Khmer identity: a religious perspective

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Although Cambodia is conventionally described as a Theravada Buddhist country, scholars trying to define the boundaries of its religious life more accurately see it as a syncretism of animism, Brahmanism and Buddhism. History, Buddhism and New Religious Movements in Cambodia offers an overview of the country’s religious life, using a wide range of perspectives to address the question: ‘What is particularly Cambodian about Cambodian religion?’

Chapters explore national identity, the present religiousness of the Cambodian diaspora, 19th century architecture and individual contemporary religious identities. The thematic variety and the authors’ knowledge makes this book an important asset to Khmer studies, religious studies and the study of contemporary Buddhism; it is a valuable contribution to the anthropological study of religious phenomena within the larger context of human interaction and the division of social prestige.

Most of the studies compiled in this volume address the multiple ways in which Cambodian religious ideas and practices relate to concepts and institutions that have given and give shape to Cambodia as a social and political body. The editors assume that Buddhism is not only a part of the Cambodian institutions and religion’s role in the gradual creation of Cambodia as a social and political body. The reconstruction of traditional culture is vital to the Cambodian diaspora, which they achieve by practicing, through their religious life and public cultural events, the traditional rituals that serve as culturally unifying symbolic systems. Satisfying the individual’s need to know and actualise his own roots satisfies the nation’s need for a stable foundation on which its own identity can be constructed.

Personal identity, social belonging and national pride all mingle with religious symbols and rituals to convey stable layers of meaning. In order to build new structures the old ones must first be transformed, whether in their outer material expression or in their inner layers of meaning. A stable balance between the old tradition and the need for change can serve as a base on which to build national or personal identity. Continuity, being in touch with one’s own cultural roots and a sense of belonging to a community are human needs met through cultural and social interaction and in the layered symbolism of rituals. Religion, such as Buddhism in Cambodia, plays an important role in preserving the fragile continuity between the past and the present’s need for change.

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