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Order from Chaos: Agonism and Salvation among Khmer Evangelical Christians in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Social Anthropology

School of Social and Political Science
THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

2019
Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is of my own composition, and that it contains no material previously submitted for the award of any other degree. The work reported in this thesis has been executed by myself, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

Q. Adam Marshall
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Abstract

This thesis is about Christian salvation in the Khmer world. It ethnographically investigates the everyday religious experiences of poor-to-middle class Khmer evangelical Christians who have predominantly migrated from the outside countryside into the densely populated, poor, and precarious neighbourhood of Phnom Penh, Cambodia called Toul Sangkae. Relying on ethnographic and historical evidence, this thesis follows the sites of where Christian salvation can occur by highlighting the agents of chaos, such as agonism and sin, where Jesus actively works to produce balance, order, and, thus, salvation. It argues that for these Christians, Jesus’s salvation from sin takes on a multiplicity of quotidian, everyday facets on varying scales, from the “heart (cett)” of the individual believer outward to the national and even global level. Ultimately, this thesis displays how a “good” world, like the person, is created through the interplay between order and chaos.

Chaos can be explored, for example, through the spatial geography of urban life. For many Khmer migrants, the city of Phnom Penh is considered “wild,” “chaotic,” and marked with unpredictability and instability. In such a dynamic environment as Phnom Penh where traditional Khmer sociality is shattered, new ways of being are inevitable. Conversion to Christianity aids these religious people to not only cope with and engage city-life, but also offers hope for a better future. Khmer religion plays a crucial role in the creation of the Khmer moral order, offering rituals that bring a deep sense of belonging and refortifies notions of Khmerness. Removing oneself from this order, by, for example, adopting foreign and modern modes of living creates dissonance and angst. Becoming Christian is described by many to be a “betrayal” that causes the convert to “no longer fit in” in Khmer society. Therefore, conversion itself introduces chaos and agonism that needs to be addressed.

Christians understand their new religious lives to be marked with, in part, “persecution.” Crucially, their persecution plays an important role in the salvation of the Khmer nation. Christians use the momentum of their experienced agonism to position themselves from “outside” of the Khmer order, providing them the space to critique Khmer society in the hope to transform it.
In that way, Christians are able to act like Jesus as the sacrifice-turned-saviour. Thus, we can begin to see how this salvific dynamic can be extrapolated to the national level. Christians deploy a political theology that bolsters Jesus as the true Lord and Sovereign of Cambodia. While being framed as apolitical, this political theology is understood to be outside of the political sphere, allowing Jesus to effectively save the Khmer people from the political agonism that continues to haunt the nation. Therefore, this thesis displays how the interplay between order and chaos not only animates evangelical Christian life, but also helps create a “good” world.

Lay summary

This thesis is about Khmer evangelical Christians in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Protestantism is a recent arrival in Cambodia, only taking hold after the formation of a new constitution and opening of the nation’s borders in 1993, following decades of calamity. Since that time, there has been a large push for mission from a number of international Christian organizations. This research concentrates on Khmer Christian converts and inheritors of this mission in a poor neighbourhood of Phnom Penh called Toul Sangkae. Toul Sangkae’s social difficulties, such as drugs, crime, sex industry, lack of infrastructure, and poverty, made it a prime location for those Christian organisations to establish churches. Three church communities were investigated in Toul Sangkae in order to learn about the lives of those converts as both Khmer and Christian. Additionally, this research explores Buddhism to better understand the broader Khmer religious context.

This thesis explores the challenges, successes, hopes, and failures of being Khmer and Christian in the Cambodian context. The Cambodian people find themselves in a rapidly changing and precarious world. Urban life in Phnom Penh disrupts much of what the Khmer understand as the proper “Khmer order,” in terms of hierarchy, ethics, family, and religion. For most, conversion to Christianity is likewise an uncertain and unstable experience that needs to be strengthened and clarified. In addition, Christianity is seen as a foreign religion and Jesus a foreign God, which makes conversion a betrayal of Khmer identity, and a source of conflict and strife. In this way, Khmer Christianity is marked by hardship, uncertainty, and persecution, which I call “agonism.” Furthermore,
Khmer Christians understand that this agonism is important for their Christian witness, as it helps strengthen and clarify their faith. Those Christians who dwell in the nation’s capital stress that Jesus’s salvif work achieves stability and order not only in the life of the individual person, but also in the world, including the political domain. Jesus’s position as Lord and Sovereign places him above the political agonism that plagues Cambodia and heals the nation from its corrupt and violent past. My research empirically displays the necessary interplay between such salient and diametrical notions of Khmer religion as order and chaos, salvation and wildness, certainty and doubt, and structure and mutation.

A Note on Language and Translation

The Khmer language is derived from the Pali and Sanskrit languages. The Khmer script closely resembles Sanskrit. Transliterating the language into a phonetic alphabet can be an awkward and distracting endeavour. For example, Chapter II regularly deploys the phrase “thwoe bon,” which means to “do/produce/make merit.” Transliterating the verb “thwoe” (pronounced “twas,” leaving the “s” silent) through the International Phonetic Alphabet would result in “tʰwə,” which might be cumbersome to the reader. Additionally, transliterating “chaos” would result in “roɲɛɾɔɲa,” which, again, might be too distracting to read. The consonant “ɲ” is pronounced like the first “n” in “onion” and the vowel “aɪ” is pronounced like a long “aye” with a slight inflection toward the end of the utterance. To make matters even more interesting, Khmer people often pronounce words differently than they are written. There is no ending “r” sound. So, “Khmer” is pronounced “khmaye.” In other words, even if there were a standardised way to transliterate the Khmer, it still might be impenetrable for the reader. For continuity purposes, and where applicable, I borrow transliterations from Cambodianists David Chandler, Judy Ledgerwood, Penny Edwards, and Eve Zucker who minimally deploy Khmer in their writing. I use the Khmer sparingly for readability and only deploy Khmer terms when ethnographically significant (such as “thwoe bon”). My transliterations are intended for unacquainted readers of the Khmer language, yet accurate enough for any Cambodianist to cross-reference his or her own work.
Prologue – the God of Salvation

Into the Mire: Missionary Calling and the Semiotic Paradigm of Sin

I first came to Phnom Penh in 2010 volunteering my time between several faith-based NGOs that aimed to help care for women and children who were victims of the so-called sex industry of Cambodia. My background and inclinations were both Christian and I was being haunted by the many documentaries, books, websites, and other types of discourse that exposed the extreme injustices that were supposedly happening to Cambodians in the forms of genocide and human trafficking. I was at the mercy of Christian missionaries who were my primary sources of knowledge regarding the social landscape of Cambodia. Even though I was incredibly naïve and ignorant of Khmer culture and society, I was asked to perform tasks for which I was highly unqualified. I exhausted myself to the point of near insanity trying to make sense of the world that I was asked to participate in.

One afternoon I met my boss, whom I will call Debbie, for lunch at the River Front (moat tonle), Phnom Penh’s main tourist district, to discuss my departure. She, being an evangelical Christian, was one of those missionaries I had come to know who made decisions based primarily on impulse and affect. At the time, she was in the process of legally adopting two female babies whom she “rescued” from incredibly precarious situations that could have potentially led to sexual exploitation. Whenever I had any sort of question about the work we were doing, Debbie would quash my doubts by providing a horrific anecdote. “This child,” I remember her pointing out on such an occasion, “was chained to a bed and raped over and over!” These sorts of horror stories were supposed to dismantle any sort of scepticism and give credence to our work. It was better to do than to sit idle or, worse, pontificate.

Debbie was incredibly cynical of any sort of “manmade” institution, condemning them as corrupt, delusional, and incapable of doing any good. Academics and politicians were especially deserving of condemnation, being
exemplars of such depravities and, apparently, incapable of having any moral conviction. Expressing my interests to pursue post-graduate work, she bluntly responded, “that’s just not real life!” Real life was in the “hard places,” she called it, helping the poor and making an actual difference in people’s lives. Changing people’s lives was a good and necessary cause. Her only hope to achieve these goals was in the Holy Spirit to not only inspire her work, but to also do her work. Bypassing the “Kingdom of God” for an “earthly” institution like the political sphere was not only a betrayal of her trust in Jesus, but would also be moot – like putting a plaster on a deadly wound. The Khmer Rouge was a political (communist!) regime, after all. She even traced the paedophiliac sex industry of Cambodia to the UN’s Charter in the 1990s. Apparently, the sex-craved soldiers of a super-government created a market for child prostitution and human trafficking. Overlooking the historical, social, cultural, economic and political circumstances of Cambodia, we were to go straight to the root of the problem: sin.

As an injustice perceived to primarily enslave women and children, human trafficking is vehemently reprehensible to the moral sentiments of evangelical Christians. The trafficking of children into the sex trade is the epitome of wickedness and stokes passionate aspirations for justice and salvation. Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick suggests evangelical Christians conceptualise “the cause of slavery and trafficking as both personal (lack of education or skills) and cosmic (the presence of sin and evil)” (Choi-Fitzpatrick 2014: 133). In addition to Debbie, several missionaries throughout my PhD research intimated that the genocide of the mid-to-late 1970s, bookended by civil war, and present-day human trafficking were directly linked to not only abject poverty but, moreover, the sin aggregated after centuries of Khmer paganism.

After the ratification of a new constitution in 1993, the opening of national borders, and the liberalisation of Cambodia’s economy, global Christian actors began to mobilise to Cambodia. The chaos and destruction caused by the Khmer Rouge in the mid-to-late 1970s and the subsequent conflicts between remaining Khmer Rouge factions and the Vietnamese and Soviet overlords of the 1980s People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) provided an apocalyptic landscape ripe for Christian mission. Reports from Christian non-government organisations grew of so-called “brothel villages” in and around Phnom Penh. Haugen and Hunter’s memoir Terrify No More (2005) is an especially harrowing account of Christian intervention to the child sexual exploitation and trafficking in a small village on the northern outskirts of Phnom Penh called Svay Pak. The
exploitation of children was so overt, that undercover investigators of the International Justice Mission (IJM) reported large-scale brothels offering dozens of young girls for sex. Gary Haugen, president of IJM, recounts watching footage from an undercover camera:

I had seen too much of this [brutal injustice] before. But I had never seen girls so young, eleven, ten, maybe eight. And then as the footage rolled forward I saw a tiny girl – no more than five years of age – held on the hip of another girl and pushed forward for sale. It was a horrible moment, captured in clear black and white and repeated in slo-mo (Haugen and Hunter 2005: 57).

This sort of horror is what propelled several Christian missionaries, Debbie included, to pursue mission work in Cambodia. I had known little of these alleged atrocities until I arrived in Cambodia to work with Debbie. *Terrify No More* was well known to many missionaries in Phnom Penh. IJM continues its work in Cambodia at the time of writing this thesis. They were and remain well respected amongst the evangelical missionaries in Phnom Penh. Their work was *real*, as Debbie would say. Debbie first came to Phnom Penh to assist Agape International Missions (AIM), the Christian organisation in Svay Pak that worked with IJM to establish an evangelical church and aftercare facility for girls who were victims of exploitation. AIM’s work in Svay Pak has been subject to several US-based documentaries, many from mainline news outlets like CNN and ABC News. One documentary called the *The Pink Room* (Goat Rock Films 2012) even won an Emmy in 2014.

Providing legal support, aiding local police to shut down the brothels and rescue the children, purchasing and renting building space, establishing a Christian church, and providing programmes such as affordable schooling and living-wage jobs were all a part of the missionary strategy to tackle this gross injustice in Svay Pak, which continues today through AIM. Haugen and Hunter describe throughout their memoir the quagmire of corruption from government officials that hindered their good work. Anastasia Hudgins (2005) suggests IJM’s intervention in Svay Pak ignored the structural violence that was deeply embedded in the predominate Vietnamese migrant population of the village. This structural violence was in part due to the Vietnamese’s repugnant and reviled presence in Khmer society. Yet, for Christians like Debbie, that sort of sociological evaluation would be inept. The issue was much deeper, much more fundamental than structural violence, poverty, and the like. It was sin. This form of gross injustice, in other words, was the paradigmatic semiotic expression of sin.
These sorts of horror narratives are crucial in the shaping of missionary encounters in Cambodia. *Narrative*, Brian Howell (2012) argues, is partially what animates evangelical American missionary travel. Short-term missionaries’ travel experience to specific, marginalised places to conduct their altruistic mission helps them insert their own personal narrative into the temporal, Biblical narrative (*ibid.*: 49). In the Cambodian context, one is able to go into the “hard places,” encounter the most grotesque expressions of sin, offer Christ’s salvation, and thus, partake in the Biblical narrative of redemption. Understanding this missionary context is crucial to understanding how Khmer evangelical Christianity has taken shape since the 1990s. Addressing the sin, which was paradigmatically signified in child sexual exploitation and government corruption is key to understanding evangelical Christianity in Phnom Penh.

**Deus Ex Machina**

Furthermore, Jesus’s salvation was expected to take place in the everyday, not solely the eschaton. The Khmer context is indeed a complicated one. Marred by decades of conflict during the twentieth century (Chandler 2008; Hinton 2005), and more recently being caught in rapid globalisation and neoliberal industry (Derks 2008; Hoefinger 2013; Hughes 2003; Hughes & Kheang 2011; Springer 2010), it is unfortunately no surprise that the Khmer people continue to suffer from incredible hardship in the forms of extreme inequality, poverty, violence, and political strife. For many evangelical Christian missionaries, *salvation* takes on a much more quotidian, everyday, role than an eschatological, life-after-death role. Jesus is the answer to the problems Cambodians face. This is what drew Debbie to Cambodia. The calling was too deep to ignore: babies were being sold for sex; orphaned children lived, ate, slept, and begged on the streets; for God’s sake, the Prime Minister was a former Khmer Rouge solider! This was hell on earth. Only Jesus could save.

Fast-forward to 2016 when conducting research for this thesis, I sat across the aisle of a bus with an Australian evangelical missionary, whom I call Becky, who echoed Debbie’s soteriological sentiments. Becky was a director of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), an evangelical Christian mission organisation in Phnom Penh who allowed me to research one of the Khmer churches OMF established. Unlike Debbie, Becky was much more open-minded and reflexive about her work in Cambodia. She was genuinely interested in my
anthropological research and saw value in the epistemological tradition of the academy. We both breathed a sigh of relief as we shared the ten-hour bus ride away from the city to Cambodia’s north-easternmost province. All of OMF’s Khmer church communities were joining together for a weekend retreat. Along the way she and I discussed a variety of things, from our respective families to politics. The people of Phnom Penh had been subject to sporadic and overt political violence throughout my fourteen month research, including assassinations, spurious incarcerations of political opponents, and a crackdown of protests. Lamenting the continued political strife, I explained how I found Christianity to be the hope and betterment of Cambodia according to the vast majority of my Khmer Christian interlocutors. She responded with a vulnerable and humbled expression (as if anticipating scepticism from me), “I truly think the only answer can be Jesus.”

Becky was unlike Debbie in many ways. She understood Cambodia’s rich and complex history. She also astutely recognised the complications that globalisation and transitioning to a neoliberal economy brings on a struggling nation. Yet like Debbie, Becky understood the social problems to be cut too deeply and much too convoluted for any programme, treaty, or reform to solve. Jesus was the only truly capable remedy for the problems of Khmer society. Like a tragic ancient Greek play with no possible happy ending, the dreadful outcome could only be overturned and saved by the deus ex machina (god from machine) – the god who suddenly appears (typically by lowering the god-actor by crane/machine) toward the end of the play, coming from the outside, bringing with him or her a magnanimous and great resolve. This deus ex machina soteriology was how Christian salvation was being implemented by many evangelical Christians in the Cambodian context. Jesus too was on a mission to save.

Dissonance and Chaos

Yet this project is not about missionaries. It is about their beneficiaries, Khmer Christians. During my work with Debbie I developed a deep curiosity to understand what Cambodians thought about all this Jesus “noise.” Who was Jesus to them? What was Christianity or religion, for that matter? What did being both a Christian and Cambodian entail? Early during my fieldwork for this thesis, I observed the slippages between missionaries and their Khmer counterparts.
For example, during the same excursion to the countryside with Becky, Peter, another OMF missionary from Korea who established one of the churches this thesis focuses on, attempted to teach the assembly of OMF Khmer church members about triune theism. His lesson on this cornerstone of Christian theology was met with utter confusion, apathy, and boredom. It was typical during any sermon I attended in Cambodia to see congregants “playing Facebook (leng Fasbuk)” on their smartphones, chatting with one another, or napping. Yet that time especially missed the mark – and Peter knew it. Afterward, we laughed together at how his lesson was a flop. He reckoned it was “too heavy” of a teaching for these “young” (meaning, recently converted) Christians. I reckoned it was because triune theism made no sense to them.

Short-term missionary visitors, who always seemed to be coming and going, added an extra layer of dissonance, bringing with them their zeal and utter unfamiliarity of Khmer culture. I always felt a sense of pity for the ambitious volunteer who would do on-the-spot translations of the visitor’s message from on high. One of the salacious ironies between the Khmer and English languages is that the English word “joy” is pronounced identically to the Khmer word “to fuck (joy).” One can imagine the red, embarrassed, hiding, and smirking faces when an impassioned visiting preacher repetitively shouts “Joy! Joy! Joy!” To the unacquainted, there is a lot of talk about joy in Christianity. There was also a lot of confusion and uncertainty with Christianity in the Khmer context.

The dissonance, that is the incoherent noise, misunderstandings, talking past one-another, untranslatability, and so on that leads to confusion, angst, anxiety, doubt, and hardship was an intrinsic aspect of Khmer Christianity. Being a Khmer Christian entails negotiating the noise, aporia, and chaos of this new and foreign religion. Protestant Christian organisations from all of the world have converged on Phnom Penh and compete with one another, leaving the Khmer people in a vortex of Christian dissonance. Most of my Khmer interlocutors took the foreign missionary with a pinch of salt. They politely sat through sermons on triune theism and awkwardly smiled past the tirades of joy. Phnom Penh has historically been a city where Khmer sociality collided with foreignness (see Osborn 2008). Their world had been marked by dynamic changes, being in constant, precarious, and unpredictable shifts and flux. For decades, they have been exposed to western foreigners whether through the UN, international courts, missionaries, and other entrepreneurial expatriates. At times, change in
Phnom Penh has been experienced subtly and quietly, while other times the change has been violent and mercurial.

**Jesus’s Intervention in the chaotic world**

After my lunch with Debbie in 2010, I hailed a motorbike taxi (*motodup*) to return to the team house in the southern district of Phnom Penh called Toul Tumpong. I was utterly dejected from our meeting. Between juggling babies, insensitive demands toward the restaurant staff, and the unending phone calls, Debbie could hardly finish a thought other than that paedophiles supposedly still lurked in every dark corner of Phnom Penh. The River Front is a popular destination for foreign white “backpackers” who come to participate in, and thus perpetuate, the seedy nightlife of Phnom Penh. After procuring a *motodup*, the driver asked me in crisp English within the first minute of our journey whether or not I had a Khmer girlfriend. Knowing this to be a feeler for solicitation, I gave a stern “no.” He further asked if I wanted a “boy,” a male sex worker. Following another “no” he persisted and asked if I wanted a “little girl.” This was ridiculous! Was I truly losing my mind? Perhaps Debbie was right to paint all Cambodian men as sexual predators? I told him something to the effect that I did not come to harm the Cambodian people, but to help. “OH! You’re a missionary!” he responded. He said that this was a good thing and that his people needed a lot of help. Knowing this to be a feeler for solicitation, I gave a stern “no.” He further asked if I wanted a “boy,” a male sex worker. Following another “no” he persisted and asked if I wanted a “little girl.” This was ridiculous! Was I truly losing my mind? Perhaps Debbie was right to paint all Cambodian men as sexual predators? I told him something to the effect that I did not come to harm the Cambodian people, but to help. “OH! You’re a missionary!” he responded. He said that this was a good thing and that his people needed a lot of help. He tried to do good and help people, too, he claimed. Hoping the awkwardness would cease, he asked me if I wanted to shoot or blow up a chicken with a machine gun or grenade, no doubt with remnants from the conflicts pre-1991 Paris Peace Treaty, for twenty US dollars.

It turned out that the moto driver was a public school teacher who worked part-time as a *motodup*. He revealed his other profession as we were weaving in and out of Phnom Penh’s chaotic traffic. Traversing the streets of Phnom Penh is an adventure in and of itself. I liken traversing Phnom Penh’s streets to walking through a moving crowd, only everyone is on a motorbike. Common-sense traffic rules simply do not apply during a traffic jam (*steah* – literally a “clog”), power outage, or inclement weather. Sidewalk pavement is a suitable side-road. No need to yield when turning. Driving toward oncoming traffic is acceptable if one needs to make a left-handed turn. A driver’s focus remains immediately in front of him or herself. His or her movements are predicated on the traffic just ahead. Construction, weddings, funerals, grand
openings, flooding, or government blockades regularly and unexpectedly close streets. There were some times when traffic was so dense that the sheer disorder was the only reason for the clog. All motorist and pedestrians were to blame. Cars, lorries, buses, tuk tuks, motos, street carts, and bicycles all converge into the same path and contribute to the organised chaos.

After dropping me off outside the team house, the taxi driver took off his helmet and had a worried and sincere expression. He made a desperate plea with me to return to the US, where I am from, and tell then President Obama about Cambodia. He lamented about having to work part-time as a motodup due to the government’s corruption. The corruption of the Khmer government was so palpable and oppressive that it indirectly coerced the Khmer people to undergo extreme measures to just get by in life. After a disappointing lunch, awkward propositions, and anxiety from riding on the back of a small moto through Phnom Penh’s traffic, I felt even more angst and confusion for the Cambodian situation. This was the same man who offered to take me to a guest house to partake in the sex industry that I, naïvely, came to address. He was clearly using his skills and resources as a fixer, liaising foreign clients with illegal activities. What was striking to me was his seemingly extreme cognitive dissonance – bouncing back and forth between being a victim, victimiser, and saviour. I too was a blurred subject in his eyes, being both a seedy backpacker and a do-good missionary. His scattered thoughts and mobile positionality reminded me of Debbie – they constantly created a world of hope and despair, of loveliness and ugliness that they were both outside of and yet subject to. I doubt many of us motorists considered ourselves to have been a part of the clog, but we all certainly understood ourselves to be in and subject to it.

One thing was certainly true for both Debbie and the motodup, the world in which we lived was not a good nor a moral one. To Debbie, this was hell on
earth. It was as if Haugen’s undercover video was repeatedly played in slo-mo in her mind. To the motodup, the troubled city was headquarters to an oppressive government – a good-ol’-boys’ club that worked to make themselves richer at the expense of the Khmer people. It was also a city where foreigners came to play, exploit, and help. Initially I was a wealthy and foreign hedonist and he was my concierge. His tune changed quickly (though briefly) when he deduced me to be a missionary. Everything seemed to be mobile. Sometimes the most unusual became the most ordinary. Nothing was static.

This was the world many Khmer Christians found themselves in. The deus ex machina soteriological model presupposed by the missionary, which excepted Jesus’s salvation to be experienced in the everyday, translated well in the religious lives of Khmer converts to Christianity. Sin too was a crucial aspect of the world that needed to be addressed. Jesus was the answer. The world was not a good one. A good, moral world, like an individual person, must be made. What my Khmer Christian friends showed me throughout my fourteen-month research was that this comes out of turmoil, friction, entropy, dissonance, chaos. For Khmer converts to Christianity, Jesus was working to bring order.
Introduction

Introduction

And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing." And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.

--- Matthew 8: 24-26 (ESV)

This thesis is about Christian salvation in the Khmer world. It ethnographically investigates religious experience in a densely populated, poor, and precarious neighbourhood of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, called Toul Sangkae (pronounced "Tool Sang-kai"). With the vast inequalities between the wealthy and the poor, the headquarters of a seemingly schizophrenic state apparatus that swings between political authoritarianism and anarchy, and the collision between traditional Khmerness (wobbathomkhmaer) and globalism, Phnom Penh is a city of contrasts and rapid change. Images of the ancient Khmer empire, which are notably the most potent symbol of Khmer history and cultural identity (French 1999: 170), are juxtaposed with the stuff of globalism and modernity. Everyday life in Phnom Penh is marked with paradox. It is a city where everyday sociality is negotiated between the super-rich and the abject poor, between local and foreign, and the struggle to hope, dream, survive, and achieve success when failure, angst, antagonism, ennui, and frustration are all too common.

This ethnography focuses on the everyday religious experiences of poor-to-middleclass Khmer evangelical Christians who have predominantly migrated from the outside countryside (srok) into the densely populated and shifting urban neighbourhood of Toul Sangkae. It argues that for these Christians, Jesus’s salvation from sin takes on a multiplicity of quotidian, everyday facets on varying scales, from the “heart (cett)” of the individual believer outward to the national and even global level. The concept of “salvation (secktay songkruer)” as
a religious term is not foreign to the Khmer people. Like its regional neighbours of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos, Cambodia is formally a Buddhist (Theravada) nation. Khmer Buddhism understands sin (bap) to be, in part, a destructive and corrosive force in the world created through immoral behaviour (Chapter II). Buddhist religious praxis produces a substantive goodness (bon) that helps restore and bring balance to the individual person, thus elevating the person into a holy and centred god-like being. Following the way of Buddha, one will transcend the world and receive perfect balance and stability, which is called salvation. In contrast, for Christians, the agency of salvation is redirected from the individual person to Jesus Christ. Jesus’s salvation, in other words, is the active force in bringing restoration and order amongst the angst and chaos of the world.

Relying on ethnographic and historical evidence, this thesis follows the sites where Christian salvation can occur by highlighting the agents of “chaos,” like “agonism” and “sin,” where Jesus works to produce equilibrium, order, and, thus, salvation. Chaos can be explored, for instance, through the spatial geography of urban life. For many Khmer migrants, the city of Phnom Penh is considered a wild place that is navigated through networks, whether familial, educational, religious, or recreational (Chapter I). Khmer notions of religion hinge on the dynamic between order and chaos (Chapter II). Conversion to Christianity enables people to not only cope and engage with life in the city, which causes dissonance with their Khmerness (Chapter III), but also gives space for them to critique Khmer society through paradigms of sin and evil (Chapter IV). The scalar work of Jesus’s salvation moves outward into the national level. Thus, we can begin to see how the political sphere is enfolded into this dynamic. Christians and Jesus, while being framed as apolitical, can play a role in the salvation of Khmer nation (Chapter V). Therefore, this thesis argues that a good and moral world, like the person, is created through the interplay between chaos and order (Conclusion).

