"Sihanouk! Long live Sihanouk!" However unusual in the circumstances, this evocation of the prince was no surprise. Citing the destruction by the Americans of their sanctuaries over the border in Cambodia, Hanoi's troops had penetrated to the heart of Khmer country with impunity, with cigarettes as their only viaticum, and Sihanouk's name as their open sesame (Bizot 2003, 24).

The Demise of Royalists

Cambodians love their king. Yet in the 2008 general elections they dumped the royalist parties led by the blood royal. FUNCINPEC, the winner of the 1993 election with over 45% of the votes, plummeted to the nadir of 5% of the votes, which delivered a meager 2 seats. Norodom Ranariddh Party, another royalist party, also collected 2 seats. Together they received only 10.67% of the votes, losing more than half the votes they had previously collected before they split up. Neither party won a single seat in Phnom Penh, and more shockingly, they won only one out of 18 seats in the province of Kampong Cham, the biggest constituency and undisputed stronghold for the royalists in the past. Although the defeat was not unexpected due to a steady decline of the royalists since their triumph in 1993, nobody was ready to witness such a dramatic fall.

Explanations abound on the debacle of Cambodian royalists (Jeong 2009). One to be explored in this article is Cambodian royalism, which could have been the basis of people's support rendered to the royalists in the past. A thesis that has long been circulated in regards to royalism holds that Cambodia is a Buddhist country with Hindu tradition and in such a country the king commands a status of authority to which his religious subjects pay unquestioning respect and support. Has Cambodia moved "from royalism to secular democracy" (Vickery 2007, 195)? The question prompts further, more fundamental questions. What exactly is the idea of kingship in the minds of Cambodian people? Has the Buddhist kingship secularized or attenuated in contemporary Cambodia? If not, how do the Cambodian people reconcile between political reality and religious cognition surrounding the king of the Kingdom?

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Religions in Cambodian Villages

Cambodia is a Buddhist country. Over 90% of the population is Buddhists and Buddhism is undoubtedly the heart of what defines Khmer. Even the ruthless persecution by Khmer Rouge could not annihilate Buddhism in Cambodia. Buddhism quickly bounced back upon the rout of Khmer Rouge (Harris 2007; Hinton 2008; Ledgerwood 2008, 147-149). As Forest (2008, 24) argues, "Buddhism was the only enduring and unifying factor" in divided Cambodia. As of 2005, there are over 4,106 Buddhist monasteries across the country and about 58,828 monks and novices which is nearly the same as before the war (Sovanratana 2008, 259).

However, it is wrong to assume that Theravada Buddhism per se is the one and only religion or source of world view in Cambodia. Cambodian Buddhism allows room for multifarious divinities, both benevolent and malevolent. Perhaps this is how Theravada Buddhism sank its root in Cambodian society (Forest 2008, 20; Hansen 2004). In fact, everyday Buddhism in Cambodia is a syncretic religion mixed with worship of Hindu gods and animist spirits. Hindu gods are enshrined in many schools, public offices, and even Buddhist temples. Two small shrines at the riverside across from the royal palace exemplify the coexistence of distinctively different traditions. One houses Vishnu while the other Neak Ta, the most popular spirit among Cambodians. Built in the same size and structure, these two temples evenly attract worshipers.

Worship of animist spirits existed in Cambodia before the adoption of Indian religious practices and continues to be a significant part of religious life. Many Buddhist temples reserve space for traditional spirits. Shamans are easy to find near or even inside Buddhist temples (Marston 2008). Spiritual eminences are often associated with the soil and with ancestors buried in the soil. Roughly speaking, Hindu gods are worshiped for benediction while those territorial spirits are related to punishment. Hence people pray to those spirits to ward off accident, illness, and misfortune. Neak Ta is a spirit par excellence universally found in Cambodia, including the newly constructed Khmer Rouge tribunal court. Neak Ta standing at the gate symbolizes justice and those who undo justice cannot escape retribution. In the Cambodian court, defendants swear to tell the truth not to Buddhist moral principles but to Neak Ta figures (Edwards 2008, 219). Since it is not easy for laymen to abide by all the demanding ethical rules of Buddhism, they pray to Neak Ta for exoneration.

