tiang Vida. 2015. “Plough Shares: Royal Event to Move to Battambang.” *Phnom Penh Post*, April 20. Accessed October 7, 2017.
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/plough-shares-royal-event-move-battambang>.
- Taussig, Michael. 1987. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wildman: A study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Taylor, Philip. 2007. *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta: Place and mobility in the cosmopolitan periphery*. Singapore: NIAS Press.
- Taylor, Philip. 2014. *The Khmer Lands of Vietnam, Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Tambiah, Stanley J. 1970. *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Royal Embassy of Cambodia to Australia and New Zealand. "Royal Ploughing Ceremony in Cambodia, Cambodia in Focus." The Royal Embassy of Cambodia to Australia and New Zealand. Accessed Dec 4, 2016.
<http://www.embassyofcambodia.org.nz/May2008/april2008-4.htm>.
- Thirachai Phuvanatanarubala. 2010. *Know Your Future: Thai Astrology Step by Step*. Hants, UK: O Books.
- Titthara, May. 2014. "After KDC Clashes, rage burns." *Phnom Penh Post*, July 14. Accessed June 14, 2017 <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/after-kdc-clashes-rage-burns>.
- Thompson, Ashley. 2004. "The Future of Cambodia's Past: A Messianic Middle Cambodian Royal Cult." In *History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia*, eds. John Marston, Elizabeth Guthrie, 13-39. Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press.
- Tilley, Christopher. 1999. *Metaphor and Material Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Turner, Victor. (1967)1982. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, Victor. 1975. *Revelation and divination in Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Van Gennep, Arnold. 1960. *Rite of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vong Sokheng, and Adam Miller. 2010. "Fortune-telling the Kingdom's Future." *Phnom Penh Post*, December 22. Accessed March 7, 2017.
<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/fortune-telling-kingdoms-future>.
- Wissinger, Elizabeth. 2007. "Modelling a Way of Life: Immaterial and Affective Labour in the Fashion Modelling Industry." *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 7(1): 250-269.
- World Bank Group. 2017. "Cambodia Sustaining Strong Growth for the Benefit of All: A Systematic Country Diagnostic." Accessed March 7, 2018 <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/620151496155751423/pdf/115189-replacement-PUBLIC-SCD-Cambodia-web.pdf>.
- World Population Review. 2014. <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/cambodia-population/>

Zucker, Eve Monique. 2013. *Forest of Struggle: Moralities of Remembrance in Upland Cambodia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i.