In such a dynamic environment as Phnom Penh new ways of being are inevitable (Chapter I). Khmer religion plays a crucial role in the creation of the Khmer moral order, offering rituals that bring a deep sense of belonging and refortifies notions of Khmerness (Kent and Chandler 2008). Removing oneself from this order, by, for example, adopting foreign and modern modes of living creates dissonance and angst (see, e.g., Derks 2008). Thus becoming Christian was described by many to be a “betrayal” that caused the convert to “no longer fit in” in Khmer society (Chapters III & IV). Therefore, conversion itself
introduces chaos that needs to be addressed. In other words, Jesus’s salvation can take shape in multiple locals, such as the political sphere (Chapter V).

**Crushed Brick and Muddy Streets**

I offer an illustration of how Jesus can work to bring order in the everyday as a starting point for the thesis. I soon discovered how much the monsoon rains from June to October disrupted the rhythms of city life. Non-essential commitments were put off during the torrential downpours. There was a general acquiescence to the rains – life seemed to melt away. Passengers on motorbikes parked underneath trees, petrol stations, or overpasses and became mesmerised by the droning rain. Children stripped down and played underneath the rushing water from the rooftops while mothers tossed them a bar of soap signalling the opportune time to bathe. Phnom Penh suffers from flooding during the rainy season due to its lowland location and struggling infrastructure (see Kolneberger 2015). Toul Sangkae’s infrastructure especially suffered during the harsh weather. Streets flooded and existing potholes hidden by water expanded due to the continual violent crashing of unsuspecting vehicles.

The road in front of Jesus Village Church (JVC) became nearly impassable during the rainy season. There the unpaved streets were constantly changing due to the roaring lorries coming and going from the adjacent garment factory and recycle sorting facility. By September, Om (elder aunt/uncle) Sreylien’s shop across the street from JVC seemed to become entrenched by a muddy and impassable road. Leading the collective prayer one Sunday morning in late September, Roth, Om Sreylien’s son, prayed that God would influence the local Commune (Sangkat) authorities to fix the problematic road and urged the church to continue praying for this miracle from God. I asked Roth about the prayer over lunch following the service. He said that while the local political leaders can be messaged on Facebook, they rarely helped due to lack of resources. Nor were they expected to help without being financially enticed or having a close relationship with someone in power. These sorts of blurred relationships between state and non-state actors are common in South and Southeast Asia (see, e.g., Jauregui 2014), illustrating the complexity of accessing public resources in such an unpredictable setting as Toul Sangkae. Regardless, Roth’s ultimate concern was that the local political authorities would
not take them seriously because they were Christian. He was asking for a miracle.

Two weeks later a lorry dumped a load of crushed brick from a nearby brick factory in front of the church. That Sunday, a male elder of the church, Dr Chhin, during the time of prayer exclaimed this event to be a miracle from God. “When our neighbours see us they mock us,” he claimed. “They laugh at us because we worship a foreign God. But now they see that our God is the true God. They see us pray and they say, ‘ooooooo, they pray well! Their God listens!’” This seemingly mundane blessing captures much of what this thesis will address. Jesus was at work for these Christians, providing everyday blessings like crushed brick that not only improved the quality of their lives, but also brought order and stability in such a uncertain and precarious context. These works displayed the truth and reality of the Christian God amongst a population that scoffed and rejected those who followed Jesus. Those like Dr Chhin and Roth recognised their otherness in Khmer society, using that as momentum to circumvent the antagonism they experienced from the political sphere, their neighbours and family, and even the everyday challenges of dwelling in Toul Sangkae. Many Christians who lived in Toul Sangkae found their migration to the city at the mercy of circumstance and luck – like the monsoon rains, events seemed to follow the path of least resistance. They found themselves in a vortex of angst, hardship, confusion, and an uncertainty. Thankfully, Jesus was on a mission to save.

Christian Protestantism is a recent arrival in Cambodia, only taking significant hold after the formation of a new constitution and opening of the nation’s borders in 1993, following decades of calamity. Since that time, there has been a large push for mission from a number of international Christian organisations. This thesis traces the challenges, successes, hopes, and failures of being Khmer and Christian in the Cambodian context. By theoretically exploring the intricate connection between chaos and order, we can further understand how Jesus’s salvation fits into the Khmer notions of “order (lumdab)” and “chaos/disorder (ronnernay)” that are intrinsic to life in Cambodia. Thus, we can begin to see how seemingly diametrical and competing forces as flux and stasis, doubt and faith, are actually imperative to animating evangelical Christian life and necessary in the production of not only a moral person, but also a good and moral world.
Khmer Order: Hierarchy and Proper Behaviour in the Khmer World

In his highly effective monograph *Siam Mapped* (1994), Thongchai Winichakul traces the discourses of nationhood that have shaped notions of “Thainess” throughout Thailand’s history. He found that in addition to imagining a shared ethnic identity and common language, Thai *spatiality* was an important mechanism that helped shape notions of *Thainess*. Conceptualising the Thai “world” was, in other words, a significant technique that shaped notions of what it meant to be Thai. Prior to British colonial influences, the Thai conceptualised their world cosmographically. Spatial mapping was created from a sacred topography, mirroring the mythos of Thai Buddhism. Sacred topography reinforced Thai hierarchy and order, both of which are fundamental aspects of *Thainess*. The introduction of British mapping of Thailand not only changed Thai spatiality to geopolitical models, but was also used by Thai elite to help shape and alter notions of *Thainess*. Geopolitical models of mapping relies on boundary work, marking the boundaries between certain peoples. Following colonial influences, the Thai elite began to use these spatial methods to legitimise their power and control over certain regions and peoples.

Leaning on Thongchai’s work, I wish to highlight two key components that are important to frame the analytical approach of this thesis. First is the notion of the Khmer “world.” Like the Thai, the Khmer imagine their “world” to be bounded and made up gods, angels, spirits, ghosts, animals, humans, and sub-humanoids who are ordered in hierarchy. Boundaries are of course blurred when the abstract, virtual world is attempted to be materialised in physical boundaries. Thus, the historical hostility between Cambodia’s neighbours, such as Thailand and Vietnam, over contested spaces continues to persist (see, e.g., Fox 2002). It is common for the Khmer people to consider non-Khmer as “other,” “foreign,” and from the “outside” of the Khmer world. Referring to a fellow Khmer person as an outsider is a deep-cutting insult (see Chapter V). As will be explored throughout this thesis, one of the key features of Christianity is that it is particularly good at solving the central problem of the Khmer moral world.

The second component I wish to take from Thongchai’s work builds on his notion of *Thainess*, which I adapt for the Cambodian context as *Khmerness*. Thongchai’s use of *Thainess* denotes a common sense of Thai “nature” and “identity.” I wish to steer away from the use of “identity” or “nature” for their
problematic and ambiguous connotations (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). For the Khmer, there was a widespread assumption for what it meant to be Khmer: *wobbothoamkhmaer*, which was often used to describe Khmer “identity,” “tradition,” and “culture.” It indexed the essence of what it meant to be “Khmer,” and therefore, following Thongchai, I deploy the term *Khmerness*. Like the Thai who understand *their* nation to be the *Thai* world, I argue that the Khmer understand their world in terms of an imagined shared ethnic identity and common language. More often than not, my Khmer interlocutors referred to the nation of Cambodia as *srok Khmaer*, “the (tamed/cultivated) land of the Khmer” as opposed to its formal name of *Kompuchea*. Language as well was a crucial aspect of *Khmerness*. The Khmer language not only indexes a “proper” Khmer person, but also, as will be explored in Chapter II, Khmer language has the agency to shape the person into a proper Khmer person. The term “Khmer (*Khmaer*)” was used interchangeably to speak of the nation, the land, the language, and the people of Cambodia. Therefore, I regularly deploy the term “Khmer” throughout this thesis.

Locating these two key terms of the Khmer “world” and “*Khmerness,*” we can begin to unpack the key features of *Khmerness* that keep the Khmer world in order. By “order,” I mean when things are in proper place and, thereby, when things are in proper hierarchy. Hierarchy and rank have been noted to be prominent features of Southeast Asian societies and is especially important for the Khmer. “A larger cosmic order exists in which all beings are ranked,” Judy Ledgerwood writes of the Khmer, “Humans exist beneath gods and above animals. Among human beings, all individuals are ranked” (Ledgerwood 1990: 14). Khmer hierarchy and the moral order have been intricately tied to kinship and the “home.”

“Home” provides a stationary point to ground oneself (Rapport & Dawson 1998). It is perceived to be fixed and ordered. The “Home/house (*phteah*)” is often used interchangeably with “family (*kruesar*).” The home is a place of unity, peace, vitality, safety, and sanctuary. The house is also directly associated with the land (*srok*), for it is inherited through the family. The land is the economic foundation of rural Cambodia. Illustrating more of the abiding relationship home and land, labouring the land displays loyalty to the family and reciprocity for neighbours (Kim 2011).

Everyday life in the city contrasts the prototypical and traditional everyday life in the countryside. While I spent the vast majority of my research in Phnom Penh, I was able to venture to the rural countryside with my Khmer
friends on several occasions. During the same retreat to the countryside with OMF’s churches mentioned in this thesis’s Prologue, one of the three buses developed a flat tyre. We were in the Northeast somewhere between Steung Treng and Ratanakiri on a dirt road, far in the rural countryside. We pulled the caravan over to a small road-side market area to fix the flat. We took the opportunity to stretch our legs and use the toilet. I was surprised to see a dozen of my friends walk freely and jovially to the adjacent homestead to use their toilet and hide from the sun beneath a stilted home.

The homestead was idyllic. It had a stilted, single-room home that provided a private dwelling space for the family above and a greeting, lounging, and eating area beneath, a separate kitchen (*phteahbuy*, literally “food house”), and a toilet (*bontuptek*, literally “water room”). Chickens roamed freely and scratched beneath a line of drying laundry. Several large water containers lined the home that would be filled from the rushing water off the rooftops during a rainstorm. Behind the homestead was a rice field coloured with a brilliant green that indicated the harvest was near. In these rural communities, life was temporally marked by the rice-growing season. Markets, *wats* (Buddhist pagodas), or underneath the village chief’s or an elder aunt’s home were all common, daily spaces to socialise. My friends who dwelt in the city looked fondly to the simplicity of their lives in their home villages (*srokkamnaet*). It was described as a “different time,” yet “boring.”

Eventually, a young woman exited the house and sat on her steps seemingly unbothered by the flood of strangers at her home. I was amazed by my friends’ confidence to invade someone’s property. I turned to Soka, my close friend, and asked him if anyone knew the family. He laughed and said “no.” Knowing my confusion he said, “we Khmer are family. It’s no problem.” What struck me the most was that this was the exact opposite of how I experienced life in the city. In the city homes are barracked, neighbours are unknown, and resources are not shared. The city seemed to shatter this familial sociality found in the rural countryside (see Chapter I).

Like in many Southeast Asia societies, this sort of rural homestead was understood to hold much of the Khmer world in order. Families lived, grew, worked, and farmed together. Neighbours could come and go. Gender roles are understood to create social balance for the Khmer (Frieson 2011). Mothers are known as the “boss of the home (*me phteah*).” Fathers are providers, yet family events are mediated through mothers. The home is considered a “female space” that serves to produce the Khmer *family* (Davis 2009: 202). Khmer kinship is
cultivated in the home. As Soka suggested above, the Khmer understand themselves to be a meta-family. Thus, people refer to each other in familial terms. These terms are also coupled in terms of hierarchy and rank. One would refer to their fellow Khmer as, for example, “younger brother” (b’oun broh), “elder aunt” (om srey), “grandfather” (ta), and so forth. To be referred to as the impersonal second person “neak” (you) is cold and distant. Neak is also a qualifier for “human.” So, for example, to say there were ten people at an event, one would say “manuh dop neak” (literally, “ten human people”). Thus, being called “neak” signifies being a foreigner, another human being, and distant from being a family member. In addition to teasing as a sign of acceptance (cf. Geertz 1973: 416), being addressed in familial terms is a sign of being accepted by the Khmer people. Conversely, for Khmer people to address other Khmer people in non-familial terms is highly disrespectful, signifying great distance between themselves. As will be addressed throughout this thesis, Khmerness, rooted in the home and family and which also helps create order, is at stake due to the chaos of the city. City-life seemed to erode these important categories away. Moreover, while Christianity attempted to fix these fragile features of Khmerness, it often found itself at odds with traditional Khmerness, creating chaos of its own (Chapter III).

For comparison proposes, Janet Carsten (1995) argues kinship in Langkawi, Malaysia, is never static but is always in the process of being created. The heterogeneous ethnic and historical milieu of the Langkawi people is actively disregarded in the process of forming kinship ties. “Siblingship” is never fixed as consanguinity is capable of being changed. Rather, siblings are created or formed by the sharing of food in the home. This process of becoming a sibling has a focus toward the future production of kin and thus considers past details of diversity to be obsolete. “In this sense,” Carsten suggests, “forgetting this past is part of an active process of creating a new and shared identity” (ibid.: 324). Khmer kinship heavily relies on consanguinity. The sharing of the meal, like in Langkawi, generates the same substance within the family, fostering kinship ties (Zucker 2007: 160).

The meal is considered to unite and mend relationships. The house as the symbolic centre of the family provides the meal to be the symbolic source of familial vitality. Feeding family does not cease after death. Dimitri Tsintjilonis (2004) argues much of the Southeast Asian literature on memory and death suggests mortuary rituals help forget the deceased in order to create a new future. For the Buntao’ of Tana Toraja, Indonesia, death is a process by which
the deceased is not considered dead, but lays “ill” until their spirit is ritually “re-membered.” The mortuary ritual of the Buntao’ heavily relies on the memory of the deceased’s past in order to “re-member” the dead into death. “In this way,” Tsintjilonis argues, “although the living remember the dead, it is the dead who re-member themselves” (2004: 388). By foregrounding the past in the present, the process of re-membering creates an intimate connection between the family and the deceased in order for the dead to communicate the kinds of “ritual joints,” or sacrificial foods, they desire in their process of dying. These sorts of exchanges between the living and the dead are not uncommon amongst Southeast Asian societies.

For example, many traditional Khmer rituals are temporally marked congruent with the rice-growing season. The months September and October are at the end of the rainy season when farmers transplant rice in preparation for the harvest. During this time is the festival of the dead, Phchum Ben, when it is believed the spirits of the dead who have not been reborn return from hell and, starving, seek food offerings from their descendants. Lacking the intimate connection described by Tsintjilonis, no one can know for sure if one’s ancestors remain in hell or have moved on in their rebirths (Ledgerwood 2012: 180). Thus, Phchum Ben provides a great example of ritual exchange and the “gift economy” between the living and the dead (Davis 2009: Chapter 4). Through the mediation of monks, the living provide the dead offerings of food to help them along their journey for rebirth, and the dead provide their descendants with health and blessing. Neglecting to provide offerings angers the spirits, which might lead to sickness, bad luck, and even death. Presently, Phchum Ben has become the most significant ritual for remembering those who have died during the Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) era (Ledgerwood 2012). The need to help ancestors progress to a happier place after death (i.e. moving from hell to a new birth) is evident in both Khmer and Vietnamese kinship, especially when one’s ancestors died from a traumatic past (Kwon 2006; 2008).

Heonik Kwon (2006) discusses a similar engagement between the living and the dead in Vietnam. The type of death a Vietnamese person endures initiates specific teleological consequences. Death inside the home is considered a pleasant death denoting a happy death. Those who die outside the home, “death in the street,” denotes a bad death where the spirits of the dead are unhappy and in turmoil. These unhappy spirits need the help from their living descendants in order to progress from these troubled, wandering spirits into local deities.

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Introduction

(Kwon 2008). Kwon's findings illustrate that the role of kinship continues beyond the grave.

The above discussion helps us understand that for the Khmer, notions of Khmerness, cultivated in the home and family, are ordered and should be preserved. Perhaps the largest current anthropological question regarding the Khmer people considers the cultural ruptures of traditional Khmer practices, using the genocide as the temporal marker for discussion. Ovensen et. al (1996) argue the genocide and subsequent Vietnamese strategies to wipe out remnant Khmer Rouge soldiers in provincial regions (see, e.g., Slocomb 2001) have ruptured traditional Khmer customs and behaviour. Khmerness remains fragile today due to diffused kinship and communal ties caused by the conflicts of the past forty years, producing the decline of traditional beliefs and Khmer ritual practices as well as the fragmentation of kinship ties and community networks. Ovensen et al.’s investigation was during the mid-1990s, fresh after the conflicts of the DK and PRK. Since then there has been extensive anthropological work suggesting that while Khmerness might been fragmented, the Khmer have done a lot of work to reforge and reimagine their Khmerness.

Judy Ledgerwood (2012) argues against Ovensen et al.’s findings, claiming social networks and significant Khmer rituals like Phchum Ben remain intact and are resilient to change. Likewise, Alexandra Kent and David Chandler’s edited volume (2008) argues while there has been much cultural turmoil over the past forty years of Cambodian history, there is a strong reconfiguration and resurgence of Khmerness today, which is best supported by Eve Zucker’s impressive ethnographic engagement with the people of O’Thmaa in the Kompong Speu Province who strive to reincorporate traditional Khmer rituals that were lost during the Democratic Kampuchea era (Zucker 2006).

Religion too works to create the Khmer world and order. Morality and the moral order are woven with these notions of Khmerness (Chandler 1996; Kent and Chandler 2008; Hansen and Ledgerwood 2008; Marston 2011). Lisa Arensen stresses that for the Khmer, living in a precarious and ever-changing world does not dismiss the Khmer’s desire “to settle in a locale, to emplace themselves and come and rest after years of mobility” (2012: 8). For the Khmer, there is a deep desire to keep order in a world that is filled with turmoil.

“Worlds” collide and Radical Uncertainty
The Khmer people rely on dichotomies to imagine a perfectly balanced world. “Good” and “evil,” “proper” and “improper,” “male” and “female,” and “tame” and “wild” are all examples of productive binaries that help hold the Khmer order. It would seem that Structuralism, which relies on binaries, would work well as a theoretical framework to help investigate religious experience in Cambodia. In his *The Raw and the Cooked* (1970), Lévi-Strauss unpacks the structure of myths writ-large, attempting to find a common link between “primitive minds” and “modern minds.” Contrasting cultural relativism, Lévi-Strauss provides a universal, human cognitive process that all people attempt to help make sense of our world through myths. Myths, Lévi-Strauss found, are complex structures of binarily opposed and bifurcating categories (i.e. “raw” and “cooked”). Crucially, even though Structuralism assumes a universal connectivity between differing cultures due to the structure of myths, no myth perfectly repeats itself. What might seem as disorder and incommensurability between differing “worlds,” Structuralism at least helps us consider that there might be an underlying connectivity between them and allows us to take binaries seriously.

One potential problem with deploying such a term as “world” might assume that worlds are fixed and bounded. The reason why I choose to deploy the term is that it facilitates a more nuanced approach to understand what possibilities can occur in a “world.” It allows us to ethnographically and theoretically explore the effects, much to the Khmer people’s concern, of when things come, go, and change in their world. Following the logic of Michel Foucault, these sorts of “worlds” are a fiction, though have real-world manifestations.

Foucault suggests that the ideal world, or “utopias,” “are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form”; yet, he goes on to write, they are “fundamentally unreal spaces” (Foucault & Misckowiec 1986: 24). He postulates that what we can actually observe are *heterotopias* – a negative and concrete reflection of the ideal/utopian world (Foucault & Miskowiec 1986). The ideal is never actually realised, but what is are spaces that are not the ideal. By understanding certain spaces as *heterotopia*, one can imagine what the world ought to be. If a space is regarded as hellish, then one could imagine what its binary opposite (heaven) might be like. Also, *heterotopias* allow for a sort of bizarro-world where social norms are, to borrow from Foucault, “turned upside down” (*ibid.*: 24). They allow for the possibility for alternative social practices where “something else” happens. We can begin to take into consideration that
for the Khmer, the “world,” while being fictive, is understood to be a bounded and can influence everyday life.

The problem with the Khmer context in Phnom Penh is that the world is rapidly changing and filled with uncertainty. Here, Ruth Marshall’s (2009) rich engagement with Nigerian Pentecostals is helpful. For those in the “Born-Again” movement, Pentecostalism has the potential to respond to “radical uncertainty” of urban and post-colonial Nigeria. Marshall understands that “radical uncertainty” is a crisis of pluralism where signs and corresponding meanings “become increasingly unmoored, giving rise to a heightened sense of social insecurity, a fear of fraudulent identities and of strangers, and a growing quest for moral mastery and the ability to control what were seen as untramelled and dangerous powers” (2009: 9). Such pluralism indicates a profound transformation of social ordering between different and competing visions of what the good life entails (cf. Mouffe 2006: 319). Marshall found that Pentecostals envisioned the Born-Again movement to result in political stability. In this way, Marshall argues, Pentecostalism is a highly political movement. While not entirely convinced of her investigation of Pentecostal life in urban Nigeria, we can see from her analysis how Christianity is particularly good at responding to radical uncertainty.

The point is that things are in constant flux as well as trying to remain in order. There is an amalgam of structure and mutation. Interestingly enough, the basic concept of chaos theory helps us understand this abiding relationship between structure and mutation. My aim is to not create a theory of change. What I do propose, however, is that the world is constantly changing and how people mark and measure change varies.

**A Theory of Order from Chaos: Agonism and Salvation**

So, why “chaos,” “order,” “agonism,” and “salvation?” Simply put, these terms are both theoretically and ethnographically relevant to understand Christian life in Phnom Penh. It is my goal in this section to unpack each of these terms. I will first theoretically explore these terms prior to stressing their ethnographic salience. As explored above, “order” in the Khmer world is a crucial feature to how the Khmer understand Khmeress. The world is kept in order in terms of rank and hierarchy and, moreover, when things are stable. Taking the stabilised world into account, we can attribute an ordered, stabile world to have
zero change or flux. However, we know that this type of static world is a fictive utopia, as explored through Foucault’s notion of heterotopia. Things are always in flux and change.

“Order (lumdab)” and “chaos (ronneronny)” are two categories that help animate Khmer society (Chapter I). While we anthropologists have since moved on from the binary logic of Structuralism, the Khmer people heavily rely on such dichotomies to understand their world (Zucker 2008). Structuralism assumes a human-universality of cognitive processes. While critics of Structuralism assume a fixity and stasis of cognitive structures, others suggest that Lévi-Strauss’s Mythologiques was actually a study of entropy, mutation, and change (Barbosa de Almeida et al. 1990; Barbosa de Almeida 1992). I am convinced Lévi-Strauss was concerned that structures mutate, change, and eventually dissolve. His Tristes Tropiques (1992[1955]) is especially revealing. Perhaps a moment of foresight, he pondered the effects of an eventual “global village” that would result in the flattening and dissolve of such structures as myth and kinship.

The world began without man and will end without him. The institutions, morals and customs that I shall have spent my life noting down and trying to understand are the transient efflorescence of a creation in relation to which they have no meaning […] he himself appears as perhaps the most effective agent working towards the disorganized matter towards even greater inertia, an inertia which one day will be final. From the time when he first began to breathe and eat, up to the invention of atomic and thermonuclear devices, by way of the discovery of fire […] what else has man done except blithely break down billions of structures and reduce them to a state in which they are no longer capable of integration? No doubt he has built towns and cultivated the land; yet, on reflection, urbanization and agriculture are proportion infinitely higher than the amount of organization they involve. As for the creation of the human mind, their significance only exists in relation to it, and they will merge into the general chaos, as soon as the human mind has disappeared. Thus it is that civilization, taken as a whole, can be described as an extraordinarily complex mechanism, which we might be tempted to see as offering an opportunity of survival for the human world, if its function were not to produce what physicists call entropy […] Every verbal exchange, every line printed, established communication between people, thus creating an evenness of level, where before there was an information gap and consequentially a greater degree of organization. Anthropology could with advantage be changed into ‘entropology’, as the name of the discipline concerned with the study of the highest manifestation of this process of disintegration (1992[1955]: 413-414).

Perhaps Lévi-Strauss’s nightmare would be where the world is flattened and there is no difference. Lévi-Strauss’s fascination with “entropy” imagines that
through time, structures will be destroyed through the “inertia” of flux and change. His concern is that a globalised world would eventually see the decline of the “rainbow of human cultures” (*ibid.*: 414). To him, “entropy” is like a wrecking-ball that flattens structures, leaving the human population in a homogenous vat of *sameness*. To some extent, Lévi-Strauss’s prediction holds some weight. “The globalizing era,” Michael Scott (2005: 194) suggests, “is one in which the formerly naturalized limits of nations, cultures, and ethnicities have become blurred under forms of spaces of hybridity, flux, liminality, and uncertainty. This is to say that we live increasing in a state of chaos.” With the advancement of chaos theory since Lévi-Strauss wrote his *Tristes Tropiques*, we now know that, contrary to Lévi-Strauss’s prediction, chaos gives rise to new orders and unpredictable possibilities.

Famed physicist Ilya Prigogine’s definitive work on chaos theory is outlined in his *Order out of Chaos: Man’s new dialogue with nature* (1984), co-authored with philosopher and chemist Isabelle Stengers. To spare the reader of nosebleed physics, I will briefly synthesise Prigogine’s work to the discussion at hand. Through the interplay between chaos and order, the universe can become self-organised. Even though the nature of the universe is entropic (never being in a state of stasis), higher levels of order and structure can arise through chaos. Prigogine’s theory of chaos allows us to understand that as the universe moves toward greater chaos and disorder, structures of greater complexity and order will arise (cf. Mosko 2005: 33). Order can come from chaos when equilibrium of entropy is reached. As I will unpack below, this is analogous to salvation (order created from equilibrium) and agonism (entropy).

Entropy is a unit of disorder. It is an agent of chaos. Friction can be a form of entropy. Adding enough friction to an engine, for example, could result in chaos (i.e. the engine breaking). In terms of thermodynamics, a system that undergoes zero change is understood to contain zero entropy (Prigonine & Stangers 1984: 119). The more entropy that is introduced into a system, the more likely the system will erupt into chaos. Chaos is unpredictable change and disorder, or, to borrow from Ruth Marshall, chaos is “radical uncertainty.” The study of thermodynamics is essentially the study of how to predict “how a system will react to modifications we may impose on it from the outside” (Prigonine & Stangers 1984: 106). Please, gentle reader, do not read that I am attempting to formulate social change. If anything, chaos theory suggests that such an attempt is impossible. I find the
order-from-chaos model fitting for what Christians attempt in Cambodia. Chaos is change and disorder that is out of control and Jesus’s salvation causes order.

I use “agonism” as analogous to entropy. The more agonism one experiences in the world, the more his or her world is thrown into disarray and chaos. I borrow from Chantal Mouffe’s (1999; 2006) political theory of agonism that assumes the democratic process relies on friction and angst between different political factions. For Mouffe, the political can be understood as “the dimension of antagonism that can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations” (Mouffe 1999: 754). Politics is a process of working through the tensions and friction (entropy) of political strife to accomplish a healthy society. Democracy relies on friction, opposition, and entropy. Agonism understands that resolve and order arises through the working out of such angst. This is very similar to Prigogine’s theory of order-out-of-chaos.