Spirits are sometimes mixed with Hindu gods to create a unique worship figure. Wat Kien Svay Knong located in Kandal province not far from Phnom Penh has a statue of Hanuman, Rama's monkey general, which is worshiped there as a Neak Ta. More interestingly, beside the statue stands a wooden sculpture of Buddha, or more precisely of the savior Maitreya: Buddha-to-come. Local
worshipers identify the statue as both Rama, Vishnu's incarnation, and Sihanouk (Thomson 2004). This implies that Sihanouk is considered Rama as well as Maitreya. To the worshipers of this hybrid statue Sihanouk is the king and at the same time the savior who is going to save the country. Does this imply that the king of Cambodia is still identified as a god incarnated to rule the world?

Another case of particular interest to be examined is the statue of the "leper king" or sdach kamlong. Various versions of the legend create confusion over precisely who the king is, but scholars have come to agree that the statue represents Yama, the god of death. Nonetheless, the academic conclusion is not relevant to ordinary Cambodians who continue to believe it to be an ancient king. Thought to be built during or shortly after the reign of Jayavarman VII, it was originally at the "terrace of the leper king" in Angkor Thom but was moved to Phnom Penh for safekeeping and placed in the center court of the National Museum. What currently stands in the terrace attracting both locals and tourists is a replica (Sophea 2004).

The leper king’s posture, with the bent right leg, as well as his moustache and fangs, is unique in that it differs from typical Buddhist statues and classic Angkorean forms. As Sophea (2004) points out, the location of the leper king statue in the museum indicates its extraordinary sacred value. Although other statues inside the museum are worshiped too, the leper king is the most prominent object of worship. Many people visit the museum just to worship the leper king and they typically pray for health and prosperity particularly during times of trouble.

Interestingly enough, the leper king statue has been copied and can be found in many places including Wat Unalom, the headquarters of the Mohanikay sect. It is important to note that it is politicians who made and enshrined the copies. The one sitting in front of Wat Unalom along the Sap riverfront is the most frequently visited one, perhaps because it was first consecrated by King Norodom and later by King Sihanouk right before the elections of 1993.

During the skirmish after the 1998 elections, King Sihanouk also consecrated Eay Tep, or divine female ancestor, under a bodhi tree in the center of Siem Reap. Eay Tep is another replica of the leper king but without fangs. Yet it is worshiped as a female deity with lips and fingernails painted red. Sophea (2004) argues that this is not surprising because in the Khmer tradition divinity can be manifested in masculine and feminine forms at the same time. Although situated in the middle of the busiest road, the area is always crowded with people. Soldiers including high-ranking officers come to solicit Eay Tep's assistance in their military action. On holy days, the king visits the place with offerings of food and flowers.

The religious practices discussed above demonstrate that everyday religion in Cambodia is rather a syncretic Buddhism that incorporates Brahmanist and animist practices. More importantly, the religious practices involving kingly figures shows that the deep-rooted idea of kingship has
survived in the minds of the people, though they may not carry precisely the same meaning they once did (Thompson 2004; Edwards 2008). The Khmer idea of kingship needs to be studied in such a context of Buddhism fused with other religious traditions.

The Idea of Kingship in Cambodia

(1) Devaraja

As the Cambodian myth of national origin tells, the Indian influence was stronger in Khmer territory than any other place in Southeast Asia. The Indian influence was particularly evident in rituals associated with statecraft. One of the rituals that readily attracted Khmer rulers was the devaraja cult. Literally put, devaraja is god-king and as such it has often been interpreted as a god incarnated as king. Coedes asserted in this vein that the king of ancient Khmer was nothing else but god (Coedes 1963). This view has been widely reiterated in most publications on the history of Southeast Asia (Hall 1966, 99; Ishii 1986, 151; Osborne 1997, 64), which has in turn led political scientists to claim that the davaraja tradition is the source of power and authority exercised by Cambodian kings. Neher went on to say that Cambodian "kings claimed to be reincarnations of Siva" and their descendents "continue to wrap themselves in the glories of the past to perpetuate their positions as devarajas" (Neher 1995, 19).

Given that kings in Cambodia have been considered god or equivalent to god, how could they be dethroned and even murdered by usurpers? Usurpation indeed is not uncommon in the history of Cambodia. Jayavarmann III, the first successor of the Angkor dynasty was dethroned by a usurper, Indravarman (r. 877-889). As splendid as it sounds, the above interpretation departs from historical reality. Overwhelmed by the grandiose relics of Angkor waiting to be explained and imbued with orientalism, scholars must have been driven to the mythical annotation of equating devaraja with god.

Available evidence suggests that devaraja is not a king but a god worshiped by kings. An epitaph titled Sdok Kak Thom, for instance, reads that Jayavarman II, the founder of Angkor, ordered brahmins to perform a rite devoted to devaraja, "kamraten jagat ta raja", the ruler of the universe (Kulke 1978, 23; Soh and Cho 2004, 23). Devaraja read in this way is not "god-king" but god, "god of the kings" or the king of the universe. Thus the devaraja cult performed by Angkorean kings was not to apotheosize themselves but to worship gods.

Although it no longer seems tenable to maintain that the devaraja cult was a ritual by which a king became god, neither is it correct to say that the cult was a simple worship rite. The devaraja
cult was clearly a royal cult designed to legitimate and maximize the king's power by endowing divinity or quasi-divinity onto kingship. The Indian ritual was the most sophisticated and hence most powerful ideological device available at the time to which kings were readily attracted. Kings present at the cult were definitely distinguished from brahmans in that what the cult was to bring down to this world was legitimacy and authority of rulers over the ruled. Sublimity and godliness emanated by gigantic shrines and conspicuously placed lingas could effectively produce a religious basis for the legitimation of the kingship (Kulke 1978; Harris 2005, 19). Power therefore was clearly centered upon the king "who was the divine source of all authority" (SarDesai 1989, 29) and the divinity of kingship was achieved by the king's proper ritual service to god (Mabbett 1969, 209).

Nevertheless, the divinity endowed through the rituals was not enough to protect kings from usurpers. Perhaps all the accounts above, be they god reincarnated or not, could be misleading when considered from a perception of god produced and consumed in the monotheist world where god is an omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient being. Hindu gods are far from being such almighty gods. As Newman (1992, 49) argues, the status gods held in ancient India was not beyond everything around them. In that case, devaraja, whether a god reincarnated or a ruler of divinity, is not necessarily entitled to an absolute authority, unchallengeable and invincible. By the time of Suryavarman I (r. 1003-1050), extensive hydraulic projects led to the institutionalization of bureaucracy by which power "rivaled or even surpassed the power of the king" (Chandler 2000, 43).

The fact that Suryavarman I, another usurper, summoned upon his coronation up to four thousand officials at his new palace to swear publicly an oath of loyalty implies that Cambodian kings had been less powerful than what has been presumed. Except at the beginning of the empire, as Chandler (2000, 48) argues, Angkorean kings had to rely on networks of patronage and mutual obligations with power-holders not only at the center but at the periphery. Kings could be and were murdered and dethroned in Cambodia.

Furthermore, Brahmanist rituals could have performed intended functions only among the elites including royalties who might one day vie for the throne. As Chandler (2000, 98) aptly points out, it is very likely that most Cambodian people did not pay special attention, since the rituals had no effect on their lives which would remain fixed in a permanently stratified society. Although the religious life in contemporary Cambodia inherits some Brahmanist practices as seen above, therefore, it is not surprising to find that the concept of devaraja has no place in the minds of common people. Few understand the conceptual connection between the king and divinity. The ideological device for enhancing the king's power and authority has thinned out, now playing little role in favor of the king and his family.
In the Buddhist world, social hierarchy is justified by the cosmological order in which karma determines one's social status. A person of higher status is born as such because of the merit or moral standing he or she accumulated through previous lives. This logic also applies to kings, the pinnacle at the hierarchy of merit in a given society. One becomes a king because of his extraordinary merit which surpasses the rest.

However, having the highest merit does not necessarily endow upon the king unlimited power and authority. The king's power in a Buddhist kingdom is predicated on two conditions. First is the condition that, because it is incomparable merit that seats one on the throne, the king has to live a morally exemplary life and rule the kingdom according to justice and the moral principles called dhamma. A king who successfully abides by dhamma is thus called dhammaraja, a raja by dhamma, or dhammik in vernacular Khmer, while failure to do so makes a mararaja, a raja of evil. Should any of the moral precepts be breached, the moral ground on which the kingship stands crumbles.

The second condition of Buddhist kingship is that the king has the responsibility to provide benefits to the whole kingdom through acts that promote not only peace and prosperity but also "spiritual welfare." Promoting Buddhism itself through protecting the sangha, building temples, and collecting Buddhist texts, takes up a significant portion of the kingly responsibility (Edwards 2008, 221; Hansen 2007, 52). The king has to continuously prove that his merit is high enough to protect and encourage Buddhism. This is why the court and sangha have been mutually dependent in Cambodia and other Buddhist kingdoms. In contemporary terms, Buddhist kingship is justified on performance.