Salvation can be analogous to the process of reaching a state of balance and equilibrium. Through agonism, salvation can be achieved. As Chapter II explores, the logic of Khmer religion is that religious praxis brings stability and equilibrium in not only the individual person, but also to the world. Balance, steadfastness, and being “centred” are crucial aspects of the religious person. Additionally, Khmer notions of religion understand that sin to be a destructive, polluting thing in the world that is an agent of chaos. There are substantive qualities that works, or disrupts, to bring forth equilibrium. For the Christian, Jesus is the crucial actor that brings forth stability/salvation – stability in their heart, stability in their homes, in their jobs, in their lives. Thus, religious life in Cambodia can be explored in the in-between, the interplay between agonism and salvation.

So to sum up, chaos and order are interictally linked and are helpful descriptions for how the Khmer people experience their world – a world that is fraught with radical uncertainty. Agonism, like entropy and friction, is the process and interplay between order and chaos. Finally, and as is the central investigation of this thesis, Christian salvation is especially good at bringing order to the Khmer world.

While theoretically exploring how chaos relates to “radical uncertainty,” the ethnographic salience of chaos and order is what ultimately propels the argument of this thesis. For Christians, things are not the way they ought to be. This fits in theologically with the Christian narrative of a “fallen” world (cf. Sahlins 1996). As explored in the Prologue, Cambodia sets the scene for such a chaotic world. Interestingly enough, many Khmer people expressed that life in
Phnom Penh was a place of “chaos” (Chapter I). Some forms of evangelical mission strategy emphasises the redemption of humanity is directly tied to the redemption of physical environment and space (e.g. Parker 2001). The manifestation of sin in the world of child trafficking and sexual exploitation was localised in such urban settings of Battambang, Siem Reap, and Phnom Penh. Evil, in other words, plays a particularly important role to understand the Christian’s place in the world. As discussed in the Prologue, “chaos” and sin play a crucial role in how Christian missionaries understand the Khmer context. Genocide, human trafficking, abject poverty, government corruption, paganism, and the like provide an apocalyptic landscape that shapes the missionary imagination for what is going on behind the scenes in Cambodia through sin. Michael Scott (2000) argues that Christianity hinges on the idea of a world originating from chaos. Returning to Marshall’s discussion of the Born-Again movement, Christianity has the potential to resolve the radical uncertainty experienced in post-colonial Nigeria.

Some Evangelical theology explicitly understands Jesus’s salvation to bring order out of the chaos that was introduced after the collapse of Eden. Gregory Boyd (1997) reaches further back in the Christian metanarrative to the time prior the creation of the world. According to Boyd, Genesis 1:2 portrays God’s spirit to be hovering over an earth that was “formless, futile, empty, and engulfed by chaos” (1997: 104). This suggests that the creation story is an account of God’s restoration of a world that had been through a previous conflict. Humanity’s role is to aid God in his redemptive work in vanquishing sin in the world. “Humans,” suggests Boyd, “are made in the image of God and placed on the earth precisely so that they might gradually vanquish this chaos and establish – or better, reestablish – God’s all-good plan for it. As God’s earthly agents, we are ‘to effect the conquest of an evil being who had penetrated into creation’” (ibid.: 107). Boyd’s polemic account traces the conflict between God and the satanic order, urging Christians to join God in his “war” against evil. Through this soteriological framework, we see how the expectation that Christianity can bring order out of chaos can be experienced in the Khmer context.

Neoliberalism, Globalisation, Modernity, and Christian Conversion in the Global South
Evangelical Christianity, and especially Pentecostal Christianity, has dramatically increased in the global south since the advent of globalisation (Robbins 2004b). The anthropology of Christianity is saturated with the discussion on the nature of conversion. Joel Robbins’s intervention (2003; 2004a) of the nature of anthropology stresses the need to take the “cultural logic” of Christianity on its own term. His investigation of Christian life in Urapmin of Papua New Guinea is an excellent example of a self-conscious effort to make Christians appropriate objects for anthropological analysis. Moreover, Robbins (2007) argues the tendency for anthropology to rely on notions of cultural continuity, discounting cultural rupture to be of significance. Urapmin Pentecostals, he found, stressed cultural rupture as necessary for conversion to Christianity. Converts actively juxtaposed their new lives as Christians at odds with their pre-Christian pasts. Birgit Meyer (1998) had previously highlighted this tendency for Ghanaian Pentecostal converts to attempt to “make a complete break with the past.” In such cases, Christians stressed cultural rupture to be significant aspect of Christianity.

Critics such as Peter Gow (2006) questions the validity of assuming there is something specifically “Christian” about those who convert to Christianity in the global south. Gow suggests that the Piro people of Peruvian Amazonia, who, although they converted to evangelical Christianity in the 1940s and 1950s and who consider their Christian identities to be important, found their Christian past to play no real role in their present-day sociality. To Gow, “conversion” is a Christian theological term that relies on the notion of *individual* and inner belief that were both foreign to his Piro interlocutors. Thus “conversion” in the Piro context is a myth.

Through the rupture-continuity debate, we can begin to interrogate the nature of conversion in the Khmer context. Does Christian conversion in Cambodia entail a complete break from the past? Conversion in Cambodia might resemble more of Matthew Engelke’s (2010) findings that conversion is not so much a complete rupture from the past, but more of a realignment of empirical categories and a reinterpretation of the past. This can be seen slightly in the Khmer context when reconciling Christianity’s foreignness. Khmer Buddhism localises religion to the Khmer people (Chapter II). Christianity is reconfigured by Christians to be a global religion that allows for a distinctive Cambodian “voice” (see Chapter V). So the question we should ask is, is “conversion” the best way to frame how people become Christian in Cambodia? As will be explored in Chapter III, and leaning on the work of Liana Chua (2012a; 2012b),
“rupture” vis-à-vis “continuity thinking” is inapplicable for Khmer Christians. “Becoming Christian” and “offering themselves (thway khluen)” were prominent ways Khmer Christians framed their religious transformation. However, there was an ambiguity of what that entails and when that exactly occurs.

As will be discussed below, Protestant Christianity is relatively new to Cambodia. Missionaries have been coming to Southeast Asia for hundreds of years in part due to French, Spanish, British, and Dutch colonial influences. Most of Southeast Asia remains resistant to Christian conversion, with exception to Brunei, the Philippines, and Singapore. However, Christian conversion has been successful in places where the converts are ethnically other from broader society such as the Bidayuhs of Malaysia (Chua 2012a, 2012b) and the highlanders Sulawesi (Aragon 2000). Buddhist societies in mainland Southeast Asia have been especially resistant to Christian conversion. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Cambodia had the smallest Christian population of all Southeast Asian countries with only 0.1 percent being Christian (Keyes 1996: 286). Like their southern neighbours, Christian converts in these Buddhist worlds have predominantly been in ethnic minority populations. Christianity allows such populations to navigate their ethnic otherness around the ethnic majority population, for example the Hmong people throughout the highlands of the Southeast Asian peninsula (Tapp 1989), the Karen of Thailand (Cassaniti 2014), and the Akha Highlanders of Myanmar (Kammerer 1990). What is crucial to understand about my research is that my Christian friends identified to be a part of the dominate Khmer ethnicity, going against the trend described above. Christian conversion in Cambodia, in other words, is in competition with being ethnically Khmer.

One thing is certain about Protestant Christianity in Cambodia, it is directly linked to the economic transition and rise of modernity. 1980s Cambodia was marked with violent conflict between remnant Khmer Rouge forces and those loyal to the ruling party of the Vietnamese-controlled People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The Khmer Rouge’s communist Democratic Kampuchea (DK), while taking notes from Maoist China, strove to be isolated from the Soviet bloc, and aimed to be a completely independent, ethnically Khmer nation (Chandler 2008: Chapter 12). 7 January 1979, known as “Victory over Genocide Day,” initiated Vietnamese, and thus Soviet-by-proxy, control of the nation. The Paris Peace Accords of 23 October 1991 marked the end of the PRK and aimed to halt the fighting between political parties, paving way to the formation of a new constitution in 24 September 1993. Cambodia’s new constitution declared a
market economy, liberalised industry, and opened the nation’s borders to foreign
investors. Much of the social life in Phnom Penh has been shaped by these
changes (Springer 2010). Tandem to this political and economic shift was the
mobilisation of global Christian actors to Cambodia.

With the advent of globalisation, life in Phnom Penh and conversion to
Christianity were tied to entering into ‘modernity’ – modernity typically signified
by western and capitalistic modes of mobility, industry, material stuff (‘ewan’),
and the like. Webb Keane (2007) argues Christian conversion in Sumba,
Indonesia, is associated with entering into modernity and signifies being
autonomous. Rosalind Shaw (2007) discusses how the religious activities of
post-war Christian youth in Sierra Leone engage in capitalistic and modern
endeavours as a means for healing and reconciliation. Capitalism’s tie with
Protestantism and Evangelicalism has been argued elsewhere (Weber
2001[1930] and Connolly 2008, respectively). These connections hold true for all
of my Khmer interlocutors. Christianity was certainly connoted to be a foreign
and ‘modern’ religion. Most were introduced to Christianity through aspirations
for a job. As will be discussed further, many rural villagers migrate to Phnom
Penh in order to engage with capitalistic endeavours (see Chapter III). Khmer
women, on whom new economic strategies are dependent, embrace the
“modern” (tumneup) and “western” lifestyle, which violates their gendered role
of preserving the Khmer culture (Derks 2008). The recent rise of Christianity
since the early 1990s must be understood in this context.

This “freshness,” as my friends described it, of Christianity entails that
much of Khmer evangelical Christian theology has not been well developed.
Jesus (PreahJesuh) was often compared to Buddha (PreahPutt). Both are called
Lord, master, teacher, saviour, and God. Jesus, I was explained by a Buddhist, is
the God of foreigners. Buddha, on the other hand, is the God of the Khmer.
Reorienting one’s devotion to Jesus, and thus, a foreign God, signified a betrayal
of one’s Khmerness, creating tension and anxiety converts strived to reconcile.
To reiterate, Cambodia is predominantly ethnically Khmer. The Cambodian
people often use ‘Khmer’ interchangeably with all things Cambodia. The people,
language, land, and even Buddhist religion are commonly referred to as simply
‘Khmer’. The point, and the central investigation of this thesis, is how do these
Khmer evangelical Christians navigate around the agonism of being Khmer and
Christian? As will be unfolded throughout this thesis, new possibilities emerge
due to this agonism.
With these two contextual features of Khmer Christianity – that is, Christianity’s “freshness” and its competition with being Khmer – we can further situate Khmer evangelical Christianity within the anthropology of Christianity’s rupture vis-à-vis continuity debate described above. Khmer Christians were ultimately concerned with how their Khmerness fit into being Christian, not necessary how Christianity was being empirically and theologically contextualised from a Buddhist framework. Sin (bap), heaven, hell, angels, demons all had carryover between Christianity and Buddhism. We will see in Chapter IV how a Khmer pastor reinterpreted a prominent Buddhist ritual through a Christian lens. That was the extent to how I found Christians attempted to contextualise Christianity in such a Buddhist context. In fact, I often found that Buddhism was ignored all together in contextualisation. The underpinning logic of Khmer religion, I argue, remained intact between Buddhism and Christianity – both ultimately deal with sin in the world and help shape a moral person (Chapter II). Yet, as one might suspect, there were slippages when missionaries took for granted the logic of Khmer religion.

To ground this point with some concreteness, I turn to a conversation I had with a missionary regarding the nature of ‘sin’ (bap). Peter, the very kind and humble Korean missionary who established Jesus Village Church (JVC, see below) was flummoxed when I probed his understanding of the Khmer word bap (‘sin’). As will be explored in Chapter II, the Khmer understand ‘sin’ (bap) to be a destructive and polluting substance created when ones ‘does sin’ (thwoe bap). Buddhists understand that the root of sin is kileh. Kileh is an evil kernel within the heart (cett) that propels one to sin. In that way, sin is a thing within the world that needs to be dealt with. Peter, being a good Protestant, did not recognise this thing-like quality of sin. Sin was merely a metaphor for poor and evil behaviour. Peter turned to Roth and asked him about Kileh. Roth matter-of-factly responded that it was the root of sin and was what compelled people to do bad deeds. Peter dismissed its contextual salience, citing that if he tried to contextualise it, then it would be too close to syncretism.

To make matters more interesting, I am not even sure if Roth cared about this sort of slippage between the Buddhist understanding of sin and the Protestant Christian one. Categories, signs, and meanings were always in flux for Khmer people like Roth. The problem with attempting to situate this research within the anthropology of Christianity’s rupture-continuity debate is that it assumes that these two binarily opposed positions are static. Signs, meaning, and belief are always in flux in such precarious and changing contexts as urban
Southeast Asia (Baxstrom 2008). The theoretical framework of this thesis stresses that order and chaos are intricately connected, and, therefore, there will always be an amalgam of rupture and continuity. This is the reality of Christianity in Cambodia. And, agreeing with Liana Chua’s work (2012a, 2012b), the continuity-rupture debate is not a helpful way to understand Christian life in Cambodia. Holding on to and keeping one’s Khmerness was a primary concern for being Khmer and Christian, which of course entailed a continuum of rupture and continuity.

Evangelical Christianity

The type, or rather *mode* of Christianity this thesis explores is Protestant Evangelical. Many efforts have been made to pin down the terms of “Evangelicalism” yet they are at times conflated and convoluted. Jon Bialecki (2012) writes of Protestantism’s nature to create an infinite number of *modes* of Protestant Christian life. It is in Protestantism’s DNA to allow constant flux and mutation while imagining continuity. Denominations are destined to splinter due to emerging differences (Bialecki 2014b). While anthropologists struggle to consider who is and who is not a Christian, even Christians themselves have a difficult time agreeing on who counts as a Christian or not (Bialecki 2017: 7). Regardless of these seemingly infinite variances, we ought to speak of Protestantism as a whole (Bialecki 2017). With so many types of “Christianities,” Bialecki helpfully suggests that an anthropology of religion ought not dismiss Christianity as an object of enquiry due to these variances. By looking at variance through Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the *diagram*, Bialecki suggests we can see how Christian variance and difference can work together. Diagrams sit “somewhere between a pure virtuality of the question of how a concatenation [(linkage)] of forces will play out and the various concrete forms that could result” (Bialecki 2017: 79). These abstract sets of pure relations collapse and fold onto other diagrams, thus giving new expressions. In lay terms, because religious folk ground their understanding of the world in multiple abstract principles, there are infinite possibilities for their ideas to be blended together, made real, and acted out in the concrete world.

One reason why I choose to use such an ambiguous category as Evangelicalism is that it accommodates for flexibility and communality in ethnographic comparison between Christian communities, whose differences
were at times subtle while at others drastic. Much of the Christianity introduced in Cambodia since the Paris Peace accords of 1991 was transmitted by evangelical Christians. Many of these missionaries initially started their mission in Khmer refugee camps along the border of Thailand in the 1980s (see Chapter III). Protestant Christianity was introduced in neighbouring Vietnam by the Christian Missionary Alliance, an evangelical Christian denomination, by Robert A. Jaffrey in 1911, starting the Evangelical Church of Indochina (later named Evangelical Church of Vietnam) (Phan 2011: 139). In 1923, the Christian and Missionary Alliance sent David Ellison to Cambodia (Cormack 1997). Soon evangelical missionaries began to translate the Bible into Khmer and planted churches. However, the Khmer Rouge’s onslaught completely halted Evangelical activity. The Khmer Rouge murdered many Catholic and Protestant leaders and expelled foreign missionaries. “At that time,” Peter Phan suggests, “there were 14 Cambodian Protestant ministers, and when the Vietnamese defeated the Khmer Rouge in 1978, only three were alive” (Phan 2011: 142). By 2011, Cambodia had a population of approximately fourteen million where 95% practiced Theravada Buddhism (ibid.). Phan optimistically suggests, “Protestant Churches are multiplying rapidly, with missionaries being […] particularly the Evangelicals” (ibid.).

In lieu of attempting to define such an equivocal category, I will discuss the terms of Evangelicalism that were common amongst most Protestants in Phnom Penh. The four major terms of Christian Evangelicalism salient to every Christian community this thesis explores are the following: Evangelicals are Protestant (that is, not Catholic or Orthodox) (cf. Harding 2000: xvi), consider the Bible as authoritative and the hermeneutic for knowing all truth (cf. Crapanzano 2000), emphasise evangelism in order to convert individual persons (Elisha 2011: 20), and, crucially, expect to personally experience Jesus (Luhrmann 2004) as well as expecting Jesus to act in the world through, though not limited to, miracles and charisms (Bialecki 2017). The degree and intensity of how these characteristics interact varies from community to community. For example, New Life Fellowship (NLF, introduced below) stressed experiencing Jesus through miracles and charisms. Bible study, while an important aspect of religious life, was secondary to experiencing Jesus. Jesus Village Church (JVC, introduced below), stressed discipline through Bible study. Experiencing Jesus through rapturous moments were peripheral, albeit important. Evangelicalism belongs to no singular Protestant tradition, denomination, movement, or sect.
The Evangelical ideologies, while shared among Evangelicals, are manifested in a variety of modes.

Investigating Christianity in Cambodia is a complicated endeavour, for many Evangelicals from around the globe have converged on Phnom Penh and generally operate according to the above terms; yet, there are tensions and even contradictions in how they concretely seek to achieve their goals. While some Cambodian churches have been “planted” (a popular term used by Christians to describe the establishment of a new church) by, for example, Swiss Pentecostals, Californian Vineyard charismatics, Indonesian Calvinists, Korean Presbyterians, Australian megachurch ‘non-denoms’, American-Vietnamese Baptists, and others, there remains the thread of evangelical Christianity amongst them. That is not to say all Christian endeavours in Cambodia belong solely to Evangelicals. There was a Catholic church, for example, on the eastern side of Toul Sangkha. With Cambodia’s French colonial history, much of the Catholics in Cambodia were foreign and Vietnamese, who remain repugnant in Khmer society. Thus, Catholicism remains marginal in Khmer society. Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses were also active in Phnom Penh; however, Evangelical leaders did a lot a work to distance themselves from these Christian forms.

Fieldsite and Methodology

Ethnography in such a precarious and rapidly changing city as Phnom Penh can be a delicate endeavour for the ethnographer who aims to investigate the everyday sociality of Khmer religion. Cambodia’s present and recent history illustrates the vast inequalities between the wealthy elite and the majority Khmer population. The challenge any researcher must face when exploring Khmer urban sociality is navigating the intersection between the hierarchal power (top-down) and the everyday lived experiences of the average Khmer (bottom-up). For example Lisa Arensen, in her excellent PhD thesis of place-making in rural Cambodia, notes of her reluctance to being hosted by the village chief (me phum), as it would have skewed her findings as the chief’s adopted daughter (koun jenjem) with other members of the community (2012: 16). However, she was able to work around these hierarchical differences. The home of the village chief was a central space of sociality in the rural villages. As will be discussed in Chapter I, Phnom Penh has been a historic site where Khmerness
collides with foreignness. For many provincial migrants, the city was just as foreign to them as it was me.

Researching evangelical Christians is another delicate endeavour, for they are typically and deeply concerned with the researcher’s own religious convictions. Missionaries in Phnom Penh, I quickly found, were very protective of their work by filtering out those who could be seen as ‘hostile’ to their work, for example the socialist, liberal, and atheist academic. While I mostly fit the mould of those sorts of ‘nasty’ [sic] academics, I am an Anglo-Catholic. Also, I have a master of divinity from a notable Wesleyan Evangelical seminary in Kentucky that many missionaries knew and respected. Simply put, I would have not be given access to the Christian communities I researched without stressing my background. While I share some of the ideologies of the Evangelical, I am not one. Yet, in order to gain access to the highly Evangelical religious communities and events explored throughout this thesis, I had to play the role of the Evangelical while not being insincere. I was asked, for example, to preach on one occasion for my friend Dara’s church. His church was a Pentecostal church that valued praying in tongues, which I do not practice nor ideologically grasp. I decided to teach the meaning behind the events at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on his people through flaming tongues (Acts 2, this is also some Christians’ textual proof for the need to speak in tongues) and how Luke, the author, perhaps juxtaposed Pentecost with the events at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). I constantly and delicately teetered the line between respectfully playing the part and not being insincere.

While the Christian leadership knew of my Christian background, the majority of my Christian friends did not. Due to my whiteness and foreignness, they correctly assumed I was a Christian and were pleasantly surprised that I was there in the role as a researcher and not as a missionary. “I am the student, you are my teacher” I would often tell my interlocutors. With the exception of a few missionaries, my positionality as a researcher and Christian posed very little confusion or hinderance. Toward the end of my research, those few missionaries who realised that we did not share identical religious ideologies distanced themselves from me and my research. Phone calls were not being answered. Coffee dates, which seemed to be a daily pastime for missionaries, were avoided. As missionaries were not the subject of my enquiry, this had very little effect on my research.

Studying Buddhism had a very different dynamic. Buddhists, as will be explored in Chapter II, are generally unconcerned with other people’s sincerity of
Or

order from Chaos

Introduction

faith. One’s own sincerity is important, but unlike the Evangelical, policing others’ is not. My research in the Buddhist wat (pagoda) was welcomed. Being Christian, Buddhist, agnostic, or whatever is of very little concern in Buddhism. However, for Cambodian Buddhists, what mattered most for the lay Buddhist was that I was not Khmer. To them, I was always a foreigner and a researcher. My position as any sort of religious person was of no consequence for the Buddhist.

I initially set off to Phnom Penh to investigate the spatial and temporal trajectories of evangelical Christian conversion. Prior to fieldwork, I received preliminary consent from AIM (see Prologue) to investigate their Christian outreaches in the urban village of Svay Pak. AIM’s emphasis on the village’s history of sexual exploitation that frames their work attracted me to investigate how that sort of spatial and temporal thrust was transmitting to the Christian convert. I planned to become active in the religious lives of those Khmer Christians who participated in AIM’s programmes and, importantly, trace how they extrapolated the urtext of ritualised church services into their spatial engagement with Svay Pak (cf. Haynes 2015: 277). My wife, a social worker and who also accompanied me, secured a position with an NGO that offered crisis pregnancy counselling and care. Their office was in the southside of the city. Svay Pak was, however, on the norther edge of the city. We decided to find an apartment in the norther neighbourhood of Toul Kork to split the difference for commuting purposes. Unfortunately, two months after my arrival in November 2015, AIM reneged their consent due to their unfamiliarity with ethnographic research, leaving me to drastically alter my project. This falling out actually turned out to be serendipitous.

A part of my research design was to allow the city to become an actor in my thesis. I knew that I wanted to focus on an urban neighbourhood known for its precarity and social difficulties where Christian missionaries intentionally engage with due to its a high crime and poverty, similar to that of Svay Pak. The majority of my first three months of research was dedicated to language training and networking with the Protestant Christian community in Phnom Penh. One day in January 2016 my wife and I noticed a large plume of black smoke along a decommissioned railroad track that was at the end of our dead-end street. Joined by our landlord, we went to the rooftop and helplessly watched as the fire swallowed up six composite homes in a matter of minutes. Those who lived along this decommissioned railroad were very poor people (neak kra) as they were illegally squatting on government-owned property. My landlord suggested
that it would be difficult for the firefighters to quell the fire not only due to the fire’s location, but, moreover, the inhabitants along the railroad would not have enough money to pull together to entice Phnom Penh’s poorly-funded fire brigade to put out the fire. The other side of the railroad from us and to the east was a former marshland called Lake Kok (Beng Kok) that had been emptied of both its water and occupants, which was also under a massive construction project headed by a Chinese company. This drastic contrast of inequality was commonplace in Phnom Penh.

Following the railroad north a few hundred metres led into another neighbourhood called Toul Sangkae. Soon after the fire, I drove my motorbike across the road into Toul Sangkae, which found to be an ideal location due to its socioeconomic discord. Three evangelical churches had been established in the neighbourhood, all within the past decade. Fortuitously, Toul Sangkae was the same neighbourhood Annuskha Derks (2008) primarily conducted her ethnographic research some thirteen years prior to mine. Her interlocutors were predominantly “young Cambodian women with similar rural, economically poor, rice-farming and poorly educated backgrounds [who involved] themselves in urban employment such as the sex industry, factory work, and street trading” (2008: 7). Toul Sangkae had several garment factories, and was only a short distance away from the universities and hospitals not found in the countryside. It provided a context that poor provincial migrants could rent a room for an affordable price on a fixed term. All three churches were established in this neighbourhood in part to “reach out” to these types of provincial migrants who dwelt in the city under precarious circumstances.

Toul Sangkae was a very fluid neighbourhood. People regularly came and went, relying on familial and village networks to navigate the city (Derks 2008: Figure 2: Map of Phnom Penh (Toul Sangkae approximately outlined in red - Google Maps 2019)
While there are official borders and boundaries, most of the inhabitants of Toul Sangkae I had gotten to know were unaware of nor concerned with these boundaries. Streets and markets were the general markers between one neighbourhood and the other. Hierarchy remains a central aspect of Khmer culture (discussed above), and this plays a role in the spatial arrangement of land ownership and demarcation of regions throughout the nation. Urban areas are demarked from the largest to smallest as the following: national capital city and home of the King (Riechieni), district (Khan), commune (Sangkat), and village (Phum). Each of these demarcations have a respective leader (me) from the governor down to each urban village chief. As most of the inhabitants of Toul Sangkae rented or squatted their living space, very few knew nor were concerned of the me Phum (village chief). Businesses and new construction projects needed the blessing from each leader. The more intricate the endeavour, the higher up the hierarchy-chain one needed approval. Thus the political bureaucracy in these urban neighbourhoods was described as stiflingly and “secretive”.

Toul Sangkae was located in the city of Phnom Penh, Russey Keo District, and the Toul Sangake Commune. At the time of research, Toul Sangkae was split between three villages; however, the small-scale demarcation of an urban village (Phum) was irrelevant to most of the people I came to know in Toul Sangkae. Residents of Toul Sangkae conceptualised their neighbourhood from the commune (Sangkat) level. This was predominately due to the neighbourhood’s markets, main arterial roads and, significantly, the neighbourhood’s wat (pagoda). Additionally, for most migrants in Toul Sangake, “village” was directly related to the notion of “home” in the countryside.

According to an official 2013 census, Toul Sangkae had 55,106 inhabitants, 42,978 being adults (eighteen years or older). However, these numbers are only those who have registered as permanent residents in Toul Sangkae. Most people I engaged with in Toul Sangkae, and the city for that matter, revealed how even though they might dwell in the city, they considered their home to be in the countryside (srok). Those like my friend Chanthol remained registered in their hometown because they wished to keep ties with their home villages and, as Chanthol suggested, wanted to represent the countryside politically. Toul Sangkae’s population was significantly higher than the census indicated.

The infrastructure in Toul Sangkae was very poor and unsustainable for the dense population. There were several foreign owned factories scattered
throughout Toul Sangkae. According to one informant, fifteen years prior to my research Toul Sangkae was a marshland on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. In 2015, the neighbourhood had been swallowed by the urban sprawl of Phnom Penh. Many factory workers migrated from the countryside to Toul Sangkae looking for work that did not require an education nor proficiency in a foreign language.

The eastern border of Toul Sangkae bordered the Sap River, just three kilometres north from where the Sap meets the Mekong River. There, many stilted wooden homes swelter in the hot and humid climate. The land swelled with the river while sewage and rubbish collected at the riverfront. Bisected by the harried National High Number 5, the eastern part of the neighbourhood was one of the most undesirable bits of property, near one of Phnom Penh’s “most famous brothel streets” (Derks 2008: 17), and was home to many undocumented Vietnamese migrants. There, only 42.3% of (documented) children age 3-11 attended schooling as opposed to the 64.4% Sangkat-wide.

The aforementioned railroad track ran through the centre of Toul Sangkae. It formerly connected a rubber factory in the northern part of the Russey Keo District to the city centre just south of Lake Kok. Along this railroad was one of the most precarious sections of the neighbourhood. I had gotten to

Figure 3: Railroad through Toul Sangkae

The aforementioned railroad track ran through the centre of Toul Sangkae. It formerly connected a rubber factory in the northern part of the Russey Keo District to the city centre just south of Lake Kok. Along this railroad was one of the most precarious sections of the neighbourhood. I had gotten to
know members of three families along the railroad, all whom were connected to one of the churches I researched. One matriarch, Ming Kinal (see Chapter I), who dwelt along the railroad since 1988 when Toul Sangkae was on the edge of the city and a marshland/extension of Lake Kok, hinted that one of Cambodia’s largest banks was in the process of purchasing the railroad from the government to create a road. Residents were anxious about the government coming and expelling the inhabitants along the railroad as they did in 2012 just south in Lake Kok. While controlled by gangs, the railroad was owned by the Khmer state. These families harboured most of their resentment toward the Khmer government who, in their opinion, was the reason why they had to dwell along the railroad in the first place.

The antagonism between the poor inhabitants of Toul Sangkae and the Khmer state is critical to understand for the lives of those who dwell in Phnom Penh and in particular Toul Sangkae. Toul Sangkae was regularly described as “chaotic (ronneronnay)” and “wild (prei)”. Khmer people have a particular fear of the forest at night. Night is when the fiercest and wildest animals, ghost, witches, and evil spirits “catch (cap)” their prey with ease. In Toul Sangkae, it was the wild people. Upon beginning my research in Toul Sangkae, I was warned by one female church member of a church near the railroad not to travel too late at night. “Thieves will catch (cap) you! Prostitutes will grab (cap) you!” I was warned. Pastor Senna, the leader of another church in Toul Sangkae (see below), described the neighbourhood as a “place of dogs” due to the gangs, brothels, and, significantly, the corrupt fraternity of the local political authorities who were loyal to Prime Minister Hun Sen’s Cambodia’s People Party (CPP).

The ambient anxiety of the Khmer state was at times palatable in Toul Sangkae. Much of the time, government forces were absent, making Toul Sangkae seem as a site of anarchy. However, there were times when the Khmer state flexed its muscles, so to say, so to bring order. Soon after the 2018 general elections that have been widely criticised as a sham election (Holmes 2017), Cettra, my research assistant sent me, a video (CBN Khmer 2018) via Facebook with the message “this is your neighborhood!” Tilted “One day after the election,” the video recording took place in Toul Sangkae. A gang of youth were squaring off with a gang of state “political police (pholih neobay),” a term commonly used for Prime Minister Hun Sen’s military/government police. Between them on the dirt road was a gnarled motorobike, crushed by an idling backhoe the police were hiding behind. Holding Molotov cocktails and crude farming tools, the youth were indignant with the police who had stopped and
beaten a child “around ten, twelve years old” and left his composite motorbike as a display. It turns out a wealthy landowner (*lokdaï*) wanted the squatters to leave so he could further develop.

While not submitting the video as evidence, it displays the sort of tinderbox tension between the poor urban dwellers of Toul Sangkae and the Khmer state. At moments the neighbourhood seemed to be in a state of anarchy with seemingly no state presence. Other times, as in August 2016, hordes of military police stormed a section of the neighbourhood for reasons I can only speculate. A cycle of order and disorder ebbed and flowed. While reviling gangs, thieves, sex workers, drug dealers, and corrupt government officials, Christians took a passive stance against these antagonistic forces. However, as this thesis will show, Christians did a lot of work to address these very problems from the outside.

**Jesus Village Church (*Kruncumnnum Phum PreahJesu*)**

The Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) is a well-established Protestant mission society. Originally called the China Inland Mission, OMF was established in 1865 by British missionary Hudson Taylor with the specific goal to missionize east Asia. OMF missionaries arrived in Cambodia just prior to the conflicts of the 1970s, working primarily with indigenous communities along Cambodia’s eastern border. Shortly after the newly formed constitution of 1993, British missionary Naomi Sharp was sent to Phnom Penh by OMF to help establish a church while teaching music at the University of Fine Arts. Missionaries commonly refer to the establishment of a new church as “planting a church”. This agrarian language helps denote the care, work, and time that is needed to establish and “grow” a working, healthy, and sustainable church in a new, “fertile” context. After two years of scouting locations and research with other OMF missionaries, Sharp decided to plant a church near her university in the northern area of Calmette. Calmette has a historical significance of being a part of the French Quarter during the French Protectorate (Osborn 2008: 2-5). Today it remains home to the French embassy, universities and schools, and one of the most established hospitals called Calmette Hospital. Calmette also borders Lake Kok to its west and Toul Sangkae to its north, northwest.

In April 1997, OMF sent Peter and Sun, a missionary couple from Korea to assist Sharp with the planting of the Calmette church. They began hosting
programmes out of their home such as English and Taekwondo classes to entice youth to participate in church activities. Eventually they introduced Bible studies and had a Christmas programme in December 1997. The first Khmer people who were receptive to their work had prior exposure to missionaries while residing in border refugee camps during the 1980s. They were typically poor people who lived in neighbouring Lake Kok. Peter was drawn to reach out to those in Lake Kok due to their precarious situations and receptivity to their Christian work. Lake Kok was described by Sharp in her OMF report as “not a very safe place as it was an area with prostitutes, drug addicts and gangsters. Although our neighbours advised against visiting the area, we continued with the ministries there and we thank God for His protecting hands over us.”

A common style of Cambodian urban home is the phtealweng (“long house”), a row-house, concrete-style home that is narrow and multi-storied. Influenced from Chinese architecture, families were able to live in the upper levels of the phtealweng while having a business on the street level (Sokly & Seo 2016: 17-19). OMF’s Calmette church was a rented phtealweng, using the ground level as a sanctuary. By the early 2000s Calmette church offered accommodation to university students for an affordable rate in its upper halls under the condition that tenants would participate in church events. “Dormitory ministry” like this was a popular evangelistic technique for every church explored in this thesis. Peter made strong relationships with several young men, many of whom became leaders of the church by the time I began fieldwork in 2015. The number of church members began to grow when in 2005, OMF decided to construct a church complex in the neighbourhood of Toul Sangkae. By that time many of the church members were living in Lake Kok and Toul Sangkae. Contrasting the Calmette area, Toul Sangkae’s social difficulties were an important reason for relocating the church. OMF writes of Toul Sangkae:

Toul Sang[kae] was one of the most dangerous villages in Phnom Penh. A few missionaries and Khmer believers got into the village to teach the children and often chased out by the villagers with knives and sticks. Prostitutes would grab them by their arms on the streets so they have to cycle very fast, and have witnessed bloodshed almost everyday as it was a hub of drug dealers, thieves and all kinds of criminals (OMF 2014).

Peter, Sun, and the other OMF leaders chose to build the new church in the heart of the neighbourhood in order socially transform the area. Construction of the church complex began April 2006 and finished May 2007. Upon completion, OMF changed the church’s name to ”Jesus Village Church” (JVC, Krumcumnum Phum PreaJesus).
Jesus Village Church’s complex is situated in the centre of Toul Sangkae and sandwiched between a cluster of small, ramshackle factories and the railroad. The building acted as a hub for Christian worship and fellowship. An independent primary school called the International Christian School Cambodia (ICSC, Sala Ontorciete Kristien Kompucie) managed by my friend Chanthol, operated on JVC’s ground and first floors during the day. Chanthol was one of the first university students who dwelt in the Calmette dormitory and became a Christian through its ministry. The second floor housed the church’s sanctuary and the third floor housed the male dormitory. JVC’s female dormitory was only a few doors down from the church complex. JVC was always busy and provided the perfect context for me to base my research from.
Soon after discovering JVC in early 2016, I was able to secure a meeting with one of OMF’s directors called Becky (see Prologue) to discuss my research. At that time JVC’s leadership was uncertain. The first of Peter’s proteges from the original Calmette church, tipped to become JVC’s lead pastor, was ousted due to misuse of church money. The second had a slight falling out with Peter after he acquiesced to his in-law’s demands to invite a Buddhist monk to perform a rite at his wedding. Thus, throughout my research, Peter was the acting leader of JVC while overseeing several of OMF’s churches just outside of Phnom Penh.

Becky set up a meeting between me, Peter, and Sun to discuss my research. In March 2016 I began attending church programmes. By April I began volunteering my time in the evenings teaching English to Chanthol’s youth. This was a way for me to not only improve my Khmer language skills, but to also become more involved in the JVC church community and form relationships, particularly to my peer group of married men in their thirties, as much of Khmer socality revolves on hierarchy and gender.

Due to JVC’s two decades of operation in the area of Calmette and Toul Sangkae, there had been several families who were crucial members of the church. Dr Chinn, a medical doctor and teacher at a nearby medical school, was perhaps the church’s most respected leader. Om Sreylieng was another well respected elder. Her family originally lived in Lake Kok and was one of the first families to join the Calmette church. Her son Monyroth (Roth) was an up-and-coming leader of the church, lead the young adults, was trained in a nearby Presbyterian bible school, per Peter’s requirement of church leaders, and preached on occasion.

Peter’s religious leaning was rooted in Presbyterianism, a branch of the Reformed tradition that highly values the sovereignty of Jesus and stresses the formation of the Christian subject through such disciplines as corporate prayer, bible studies, and discipleship/mentorship. Peter’s Korean background also influenced a charismatic element of religiosity, which expected miracles and other “signs” of the Holy Spirit to be manifested through religious life.
Additionally, “sharing the Good News (phsay dumneng l’oh)” was stressed and a marker of faithful Christians. Thus, JVC is situated nicely in the Evangelical parameters described above. While Peter and Sun were active in the JVC leadership, the Khmer members of JVC strived to “localise” their religious praxis, meaning JVC strived to make religious rituals their own distinct, Khmer expression and not reflecting that of Christianity in the Anglo world (cf. Howell 2008). New Life Fellowship, a half kilometre north of JVC, on the other hand actively attempted to “transcend” Khmer culture and emulate that of global (Anglo) Christianity.

**New Life Fellowship (Kruncumnnum Ciiwit Thmey)**

New Life Fellowship (NLF, *Kruncumnnum Ciiwit Thmey*) was founded in the late 1990s by Charles (Chuck) McCaul. In 1995, Chuck and wife Cindy moved their family to Phnom Penh from California to assist another missionary create what he described a “New Testament Church,” that is a “true,” authentic church that emulates the first century church’s commitment to following Jesus and having the same sorts of miraculous encounters described in the New Testament. Chuck was influenced by the 1994 Toronto Blessing, a highly charismatic revival meeting that had become a large marker for charismatic forms of Evangelicalism (Bialecki 2017: 171-181). Like Peter from JVC, Charles and his wife began their evangelistic ministries by offering free English classes. Eventually when relationships with students were formed, they would introduce new English words by using terms from the Bible. This naturally lead to formalised Bible studies.
By 2004, Chuck had passed on his senior leadership position of the church to his son Jesse, though Chuck remained active in overseeing the development of new programmes. In 2009, Chuck decided to plant a church in Toul Sangkae in order to reach out to factory workers. They met in the offices of a Christian NGO opposite the same cluster of factories to JVC, though, ironically, neither were aware of each other’s presence. In late 2015, at the beginning of my research, NLF began renting a newly refurbished factory space in the northern part of the neighbourhood. The factory was in a larger gated complex and functioned as a sanctuary, male dormitory, and classrooms for English, computer, and Bible classes. Several rented rooms were in the same complex, many of those rented by members of NLF.

NLF was popular amongst youth. Where JVC attempted to localise Christianity into the Khmer context and had a variety of ages, NLF unabashedly attempted to create something new and foreign enticing the youth of Toul Sangkae. NLF saw themselves as other from Khmer society. Hanging above the NLF stage was a banner in both Khmer and English describing the vision statement of NLF:

Figure 6: New Life Fellowship
To plant a large New Testament Church in Phnom Penh which will have a positive influence on every sector of Cambodian society: Religion, Education, Politics, Social Relationship, Business, Sports and Communications

and will be a model and resource center for planting churches in every province of Cambodia with the same philosophy and foundation.

And to send Cambodians as missionaries to other countries.

NLF was fun and exciting. It incorporated global and modern technologies in their worship, emulating much of Chuck’s charismatic-evangelical background. Popular worship songs by Hillsong United and of the Vineyard Church’s repertoire (see, e.g., Bialecki 2017: Chapter 1) were translated into Khmer. NLF’s worship band called the “Life Band,” a mixture of Khmer and missionaries, wrote and published original songs. Lighting effects were used during worship and large, fun events were commonly offered by short-term missionaries, such as an American “strong man” group that would perform feats of strength to the theme of Philippians 4:13, which reads “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (ESV). Because of NLF’s longstanding English language ministry, many of the NLF leaders spoke crisp, American English. Thus, NLF was both modern and foreign.

NLF was one of if not the largest collection of churches in Cambodia. Chuck’s goal to plant churches in every Province was very close to being fulfilled. NLF Toul Sangkae was one of two of NLF’s churches in Phnom Penh. Many of Toul Sangkae’s church leaders were enlisted from the central church near Olympic Stadium to assist in NLF Toul Sangkae. For many of the well-established church members, they saw attending and serving the Toul Sangkae campus as part of their Christian “calling.” Some like my friends Khuntie, Rity, and Bara even moved to Toul Sangkae to help lead the church. Pastor Sothie was the NLF Toul Sangkae’s lead pastor. He grew up on the outskirts of Phnom Penh in a very poor family. Sothie took part in Chuck’s English lessons and became a Christian. He was one of the first of Chuck’s converts and proteges.

Like JVC’s church complex, NLF’s church complex was meant to be a space of peace and refuge within the neighbourhood. Whereas JVC’s central worship meeting was on Sunday mornings, NLF’s meetings were Sunday evenings, thus I was able to participate in both rituals. I also volunteered
teaching English on Wednesday and Friday evenings for NLF’s English ministry, though I dropped the Wednesday lesson as I was being spread too thinly once research was well on the way. During the mornings and early afternoons, NLF was empty while children were at school and staff were at their respective work. However, the church complex was very active in the evenings with several English and computer classes. Saturday nights, NLF offered a youth programme. I rarely attended these events as children were not my intended interlocutors. Also, JVC’s young adult ministry took place during the same time. A small number of youth from JVC attended an occasional programme of NLF, though rarely. Other than JVC occasionally using the Life Band’s recorded music for a video presentation, the two churches rarely intersected.

**Pastor Senna, Pastor Dara, and Friends**

Jesus’s Church Phnom Penh (JCPP, *Krumcumnum PreaJesus Phnom Penh*) is a small church on the northern edge of Toul Sangkae operated out of the home of Pastor Senna. Like many other Khmer Christian leaders his age, Pastor Senna converted to Christianity in 1984 when in a refugee camp at the Thai/Cambodian border during the conflict of the late 70s and 80s of the DK and the PRK. He worked for the UN during the Peace Keeping missions of the early 90s in Battambang and moved to Phnom Penh in the mid 1990s to help establish a church. Though he never explained the reasoning behind his recent departure from the church, Senna had retired from being a leader at a larger church in southern Phnom Penh where he also continued to operate a Christian dormitory. He moved to the norther edge of Toul Sangkae in a newly built *phtealweng*. Senna was a seasoned Pentecostal, highly valuing the charisms of the Holy Spirit and understood the world to be in continual conflict between Jesus and Satan (cf. Meyer 1998).

Very few adults attended Senna’s church throughout my research. He, being a father of children, had a small youth ministry. The only attendees of JCPP were children from the neighbourhood. Senna explained that he preferred to help children because not only were they the future leaders of Cambodia, but they were also more receptive to the “new faith of Christianity.” “Christian faith,” he explained, “is a new faith for Khmer people because Buddhism has a long history in Cambodia. Jesus is new. The Paris Peace Agreement allowed newness.”
His new home/church was amongst the urban sprawl at the edge of the Commune, near to where the gang of youths squared off with the government police in the Facebook video. While his house-church does not have a large presence in this thesis, Pastor Senna’s broader church connections and community was an important group this thesis investigates. I met Senna through a close Christian friend and interlocutor called Dara. Dara was a pastor of church-cum-dormitory in a different neighbourhood toward the city centre. Dara was my age and married, which meant he and I were in the same peer group. We met at a prayer meeting organised by Senna and other independent (meaning not overseen by missionaries) Khmer pastors one Friday night in December 2015. Having studied at a Pentecostal Bible college in the Philippines, Dara was fluent in English and he quickly became a close interlocutor. Senna and Dara’s pastoral cohort were highly evangelical and charismatic with the aim to transform Cambodia into a Christian nation (Chapter V). Senna used his JCPP as a hub for meetings for the cohort. Thus, Senna and Dara gave me the opportunity to move outside of the neighbourhood and investigate Christian life from a broader scale. These three church bodies allowed me to not only have hubs into the Toul Sangkae community, but to also be active in the Christian life of Phnom Penh.
**Wat - the Buddhist pagoda**

Alongside my research with Christian communities, I conducted research in local *wats* in order to better understand the broader Khmer religious context. Every Commune (and in some cases every village) in the city typically had a Buddhist *wat*. A *wat* is a Buddhist pagoda and religious complex that is a central architectural piece in Khmer society. *Wats* are large and beautiful, peppering both city and countryside with magnanimous structures. The *wat* is not simply a religious space where the *loksong* (the order of Buddhist monks, often transcribed from the Sanskrit as *sangha*) live and where faithful Buddhists come to worship. It is also a meeting place, a place to gather to play games, dance, nap under a tree, eat a snack, and, significantly, find a place of refuge, shade, and calmness in the city. *Wats* are crucial to Khmer sociality and community formation (Ledgerwood 2008, 2011; Kobayashi 2008). It is distinctly a Khmer space and was vilified by the missionaries as a paradigm of paganism.

![Wat Toul Sangkae](image)

Figure 8: *Wat Toul Sangkae*

My research focused primarily on lay Buddhist worship, as there remains a divide between the (male) *loksong* and the majority Khmer population. *Wat Toul Sangkae* was opposite the railroad from JVC in the heart of Toul Sangkae.
Wat Toul Sangkae is an unusual wat in that while being in a poor neighbourhood, it was the District’s central wat and thus had a lot of wealth compared to other wats in the District. There, many of the buildings had political and administrative functions. Also, several high government ministers gave large financial offerings to the wat. Wat Toul Sangkae’s south-eastern border was the squatter-village along the railroad, providing a stark contrast between those “who have (neak mien)” and the poor. This sort of inequality was one reason why so many people in Toul Sangake were disenchanted with Buddhism (see Chapter III). I also visited other wats in and around the city, speaking with both monks and laity to get a broader understanding religious life in the wat.

With the exception to a few missionaries, all of my informants were Khmer speakers. A handful of Khmer Christian leaders like Sothie, Dara, and Chanthol were very proficient with the English language. Thus I was able to conduct interviews with them and missionaries in English. All other interviews were conducted in Khmer language. My wife, being proficient in Khmer, assisted me on one occasion with an interview with a female member of JVC whose Christian conversion occurred in the context of a very difficult past. Audio recordings were used during interviews as well as note-taking. I later translated and transcribed all interviews with the help of a research assistant.

My first three months in Phnom Penh were dedicated to intensive language training, using the resources of two language schools. One of my language tutors called Cettra became a close friend whose help I enlisted as a research assistant on several occasions. I would sit with Cettra and play each interview recording where he would slowly and clearly repeat (never translating) the recording. I would then translate and transcribe on-the-spot. This was especially helpful to increase my vocabulary and, moreover, to receive his commentary. Therefore, all quotations from the Khmer are my translations. Buddhist literature, which uses a high form of Khmer language, and Pali used during Buddhist rituals were translated into simple Khmer by Cettra and then translated into the English by myself.

Cettra originally came from central Cambodia to Phnom Penh as a Buddhist monk to minister in one of the city’s wats and to undergo Pali language training. He served as a monk for five years and later started teaching Khmer to English speakers at a language school operated by an Indonesian missionary. Though not a Christian, Cettra had a lot of exposure to Christianity through the several missionaries he previously tutored. He considered himself an atheist and a Buddhist, the two not being mutually exclusive. Not only was he an exceptional
research assistant for his knowledge of both Buddhism and Christianity, he was also incredibly interested in my research. Cettra was crucial in helping me gain access to Toul Sangkae’s wat, as Khmer wats are a Khmer space. Wat Toul Sangkae was especially challenging to gain access to due it being the District’s wat, and thus being an important political tool for the CPP. Also, white foreigners rarely visited this particular wat, as opposed to other tourist-friendly wats in the city centre. One elder monk of the wat suggested that another foreigner had visited the wat only a few years prior to me, but that I was the only white foreigner to ever participate in his wat’s rituals.

**Structure of Thesis**

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter I investigates the spatial geography of everyday life in the city and argues that the city of Phnom Penh is conceptualised similarly to that of the forest (prei), a “wild” (also prei) place where Khmer order is at times flipped on its head, where dangers lurk, and new opportunities are made possible. Using historical and ethnographic evidence, I suggest Phnom Penh has been marked by mercurial change due to, in part, of the spatial dynamics the city vis-à-vis the imagined locus of Khmer order in the countryside (srok). My Khmer friends often spoke fondly of their home in the countryside, contrasting their lives in Toul Sangkae. Dwelling in the city allows for the instability of the Khmer order. Khmer order unravels in these spaces, giving new opportunities to develop. The diametrical relationship between the countryside (srok – “tame”) and the forest (prei – “wild”) illustrate the interplay between chaos and order described in this Introduction. Importantly, we can see how even though forest/city is conceptualised as a wild, chaotic space that destabilises the Khmer order, it brings forth new possibilities and a new order.

Chapter II explores the Khmer notion of religion (sasna), arguing how the aim of religious praxis is to stabilise the person through the purification of sin and the stabilisation of the heart (cett). In other words, religious ritual and practise is meant to purify the person from sin, centring/stabilising/fixing (obpekkha) the heart, and thus bringing perfect balance and equilibrium to the Khmer person. Crucially, rather than framing Khmer religion on notions of belief, which, as Talal Asad (1993) argues Western notions of religion have privileged, Khmer religion focuses on the practice of religion and the substantive things produced through religious praxis. It is from this context that we can begin to
understand how conversion to Christianity fits in this moral reconfiguration of the Khmer world. Ultimately, religion for the Khmer creates a moral Khmer person. Theravada Buddhism, being the historical and national religion of Cambodia will be the primary focus of the chapter as this provides the context with which Christianity finds itself competing against. This chapter argues that imbedded in the logic of Khmer religion is the interplay between chaos and order, using the tension between such diametrical forces to achieve a state of equilibrium.

Chapter III addresses the nature of Christian conversion. By engaging with the anthropology of Christian conversion, this chapter argues conversion in the Khmer context is a process marked with failure, aporia, and angst that needs to be clarified by Jesus. Conversion rarely occurs in a vacuum and is predominately understood to be caused by external influences, such as colonialism in pre-Christian societies (e.g. Comaroff & Comaroff 1991). This chapter does trace the external, precarious forces that influence many Khmer to convert such as a way to become modern, aspirations for prosperity and a career, and receiving help and care. Yet, Christians were very aware of the fleeting nature of becoming Christian for similar reasons some anthropologists are skeptical of conversion. As this chapter will show, Christians stressed to "know Jesus clearly" and to have "Jesus in their heart". Jesus, in other words, had an important agency in the life of the Christians to clarify faith and to bring order in the chaotic process of conversion.

Chapter IV extrapolates the logic of Chapter III into the broader Khmer world. It traces the antagonism between Christianity and the Khmer world both experienced and created by Christians who aim to join Jesus in his salvific work. Becoming a Christian is marked by anxiety largely due to being forbidden to participate in the rituals of Khmer Buddhism. Many Christians understand their religious lives to be marked by "persecution" and alienation from Khmer society, which in turn equates them to a contagion as described by Mary Douglas. Taking an ironic turn, Christians turn the tables on this agonism and work to address it through Christian salvation. This chapter follows the techniques some Christians undergo to not only vilify the Khmer world but to also bring redemption and salvation. This persecution and agonism, I argue, allows the Christian to transcend Khmer society, becoming like Jesus, and become the contagion-turned-saviour. In this way, this chapter ethnographically illustrates the interplay between the seemingly diametrical forces of order and chaos that brings forth a new order.
Chapter V explores how the domesticating goal of Christian salvation can be extrapolated onto the national level. It argues that while evangelical Christians understand their religious lives and aspirations to be apolitical, evangelical Christianity is a highly political project. This chapter follows Christians’ endeavour to make Jesus the true ruler of Cambodia, thereby circumventing the antagonistic political sphere. As Lord and Sovereign, Jesus is understood to be a crucial actor in the Khmer nation. Like the Christians who understand their religious lives to be outside of the political sphere, Jesus is able to alter the political landscape of Cambodia while remaining outside. Khmer Christians deploy a political theology that places Jesus above and, thus, sovereign over the Khmer nation. Their religious lives are able to mirror the political while remaining separated and, importantly being able to affect the political.

This thesis concludes by summarising what Khmer evangelical Christians have shown us is how a moral world, like a moral person, is created through the dynamic relationship between order and chaos.
Chapter I: Shifting City, Shifting Geographies

Introduction

As explained in the Introduction, much of this ethnography focuses on urban poor, “those ‘low-income, low-skill, low-status, and low-security’ working people who largely (but not exclusively) navigate informal life and labour of precarious nature” (Bayal 2015: S34). These urban poor were often migrants from the countryside, or the children of migrants who still identified the countryside as home. For these Khmer, authentic Khmerness was preserved in the countryside. Both Eve Zucker (2007) and Lisa Arensen (2012), whose PhD theses investigate rural Cambodian communities, recognise the intrinsic notion of the countryside to hold the locus of Khmerness. Khmerness is imagined to remain in the srok (countryside). Yet, things move. People move.