These two conditions make Buddhist kings vulnerable to challenges. First of all, it is not easy to abide by all the moral principles prescribed to kings. To become a dhammaraja is not predetermined by karma. Karma is not as deterministic as it is often thought to be. Life is contingent upon many factors, and thus good karma does not guarantee a good life. Indolence and misdemeanor can change the course of one's life. The same is true with kings. As a human being, the king must live up to what his karma prescribes, which is why it is usually recommended that he be ordained and practice asceticism for a time before being throned. Constant accumulation of merit is the sine qua non for Buddhist kingship. A late 17th century anecdote shows the extent to which Cambodian kings were concerned with merit making. According to the story, the ruling king pardoned a buffalo tender who had approached him using ordinary language for the reason that by not punishing him or following the precepts he could increase his fund of merit (Chandler 2000, 94).
Secondly, the king's merit is directly related to the peace and prosperity of the kingdom. The righteousness of the king is a decisive factor in the harmonious functioning of nature, including proper rainfall. Under a truly virtuous king, therefore, the realm can prosper (Hansen 2007, 21). From this follows that the suffering of subjects can be attributed to the paucity of the king's merit (Kent 2008, 110). Natural disasters and defeat in wars often plunge the whole society into a chaotic situation that leads people to doubt the king's merit. This is where Buddhism distinctively differs with Brahmanism. In the Brahmanist world, the king is primarily responsible for disasters and sufferings but shares the burden with god because ultimately what happens is god's will. In contrast, Buddhist kings are solely responsible for everything that happens in the kingdom. Every single royal act entails consequences for the whole kingdom. Therefore, Buddhist kings must live a moral life in order to deliver peace and prosperity to the kingdom.

This notion that the king's merit is related to the kingdom's prosperity is the main theme of the story of King Vessantar (Vessantar-jatak). When the prince gave away his rain-making elephant to a neighboring kingdom, his subjects began suffering from the consequent drought and expelled him to the forest. Yet the prince continued to give away everything he possessed including his wife and children. By doing so, he reached the ultimate level of merit, which in turn brought in unceasing prosperity to his realm. Another lesson that the Vessantar story delivers is that the prince’s indifference to worldly power eventually made him truly powerful, powerful enough to command nature. As such, spiritual power and worldly power are merged into one. A virtuous person of full merit is powerful and therefore a powerful person is necessarily meritorious (Hansen 2007, 34). Vessantar was such a king, an ideal ruler who moved to a cosmic order beyond his earthly ties to reach perfection. It is important to understand that this story is deeply ingrained in the hearts of Cambodian people as it used to be one of the most popular and highly esteemed Buddhist texts in Cambodia that "monks read most often to the laypeople" (Hansen 2007, 28).

Yet kings in reality do breach moral precepts, and it does not mean that they pay a price every time they commit morally unacceptable behavior. Oftentimes immoral acts are ignored or justified by other means. Kings have to take disagreeable actions once in a while in order to fulfill their duties. Even excessive violence is justified if exercised in the context of moral responsibility (Edwards 2008, 217). Perhaps it is the power and authority inherent in the throne which best nullify royal misdemeanors. However, continuously excessive misdemeanors are very likely to cost the people's respect and thereby royal authority. Power is supposed to be exercised only within the limit of dhamma. Only in dhammic power lies the ultimate authority (Hansen 2007, 43). In the 17th century when Reamthipodey I (r. 1642-1660), who is better known for having converted to Islam and changing his name to Ibrahim, usurped the throne by murdering all other royal dignities, people
"wished him dead" (Kersten 2003, 14) because his gruesome actions were considered to have gone too far off dhamma.

More devastating consequences could ensue when royal misdemeanors are connected with the poor performance of the court. King Cau Bana Nom (Kaev Hva I, r. 1600-1602) was drowned to death because his behavior was thought to be the cause of drought, famine, and disease. Enthroned at the age of sixteen, he did not observe the royal precepts and disregarded Buddhism. He hunted frequently, drank alcohol, and engaged in debauchery. That a respected monk was behind the murder indicates that killing an unrighteous king was justifiable in the Buddhist perspective (Harris 2005, 40).

When the king fails to live a moral life and bring benefits to society, those who aspire to be king are rendered a just cause to rebel. Such a bad king is not irreplaceable and should be replaced. Even murder is countenanced, if deemed necessary. A successful usurper can therefore claim that his merit outdoes that of the deposed. Yet the same logic of merit also befalls the new king: he can prove that the usurpation was just only by living a life of dhammaraja. Otherwise, he too can face the same fate as the previous king.

Whether a rightful heir or a usurper, however, palace politics could have had little meaning for laymen during normal times. Throughout Cambodian history, the royal palace was severed from the people and neither part has paid much attention to the other. A collection of anecdotes produced in the 1690s by a member of the royal family offers an illuminating story concerning people's perceptions of the palace. It is a story of a princess and a fisherman. When a princess ordered her lords-in-waiting to bring some fish to her, they went out and ordered a fisherman to give his fish to the princess as tribute. The reply from the fisherman was that they and therefore the princess had no right to take his fish without payment. The court officials took the fish without payment and the fisherman was forced to pay a fine for disrespect (Chandler 2000, 94). Important to note is that respect for the king and royalty was not ubiquitously given. Needless to say, the royal court did have power. However, the power was based only on wealth and violence. Monarchy was accepted according to the logic of karma and merit and because of the fact that no alternative form of government had yet been known. Theravada Buddhism was less effective than Brahmanism in terms of generating extra authority and reverence for kings. In normal times, it was only the royalty and nobles to whom the Buddhist idea of kingship really mattered.

People are more likely to acknowledge the existence of the king in extraordinary times, either catastrophic or glorious. As discussed above, the king becomes the object of people's resentment when their lives are ruined. Between 1750 and 1850, for instance, repeated aggressions by Thailand and Vietnam and the inability of the palace to repel and bring the territory back to
normalcy severely undermined the king's authority over his people (Chandler 2000, 98).

By the same token, the king is praised for ushering in unusual prosperity or glorious victory over an aggressor. Heroic subjugation of unruly savages to whom Buddhism is unknown further elevates the king's dignity. Under such circumstances, the idea of cakravartin begins to play a significant role in strengthening the king's power and authority. When a king successfully abides by moral principles and rules his kingdom according to dhamma, he will one day be rewarded with a cakkra, a wheel of the universe, with which he can move on to conquer the rest of the world and become the "wheel-turning" cakravartin, the true "conqueror of the world" (Ishii 1986, 73; Soh and Cho 2004, 32). Ideally speaking, the way cakravartin conquers the world should be congruent with dhamma, involving no violence. Yet violence can be allowed as long as the enemy to be conquered is identified as an evil (mara) that obstructs the divine task of bringing the whole world under dhamma. A cakravartin is therefore a dhammaraja, the ideal king in the Buddhist world, the one who lives a moral life and at the same time brings prosperity and glory into the kingdom.

As such, cakravartin is not an ordinary king and is said to come only in kappas, or times of chaotic disorder that come in a cyclical order. Cakravartin is expected to be the one to rescue the world by undoing damage done to dhamma. Cakravartin hence is conceived by lay people as a godly figure, often as a Maitreya, to whom extra respect and support are due. In this vein, the interpretation that many of the temple-mountains constructed by Jayavarman VII express the king as a cakravartin gains audience because those mountains were built on the sites of major victories over the Champa (Harris 2005, 22). And so was the period beginning from the 18th century down to the 20th century marred by foreign domination in search of a figure of cakravartin like Jayavarman VII.

To sum up, the king's authority in Buddhist kingship is contingent on the performance of the court. Ascendance to the crown is justified by the theory of merit, which entails the burden of proof. Kings have to face a constant threat of usurpation particularly in times of trouble. Morally unimpeachable life is a necessary condition for superb performance, without which cakravartin, the ultimate status of Buddhist kingship, cannot be reached. Cakravartin therefore rarely comes to the world. It is only when a Buddhist king is perceived as cakravartin that Buddhism renders an ideological basis on which popular support through awe can be engendered.

Modernization of Buddhism

When Cambodia was suffering a series of revolts and foreign interventions which culminated in the
Vietnamese kidnapping of Queen Mei, Cambodian Buddhism entered a critical turning point in its history. It started with Ang Duong's return in 1841 from Bangkok. Ang Duong was enthroned in 1848 by Thais, and his twelve-year reign is considered the renaissance of Cambodia (Chandler 2000, 129-136). Having lived in Bangkok where Buddhism had already gone through reforms, Ang Duong aspired to introduce the same reform to Cambodia. He wrote a letter to Rama IV in 1854 requesting a copy of the Tripitaka (Hansen 2007, 79). Also, a group of monks were dispatched to Bangkok by royal order where they studied the Pali as well as the Tripitaka.