By historically and ethnographically investigating the spatial geography of Phnom Penh, this chapter argues that the city parallels the forest. It shows how everyday life in the city involves a dynamic interplay between “wildness” and “tameness,” of chaos and order. Anthropologists of Cambodia have noted how the important categories of the “wild” and the “tame/civil” are for the Khmer (Arensen 2012; Zucker 2007; Chandler 1996; Davis 2008; Edwards 2008), which allows us to further investigate how the Khmer tame the wild, bring order to chaos.

The countryside is the tamed, agricultural land, cultivated to create community, civility, and order (Zucker 2007: 158). People imagine the countryside to be idyllic and the source of Khmerness. What became apparent dwelling in Phnom Penh was that the city was not like the srok. The srok is an image of order while the city, much like the forest, is wild, unpredictable, and chaotic. The aim of this chapter is to unpack this logic. The city is a place of both chaos and opportunity. Like the contrasting images of the countryside and the forest, order and chaos are productive binary forces. They are necessary for balance and are crucial for the creation and re-creation of Khmerness. Following Eve Zucker, “nature as prei is a potent force that constitutes not only a site of
destruction, chaos and violence but is also capable of producing and reproducing society and individuals” (2007: 159). Both the forest and the city allow for the creation of a new order.

Despite the drastic differences between the natural and the urban, this chapter also argues that for the Khmer, the city of Phnom Penh allows for the same possibilities that are understood to occur in the forest. David Chandler has argued that central to the Khmer moral order is the distinction between the countryside and the forest (Chandler 1996). The city, like the forest, is a place that is to be revered but engaged cautiously. It is also filled with resources and opportunities, and accommodates for new models when the paradigms of the srok break down. Significantly, dwelling in Phnom Penh, highlighted in Toul Sangkae, may be viewed as an ongoing process in which inhabitants attempt to stabilise the uncertainties and dangers of life.

Srok – Visions of the “Tame”

The rains were late in 2016. Rainy season typically begins late May, early June, but that hot season was long with record-breaking heat and severe drought. Leaving my home after lunch one day in June, I met shirtless Bona, the day-guard of my apartment building. “Eeeee, it’s hot!”, he exclaimed. “You know why it is so hot? Because they, [the government], are cutting down all of the forests for China!” This was not the first nor the last time I heard him or others attribute abnormal weather to the illegal logging of Cambodia’s forests. Why was it so hot? Because of deforestation. Why was it so windy, dry, wet, even cold? Deforestation. The Khmer people were proud of their jungles/forests (prei). They represented the unadulterated “wild” (also, prei) and “natural” world (Zucker 2007: 158). By destroying forests through the illegal logging that was propped up by the Khmer government (see Cock 2016 regarding the illegal, State-endorsed logging of Cambodia’s forests), the natural order was changing, much to the Khmer’s dismay. David Chandler (1996) found that throughout Khmer regional literature, the “forest” was often used as a metaphor for a place of bewilderment and enchantment. It represented “all that is chaotic, barbarian, untamed and lawless” (Zucker 2007: 158). Forests were used to contrast the tamed (srok), ordered countryside (also, srok). How could destroying such a wild, violent, and chaotic place lead to the destabilisation of the Khmer natural order? Importantly, Chandler found that for the Khmer, the notion of an
“ordered” world, symbolised in the cultivated countryside, needed a diametrical counterbalance – the forest. This interplay between the chaotic forest and the ordered countryside is capable of creating and reproducing Khmer sociality (Hansen & Ledgerwood 2008).

Dripping with sweat while driving to Jesus Village Church (JVC), I agreed with Bona to myself, “Good Lord, it’s hot.” Driving through the fortified gate of the church, I parked my moto and found a spot on the ground floor to sit, rest, and hide from the sun. Normally, the church was very animated during the day with the playing and squealing of children from Chanthol’s school. However, being one of the many public holidays, the church was strangely quiet. JVC was hosting an evangelism seminar that day. Soon after taking a moment to rest and wipe the sweat from my brow, I met a very kind and young pastor from the countryside who was attending the meeting. He had a very warm smile and knew English quite well from studying at a Bible school in the Philippines. We chatted using an organic mixture of English and Khmer. He was excited to learn that I was a researcher and commented how many foreigners, especially missionaries, did not understand Khmer culture. I asked his thoughts on the difference between Christianity in the countryside and the city. “We Khmer are like trees,” he answered. “If we are planted in a certain field (sroksraï) in a certain region we’ll reflect that. If we are [transplanted] into a new field in a new place we will change to reflect that. This city is like this.” He went on to say how the city is always changing and people move a lot for work or to rent a new place. The countryside, however, is much more stable and relationships are more sustainable. He suggested this made it easier to pastor in the countryside. His concern, along with other pastors I had met, was the fleeting nature of Khmer Christians’ commitment to Christianity. One might quickly abandon their faith if he or she moves away from their Christian context to a new one void of Christian influence, much like the transplanted tree (see Chapter III).

For this pastor, the turbulence of the city vis-à-vis the stability of the countryside is reflected in the steadfastness of faith. The countryside is calm, quiet, and crucially stable. The city is noisy, dirty, dangerous, and crucially unstable. As a Bible-school-trained pastor, he was a bit of an exception, choosing to return his hometown to pastor rather than make his home in the city. From what I had been told by several missionaries, trained Khmer Christian leaders were hard to come by in the countryside. Educated Christian leaders, like
so many educated Khmer, remained in the city where better opportunities for work were available.

As he and I visited with each other, a few *nings* and *oms* (“aunties” and “elders”) returned from their lunch break and sat near us. A few more came, and I soon became a spectacle. Surrounded by six *nings* and *oms*, I was interrogated with a polyphony of voices:

Where are you from? Oh you know a lot of Khmer language! How many kids do you have? None! What a shame. Oh, you want to have a baby next year. May God bless you. How long have you lived in Cambodia? How long have you studied Khmer? Only 8 months?! Can you read and write? I don’t know the older script either. You speak clearer than the missionary pastor and he has studied Khmer for a long time! (Laughter. Playful hitting) Don’t be rude. Where do you live? How much rent do you pay a month? You know a lot of Khmer! What does your wife do? Is she Khmer? How many kids do you have? Eeeee (more hitting), he said he doesn’t have any yet! What’s your salary? How can you eat if you don’t have a salary?! Oh, the university gives you money (untrue, but a good excuse). How much a month? No, he knows Khmer! How much longer will you stay in Cambodia? When will you return after you go back to Scotland? How many kids do you have? What is your job? (I disclose that I am a researcher and came to learn about Khmer culture, religion, and society). Eeeeee! You cannot find *wobbothoamkhmaer* (*Khmerness*) in the city. You need to go to the countryside!

“You cannot find *wobbothoamkhmaer* (*Khmerness*) in the city. You need to go to the countryside:” responses like this were commonly given when describing my research interests. For the Khmer, *Khmerness* was understood to be held in the countryside.

City folk often romanticised the countryside, looking fondly to its calmness and purity to contrast their dissatisfaction with living in the city. Images from the countryside were regularly deployed in the city to bring the simplicity and beauty of *home* to the hustle-and-bustle lifestyle of the city. Spread throughout the city were Khmer-style cafes with lawn chairs oriented toward televisions. Men came to retreat from the sun, hang out, and *si maung* (“eat time,” waste time). One of the many cable TV karaoke channels might be playing a love ballad set in the countryside: two lovers meander through the fertile rice fields singing of their love; a woman sings of her anguish, for her true love is not the man her family wishes her to marry; a woman’s love triangle ends in tragedy as the two men fight at the river bank and one accidentally kills the other. I was especially struck by a humorous car battery TV ad:

A cunning young man sits next to a love interest at a traditional country home. The disapproving mother nonchalantly trades places with her daughter, scaring off the cheeky man before he can sneak in a kiss. The scoundrel later attends the village’s dance party and is caught dancing
with the seemingly apprehensive beauty. Suddenly, the electricity fails, spoiling the party moments before the mother can reprimand him. He wryly grabs his Japan brand battery – “Strong power! Good with cars, motos, televisions, fans, and light bulbs” – saving the party! The impressed mother nods her head in approval and the party continues (khun engruy 2017).

A sign reading “my village’s dance party (roamwong phum khnom)” leaves the audience with little doubt that this commercial is set during one of the most anticipated and exciting national holidays, Khmer New Year. What struck me above all regarding this silly battery commercial is that it cohesively captures many notions of Khmerness in humour, gender, sexuality, kinship, the home, and community celebration. Men are virile. Women are seemingly apprehensive yet attracted to men’s efforts to seduce them (cf. Cannell 1999). Mothers are “bosses of the family (me phteah)” and proper relationships are mediated through them (cf. Ebihara 1977). Mothers’ approvals are overcome by the cunningness, resourcefulness, and provisions of their daughters’ suiters. Khmer New Year celebrated in the countryside with family and friends is a happy and fun occasion. Leisure time is very important to the Khmer and is typically set in the countryside. During Phchum Ben and Khmer New Year, the two largest national holidays, there is a mass exodus to the countryside from the city. Leading up to this time, people are extremely excited and happy. Men brush up on their card games in preparation for going back home. As people leave for the countryside, they buy food and gifts for the relatives they will soon visit. Van taxis are overflowing with people, Khmer cakes and bread, clothing, and crates of beer. People return “fat,” very content, and happy.

While dwelling in the city promised opportunity and modernity, which most people desired, it caused significant strain and rupture of traditional Khmerness (Derks 2008). The srok remains critically present in the imagination of urban Khmer. In other words, the countryside-city dichotomy is much more fluid than it appears. Being “uprooted,” to use the image of the young pastor described above, from the stable countryside and placed into the uncertain and chaotic context of the city allows for a disruption of the seemingly fixed ideologies of Khmerness. New models, geographies, and subjectivities (e.g. kinship, religion, cosmology, moral order, et cetera) are navigated in concert with those models in the archetypal srok by the urban Khmer. While life in Phnom Penh allows for a suspension of Khmerness, as the Khmer understand it, this can be seen as necessary when the paradigms of the srok break down.
Lisa Arensen (2012) explores the re-making of a countryside village in northwest Cambodia. After decades of war and conflict, Hansom Village became overgrown and forested due to neglect. Landmines were also placed in these northern forests during the 1980s by the Vietnamese as a strategy to snuff out remaining Khmer Rouge factions (Slocomb 2001). Arensen explores the dangerous efforts of the people of Hansom Village to transform the “wild” landscape back into the “tamed.” Visiting a neighbouring village with her friends, Arensen asks:

Why did you move here? I asked a recent incomer to [the neighbouring] village one day. He was an amputee living with his brother, and clearly unhappy about his prospects. “I am in the forest with the others because I am poor,” he retorted, adding, “The poor enter the forest and chase out the ghosts.” Our audience responded favorably, but I was puzzled and asked what this comment meant. His brother, laughing, recited the old expression in its entirety:

\[\text{The Chinese chase out the Khmer,} \\
\text{the Khmer chase out the ghosts,} \\
\text{the rich chase out the poor} \\
\text{until the poor flee into the forest.}\]

In this exchange, this use of an old adage, the constraint of the forest was invoked rather than its potential. The forest is not a desirable site, the incomer’s use of the adage implied—the poor dwell there because they lack choice and have been forced out of other sites. Yet his brother, one of the first wave of post-war settlers, had chosen the place for its potential, a place where land could be cleared and claimed and food could be grown (2012: 215).

There is a familiarity to Arensen’s exchange regarding my interlocutors in Phnom Penh. Many come to the city because they are poor, lacking options in the countryside, and engage the city in search of opportunities and resources. Successful dwelling in the city of Phnom Penh requires necessary skills to know and tame the city (Saphan 2007).

A Snapshot of Day life in Toul Sangkae and the Agency of the City

Life in Phnom Penh is dynamic and never static. Foreign tourists, businessmen and women, aid workers, and bureaucrats come and go. Roughly seventy-five percent of Phnom Penh’s residents are provincial migrants (Derks 2008: 33). The number of these migrants ebbs and flows depending on the time of the year. The dynamic nature of the city is reflected in the neglected infrastructure. Buildings were destroyed, built, and at times abandoned in a
matter of months. Traversing the city entailed a level of uncertainty, for road conditions are never definite. On any given day, streets could be flooded, closed for construction, or blocked by weddings, funerals, or government blockades. Phnom Penh’s chaotic traffic has even been used to describe the everyday sociality of Khmer city-dwellers (Kolnberger 2011). During my first visit to Phnom Penh in the summer of 2010, I could not help but notice the only skyscraper, mere blocks away from Lake Kok – a marshland amid the city where an estimated 30,000 people had made illegal residence (Schneider 2011: 4). 

Upon my return to Phnom Penh in November 2015, I was surprised to discover a new and taller skyscraper standing beside the other and the marshland to be completely drained of not only water but also those who dwelt there. Many of these inhabitants relocated across the road to the northern neighbourhood of Toul Sangkae. Things change in Phnom Penh.

As explained in the Introduction, I partially chose to set this ethnography in Toul Sangkae because it provided a nice snapshot of life in Phnom Penh and how certain forms of religion were experienced there. Any attempt to claim to fully capture everyday life in Phnom Penh would be naïve of me, to say the least. At times, I found Phnom Penh to be strange and was often captivated by things that seemed out of place. I also found that this was not dissimilar to my interlocutors’ experiences dwelling in Phnom Penh. My aim in this section is to describe not only how I found life in Phnom Penh to be, but also how some of my interlocutors found it.

The unofficial southern border of Toul Sangkae is the bustling Street 70, also known as Highway of His Excellency Khleang Mueng, dividing Toul Sangkae from my neighbourhood in Lake Kok 1 (Beng Kok Muey). My apartment was near the decommissioned State-owned railway where thousands of squatters had made residence and led north through Toul Sangkae. Driving across street 70 and down into Toul Sangkae (“down” because it was a former marshland) the infrastructure significantly deteriorated. Streets switched between paved and bare. Very seldom, if ever, was rubbish picked up by the state, causing mounds of rubbish to be littered throughout the neighbourhood and piled up on street corners and around street signs. A fifteen-to-twenty metre wide open-water sewage canal ran through the neighbourhood parallel to the railroad and emptied into northern marshlands. People have learned to throw their rubbish into the
jet-black *teks’oy* (stinky water) and had a sense of humour about it, too. The streets often flooded during the rainy season. Driving a moto through a flooded street in Toul Sangkae was always a hazard. During such times, motorbikes would be driven as slow as would allow the bike to remain upright, the driver trying to avoid putting his or her feet down in the *teks’oy* as well as any residual splashing.

Markets were crucial to everyday life. Small Market (*Psar Touc*) in the south and adjacent to the *Sangkat* government office was a fresh market offering fresh proteins and veggies. Most people were pedestrians in this market but there were also many motos driving through. Many sellers laid their stalls out on the ground under colourful umbrellas to protect themselves from the sun and were quick to butcher a customer’s fresh fish on the spot. This allowed customers to conduct their transactions while on their motos. Grandparents held the hands of their grandchildren while navigating the hot, noisy, and busy market as their daily outing to collect for the family’s needs that day. For the Khmer, markets and *wats* are typical spatial markers to navigate the city. If taxiing by motorbike (*motodup*) or *tuk tuk*, one typically told the driver where he or she wants to go by the destination’s nearest *wat* or market. Large Market

Figure 9: *teks’oy* in Toul Sangkae
(psar thom) was on the northwest end of Toul Sangkae. This large, covered market catered to those who were looking for prepared food from vendors and other goods such as used, possibly stolen, mobile phones and clothing. Large Market was in close proximity to the neighbourhood’s largest garment factories, offering cheap and easy shopping for surplus and defective clothing.

Lining the streets of Toul Sangkae were several hair and beauty salons, independent pharmacies, tailors, cafes, petrol stations, barbeque stalls, beer gardens, KTVs (karaoke bars), brothels, and a handful of Internet cafes. Traversing street 907, from Small Market to New Life Fellowship, was a narrow, windy, and very busy street. Street vendors lined the road during rush hour. People drove cars, trucks, and factory lorries through this area. These, along with the constant buzzing of motos and pedestrians, caused the streets in Toul Sangake to become infuriatingly congested during rush hour. Overhead electric wires intertwined with fibreoptic Internet cables were thick and hastily put up. Driving through the metal gauntlet of vehicles and storefronts with a canopy of wires as well as the suffocating vehicle exhaust, wafting street food, and open sewage was at times a sensory overload. During these times I normally felt the sweat pouring down my back and my blood pressure rising.
Some people’s homes were in rented rooms tucked away in the metal and cement canyons of the Khmer urban architecture. A small family-run store was also the family’s home – just pull in all of the merchandise when closed. Beds were in the back along with a TV. Male social life in Toul Sangkae, and in the city, was outside the home – along the road (tam phluw), at the wat, church, school, recreation club, park, or business. Men, if they had a job, socialised at their jobs – chatting with their colleagues, visiting friends, or even strangers. Many men, if they did not have a job or were doing informal work such as a motodup, typically found an opportunity to gamble at the railroad, a friend’s parked tuk tuk, a street corner, or café. Women ran the family store either in their home, from a street cart, or at the market while watching their young children. Female social life often took place in these spaces. Those children who attended school studied as much as they could until their help was needed running the family store or market stall or looking after younger siblings.

Factories changed shifts around four o’clock. During that time the roads near Large Market become an impassable sea of blue-shirted factory workers walking to the market or their shared rented rooms. Five o’clock was general quitting time. Many people stopped by the market on their way home from work to pick up food for dinner. Men unabashedly urinated against walls and stood near street corners with their shirts folded above their bellies – a tell-tale sign of relaxation. Football or volleyball games were played at small pitches. Billiards were played on mouldy tables with torn felt. Perhaps friends would go to a park or the central Riverfront outside the neighbourhood to hang out, but this recreation was reserved for only those with a bit of expendable income.

Neighbourhoods such as Toul Sangkae have notable characteristics and agency to affect the inhabitants. As discussed in the Introduction, Toul Sangkae’s precarious context is what compelled Christian organisations to plant churches there. They aimed to reach out to those poor migrants who were caught up in the precarity of city life. Many of the churches’ active members were young adults who were a part of dormitory life. Eating lunch with a group of young adults from JVC one Sunday, I asked the group about their impressions of Toul Sangkae. One young man laughed and said, “I’ve lived here for five years and you probably know more than I do. I try not to spend much time here.” Panha, my friend, shared his view:

It’s chaos (ronneronny), […] it’s dense, factories, kids who steal, gangs. There’s no safety. They [the government] don’t care at all. In the city centre, if there is an important minister visiting they clear up the streets to make it clean. They put the factories here. Factory workers come from
the Province, they don’t have a high education. So they are all together here. Typically those who don’t have an education do bad things. Education is very important. [The government] should focus on this place too. Prepare the system, but it is all in chaos; water, electricity, streets, it’s all a mess. It’s like a “slum (in English).” I heard before that people did not want to come. It was dangerous. It is still dangerous, but it’s a little better than before.

Panha describes the infrastructure, that is, the physical makeup (buildings, roads, utilities, etc.) of the neighbourhood to be reflective of those people who dwelt there. It was chaos. Dangerous people lived amongst the poor infrastructure. In this way, the neighbourhood was a chaotic thing that dwellers experienced. Elsewhere, in urban Malaysia, neighbourhoods similar to Toul Sangkae have been argued to have a personhood of their own (Baxstrom 2017). Richard Baxstrom (2008) explores how his interlocutors in Brickfields, a precarious neighbourhood with illegal settlements in Kuala Lumpur, aimed to “believe” in such a world that was ever-changing and unpredictable. In their attempt to forge new beliefs in such a shifting context of Brickfields, inhabitants created an intricate milieu of linkages to the concrete world that helped them grapple with change and difference. Baxstrom (2017) found that these city-dwellers could experience and were subject to the personhood of the neighbourhood. Brickfields could be “touched” or even “killed.” It exerted what he describes as a “force” that helped explain the “vertigo” of living in such a precarious context as Kuala Lumpur. Following Baxstrom’s logic, I suggest that those who dwelt in Toul Sangkae, especially the vulnerable and poor migrants, experienced an agency from the city that was at times overwhelming and had the power to transform the person. As will be unpacked below, this experience was not unlike those experiences expected to occur in the forest.

Lamentations - Venturing into the Unknown

Panha was a university student who attended services at JVC. He was new to Christianity, having converted in late 2015 through JVC’s dormitory ministry, but he has since questioned his Christian faith. Panha had a particularly difficult transition moving from the countryside to the city to study at university. Moving from a poor farming family in northwest Cambodia near the Thai border, Panha reflected on his transition to Phnom Penh:

At first I lived with a friend. I moved around forever. One month move, one month move. Until my 2nd year I was very destitute. I didn’t have money to pay for school. I knew a person at the dorm and I asked him if
I could live there, too. I moved to the dorm to reduce expenses. Before I moved here, I was renting a room, a wooden room, near the [Sap] River [on eastern side of the neighbourhood]. This room was for factory workers, it was very small for one person.

He continued his reflection by highlighting the angst he experienced:

At first, I missed my home. I was very afraid. I had not dared to live alone. When I was with my parents, I didn't really worry. I knew that I had rice to eat and a place to sleep. I had parents who helped. But here, I’m by myself. I was afraid. I was destitute. Sometimes I ate noodles (the cheapest street food) at my room and I wanted to cry. I wanted to go home. I wanted to give up. I truly wanted to give up. I struggled through it all the way. Even now, but it's not as bad. When I first came I had a problem: my landlord kicked me out due to a misunderstanding. Near my room was a female room. He thought I wanted to sin (thwoe bap) against her. I paid for the room but they kicked me out during the first week. I needed to move somewhere else and pay again. But I didn’t go to a different place because it was too much. So, I first went to my friend’s for two weeks. I didn’t have anything to drive. No moto. I had to borrow a bicycle from my friend and my friend borrowed another bicycle from someone else. He helped me too. But a thief stole that bike. Even now I haven’t been able to pay him back. He told me, “it’s ok.” I have a feeling that his bike was stolen because of me. I didn’t have anything to drive.

Moving to the city was described by most of my interlocutors as a very challenging, almost traumatic experience. Panha’s experience with extortion, confusion, loneliness, hunger, and theft was not uncommon for new migrants (see, also, Derks 2008; Hoefinger 2013). Intimidation from the wealthy elite and/or government authorities, theft, and danger all contributed to the turbulent nature of life in Phnom Penh.

Moving to the city from the countryside created a great sense of angst and insecurity for my friend Chanthol also. Chanthol lived near JVC in Toul Sangkae with his wife and two children. He was JVC’s youth leader and headmaster of ICSC, the faith-based primary school operated out of the JVC church complex. His home village was in Kampot Province. He moved to Phnom Penh in 2002 to attend university. Being very poor and naïve of city-life, Chanthol’s father searched for a wat for him to stay, though none would offer Chanthol accommodation. Wats in the countryside are one of the central-most, communal spaces of the rural village and is the site for important community events. They oftentimes function as a place of refuge for those who have found themselves in precarious situations. Those who have been displaced like an orphan or a widow could sleep in the lay worship hall (sala chan) of the wat and carry out chores for the monkhood to earn their keep. His father was an established Buddhist lay leader in the countryside and became distressed at the
lack of hospitality in the city. He described his father as becoming incredibly saddened by the lack of Buddhist hospitality in the city: "I saw my father cry at the last wat [we visited]. He tried to look for [accommodation], but he cried. I saw his tears from his eyes and I felt very disappointed." Chanthol resorted to staying with an extended family member outside of Phnom Penh until Peter, the missionary pastor of JVC, met him and offered for him to stay at JVC’s dormitory.

The drastic difference between wats in the countryside and the city greatly disturbed Chanthol’s father. Buddhism in the countryside was often understood as “purer” than the city. One woman, who I knew travelled outside the city to attend a rural wat, suggested that monks in the countryside were “poor” and, thus, more “authentic.” City monks were spoiled, wealthy, and less deserving of receiving offerings. The giving of offerings to monks is a central feature of Buddhist religious praxis (see Chapter II). One younger monk at a wat near the Royal Palace disclosed to me that becoming a monk was a way to find housing and security throughout his studies. He planned to quit the monkhood and find a job after graduation. This was in no way scandalous. Many men became monks for a short period of time, benefiting both themselves, their families, and the monkhood (cf. Cassanitit 2015). Chanthol could have bueh (offered himself as a monk), guaranteeing himself a place to stay, though he did not. Chanthol’s father was initially reluctant for Chanthol to join a Christian dormitory, which caused some tension between he and Chanthol. Yet, Chanthol described that his father eventually acquiesced for him to stay with Christians because the nature of the city allowed for one to deviate from proper Khmerness.

Bara was another friend whose experience with the city greatly affected his life. Bara was an English teacher for NLF and lived at the NLF complex in Toul Sangkae. NLF’s members in Toul Sangkae were predominantly youth, as is fitting with the church’s evangelical strategies. Bara, however, was a single male in his thirties, putting us in similar life stages, which made him a fitting interlocutor. One Saturday morning as he and I shared breakfast, Bara told the story, in English, how he first came to Phnom Penh:

In High School I could not pass the High School exam. When I failed High School exam, my parents didn’t have any ideas for me to go to the school again. I was hopeless, actually. I didn’t have any ideas for myself. And I was in the Province in Kompong Cham. I didn’t have any friends because my friends, they passed High School exams. They moved to live in Phnom Penh city to study at university. For me, I was a construction worker in [the] Province. Yeah, I, you know, ‘do this’ ‘do that’ to earn money to
support, to feed my life. As a hopeless person I sometimes smoked. I
drink beer. I walk with bad friends, bad people[...] I was hopeless, I
didn’t have any ideas.

In 2000, Bara moved to Phnom Penh with two friends who passed their
High School exams. Unlike Chanthol, they were able to find accommodation at a
wat near the riverside. He described his life at that time as “desperate,” “very
poor,” and “hopeless.” After living a year in the wat, one of his friends converted
to Christianity and informed him of NLF’s free English classes that were offered
at the main church complex near Olympic Stadium in the city centre. He joined
the classes and eventually converted to Christianity. For Panha, Chanthol, and
Bara, migration to the city was an agonistic experience that ultimately led to
their Christian conversion. They all migrated into the chaos of the city to find
opportunities. The city offered them things that the countryside could not. Yet,
what remained was the image of the countryside and its vision of calmness,
stability, and order.

One September morning I visited with a church member who operated a
snack kiosk just inside the gate of JVC’s complex. We sat with the school’s
teachers eating fried sweet bread and watched the children play during their
morning break. Commenting on the heat, she fanned herself with a manila folder
while I wiped the sweat off my brow with a handkerchief. “Is it hotter here than
at your home?” I asked. “Yes,” she replied. “Why do you think the city is hotter
than the countryside?” I followed up. “The city is dirty and has no trees. There’s
no breeze. I don’t like the city. It’s dangerous. There are bad people. It’s not
sabay (happy/fun). I miss the countryside,” she said with a disgusted look. She
and her husband had moved from rural Siem Reap to Phnom Penh five years
prior to find work and to send their children to higher quality schools than the
countryside could offer. Both her daughters attended one of the many private
schools that labelled themselves as an “International School.” I never met her
husband because he was busy working as driver for a bus company. They
attended a church in Siem Reap and heard of JVC prior to moving to Phnom
Penh. They moved to Toul Sangkae because they “were very poor” and had a
connection to the church.