Upon the return of the monks to Cambodia, Thommayut, the reformist sect of Buddhism patronized by King Mongkut, followed into the country. Although its relatively stricter regulations as compared to the Mohanikay order kept the Thommayut order small, its overall influence on Cambodian Buddhism was large. The returnees made up a group of elites equipped with correct knowledge of Pali texts and their according codes of conduct and launched a movement that can be called modernization. The prime goal of the movement was purification, and as a result a great emphasis was placed on the importance of authentic Pali and Vinaya as the guide to purification, while deemphasizing the narratives in the jataka, the Buddha's past lives. The significance of ritual and ceremonial aspects of the religion diminished as printed periodicals such as Kambuja Surya, which carried rationalized versions of texts in plain language, began to be produced. These were clearly intended to reach a wider populace (Hansen 2007, Ch. 3). The modernists translated authentic Pali texts in prose rather than verse and in the form of sankhep, abbreviated texts containing the essence of Dhammavinaya. Their translations differed significantly from the older versions and transmitted the idea that moral purification can be achieved by lay people "through rational means rather than the elusive and mythological" ways that appeared available only to monks (Hansen 2007, 151-152). The teachings attempted to convert people to a rationality with which they could make judgment by themselves. The basis of judgment was to be Vinaya, rather than what they had been told in the past. People were encouraged to think and challenge anything if it conflicted with Vinaya.

The modernization movement had a deep impact on Cambodian society to the extent that by the 1920s the new teachings were increasingly incorporated into classes of pagoda schools (Hansen 2007, 179). At the center of the movement was Gatiloke (worldly ways or ways of behaving in the world), a simplified version of Buddhist moral values tuned in to the themes of modernity. It was written in such simple words that the texts were clearly intended as a "universal ethical teaching on living the moral life" (Hansen 2007, 162). Let us peruse a few stories of Gatiloke.
(1) The Three Servants of King Bimbisara (Gatiloke 1987, 73-76)
There was a noble king in India who ruled with compassion and justice. He had a son who was reckless, wishing to take over the crown. Devadatta, the evil cousin of Buddha, approached the young prince to take advantage of his greed and jealousy. Finally, he convinced the prince to stab the king, but the attempted murder failed and both of them were brought to the court. In arresting and bringing the criminals to the court three servants of the king make different judgments. The king evaluates each judgment and uses their examples to teach them how to make a prudent judgment.

The thesis of the story is to teach the importance of being rational and prudent in comparison to simply following routines. At the same time, the backdrop delivers a meaningful picture in which the king is depicted as a dhammaraja, yet vulnerable to usurpation. The blood royal in the story is as feeble as laypeople to the temptation of greed. Consanguinity plays no role in becoming a dhammaraja.

(2) The King and the Poor Boy (Gatiloke 1987, 77-78)
A buffalo boy was orphaned and called by his uncle into the palace where the uncle was working as a cook. The boy worked very hard to get the attention of the king. The king asked the boy, "Do you receive wages for your hard work?" When the boy answered yes, six sen every month, the king asked again, "Do you think you are rich or poor?" The boy answered "I am as rich as a king." Taken by surprise, the king said, "I have all the power and wealth of this country, while you receive only six sen a month. Why do you think you are as rich as I am?" The boy explained, "I may receive only six sen each month, but I eat from one plate and you too eat from one plate. I sleep for one night and you also sleep for one night. We eat and sleep the same. There is no difference."

The basic theme the author wants to deliver in this parable seems to be the vanity of material wealth. Again, the king in question is depicted as the same human being as his subjects, not in the way that the boy says, but in that the king could be a person of vanity rather than of merit, less wise than a lowly poor boy. There is nothing to respect and awe in any king who is less than a dhammaraja.

(3) The King and the Buffalo Boy (Gatiloke 1987, 86-89)
This fable goes further. The king went hunting and was lost in the forest until he encountered a buffalo boy who kindly showed him the way out. Disguised as a layman, the king promised to reward the boy and let him meet the king. When safely returned with his entourage, the king asked the boy to guess who the king might be. A clue given to the boy was that anyone who kept his hat
would be the king. The boy, with no reason to take his hat off, pointed to the king and to himself. Annoyed by the answer, the king changed his mind and refused to reward the boy.

The lesson intended in this story seems to be that kings are human beings and therefore imperfect just like everyone else. The king in the story is far from a dhamaraja, as he breaches many of the ten royal precepts. This means that a king is not necessarily a dhamaraja, which is something to be pursued and achieved. A king who has yet to become a dhamaraja is not entitled to respect and could even be ridiculed as he was in this fable.