Annuska Derks (2008) found that many provincial migrants in Toul
Sangkae relied heavily on networks originating from home villages in the
countryside in order to navigate life in the city. This was also true for many of
my Christian friends. Most members of JVC and NLF were either students who
benefited from affordable dormitory accommodation offered by the churches
and/or, like my friend mentioned above, moved to Toul Sangkae through provincial-city networks. While these city dwellers lived an urban lifestyle, they remained connected to the countryside through images and discourses of the countryside as being “home” and happy. Thus, relationships in the countryside were preserved through continual familial and village networks (cf. Derks 2008: Chapter 8). Panha, Chanthol, and Bara had especially difficult transitions because they had no prior networks in the city. They had to forge new relationships outside of kinship and village relationships when they migrated to the city. Most of my interlocutors who moved to the city migrated with some sort of existing kinship or village network, offering them with shelter, start-up loans, and companionship (cf. Derks 2008: 147).

Derks discovered a similar dynamic with her Khmer interlocutors as I did with mine. Many provincial migrants, she writes,

view Phnom Penh, at least initially, as a dangerous place, where crime, AIDS and immoral activities are rife. To most of them, the capital is an unknown, wild place and resembles their perceptions of the wild and unknown in the forest (prey) [...] The perceived disorder in the city is equally dangerous and can be harmful to unguarded young women (Derks 2008: 145).

Furthermore, we can understand that for poor provincial migrants, the forest works “as a metaphor for urban modernity, where a growing number of rural-to-urban migrants, as well as children from broken families, must make substitute families and look out for each other” (Edwards 2008: 162). Conceptualising the city as similar to that of the forest helps these Khmer migrants make sense of their new urban world. I am not suggesting that the city converts people into Christians. I do, however, follow Baxstrom’s logic and suggest that the city can impose a sort of agency that shapes the lives of the city-dweller. With this important framework, we can begin to understand how the chaos of the city makes possible the creation of a new order. We now turn to looking at the dynamic nature of Phnom Penh’s history.

De-Forresting and Re-Forresting the City: a brief history of Phnom Penh

I am so proud that from bare hands and ghost city we have come this far
– Prime Minister Hun Sen (as quoted in Strangio 2014: 158)

Throughout my fourteen-month fieldwork in Phnom Penh, I was subject to the yearly Khmer temporal rhythms that correspond with the monsoon rains
and subsequent rice harvest. Much of the city’s population evacuates during the largest national holidays of Khmer New Year in April and *Pchum Ben* in September/October. A reverse flow of holiday migration occurs for three days in November when well over a hundred thousand provincial celebrators flood the Riverfront of Phnom Penh for a three-day celebration of *Bon Om Touk* (Water Festival). Spectators and participants from villages all around the country partake in boat races along the Sap River. While Prime Minister Hun Sen had cancelled the boat races in 2015 due to the severe drought, though many considered it to be politically motivated (Cheng 2015), 2016’s races went off without a hitch. Even elusive King Norodom Sihamoni graced the elite viewing platform with his presence for an afternoon. Phnom Penh is located where the Sap River converges with the Mekong. This auspicious location played a large role in the creation of the country’s colonial capital (Chandler 2008: 94). For half of the year the Sap River flows from the Sap lake in the north at the ancient Khmer Empire’s capital of Angkor near Siem Reap southward to join the Mekong at Phnom Penh. During the rainy season the monsoon rains from China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and upper Cambodia cause the water level and flowrate of the Mekong to be higher and greater than the Sap, reversing the Sap’s flow (Arias 2013: 25-26). This hydrological pulsation provides a nice image of Phnom Penh’s tumultuous history and flux of population.

The ancient Khmer Empire at Angkor remains the seat of the Khmer’s cultural heritage and has even been noted as the nation’s “provincial capital” (Osborne 2008: 168). The Khmer regularly deploy images of Angkor to reach back to their past greatness. Phnom Penh was made the capital city by the French upon the initiation of the Protectorate in August 1863, ratified in early 1864 (Chandler 2008: Chapter 8). By 1866, then King Norodom shifted his palace to Phnom Penh from the pre-colonial capital of Udon (*ibid.*: 173). Due to its location along the Mekong River, Phnom Penh had already been established by wealthy and foreign Chinese merchants. During the Protectorate, Phnom Penh was quartered between the French, the Vietnamese employed by the French officials, Chinese, and Khmer (Osborne 2008: Chapter 2). From its foundation as the colonial capital, “Phnom Penh,” Thomas Kolnberger argues, “represented a ‘plural society,’ encompassing different communities with unrelated cultural backgrounds in a ‘dual colonial city’” (Kolnberger 2014: 90). Kolnberger understands the “dual colonial city” of Phnom Penh’s heritage to be that of an “equifinal” space where both Khmer and French notions of urbanity negotiated and coalesced in the spatial formation of the capital city (Kolnberger 2014).
Hence, while Angkor holds the locus of Khmer cultural identity, Phnom Penh was established and remains a city where the Khmer world collides with the foreign and modern world (cf. Derks 2008: Chapter 7).

The symbol of Phnom Penh’s “otherness” played a significant role in its tumultuous history during the latter half of the twentieth century. A key consequence of gaining independence from the French in 1954 was the seemingly schizophrenic leadership of King Norodom Sihanouk (cf. Chandler 2008: Chapter 10). Sihanouk, who wanted to tighten hegemonic control while making Cambodia relevant on the international stage, erratically swung his loyalties between the French and their communist enemies of North Vietnam and China during the Indochina War. By 1963, Sihanouk had cut off economic and military ties with the US as a sign of solidarity with the communist bloc during the Cold War (Chandler 2008: 237). However, the royalists, Francophiles, and wealthy elite opposed Sihanouk’s decision, creating tension that would lead to conflicts set in Phnom Penh during the 1970s.

Removing US support from Cambodia created significant economic deterrents that would later inspire Sihanouk to reforge ties with the US in the late 1960s. At that point, the US had dropped over a hundred thousand tons of bombs throughout Cambodia’s countryside, influencing the people of the countryside to find refuge in cities and forests while becoming loyal to the communists (Arensen 2012: 12). By the end of 1972, the only remaining sections not controlled by the communists were “Phnom Penh, a few provincial capitals, and much of Battambang” (Chandler 2008: 252). Following a coup against Sihanouk in 1970, civil war broke out between the royalists and supporters of the American-imposed Prime Minister Lan Nol and the communist bloc. This political turmoil paved the way for the rise of the Khmer Rouge, the hyper-communist regime responsible for the genocide of the mid-to-late 1970s.

The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, fought their way from the countryside to the city of Phnom Penh and on the morning of 17 April 1975 Khmer Rouge forces entered the city of Phnom Penh and claimed victory (Chandler 2008: 255). For the next four years the Khmer Rouge made Phnom Penh their headquarters and implemented their communist experiment of Democratic Kampuchea (DK). Part of the logic behind Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea was to return the Khmer back to their past greatness of Angkor, when all Khmer were people of the srok and flourished as an agrarian society, and thus rejecting any forms of “western” influence. Phnom Penh was a symbol of western and capitalistic oppression. The Khmer Rouge had expelled all non-essential
personnel from Phnom Penh throughout the DK. Though not germane to the current discussion, many monographs have been written of the horrific history during Democratic Kampuchea (Cormack 1997; Hinton 2005; Kiernan 2002; Loung 2001 to name a few).

Pol Pot’s communist ideology was heavily influenced by Mao Tse-tung of China. With the Khmer Rouge’s conquest of Phnom Penh just two weeks before North Vietnam’s victory over the South, Pol Pot had already made extreme efforts to annex his country and realigned his allegiance to China from Vietnam, creating tension between the DK and the communists in Vietnam. During the four years of DK when Pol Pot’s regime conducted their atrocities, Vietnamese forces, with the aid of Khmer Rouge defectors (one of whom being now Prime Minister Hun Sen), began to make inroads in the devastated nation. Eventually, infighting within the Khmer Rouge destabilised Democratic Kampuchea. On Christmas day 1978 over one hundred thousand Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia (Chandler 2008: 274); and on 7 January 1979, Vietnamese forces captured Phnom Penh, declaring victory over the Khmer Rouge, and established the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) (Hughes and Kheang 2011: 1).

The 1980s were characterised by a decade of war conducted by a foreign regime based in Phnom Penh against remnant Khmer Rouge fighters along the Thai border. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Vietnamese forces withdrew from Cambodia creating a political vacuum in an already tattered nation. In addition to the DK and PRK, several fragmented political parties and factions continued to clash, which initiated a United Nations-sponsored peacekeeping operation on 23 October 1991. By 1993, elections were held in an effort to bring peace and democracy. The result was a co-victory of the Front Uni Natinal pour un Cambodge Indépendent, Neutre, Pacificque et Coopétif (FUNCINPEC), led by exiled Sihanouk, and the Cambodia’s People Party (CPP), who remain in power today (Hughes 2003: 2). A compromise was made between the FUNCINPEC and the CPP and a new constitution was formed, declaring the Cambodian government a democracy and opening and liberalising the economy.

By 1999, Cambodia was receiving large amounts of international aid and new foreign-owned factories were in full production in Phnom Penh (Hughes and Kheang 2011: 3). With new industry centred in Phnom Penh, the nation’s GDP grew by an average of six percent between 1998 and 2006 (Chandler 2008: 292). Even now, the Khmer government is dependent upon foreign aid, which Sophal Ear (2009) argues is one mechanism Hun Sen uses to legitimise his regime. For fifteen years, Phnom Penh was emptied by the Khmer Rouge and the
Vietnamese enforced PRK strictly regulated the city, making it the proverbial “ghost town” alluded to by Hun Sen in the above quote. Like the reverse flow of the Sap River, the Khmer began to return to and to resettle in Phnom Penh in search of new opportunities.

**Chaos and Moral Ambiguity in Toul Sangkae**

Toul Sangkae was one site of migration where poor provincial migrants settled to find work and affordable accommodation. The state-owned, decommissioned railroad played a large role in the neighbourhood’s agency to disrupt Khmer order, especially the moral order. Those who lived along the railroad like Ming Kinal were caught up in a figurative vortex of moral ambiguity and uncertainty. Ming Kinal was the mother of a young and clever woman called Dani who attended JVC’s youth programme. Dani was eighteen years old, in the process of finishing grade twelve, and hoped to receive a scholarship or some financial help from JVC’s foreign donors to attend university. Her family was very poor and had lived in Toul Sangkae since 1988 when it was only a marshland at the edge of the city. Toul Sangkae had since been swallowed by urban sprawl. Those in Toul Sangkae like Ming Kinal’s family lived with an underlying anxiety of being displaced. This angst was simultaneous to the moral ambiguity of living in such a precarious context. Rumours were spread throughout my research that the government might evict the residents there, as they had done to those in the neighbourhood just south in Lake Kok (*Beng Kok*) a few years prior.

During one of my visits with her, Ming Kinal expressed her frustration with the Khmer government as well as her seemingly moral ambivalence of the illegal activities that occurred throughout the neighbourhood. I sat in her doorway sipping an overly sweetened orange drink and reflected on how people viewed the railroad as such a “wild” place. I watched as a proud rooster strutted outside and occasionally made a strained, mechanical noise that resembled a crow. He looked pathetic. The scrawny and singular fowl scratched his way through the dirt, pebbles, and bits of plastic and rubbish along the populated railroad track. Inside Ming’s home was the relaxing hum of an antiquated sewing machine hemming a customer’s defective pair of blue jeans cast off from one of the nearby garment factories. Outside was a cacophony of what the Khmer simply call “noise (*somaek*)” – grinding metal, motor bikes, howling street vendors, laughing, shouting, crowing, and so on. My attention was soon grabbed...
when I noticed a large medallion hanging around the neck of a young, shirtless bong thom (gang leader) who proceeded to swagger around a table that was permanently sprawled across the tracks and filled with gambling patrons mere metres from Ming’s home. My Christian interlocutors advised me to never visit the railroad alone, even though Jesus Village Church (JVC) was strategically located near the tracks. Vagabonds, gangsters, drug dealers, sex workers, and other “broken people (neak khouc)” occupied that space. I would have surely been robbed or, worse, partaken in the chicanery.

I grabbed my camera to take a photo of the railroad casino when Ming sharply and sternly stopped me. “Eh, eh, eh! Don’t take their photo!” she implored. Dani had recently woken from a nap and positioned herself between the view of me and the bong thom. Being reprimanded by elders can be a sign that one has become close with them – like a family member. But this time was different. The urgency in her voice suggested I was about to do something genuinely wrong and perhaps dangerous. Many of the activities in Toul Sangkae, and especially along the railroad-turned-squatter-village, were considered immoral and unacceptable to proper Khmer norms. Drunkenness, drug use, gambling, fighting, and prostitution were sinful behaviours according to both Buddhists and Christians. There in Toul Sangkae, and magnified along the railroad, Khmer norms seemed to be flipped upside down. For example, Ming, who was an elder, showed proper respect to the much younger, yet socially “higher” bong thom. I quietly asked Ming Kinal if there were any conflicts between the gang members and the police. She replied:

It’s difficult, oun (child). When we have problems, we tell the police. The police take money but they don’t help. He [Prime Minister Hun Sen] leaves this place in chaos. They [the government] don’t think about education. They don’t think about their own citizens. Especially when youth graduate, the government doesn’t have any jobs to give. I complement the government on one thing – Cambodia has many large buildings! But it has many poor people too! The government cares about buildings. They don’t care about people. They don’t think about those who live small small (as in, “lowly”). They displace their own citizens!

Ming Kinal did not take issue with the immoral behaviour happening around us. She took issue with the Khmer government and its proxies’ corruption, lack of concern for the poor, and neglect for justice. Moreover, she understood life in this place to be chaotic and unstable. “Every day we don’t have. Every day we live by fear because we don’t have stability,” she lamented. I asked her what she hoped for in the future. She replied, “I have hope for later on there will be good
leaders. My hope is for development, the infrastructure in this community. I hope that later on I will have plat ownership, legally.”

Urban dwellers like Ming Kinal found themselves subject to the abrupt economic, political, and social change post-PRK. The democratic process of Cambodia since 1991 has been greatly shaped by neoliberalism (Hughes 2003). Simon Springer (2010) argues the liberalisation of Cambodia’s economy has contributed to the immense inequality between the rich and the poor as well as introduced a systemic pattern of political violence in Phnom Penh’s public spaces. Significantly, a key consequence of the two decades of turmoil in Phnom Penh was the “old land records had disappeared and people settled wherever they could find vacant land or housing” (Strangio 2014: 154). With the Khmer Rouge’s eradication of land titles and the new neoliberal order, land ownership was privatised and the city rapidly expanded in an unplanned manner (Schneider 2011). Now, large banks and the wealthy elite own much of the land in Phnom Penh. Ming Kinal’s desire for land ownership would bring her much desired stability. Yet the dealings between wealthy elite and government officials further perpetuated the moral outrage and antagonism of the urban poor against the Khmer elite.

Asef Bayal (2015) explores a similar example of moral outrage against the wealthy elite. He suggests that the urban poor of Cairo played a crucial role in creating momentum for the Arab Spring. These urban poor slowly and quietly took over public spaces throughout Cairo by, for example, creating shanty homes and small-scale, “illegal” businesses. Over time, they became normalised and engrained in the public spaces. The Egyptian state’s abrupt eviction of the urban poor from public spaces created a moral uproar. The state’s activities were seen as an injustice because these urban poor expected to have a claim to these spaces after years of perceived legitimacy. In this way, the urban poor created a moral economy. The state’s actions of displacing the urban poor from their businesses and homes fuelled the abhorrence against the government elite. Ming Kinal’s vehemence against the Khmer state parallels much of Bayal’s finding. The 2012 displacement of those in Lake Kok was considered morally outrageous. Many of those urban poor in Toul Sangkae feared that they, too, were soon to fall prey to the Khmer government.

What I propose is that in addition to the agency of the city to affect the city-dweller, urban life has the potential to activate a provisional agency of the moral order. Following Beatrice Jauregui’s (2014) logic on corruption in India, that which is considered immoral has the potential to be seen as a moral action
depending on who is doing the acting. For example, urban poor who use the same methods of nepotism as the wealthy elite are considered wise and savvy as opposed to the elite who are considered corrupt. Provisional agency helps us understand that under certain conditions such seemingly fixed notions of “order” (i.e. the moral order) can be flipped on their head. Toul Sangkae is seen as similar to the forest, filled with chaos and immoral activity, and, thus, urban poor like Ming Kinal illustrate the placidity of the moral order. As will be concluded below, this sort of moral ambiguity and chaotic agency of the city mimics the possibilities allowed in the forest.

**City-as-Forest – Order through Chaos**

Thus far, this chapter has explored how for the Khmer the countryside is perceived to preserve Khmerness. It is stable and seemingly fixed. Contrasting the tamed countryside is the wild and chaotic forest. The Khmer have historically engaged the city of Phnom Penh similarly to that of the forest when the countryside becomes unstable. The Khmer people have struggled with wars and conflict for centuries, forcing them to either migrate to cities or hide in forests (see Chandler 2008). More recently, during the destructive carpet bombings conducted by the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, provincial farmers abandoned their fields and villages to find refuge in the city (Arensen 2012: 12). Even after the war, the countryside became a place of danger and the city a place of refuge. Fighting amongst the Khmer Rouge took place in the countryside during the 1980s, driving rural villagers to the city for safety. Even today, certain villages leave their fallow farms during the hot season to partake in the “structured begging” in Phnom Penh (Parson & Lawreniuk 2016). Migrants to Toul Sangkae engage city life out of necessity. As Panha explains:

> I don’t really know Toul Sangkae, but I think that there are more opportunities here than the countryside, so it’s better. News travels slower there than here. Here we’re next to the city, so the news is fresh. People in Phnom Penh have the concept that they are city-folk. Thus they know a lot. I like the Province more than here because they live by honesty. Here we live right next to each other but we don’t know each other. Here we have opportunity, to go to schools that are close, but there’s no way [in the Province]. If people here don’t study, it’s alright. There if you study, you are atypical. Some people are like us (educated). Some people aren’t. My neighbours in the Province don’t agree with me studying here. They see their kids working and they see money come in. But me, I study, but there’s no money coming in. That’s the thinking of those in the Province and how it’s different from here. I’m not including factory workers. They might think differently.
Panha understands the countryside is considered to be the locus of the moral order. People are more honest there. Neighbours know each other. Relationships, in other words, are in proper order. Nevertheless, the city provides opportunities that, at times, the people of the countryside find foreign and unusual. The city allows for change. While the city is unstable and uncertain, it allows for newness, progress, and opportunity. It even allows for a new moral order.

Ledgerwood (1990: 43-56) describes the forest as home to the most exaggerated forms of beings. The fiercest spirits (or gods) and ghosts dwell in the forest as well as the fiercest animals. Vagabonds and wild people retreat to the forest when they do not fit in to the order of the srok or when this order breaks down (for example in wartime). These beings are hidden, dangerous, unpredictable, and rupture the social norms found in the srok. However, the Khmer have a history of engaging with the forest and all that dwells there. The forest is a valuable and necessary place for the Khmer. The disappearance of Cambodia’s forest is beyond an ecological tragedy. For those like Bona mentioned above, deforestation is changing the very nature of Cambodia.

David Chandler (1996) argues the Khmer moral order is indeed displayed and rooted in the srok. “There is nothing ad hoc about [the term] ‘order,’” he suggests, “The contrast between wildness (prei, which means ‘forest’) and what is grown, civilized, arranged, predictable, like rice or families, is common to many Southeast Asian cultures” (1996: 77). Also, we ought not assume these moral orders are fixed. Chandler discusses a Khmer folk-tale written in the tumultuous mid-nineteenth century during a tumultuous time in Cambodia’s history that led to the French Protectorate in 1863 (ibid.: 76-99). The story is called koun lok, or “children of humanity:’” Three young girls are abandoned by their morally corrupt mother who sends them to the forest with only one day’s worth of food. The anti-mother thinks to herself, “A tiger will devour them tonight, for certain. If they manage to survive, they’ll be dead from hunger soon enough” (ibid.: 80). During the night, a strong local spirit keeps dangerous animals and spirits at bay by interceding to the higher gods on their behalf. A higher spirit/god called Varuan hears the spirit’s plea and orders the spirit to continue protecting the girls and provide them with raw foods, for Varuan knows that these young girls will soon morph into birds. The girls eat the raw foods but are upset and attempt to return to their mother in the srok who then chases them back to the forest. Rejected again by their mother, they continue to eat the provisions of the spirit.
Little by little the girls turn into magpie-type birds. The mother, who by this point repents, comes to look for her daughters. The daughters see their mother and sing of their excitement to have become animals of the forest. They exclaim, “We are released from our humanity; we have turned into animals, and we are far more beautiful. Don’t come near us!” (ibid.: 81). Recognising her daughters in the form of birds, “The mother only hears the phrase koun lok (‘child of the world,’ translated as ‘humanity’). She runs on after them, runs out of breath and dies” (ibid.).

*Koun lok* shows us that the forest is a geography of ambiguous moral order. Like the railroad in Toul Sangkae, the forest flips the moral order upside-down. Children can be elevated to a higher moral status than mothers, animals above human, fierce spirits can show compassion to much lower-status humans, and the forest becomes a sanctuary when the countryside is compromised. *Koun lok* gives the opportunity for a new moral order (Edwards 2008).

Erik Davis (2008) writes of the fascinating account of Miss Yaan, a woman who remembered her past life and interim life as a forest-spirit before being reborn into her present life. Miss Yaan remembered her past life so clearly that she moved to the village of her previous family and reconnected with that family all while maintaining kinship ties with the family of her present life. A new familial order was created as she was known to both families as “elder,” regardless of her younger age. Miss Yaan also recounted in detail her lazy days as an interim forest-spirit dwelling in the tree tops and eating the offerings of the mortals. During storms when the trees were dangerous, she would find refuge at a *wat* in a monk’s quarters. Significantly, the narrative recounts that her engagement with the monk was ambivalent at best and was indifferent toward him and his holiness. Buddhist monks are viewed as the “highest” moral human. They, in fact, represent Buddha to the world (see Chapter II). Her ambivalence further illustrates how hierarchy and order can be flipped upside down in the forest.

The spatial geography of Phnom Penh has certainly and drastically shifted since the liberalisation of Cambodia’s economy in the early 1990s. Paired with the spatial shift is the shift in models of personhood and Khmerness. There has already been important work written about the changing effect of neoliberalism and the urban landscape. Aihwa Ong’s seminal work (1987) with female Malaysian urban factory workers parallels the study of gender and labour in Phnom Penh. Ong investigates how the liberalised economy of Malaysia during the 1980s influenced men and women to transition from work in traditional
settings (i.e. agrarian fieldwork) to factory work. Communities had to negotiate contradictory and new models of neoliberal relations of production and the subsequent capitalistic bureaucracy. New mechanisms of power, whether from state officials or factory bosses, were perceived to be elusive forces. Ultimately, Ong argues women’s sexuality became the fulcrum between the tensions of power and change. Moreover, “Concepts of gender and sexuality became transmuted through the new experiences of the emergent Malay working class” (Ong 1987: 195). The introduction of new relationships of power changed Malay notions of womanhood.

Following Ong’s logic, recent ethnography set in Phnom Penh has focused on female provincial labour migration to the urban (Derks 2008; Hoefinger 2013). Heidi Hoefinger’s monograph explores how certain Khmer women create new meanings of Khmer womanhood through engaging in the sex industry of Phnom Penh. Relying on Judy Ledgerwood’s seminal dissertation (1990), Hoefinger understands that for Khmer women to behave outside of their gender roles is to enter the “realm of chaos” of the city (Hoefinger 2013: 11), dislodging them from their female Khmerness. By becoming sexually active “professional girlfriends” to foreign men, Khmer women directly challenge traditional notions of womanhood and actively reconstruct new meanings in order to carve out new possibilities of success, power, and stability. While Hoefinger’s feminist agenda is to address the political economy of gendered (female) sex work in Southeast Asia, she importantly shows how for the Khmer notions of Khmerness are affected by “realms of chaos.” Being deviant from Khmer social norms ontologically changes their Khmer womanhood. Moreover, the spatial relocation of dwelling in the city (forest) allows for these new possibilities to occur.

Khmer women are considered more connected to the temporal world (here-and-now) and are accordingly considered “culture bearers’ par excellence” (Ledgerwood 1990: 2). Thus, as Annuska Derks (2008) argues, Khmer women must negotiate between being the dutiful, modest, and traditional daughters of Cambodia and the modern, urban, independent, and working women upon whom new economic strategies are dependent. Leaning heavily on Bourdieu, Derks argues urban Khmer women learn to “code switch” (Derks 2008: 196) between being women of the countryside and women of the city. She found that her interlocutors fluidly negotiated between differing habitus depending on the context in which they were situated. Derks’ interlocutors were poor, provincial female migrant workers in the city who laboured as garment factory workers, street vendors, and/or sex workers. While Derks’ interlocutors, as well as
Hoefinger’s, were of a very specific demographic, her findings are important to understand that the spatial relocation of provincial women to the city allows for the renegotiation of female Khmerness to come into play and crucially indicates how the countryside / city dichotomy is much more fluid than dialectical – the tameness of the countryside can be found in the forest, and vice versa. In this way, these women achieve order through chaos.

Conclusion

As will be explored in the following chapter, Khmer Buddhist religion aids to (re)fortify Khmerness and legitimises the moral order (Kent & Chandler 2008). Conversion to Christianity is considered a betrayal of Khmer identity. Most of my Christian friends told of their struggle to be a Christian in Khmer society. Samphoa, for example, became a Christian as a youth in the countryside and encountered heavy resistance from her family. Her father scolded her, claiming that her new religion made her “out of order” (no longer fits in) with the “society” of the family (see Chapter IV). She claims her “dad made me choose: ‘if you believe Jesus by yourself, pack your clothes and go away! […] I don’t support other religions!’ he said. ‘Religion of Jesus is a foreign religion. Our ancestors, history is Buddhism. Why do you choose a different religion, obey it?’” Christians, in a sense, are like the magpie-like birds found in koun lok. They are specimens of the disrupted Khmer order.

The city of Phnom Penh allows for a disruption to Khmer order and Khmerness. The Christians of Toul Sangkae learn to negotiate between the different geographies of their world through religious praxis. While the prei accommodates for chaos, disorder, and change, the srok demands stability. In the following chapters I aim to discuss the geographies of urban religious spaces (the church and the wat). Buddhism is a mechanism that holds on. Christianity breaks away into newness. The following chapter will explore the Khmer geography of the ‘self’, as explored through notions of religion.

This really should be no surprise to us. Hayden White (1978) traces the dichotomy between the wilderness and the countryside, suggesting that its moral categories can be traced throughout western notions of the “civilised.” Prominent in western civilisation is the idea that civilised society relies on the liberation of the Wild Man. What is interesting about the Khmer context is that the city can
produce the Wild Man. *Khmerness*, which is preserved in the countryside, is eroded in contexts like Toul Sangkae.
Chapter II – The Khmer Logic of Religion and the Nature of Sin

Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed how dwelling in the city brings instability to the Khmer order. This is reflected in the spatiality of Phnom Penh and how the urban setting of Phnom Penh correlates to dwelling in the forest. Khmer order unravels in these spaces, enabling new opportunities to develop. Religion plays a significant role in the attempt to bring order to the chaos of the world, and this chapter essentially discusses Khmer notions of religion (sasna) and how the aim of religious praxis is to stabilise the person through the purification from sin and stabilisation of the heart. Crucially, rather than framing religion in terms of belief, which, as Talal Asad (1993) argues Western notions of religion have privileged, Khmer religion focuses on the practice of religion and the substantive things produced through religious praxis. It is from this context that we can begin to understand how conversion to Christianity fits in this moral reconfiguration of the Khmer world.

This chapter ethnographically explores the logic of religion in the Cambodian context. It aims to orient the reader to the logic of Khmer religion, stressing the substantive affects and effects of religion. Ultimately, religion for the Khmer creates a moral Khmer person. Theravada Buddhism, being the historical and national religion of Cambodia will be the primary focus of the chapter as this provides the context with which Christianity finds itself competing. Ian Harris (2005) provides a historical overview of Buddhism in Cambodia and displays the evolution and influence of Buddhism in Khmer society. This chapter explores how I and others experienced Khmer Buddhism in Phnom Penh. In other words, this chapter takes a synchronic approach to Khmer Buddhism. This is not without merit. A part of the Khmer Rouge’s strategy was to purge Khmer society from religion by burning important Buddhist manuscripts and executing key monks and elders through whom Buddhism and the Khmer moral order are propagated (Zucker 2008). Most of the Anglophone
anthropology on Cambodia has been from the 1990s onward as that was when
the nation reopened after decades of calamity. Indeed, history and collective
memory play important roles in understanding Khmer sociality (see, e.g.
Chandler 1996; Hinton 2008; Zucker 2008). I wish to turn the discussion toward
the quotidian, everyday aspect of religious life, for not only do Buddhists expect
immediate blessings through religious praxis, but Jesus is also expected to be
present in the everyday lives of Christians.

My ethnographic engagement with Buddhism was done primarily in Wat
Toul Sangkae, participating in the many weekly and yearly rituals performed
there, visiting several other wats in Phnom Penh and two in the rural outskirts of
the city, interviewing monks, lay elders, and other visitors of the wat as well as
other Khmer bystanders of Khmer Buddhism. I soon realised how important the
quotidian aspects of religion were for the Khmer; whereas I and other academics
have been more concerned with other temporal features of Buddhism such as
theology, history, and its teleological trajectories. In pre-war Cambodia, the
average Khmer knew very little of the intricacies of Theravada doctrine (Ebihara
1966: 177; as quoted in Ledgerwood 2008: 149). Even Cettra, my research
assistant who had been educated in Buddhism, did not know nor really care
about the meaning behind Buddhist rituals. Those sorts of questions were simply
irrelevant. The importance was doing religion and receiving its products that had
agencies of their own.

Benbat, Chan, and Bon

Mornings come early in Phnom Penh by those questing city-folk who rise
well before the sun to prepare for the day. Some ambitious businessmen
powerwalk the stirring streets in an attempt to exercise before the streets
become dangerously congested. Their wives or daughters stay behind sweeping
the dust that has settled during the night from their home and storefronts.
Amongst the sound of brushing rice-grass brooms is the chanting from the
neighbourhoods’ wats (pagodas) where the loksong (monkhood) recite the
morning thoam (pronounced “toe-a,” commonly translated from the Sanskrit as
Dharma or Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha) in preparation for their first
of two meals of the day. In Toul Sangkae, herds of factory workers emerge from
their shared rented rooms and walk in groups to start their daily shifts. Lining
the streets are several breakfast carts serving sleepy and silent patrons such
staple breakfast foods as rice porridge (*bobo*), noodle soup (*kuewtio*), and my staple rice and grilled pork (*buycrouc*).

Breakfast is an important meal for the Khmer, not simply for the sustenance, but also for setting the overall tone for the day. A typical daily greeting is asking if the person is “well and happy (*sok sbay*)” followed by “have you eaten yet?” A negative response warrants a concerned reply: “when are you going to eat? What did you last eat? Are you unwell?” The meal is very important for Khmer sociality and has even been argued to help create the Khmer family and, thus, fortify the moral order (Davis 2009: Chapter 5; see, also, present thesis’s Introduction).

Additionally, offering food to the monkhood is a highly important religious feature of Khmer Buddhism. The verb “to eat” changes depending on who or what is doing the eating. Animals, monsters, spirits, ghosts, and other sub-humanoids *si* (eat/munch). As one’s status grows higher in rank, so then does the verb. Normal people *nam*; elders *hop*; highest elders *pi’sa*; and kings, gods, and other high angelic beings *saowi*. A special form of eating is reserved for Buddhist monks called *chan*. Asking a close friend or family member if they have yet to *si buy* (munch rice/food) can be either an insult, for it equates them as being an animal (or worse), or a signifier of a very close relationship. Teasing is a special form of endearment. I would often tease my friends by asking if they had yet to *chan* or *saowi* food – elevating their status. Only my closest friend, Cettra, would I tease by using *si* – and he, I.

After breakfast from around 8 to 10:30am is when an observer can witness a faithful snapshot of daylife in Phnom Penh. Businesses and schools team with commotion. The endless construction is in full swing before the sun’s oppressive rays demand a break. Markets bustle. Tuk tuk and moto taxi drivers man the crowded street corners yelling at every passer-by, “tuk tuk?!“ or “moto?!“, respectively. Bells, horns, advertisements from loudspeakers, grinding, hammering, motors, sirens, and street howlers invade from all sides. Yet amongst the chaos of the city are the silent Buddhist monks wearing saffron robes and umbrellas walking house to house, storefront to storefront seeking offerings through the ritual of *Benbat*.

*Benbat* (Pali, to “rescue” or “save”) is a ritual that allows for daily Buddhist religious praxis to occur outside of the Buddhist *wat*. Monks *Benbat* in the city by collecting food (or money for food) offerings by meandering through
the urban neighbourhoods near their wat. With an offering bowl strapped to their front, monks walk “along the path/way/road” (tam phluw), stopping outside of people’s homes or businesses and wait for any signs that someone might want to give offering. Much of the time city dwellers seem indifferent to the presence of monks walking patiently in the streets and stopping outside their residences or businesses. Monks simply and quickly move on or even bypass those who have a pattern of not giving offerings and lingering for those who do (cf. Ledgerwood 2008: 156).

Those who give offerings place (never dumping or pouring) their offering into the monk’s offering bowl, sompeah, and receive a blessing from the monks in the form of a chant and recitation of the thoam. Sompeah is an embodied sign of humility, meekness, and respect, which involves placing the palms of the hands together in a prayer-like fashion and bowing (the higher in stature the object is, the higher the hands are situated on the body and lower the bow) and is used for greetings, salutations, giving thanks, asking for forgiveness, addressing a venerable audience, and the like. It is also an important posture during Buddhist rituals when worshippers sompeah the statues of Buddha and/or

Figure 11: Benbat
the monks who represent Buddha. The *thoam* is always recited in Pali and Sanskrit language, which Khmer language is derived from. Inquiring of a monk the meaning of the *thoam Benbat* (the *thoam* recited during *Benbat*), I was told it was a simple blessing for the day, instructions to always do good, and for their “heart to be happy (*soka* – the highest form of happiness).” However, the meaning of the *thoam* is marginal compared to the dynamic agency of the recited *thoam*. In other words, rather than understanding the *thoam* for its linguistic, semiotic significance (i.e., asking what does it mean), we ought to recognise that the power of the sacred language is when it is recited. Being present and being the object of the recited *thoam* has the power to bless. This logic will unfold throughout this chapter.

Meanwhile at the *wat*, faithful lay leaders (typically female elders and nuns) carefully prepare and present the monks’ final meal of the day inside the lay worship hall called the *sala chan* (literally, “the (monk) eating hall”). The culmination of *Benbat* and lay worship occurs during the time when the monks return to the *wat* and eat (*chan*). Sitting in an elevated position, monks eat the offerings of the worshippers. Importantly, this ritual process of eating transforms the worshipper’s offerings into *bon* (often translated as “merit”). It is here that
we can see the crux of Buddhist worship and offering is to, as the Khmer say, “thwoe (do/work/produce) bon.” Literature on Cambodia typically refers to the religious practise of thwoe bon as “merit making.” Giving through offering, Judy Ledgerwood argues (2008: 155), remains the core Buddhist practice for laypeople to make merit. I agree that this is a suitable translation, but as I will explain below, I want to steer away from it because it seems too one-dimensional. Like Karma (kam), bon is, I will argue, an active, substantive force in the world and not something a person simply earns and possesses.

The ritual of Benbat can be understood in terms of a classic gift economy (Mauss 1966[1954]), where the offerings of Buddhist worshippers help sustain the monkhood, and thus Khmer religion, and the monkhood in turn bless the worshippers through transforming offerings into bon. As much of the literature on Khmer Buddhism recognises and presumes, bon is meant to help the Khmer have a more successful future life by improving their Karma (see, e.g., Ledgerwood 1991, 2008; Hoefinger 2013; Derks 2008). Yet there is a crucially important quotidian quality of bon that I aim to highlight. Inquiring with those who gave offering during Benbat, I was given common responses that it was indeed an opportunity for them to thwoe bon, but also for their businesses to be successful, for their family members to have good health, for protection from evil spirits, and the like. In other words, bon had significant quotidian affects and effects. This quotidian, everyday quality of bon is what I want to focus on. Therefore, I will attempt to unpack bon and its opposite bap.

Moreover, the image of the silent monk serenely meandering through the urban neighbourhoods of Phnom Penh seeking offerings is a striking image that captures Khmer notions of religion. Amongst all of the chaos, uncertainty, instability, change, and precariousness of dwelling in Phnom Penh (see Chapter I) is a thread of religion that attempts to hold the Khmer moral order together. Why focus on religion at all if it is peripheral to everyday life in urban Cambodia? The theoretical push of this thesis argues that for the evangelical Christians, the “world” is inherently evil and in need of salvation. A world, in other words, cannot simply be moral. A moral order must be achieved and sustained through religious praxis. There is entropy and chaos that is necessary to animate Christian life. Khmer notions of religion aim to “tame (srok)” the “wild (prei)” person, elevating their ontological status. Religion, in other words, helps create a moral person, which begins at the root and heart of the individual. Those Christians explored throughout this thesis amplify this logic by striving to address the sin and chaos of the world. By investigating further the logic of
religion in Cambodia, we can begin to understand how Jesus has a very important and active agency in saving the person and the world.

The unstable divisions of the Khmer person

Prior to dissecting *bon* and its subsequent evil twin *bap*, it is imperative to locate the foundation and centre of the Khmer person in the *cett* (heart). Asking my Khmer friends to parse the human (*manuh* – also "person"), I was given a composite response that a human is made up of a body (*khluen*), heart (*cett*), soul (*pralung*), spirit (*wi’nien*), and mind (*kumnet*). "Khmer people“, Ang Choulean suggests, “believe that each person has nineteen pralung [souls] which animate the body“ (2004: 2), though I never came across this notion in my fieldwork. Regardless, the divisions of the Khmer person, with its multiplicity of souls, spirit, heart, mind, and body already disturbs Western Cartesian models that assume a simple division between the “mind” and the “body.” This dichotomy between the mind and body has the potential to ignore local understandings of pathology (Kohrt & Harper 2008). For the Khmer, these divisions of the person are understood to be unstable, which, if not treated with care, could lead to destabilisation and harm of the person and the community.

In his exhibition of prominent ritual acts in rural Cambodian communities, such as the consecration of a home or a crematory rite, Ang Choulean (2004) highlights the crucial performances in each ritual that aim to restore one’s soul(s). The soul(s)’s “chief characteristic,” he claims, “is their fragility” (*ibid.*: 2). Prone to wander, souls are fickle, easily harmed, and, when having (unsuspectingly) left the body, can cause illness and even turbulence in the community. Similar to E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1976) analysis of Azande witchcraft, the health of the Khmer village reflects the health of the individual persons. Thus, a key performance in each ritual aims to bring healing and restoration to the souls that have been lost or harmed. Having proper balance for each person’s soul(s) is crucial for the success of each ritual. In this way, we can see the dynamic scale to bring order and balance out of chaos and dissonance, from the fundamental components of the individual person outward to Khmer society.

Additionally, Ovesen and Trankell (2010) trace the practice of French colonial medicine colliding with Khmer traditional healing practices. Unsurprisingly, the French, and thus “Christian,” as they argue, practices of
western biomedicine failed to recognise the cosmological dynamics that might have caused disease and sickness. Evil spirits have been noted to contribute to certain pathologies in the Khmer world. This takes certain specialised *krus* ("masters" or "teachers") who are trained to deal with illnesses that biomedicine cannot remedy. Of these healers are the *kru Khmer* (traditional healers) and the *kru tiey*, those who have the ability to communicate with spirits and mediate between these entities and the human patient. Prior to the onslaught of the Khmer Rouge, certain rural Buddhist monks were known to have similar mystical powers to that of the *kru tiey* and *kru Khmer* (see Chandler 1996; Kent & Chandler 2008; Ovesen & Trankell 2010).

Wishing to further explore the dynamics between the human and the spiritual world, I interviewed a *kru tiey* in Large Market (*psar thoum*), one of Toul Sangkae’s main markets. Asking *ma* ("mum", as she wanted to be addressed) how she was trained to be a *kru tiey*, she replied:

> There are two types of *kru*. One learns the trade and the other learns because the spirits come and go from the outside. Those who study are not authentic [...] I did not learn. They chose me. They took my soul for seven nights and seven days. On the seventh day they told my soul to return to my body in order to help people. Rich people know. Poor people know. I help everyone – Khmer, foreign.

She later revealed that the spirits who empowered her to do her work came and went from Mount Kulen near Siem Reap. Mount Kulen has been historically traced through Khmer cosmology to be the centre of the Khmer world and where the highest spiritual powers emanate (Ovesen & Trankell 2010: 2; see, also, Chapter V in present thesis). As *ma* shows, souls are understood to come and go (sometimes unsuspectingly) from the body. While *ma*’s wandering soul led to training and spiritual empowerment, the instability and wandering of souls can at times result in illness that can only be remedied through specific rituals, as described above. *Ma*’s humility, acceptance of the spirits’ authority, and conditioned soul at Mount Kulen allowed an abiding relationship between her and the spirits to be developed that empowered her to do her work. Throughout our visit, she spoke in glossolalia with her spirits who spoke to her about me. This was common amongst *kru tieys*, she claimed. Like tamed companions, her spirits were *hers*. She, too, was tamed by them, claiming that they did not allow her to perform certain malevolent practices such as creating curses for her clients.

Many spirits are fierce, "wild," and incredibly dangerous. Thus, well respected *kru tieys* are those who are able to tame these spirits and use them
for their own use. Ma’s abiding relationship with her spirits reflects the Khmer practice of harnessing spiritual power from spirits that can otherwise be dangerous and harmful. For example, one of the fiercest and most dangerous spirits known in the Khmer world is the bray, a female spirit of a murdered, virgin woman or of a woman who died during pregnancy. The spirit of the woman turns into an extremely dangerous and evil spirit that hides in the forest to seek revenge and wreak havoc on the living. Gruesome and inexplicable deaths are often associated with the bray’s evildoing. Yet, through specific and at times disturbing rituals, her immense power can be harnessed and tamed for protection from other evil spirits or even for activating potent love potions (Ledgerwood 1991: Chapter 2). This interplay of the wild into the tame is, I argue, embedded in the logic of Khmer notions of religion.

The bray has been known to replace the niek in Buddhist iconography of certain Khmer wats (see, e.g., Ledgerwood 1991: 53-56). The niek (often translated as naga) is a mythological creature whose image is commonly deployed throughout Khmer iconography. This giant seven-headed fire-breathing serpent is one of the fiercest creatures in the cosmos. Prior to joining Nirvana (nippien), Buddha meditated under the Bodhi-tree for four weeks where the niek coiled itself around him, offering protection from the evil that wished to thwart his journey into Enlightenment (Thomas 1949: 85). Images of this important event are found in many wats and public schools where Buddha meditates or teaches his thoam while resting on the coiled niek with its magnanimous hood surrounding him. These icons express the core message of Khmer Buddhism: like the lotus flower being the central symbol of Khmer Buddhism (from the muck grows a beautiful flower), the teachings of Buddha (thoam) tame even the wildest and fiercest creatures. This taming (srok) of the wild (prei) and evil human is, I argue, the underpinning logic of Khmer religion. The evilness,
murkiness, and instability of the person is crucially rooted in the quality of the divisions of the Khmer person. Souls wander and need to be put back into place. Spirits can become wild and dangerous, yet can be bridled. Moreover, the heart, being the foundation and centre of the person, is known to be fickle and ever-changing. It is also the core of the moral, and thus religious Khmer person.

**Taming the heart (cett)**

The Khmer distinguish between the physical organ of the heart (*behdong*) and the heart/core/centre (*cett*) of the person. The Thai counterpart for Khmer *cett* is the *jai*. Julia Cassaniti writes that for the Thai, *jai* is the “heart-mind, the seat of emotion used in compound words” (2015: key terms). This is not unlike the Nepali *man*, which also refers to the “heart-mind” (Kohrt & Harper 2008: 468-469). In both their works, Cassaniti and Kohrt & Harper approach the heart-mind from a psychological hermeneutic, focusing on the emotional and mental aspects of their informants. For the Khmer, the *cett* is indeed the seat of emotion and connotes desire (or lack thereof). Many emotions are described using “heart” compounded with a qualifying antecedent. For example, “pleased” (*pehncett* – full heart), “sad/hurt” (*pibabkcett* – difficult heart), “humbled/humiliated” (*touccett* – small heart), “selfish/greedy” (*thoumccett* – big heart), and so on. Thus, the Khmer *cett* can be seen similar to the notion of the heart-mind.

Moreover, the Khmer *cett* can be further described as the “centre” and “leader” of the person. In this respect, the *cett* resembles the central “inner kernel” (*batu ba’tang*) of the Toraja in Buntao’, Indonesia described by Dimitri Tsintjilonis (2004). For both the Khmer and the Toraja, the quality of the person reflects the quality of their centre. As will be ethnographically unpacked below, it is in terms of the “heart-mind” and the “inner kernel” that we ought to understand the Khmer *cett*. Khmer people often add “heart” to emphasise and magnify emotions that would not otherwise be associated with the heart. For example, by adding “heart” to “nervous/anxious” (*phay*), *phaycett* connotes an anxiety to the core and totality of the person. Adding “heart” to “happy/content/fulfilled/fun” (*sabay*), *sabaycett* connotes a happiness to the core. *Cett* is translated to English as “heart” and Khmer people often motion to their chest, where the heart (*behdong*) is, when speaking of their emotions.
and/or their heart (cett). Thus, I use “heart” to describe the cett and will distinguish from the physical organ when necessary.

The heart is distinctly human and godly, distinguishing the human and higher beings from the lower beings. Animals and monsters, for example, are understood to not possess a heart. Buddha and Jesus Christ alike have the highest and most holy of hearts to which Buddhists and Christians, respectively, aspire to have. Like the wandering soul, the heart is fickle and is ever-changing. “Today I love. Yesterday I hated” a friend told me how one’s heart is able to change. Another described the fickleness of the heart using an anecdote of romance. “Today, I fall in love with a woman, but tomorrow I no longer love her,” he explained in the company of three younger and single women. “I see another woman and I fall in love with her. I have a new heart.” Hearts do not simply change. They become something new. Cettra helped explain, “a person has many hearts – today I have one, the next I have another. The heart dies and is reborn often – born, dies, born, dies (kaet slab kaet slab).” It is worth noting that Cettra’s logic is identical to how the Khmer understand the multiple life cycles of the human – born, dies, born, dies (kaet slab kaet slab). It could be argued that the person’s spirit is what is carried on in each life. The bray, after all, was a former human (see, also, Davis 2008, for an example of a Khmer woman who remembers her past life as a forest spirit). Yet the heart, like the body, is capable of being renewed or even destroyed.

Just as the image of the seven-headed niek is often deployed throughout Khmer iconography, so is the head of the four-faced brom, a high angelic figure that is part ruler, part guardian of the Khmer world. His image is common-place throughout Khmer imagery and architecture. The mythos of Khmer New Year celebrates the preservation of his sacrificial head for the Khmer people, and thus the preservation of life. A part of the Khmer New Year festivities celebrates the “changing of guard”, if you will, for one of the brom’s angelic daughters who preserves his head. Every year, one of his seven daughters (seven

Figure 14: Newly erected 4-faced brom in Phnom Penh
corresponding to the days of the week) takes turn preserving his head, thus initiating another year to pass. As the story goes, the *brom* willingly lost a bet and offered his righteous head to the living in order to preserve life. Like the Christmas story in many western societies, the Khmer New Year story is played and re-enacted throughout the central holiday. Many people give offerings to the new daughter’s transition as guardian. Well respected *kru tiey* announce the daughter’s favoured offering. In 2016, the angel-daughter desired fresh cows’ milk, which is expensive and difficult to come by in Southeast Asia.

While most Khmer people might not actually know nor care about the meaning behind the Khmer New Year story, the image of the four-faced *brom* is at least ambient to Khmer society and is significant to further understand the Khmer heart. Each face represents the four fundamental qualities of a moral Khmer person. The four faces represent compassion (*metta*), mercy (*anet*), empathy (*muk’ti’ta*), and equanimity of the heart (*obpekkha*). Thus the four-faced head is a metonymy for the fundamental moral qualities of the Khmer – if they are not preserved, all life will cease. Cettra explains that “the heart is like the sea – if there are waves and wind it is chaotic and difficult. But, if it is calm then when difficult things occur everything will still be well. This is what *obpekkah* means.” One’s heart is steadfast, stable, clear, and remains when they have *obpekkah*. Becoming quickly angered, for example, indicates that one’s heart is too unstable and quickly changes. Obpekkah helps one have a perfectly stable heart (*cett Odam*) like the *brom*. As will be unpacked below, Buddhist worship aims to purify, centre, and stabilise the heart. The mechanism by which the heart, and thus the person, is purified and stabilised is *bon*.

**Bon and Bap – “Do bon, receive bon. Do sin, receive sin”**

Thus far, this chapter has highlighted the everyday Buddhist ritual of *Benbat* and its purpose to *thwoe bon* as a starting point to understand the logic of Khmer religion. However, up until this point, *bon* and *bap* remain elusive in its definition. Additionally, this chapter has explored the Khmer divisions of the person as not only reflective of the quality of the person, but also fragile and in need of stabilisation. The taming of the wild – bringing order out of chaos – is foundational to understanding Khmer religion. The remainder of this chapter aims to further unpack the polyvalent nature of *bon* and *bap*, and through
ethnographic evidence of religious rituals, argues that religious praxis aims to purify the heart from sin.

At times, the railroad in Toul Sangkae provided an evangelical training ground for both JVC and NLF. NLF’s pastor, Sothea, even boasted of his many evangelistic outreaches along the railroad and the many miracles he witnessed there, encouraging his students that they, too, could do similar things. Pastor Senna of JCPP called those who lived along the railroad “dogs,” literally dehumanising them, due to the immoral behaviours such as drug use, gambling, prostitution, and gang activities that occurred there. JVC’s proximity to the railroad was strategic. Several congregants lived along the railroad, providing exploratory opportunities for young Christian evangelists to preach the Good News to their neighbours. One afternoon I accompanied two female friends from JVC on their Christian outreach. We would stop by Ming Kinal’s home mid-way for a break and snack. The three of us found ourselves opposite the railroad casino peering into a small, wooden composite home with an om srey (older female elder) resting quietly peering back, confused, no doubt, by the juxtaposition of the two Khmer women being accompanied by a foreign man. The two evangelists asked if we could join her and she agreed. Young children ran, squealed, and aggressively played outside while we conducted our holy business. Above the om hanging on the wall was a faded and framed photograph of a young man as a monk. Having a son who bueh (offers himself as a monk) brings honour and pride to the family in addition to reaping the benefits of his holy work (cf. Cassaniti 2015).

The two evangelists initially made small talk about the heat, then moved on to more serious issues like the om’s family’s wellbeing, her sleepless nights, and her constant headaches. I sat awkwardly in silence, finding comfort in the game the feisty children would play where one child would bravely run by, smile at me, and loudly say in English “HELLO!” The om would yell out in annoyance. She had guests. Like the brave children, my evangelist friends were confident and smiley. “If you were to die soon,” one eventually asked as if reciting a script from an evangelistic textbook, “where would you go?” The om replied as a matter of fact, ”That depends. If I have only thwoe bap a little and thwoe bon throughout my life, then I will go to Heaven (thansue). If I have thwoe bap a lot then I will go to Hell (thanarueh) and become a braet (a sub humanoid who is in Hell, see Chapter IV).“ This proper Buddhist response indicates her acceptance of Karma’s (kam) control over her fate based upon the amount of bon she had made vis-à-vis the bap (cf. Keyes 1995: Chapter 3).
One of the evangelists shared what she had learned regarding Jesus and *bap* – that Jesus removes the *bap* we have made, cleansing our hearts so we could become like him, and, thus, go to Heaven when we die. At that moment the *om*, understanding her guests were Christian, adjusted her responses to cater to their Christian message and claimed she “already believes Jesus (cew *Preah Jesu haey*).” Surprised, one of the young women looked at me to make sure I understood the interaction. Her expression was one of amazement, confusion, and relief. The conversation shifted from introductions to, when did you accept Jesus? What church did you go to? Why don’t you go anymore? Oh, I know that person! The two evangelists were both excited and confused to be speaking to a fellow Christian. We left the *om* after a time of prayer for her health and her family and carried on along the railroad.

This was evidently not the first time the *om* had been engaged by Christian evangelists. *Ming* Kinal hinted that other Christian organisations like Transform Cambodia and World Vision attempted to engage the people of the railroad in addition to the churches in Toul Sangkae. The *om*’s seemingly fluid religious position was no surprise to me. As will be explored in the following Chapter (Chapter III), conversion to Christianity was considered fragile and was often abandoned. Thus while the *om* quickly suggested she was already a Christian, perhaps to accommodate to her guests, it was no surprise that this created a sense of confoundment in addition to relief with the two evangelists.