Also noteworthy in the fable is the conversation between the king and the boy. The king asked the boy, "Do you know the king who rules this country?" "I don't know what you mean," replied the boy. "My grandmother used to tell me stories about kings but I really do not know what a king is." The boy challenged the king when the promise of reward was broken, even though it became evident that the person to whom he protested was the king of the country. The boy could not care less. It echoes the anecdote of the princess and the fisherman mentioned earlier in that neither of the lowly subjects is overwhelmed by the presence of royal people. Equally surprising is that the king appears unembarrassed at the boy's attitude, which is not unusual outside the palace.

It is not clear whether the sentiments in *Gatiloke* regarding the kingship reflect those of the time, or whether it was intentionally created to dismantle mythical images cloaking the kings. In either case, the status of the kings appearing in *Gatiloke* is not distinctly different from that of other sorts of kingdoms. Considering the impact the modernist movement had on Cambodian society, it can be said that Cambodian kings entered the modern era without effective ideological tools that could confer extraordinary power and authority.

**King Sihanouk**

As Brahmanism was replaced by Theravada Buddhism, so was the idea of divine kingship. And the Buddhist idea of kingship was not particularly effective at engendering the extraordinary authority of kings. The modernization of Buddhism led by the Thommayut order further curtailed the king's authority. In this case, how can we explain the enthusiastic support given to King Sihanouk?

As the Cambodian kingdom degenerated into a powerless country with no strength to stop foreign aggression, people started longing for cakravartin. It was no coincidence that the royal court had to face a number of millenarian movements which claimed the advent of Maitreya. Under such circumstances was Prince Sihanouk enthroned. In other words, he took power at the right time to become a cakravartin. And he seized the opportunity. Whether or not he is a true cakravartin is
beside the point. Just as is possible in all political theaters, King Sihanouk played the act so perfectly that he could build up an image of himself as close to cakravartin. He was well aware of the significance of dhammaraja and he distanced himself from the brutality which was an essential part of his rule (Osborne 2008, 125). He had shrewdly taken advantage of the circumstances in order to make himself the liberator of the country from foreign domination. The independence in 1953 meant more than the end of French colonial rule: it signified the end of the devastation and humiliation that had lasted for over two hundred years. King Sihanouk successfully cultivated his image as being the one who made it all happen, and who would further bring a new era of peace and prosperity.

Sihanouk's energy was phenomenal. Working at a pace that exhausted his associates, he traveled widely through the kingdom, opening schools and clinics, inaugurating factories or irrigation schemes. He exhorted, chided and congratulated his 'children.' ....Like no other Cambodian ruler before him, Sihanouk was ready to go out among his people. And as with no previous ruler, this readiness earned him an affection that went beyond the traditional awe and devotion felt by rural Cambodians towards their monarch as the ultimate embodiment of the state and Cambodia's identity. The peasantry were genuine in their warm reaction to Sihanouk, a ruler whom they still saw as possessing semi-divine qualities and who now appeared in their humble villages, arriving dramatically in a flurry of dust and wind as his helicopter sank to the ground (Osborne 1994, 132-133).

In addition, King Sihanouk did not forget to support the sangha. He financed new pagoda constructions and supplied them with texts. At ceremonies he was surrounded by monks who, by respectful presence, increased the king's authority. The economy appeared to be going well at least until the mid-1960s, though that growth seeded the future decay. It is no wonder that those who experienced all of the twists and turns in Cambodian history from 1953 until today have a tendency to think of the Sihanouk's reign as a "golden age," a time to be treasured (Osborne 2008, 123). Neither is it surprising that some loyal followers continue to identify King Sihanouk as a Maitreya, the savior.

Such affection, however, was neither universal nor unconditional. There was a growing number of urban, young, and educated people to whom monarchy was simply outdated and unfit for the task of modernizing their country. Many of them, including Saloth Sar, were attracted to radical means to overthrow the monarchy. Their voice began to gain audience when the economy went downhill. Sihanouk had to witness to his dismay that "some of his 'children' were all too ready to disobey their 'papa'" (Osborne 1994, 133). Dispossessed peasants often swarmed into the capital to
demand support for survival. Sihanouk's foreign policy inviting over 40,000 Vietnamese troops into the territory further undermined people's support (Osborne 1994, 209). Many began to doubt if he was a true cakravartin. And his extravagant lifestyle further hurt his image and credibility as a dhammaraja. At last in 1970 King Sihanouk was ousted by his own men and the kingdom was transformed into a republic.

The fall of Sihanouk clearly demonstrates that performance is the fulcrum of the Buddhist kingship in Cambodia. It functions to provide a spiritual shield strengthening the king's power and authority only if the king's performance is superb in both the spiritual and the material sense.

Sihanouk lived a life of humiliation after being dethroned. He had no choice but to live in exile and watch some of his children be murdered by the Khmer Rouge. He returned to Cambodia in January 1976, only to become a prisoner who had to play the part of puppet for the Khmer Rouge. For many Cambodians, Sihanouk was no longer a dhammaraja, let alone cakravartin. In view of the Buddhist logic of merit, he was the one responsible for all of the pain inflicted upon the people.

After the rout of the Khmer Rouge, Sihanouk came back to the stage, brilliantly taking advantage of the chaotic disruption in and out of the country. He carved out a niche for himself and FUNCINPEC. Many Cambodians, particularly those who survived to remember Sihanouk as the liberator of earlier times, could have a glimpse in Sihanouk of cakravartin who would end the chaos again. Much of the support given to FUNCINPEC in the 1993 election could have come from such a desperate hope. However, Sihanouk's goal was simply to be crowned again. It did not take long for the loyal supporters to find out that he was a completely powerless king willing to be as meek as necessary to the de facto ruler. As his image of a cakravartin evaporated, so did the support for him and the royalist party he had created.

**Buddhism and the Future of King**

The 2008 general election was conspicuously different from previous elections in that polling stations were colored with orange robes. Monks were again allowed to vote with the privilege of bypassing the queue. They explicitly and implicitly supported different political parties, sometimes even taking part in popular protests. The sangha has never been separated from politics in the history of Cambodia and is not likely to be so in the future. Wat is the sphere where village people gather and exchange their views, and where the government reaches the people. Politicians need to associate themselves with Buddhist monks who can convert people's respect into votes (Guthrie 2002). In addition, as has always been the case, the sangha itself is in need of material as well as
political support. The symbiotic relationship between the sangha and the powerful will thus remain unchanged.

Leaders of the sangha seem to have switched their symbiotic partner from the palace to the government. After all, it is the government that has the power and money to support the sangha. The sangha, in return, has to square the account with the raja. To the public gathered at pagodas, monks can deliver in their preaching messages supporting the ruling party. Indeed, Cambodia's mass media is filled with the projections of political power choreographed in ceremonies. Pictures of alms-giving in which poor peasants line up in front of a smiling politician attempt to build an image of superb merit that entitles power and status. Another scene often played is donations to pagodas. Monks aligned with the powerful make up a backdrop that creates the image of dhammaraja, the one who protects the sangha.

At the center of the media coverage is always Hun Sen. He does exactly what Sihanouk did, making up his own personality cult (McCargo 103). Regarding Hun Sen's effort to project himself as a person of the highest merit, it is important to notice that the concept of saborosjun, a meritorious but not necessarily moral benefactor, has gained saliency in Cambodia's political theater. It means that Hun Sen has yet to improve his image so as to be portrayed as a dhammaraja. Nevertheless, as Hughes (2006, 479) observes, Hun Sen plays to this figure with great skill and combines it with the image of the strong man, trying to demonstrate that his merit surpasses everyone else. Having the highest merit justifies challenging the palace as all the usurpers did. Since 2006, Hun Sen has increased the level of criticism against the palace (Vickery 2007, 193). He has given warnings that the blood royal must stay aloof from politics. After the landslide victory in 2008, he began to threaten the palace by saying that people would no longer be needed there.

The recent feud with Thailand over Preah Vihear offered Hun Sen an opportunity to show the people that his merit extends over the border to an archenemy. Viewed in this context, he had an evident intention to project himself as a cakravartin when he provoked Thailand by inviting Thaksin to become his adviser. Will Hun Sen attempt to change the constitution to that of a republic? Sihanouk abdicated because he feared that his death could be the end of the kingdom. Will Hun Sen dream of enthroning himself? It may sound ridiculous, yet he is already given the title of samdech, which is reserved only for the blood royals.

It must be remembered that the 1993 constitution chose kingdom instead of republic on Sihanouk's insistence, in exchange for leaving FUNCINPEC. Cambodians had been without a king for 23 years prior to 1993 and most of them seem to have no reason to defend that constitution. Raja in Pali means leader or ruler and should not necessarily be king. The Buddhist idea of kingship has served only the raja with power.
Bibliography