What this interaction further shows us is the polyvalent nature of *bap* and *bon*. The evangelists seamlessly integrated the concept of *bap* into the Christian concept of “sin.” “Sin” was always used as the English translation of *bap*, and was what Jesus cleansed people from. For Christians, Jesus completely replaces the notion of *bon*, that is, the remedy to cleanse one of sin. “*Bon,*” in other words, was never used in Christian circles as it was understood to be solely a Buddhist concept and was often replaced by “*thwoe l’oh* (do good).”

Furthermore, as explored in the thesis’s Prologue, Protestant missionary notions of “sin” were understood to be a semiotic form evil, indexing poor behaviour. This is indeed a partial truth to how the Khmer conceptualised sin. Sin was not only evil behaviour, “*thwoe aokrok* (do evil),” but also, sin was a substantive *thing* created through poor behaviour that had an agency of its own.

The evangelist’s apology for the salience of Jesus’s salvation was that Jesus “removes the sin we make” and that he “cleanses our hearts” so that we can become like him. Jesus does not simply forgive someone for being a sinner. He “removes” or “takes away” the sin that plagues the person. Sickness,
headaches, sleepless nights, bad fortune, unfortunate events to family members, these could all have been attributed to the sin one had made. Sin is destructive, unpredictable, invisible, and autonomous, much like chaos. If having agency, how, then, can we begin to understand bon and sin to be things and not simply semiotic expressions of goodness and evilness?

“Bon,” as explained by the head acar (male lay leader) and abbot of Wat Toul Sangkae, “means a good deed (omboue). The Sanskrit says ‘bon.’ The Pali says ‘ponneak,’ which means ‘a good deed.’” Doing bon creates bon. Thus a well-known Khmer saying is “do bon, receive bon. Do sin, receive sin (thwoe bon ban bon, thwoe ban ban bap),” or “if you do bon you get bon. If you sin, you get sin.” This saying rings somewhat true to pedestrian notions of Karma that understand if one does a good deed, then they ought to expect something good to happen to them at a later time; and, likewise, if one does a bad deed, then they ought to expect something bad to happen to them at a later time. However, to complicate this notion, the Khmer understand that while everyone is capable of doing good deeds, not all are capable of the successful creation of bon. It is only under certain conditions that the successful creation of bon can occur when thwoe bon.

As explained above, much of the discussion surrounding the Khmer practice of thwoe bon utilises the meaning to denote a process of “merit making.” While this is a suitable approach to understanding the logic of this religious praxis, understanding the verb thwoe simply as “to make” could cause the product, bon, to seem as a simple static creation – a notch on a hypothetical Karmic belt. This is indeed a partial truth of the nature of bon. Thus, those who lean on Charles Keyle’s (1995) broader work about Theravada Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia, bap is conceptualised as a “demerit” – the opposite of “merit” (see, e.g., Cassaniti 2015; Ledgerwood 2008; see, also, Chandler 1976). Yet this usage of “merit” and “demerit” cannot accommodate for the thing-like quality that acts in the life and lives of the person. Much like the Catholic concept of “original sin,” the Khmer understand that rooted in the heart, and carried throughout each life, is a kernel of evilness called kileh, that causes one to sin, further complicating the usage of the term “merit” and “demerit.”

Sel and Kileh’s role in the creation of bon and sin
In a conversation with a monk on the nature of bon, I was asked to imagine being incredibly parched and in desperate need of water. Most are capable of cupping their hands to capture water, but would only be able to receive very little water. Those who have a container like a bottle are able to receive more water. The larger the container, the more water one can receive. Likewise with bon, if one desires to thwoe bon, they need the capacity to effectively generate it. The first thing one needs to effectively generate bon is sel. Sel is both a precept that one abides by and something one “holds on to (kan sel),” illustrating further the polyvalent nature of these abstract, yet active entities. Sinning loosens one’s hold of sel, thus making it more inefficient to create bon – they lose their bucket for a cup, figuratively speaking. Those who continually sin without rectification through religious praxis, for example the thieves, drug dealers, and sex workers in Toul Sangkae, are caught in a horrible cycle of polluting themselves with sin, as no bon can be created even when they do good deeds. Thus, for Pastor Senna to call these people “dogs,” he is not simply condemning through metaphor. He is recognising their lower ontological status. As will be explored below, people who sin destroy their hearts, lowering themselves from the human order, unless they seek blessing through religious praxis.

During my research at wat Toul Sangkae, an elder monk gave me a booklet written by Lok Hul Sowan, the highest monk of the wat. In it, he suggests:

The word sel originally meant “always remaining and working.” Sel means “clear” and is a special and high thoam to teach and temper the body, words, and heart, giving meekness. Sel is also the power that helps bon develop.

The first five precepts of sel, we can have for a long time (meaning, it is easy for the common lay person to keep these):

1) Do not murder
2) Do not steal
3) Do not lie
4) Do not commit adultery
5) Do not drink alcohol

Kileh: that which is not clean, not pure. People sin (thwoe bap) because they have kileh. Sel burns up kileh. Sel gives people wisdom and leads to enlightenment. All of these burn up kileh and leads people into their next lives. But if we are completely rid of kileh, then we are able to join Nirvana.

For Khmer Buddhists, joining Nirvana is the ultimate goal of the religious person. As answered by the om at the railroad, the continuation of the cycle of life and
death ("born, die, born, die" – kaet slab kaet slab) is what is understood to happen once one dies. *Kileh*, the root of sin, is what keeps the person in this cycle of life and death. Holding on to *sel*, and thus being able to produce *bon* purifies the person from sin, elevating themselves into a higher being and eventually becoming like Buddha who remains in Nirvana. Lok Hun Sowan continues:

*Kileh* is the root of sin. *Sel* is like the firm foundation we build our house on. The last 5 precepts of *sel* are mainly for the monkhood:

6) Do not eat in the afternoon or evening (i.e. fast after noon until breakfast)
7) Do not sing nor dance
8) Do not wear makeup
9) Do not have treasure (anything of value)
10) Worship God every day.

Only the (male) monkhood, King Sihamoni, and a rare collection of faithful female nuns are understood to being capable of holding on to all ten *sels*, making them most efficient in producing *bon*. Monks are known as "(rice) fields of *bon*" (sraybon), indicating their vast potential to produce *bon*. Dedicated elders are capable of holding on to eight *sels*, while normal worshippers are understood to hold on to five. It is evident that *sel* is no metaphor. Its polyvalent nature, as displayed by Lok Hul Sowan, helps us see that *sel* is not only a precept that one keeps, it is also an active agent in the life of the person. It burns up *kileh* and is what is necessary to develop good deeds (*thwoe bon*) into *bon*. Therefore, where *Benbat* is the everyday opportunity for people to *thwoe bon* by giving offerings to the monk, the weekly ritual of *Thngay Sel* (literally – "The Day of Sel") is one of the most prominent and most recognised Buddhist rituals among the Khmer.

**The Day of Sel (Thngay Sel)**

The Day of Sel is the weekly opportunity for lay Buddhists to recover the *sel* that they might have lost during the week through sinning. The day of the week on which the Day of Sel occurs changes on account of the Lunar calendar. It is the busiest day of the week within the life of the *wat* outside of major yearly festivals like *Phchum Ben*, Khmer New Year, and the *Katthin*. Worshippers arrive at the *wat* in the early morning of The Day of Sel to receive *sel*. The vast majority of those who joined this ritual in Toul Sangkae were elders, the majority
of those being female, who acted as mediators for their families. Ream, the night guard of my apartment building, admitted that the only time he went to the Day of Sel was when he would drive his grandmother to the wat. That was when he was at home in the countryside. He never attended a Day of Sel since moving to the city to attend university. He would often tease me as I left at 4:30 am for the wat to attend the Day of Sel ritual by singing/chanting while laying in his collapsible bed with his arm resting over his eyes the opening call to worship “Soum Thwaybongkhum Preahsomputt (please, worship the Enlightened God)” that many casual Buddhists like him know by heart.

Toul Sangkae was nearly unrecognisable at 4:30 in the morning. Then, the markets, storefronts, and houses were barricaded. Driving through the sleepy, narrow streets seemed like traveling through a gauntlet of iron walls. Sex workers would rest sitting outside their places of business. Some market vendors began preparing their stalls. More activity was observed when approaching the wat as lay worshippers approached wearing their appropriate wat attire. Men wore white collared shirts and black trousers, while women wore long silk skirts and a white top. Everyone wore a kroma, a traditional multi-use long scarf, tied around their left shoulder and across their chest. Outside the wat ambitious sellers lined the walls of the wat hoping to sell appropriate accoutrements for the ritual that was soon to occur, such as incense, closed lotus flowers, candles, and food offerings for monks. As worshippers trickled into the wat prior to the beginning ritual of the Day of Sel, traditional music of celebratory chimes and wooden percussion instruments was heard over the wat’s loudspeakers.

The ritual of the Day of Sel is when lay worshippers beseech Buddha for sel (soum sel), mediated through the monkhood, and occurs in the lay worship hall (sala chan) of the wat. Every sala chan has an alter with multiple statues of Buddha and an elevated eating area where the monks eat the offerings of the worshippers collected through Benbat, the Day of Sel, and other offerings. Worshippers enter barefoot into the hall and somphea Buddha who is represented in the statues. Those who have a lotus flower, the central symbol of Buddhism, lay their offering at the altar. Offering incense was the most prominent form of offering given even for casual Buddhists like Ream (see Chapter IV). Worshippers would light their sticks of incense using one of the many candles other worshipers had given at the altar, somphea again, and place their incense in the many bowels that were at the altar and at the steps leading into the hall. If a worshipper brings a food offering for the monks, they place
their offering on an individual plastic offering bowl called a coengpien and sit on the floor with their offering oriented toward the altar. The legs are never crossed, as that is the sitting posture of a monk. Legs are folded to one side and hands in a constant position of somphea throughout the ritual of soum sel.

Giving such a detailed account of the embodied practices that lead up to receiving sel is necessary. Judy Lederwood (2008) argues that while the meaning of lay Buddhist rituals might have been lost during the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, the practice and the habitus of the rituals remains the salient feature that transmits Khmer Buddhism. Children are taught through practice, sitting on the laps of their elders, listening, and following their motions. During my second Day of Sel, a grandmother sat next to me with her young grandson of perhaps eight years old. Throughout the ritual he and I would awkwardly participate in the ritual, occasionally glancing at each other with a commiserating smile, while we trained our bodies to perform the ritual and sat perplexed by the foreign language of the thoam that was soon to be corporately recited. The positioning of the body, the clothing worn, and performance of giving offering were all a part of displaying one’s sincere willingness to receive sel.

In addition to holding on to sel, having the sincere “will (satthie, also tekcett)” to participate in any religious activity was described to be key to the fruitful production of bon. If one had no desire to do good deeds, produce bon, and sequentially hold on to sel, they were understood to not possess the “will” to do so. Conversely, if one does a good deed yet was not sincere in their actions (i.e. having ulterior motives), then no bon would be produced. Khmer Buddhism understands this “will” to be called satthie. Outside of Buddhism, the will is conceptualised as tekcett, literally “heart water” or “water of the heart.” The will is what is understood to animate the person into being willing to do good deeds. It is the individual’s own prerogative to ensure their will is sincere. Policing others to ensure their motives are sincere is irrelevant to Khmer Buddhism. A common saying amongst the Khmer is “you depend only on yourself (kluen peng ta peng kluen).” This can be reflected in the om’s matter-of-fact response to the evangelists’ enquiry on her fate after she dies: “If I have only thwoe bap a little and thwoe bon throughout my life, then I will go to Heaven. If I have thwoe bap a lot then I will go to Hell and become a braet.” Lok Hul Sowan explains that “satthie is faith. It is clean and good. It is the leader of the heart, causing incredible happiness and fulfilment when one does good deeds (thwoe bon).” He suggests that “all must have satthie” in addition to sel to successfully produce bon.
Throughout my many engagements with the Day of Sel at Toul Sangkae, a very poor woman who lived along the nearby railroad routinely and irritatingly begged me for money during the ritual of receiving sel. My presence as a foreigner in the ritual was welcomed yet awkward, particularly amongst a few female elder worshippers who hostilely called me under their breath the “barang” (literally “French”, also used derogatorily toward white foreigners). The begging woman was scandalous even amongst those who found my presence unpleasant. Her begging inside the sala chan was considered unacceptable, especially during the Day of Sel. Outside the sala chan was always a queue of beggars waiting for the worshippers to pass. Giving to beggars was a very common form of thwoe bon (cf. Parsons & Lawreniuk 2016). Her place was amongst them, not inside the hall with the worshippers. Even though the woman sat amongst the worshippers, her will could have been seen as suspect due to her devious behaviour.

With the proper habitus and willingness to plead for sel, the lay worshippers prepared themselves to receive sel from a sole monk who would later enter the sala chan. At 5:00 am, the head (male) lay leader called an acar led the group of roughly one hundred worshippers by starting the opening call to worship called the botsarophonn. Unlike the thoam that is recited in Pali, the call to worship is a melodic chant that uses a high form of Khmer. The botsarophonn goes as follows:

Please, worship the Enlightened God (Buddha), perfect, the most perfect one in the world.

He is teacher of humanity and the gods/angels (tavata). He preaches in order to disciple all life.

He points to the central path, the perfect path, which can completely eradicate suffering and existential worry. He can cut the cycles of life.

The word of God remains today. People have remnants of past lives from before. Strive to study, strive to learn, to know, to remember well.

Follow the way, you will have the highest happiness (soka). There is no other happiness compared to this calm. This happiness is the greatest form of happiness. It leaves all suffering behind. Since this world continues on, so happiness will also because the thoam is calm.

I worship the thoam, Buddha, and the monkhood in every way. We must gather and respect these three jewels. They are the cool shade of the world.

The statues of Buddha, the bones of God (i.e. the relics), are the representation of Buddha.
May the grace of the 3 jewels help the Khmer (Pali, Khemora) have happiness and continue on.

It is here in this final stanza that we see the nationalistic role of Khmer Buddhism. Khmer Buddhism is localised for the Khmer people. Khmer Buddhism helps create a sense of Khmerness and is crucial in forming the ordered Khmer world (Kent & Chandler 2008). Even my atheist friends whom I taught English at NLF’s English language ministry understood this intrinsic connection between Khmer Buddhism and the sense of Khmerness. One such friend called Destiny, a feisty migrant from the mountains of northeast Cambodia suggested that “we [Cambodians] are Buddhists because we are Khmer.” Even though she claimed to be an atheist and found organised religion problematic by keeping people back from some sort of intellectual modernity, she claimed that “we need religion because if we did not have religion how can we have morality (selthoam)?” Destiny pinpoints the logic of Khmer religion. Religion helps people “do good” and creates order. It is worth noting that the term “morality (selthoam)” can be parsed into sel and thoam – the precepts and the teachings of Buddha. The goal of highlighting this final stanza of the call to worship, in other words, fits in with the broader conversation of how religion shapes notions of Khmerness (see, e.g. Chean 2002; Davis 2009; Kent 2007; Kent & Chandler 2008; Ledgerwood 1991; Zucker 2006).

Immediately following the opening call to worship, the assembly of lay worshippers begin reciting the lay thoam that pleads for sel. Being from Appalachia, the cadence and rhythm of the recited lay thoam always reminded me of the singing of katydids at night. With its pulsating rhythm and harmony in an unknown tongue, it was calming and soothing to a foggy mind in the early hours before the rising sun. Cettra was unsure the precise meaning behind the lay thoam. The meaning was not important, he suggested. Most people did not understand Pali nor cared to grasp its meaning. They learned through memory and practice, as discussed above. The point, he continued, was that the recitation, the physical action of uttering the thoam and being penetrated by the soundwaves of the sacred thoam prepared the worshippers’ hearts to receive the sel from the sole monk who would soon enter the sala chan.

After thirty minutes of reciting the lay thoam, a break occurs while a financial offering is taken. Worshippers take the opportunity to stretch and chat amongst their neighbours. After ten minutes when the offering has been taken, the head acar calls people back to take their seats to welcome the monk who will distribute the sel. He, the acar, typically did this by making a general
announcement and by giving a short teaching. On one such occasion he taught the stirring crowd the following:

When we worship, we must be centred. We get distracted and our hearts leave and need to come back. We must centre our body, speech, and heart. Before we ask for sel, we must not think that we can sin and then just go to the Day of Sel and be made clean. This is not proper. We must always be centred because it helps us not sin.

When we ask for sel, we must forget what we have done before. Asking for sel is important, but preserving sel is more important than asking for sel. Don’t do wrong with any sel. We can ask for sel again and everyday but not change our life, we don’t have value. If we have already asked for sel but still do wrong again and again, then there’s no need to ask for sel. Don’t give your heart drag and pull to do evil. The heart is the leader. If our heart leads us to do good, good. But if our heart leads us to do evil, this is a problem. Be careful with your heart. The heart is the unseen truth. It is the way.

After this time of preparation, a sole monk enters the sala chan and sits in an elevated position toward the centre of the hall. From that point on the worshippers are oriented toward the monk. He leads the assembly of worshippers in a call and response form of the thoam that distributes the sel.
Crucially, the giving and receiving of sel is achieved through the recitation of the thoam led by the monk. After five sels are offered and received, an additional call and response is offered for those who desire eight sels. Again, all ten sels are reserved for the monkhood, the King, and a very small selection of nuns, and, therefore, are not offered to the laity. Once all sels are distributed, those who brought offerings for the monkhood can immediately make bon by placing a financial offering on top of their offerings in their coengpien (offering bowl), presenting it to the monk who takes the money, and finally place their offerings in front of the monk eating area. Participating in the Day of Sel, or any religious event for that matter, is considered to be a form of thwoe bon, illustrating the ubiquity how and where bon can be made. While the monkhood and lay leadership recognised bon’s potential to be made through any good deed, those pedestrian to Buddhism spoke of bon to be reserved solely for religious activities like the giving of an offering during Benbat and being present amongst the recitation of the sacred thoam.

Sin as a thing

I conclude this ethnographic engagement of receiving sel by highlighting two crucial moments. Firstly, it is imperative to note that sel is distributed through the recitation of the thoam. With the proper habitus and having a sincere will, worshippers are affected through the utterance of the thoam. It is from this ethnographic engagement with Khmer religious praxis that we can better understand the thing-like quality of sin that Khmer religion aims to address.

Recall the image of Buddha reciting his thoam while resting on the coiled niek. The thoam transforms and tames. The botsarophonn calls it “calm” and the “cool shade of the world.” It has power and agency beyond its linguistic function to signify words to corresponding meaning. Once, a monk inquired if by learning the Khmer language, which is rooted in Pali, my “heart was becoming supremely happy.” To him, this was not a figure of speech. He understood the Khmer language to have the power to transform my heart into a higher, more perfect heart. For the Khmer, words have the power to create. Having the sincere will (satthie), holding on to sel, and sitting in the presence of the recited thoam or a sermon, regardless if one comprehends the meaning of the utterances, is productive in the making of bon. As observed in Toul Sangkae, the vast majority
of Khmer people rarely participated in *Benbat* or the Day of Sel. However, joining festivals or ceremonies that incorporate Buddhist rituals such as weddings, funerals, house or business coronations are commonly experienced. During each of these rituals, a monk will initially distribute *sel* to the audience, anticipating most of the people in attendance hold on to very little (if any) *sel*, thus allowing them to effectively *thwoe bon*. A lay leader (*acar*) will typically accompany the monk to these events and lead the laity in the proper call and response. As has been highlighted above, the meaning of the *thoam* is not the most salient feature of this “jewel” of Khmer Buddhism. The *thoam* seems to be an autonomous *thing*, having agency of its own when uttered.

The *thing*-likeness of language will be familiar to anthropologists from other contexts. Considering the salience of the “Word (*logos*)” throughout Protestantism, it is no surprise of the multiplicity of possible language ideologies at play in Christian life (Bialecki & del Pinal 2011). For those of the Word of Faith Movement, an Evangelical Christian group in North America and Sweden, *words* have a very potent agency of their own (Coleman 1996; 2004). Simon Coleman found that “Sacred words to these Christians are not passive receptacles of meaning [...] but performative” in shaping the material objects that contains the word (1996: 108). Words can be eaten and walked on. Reading the sacred words of the Bible works to bless the reader beyond its contemplative utility. They can inhabit the body like objects of their own (*ibid.*: 113). Words can become like a gift, initiating a Maussan gift exchange between the believer and God (Coleman 2004). Like a gift, a Christian in the Word of Faith Movement can utter a claim, and that utterance has agency that compels God to fulfil said claim.

Language has elsewhere has been noted for its productive ability to control people. James Siegel (1986) explores the use of language to mark and mask hierarchy in central Java. Indonesian, being the national language and used when, for instance, people spoke as citizens, had a productive interplay with Javanese language, which is bifurcated into high and low forms and is deployed when distinguishing hierarchy. With this complex milieu of language, Siegel explores how words were entangled in the state apparatus to control and censor during the New Order. One could use a certain language to mask or mark their relationship with the New Order. Jokes, for example, could be used as a political tool. Laughter exposed the person, allowing the joke teller to see and know who exactly their audience was based on their reaction to certain words. In this way, words were productive in making the invisible visible.
Similar to Coleman’s Christian friends who read the Bible for its productive power beyond its linguistic function to signify meaning, the Khmer engage religious language for its productive capability to receive sel and to generate bon. Listening to, reciting, and even being in the presence of the sacred thoam is a form of thwoe bon that can potentially lead to the production of bon. Additionally, following Siegel’s logic, words are tools that can address that which is hidden within the person, namely, sin. In the Khmer context, sacred words can help balance and purify the fickle heart that is prone to be polluted by sin.

Conclusion – sin as chaos

Therefore, the second and final moment I aim to highlight, and as I have been building throughout this chapter, is the logic of Khmer religion to address sin through a substantive “goodness” that purifies the heart, thus elevating the person into a higher moral order. As the acar taught moments before the monk entered the hall to distribute sel, the heart is the leader of the person. If taken flippantly, hearts can leave the person to his or her harm. Hearts lead one into good or evil behaviour. It is imperative, therefore, that one’s heart is purified through bon so not to remain evil and unstable, further polluting the individual. Understanding sel and bon to be productive agents when generated, we can understand sin to be the flipside of the coin that animates Khmer religion. Sin is produced when one sins.

To reiterate, sin is polyvalent in nature. “Sin” indeed indexes immoral behaviour, but sin is also a destructive, polluting thing in the world that is created when one thwoe bap. It corrupts the heart and thus corrupts the person. Religious praxis aims to address this problem, this “Thing,” to borrow from Nitzan Shoshan (2014), that is evil and destructive. Here, Shoshan’s provocative essay is helpful to understand how the concern for a harmful Thing in a person can take shape on the national level. Shoshan explores the German state’s effort to quell the spread of neo-Nazism, arguing the state apparatuses that address the rise of neo-Nazism treat fascism as a pathogen, a Thing within the neo-Nazi that must be exposed and eradicated. The German state implements such treatments as “body-language therapy” that trains the body not to allow the Fascist Thing to manifest itself. Therefore, hate must be governed to keep the Fascist Thing from regaining traction in German society. Shoshan’s usage of the
Fascist *Thing* implies that it is not clearly known who is and who is not infected. For the Khmer, all people are sinners, in that everyone produces sin. All are infected. However, the Khmer treat sin similar to the Fascist *Thing*, it needs to be dealt with and managed.

This chapter has explored the logic of Khmer Buddhism, arguing that the goal of religion is to tame the person, rooted in their wild heart, which extrapolates outward into the person’s everyday life as well as the future, teleological life. Religious praxis aims to produce *bon*, or a “goodness,” that works to bless the person and works to remedy the sin one produces through sinful behaviour. As has been discussed, sin ought not be conceptualised purely for its semiotic function, that is, indexing evil behaviour. Sin is a destructive pollutant in the world that destabilises the person. In this way, sin is much like chaos. The problem with Khmer Buddhism in Toul Sangkae was that Buddhist rituals were inaccessible to the poor. Only those who had the financial means to give offerings could participate in the rituals to produce *bon*. Christianity offered something for the poor and hope for practical blessings when one cannot give.

This chapter has laid the foundation to understand Christian life in Phnom Penh and the work of Jesus’s salvation. As will be explored in the remaining chapters, Christianity allows the Christian to be a part of a new moral order, one that is both outside of yet subject to the Khmer world. Jesus’s salvation from sin is not metaphorical, but takes on a multitude of every day locales.
Chapter III– “They Need Jesus in Their Heart”: the Agonism of Christian Conversion

The causes lie deep and simply – the causes are a hunger in a stomach, multiplied a million times; a hunger in a single soul, hunger for joy and some security, multiplied a million times; muscles and mind aching to grow, to work, to create, a million times (from Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath, 2014[1939]: 258)

And [Jesus] lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh” (Luke 6: 20-21 ESV)

Introduction

This chapter explores the agonistic nature of Christian conversion. It explores a variety of Christians’ conversion experiences, displaying the turbulent process of becoming Christian in the Khmer context. Many are uncertain to what exactly being a Christian entails. Some fail to understand the salience of Christian faith. This chapter ultimately argues that the agonism of conversion, namely, the angst, confusion, and uncertainty of being a Christian, creates the possibility to experience Jesus. In the previous Chapter, we explore the logic of Khmer religion, which aims to bring the person to a state of equilibrium and stabilisation. Khmer notions of religion rely on the interplay of wildness and tameness – chaos and order. In this chapter we see how the nature of “becoming Christian” aims to reach a state of clarity. Absolute certitude is impossible. This facilitates the working of Jesus to help reach equilibrium. This also suggests that Jesus’s salvific work is expected to extrapolate outward into the world, as we will see in the following Chapters.

Throughout this thesis, we have seen agonism to be an agent of chaos, a mechanism that brings definition to chaos and radical uncertainty. Agonism, I
stress, helps propel things forward. It is the necessary friction to move from one state to another or even create something from nothing as explored through the fundamental aspect of chaos theory (see Introduction). This chapter explores the intrinsic agonism embedded in Khmer Christianity. Here, I am slightly using the term agonism differently. I do not primarily mean that agonism is what propels Christianity forwards, per se. As will be explored in the following Chapters, persecution (*karbietbien*) (Chapter IV) and political agonism (Chapter V) indeed help propel the Evangelical project forward. In this chapter, I primarily mean that intrinsic to Christianity is an ambient angst, turmoil, and the like. This chapter argues that the agonistic nature of Christianity, namely the tension created between being Khmer and Christian, allows for the possibility to experience Jesus through miracles and charisms. In this sense, we can see how this fits into order-from-chaos model.

I begin with the story of a young man called Meng who slowly and gradually became a Christian. In this vignette, Meng experiences Jesus in a highly affective way. My aim in deploying Meng’s story at the forefront is so that his story might be running in the background throughout the chapter.

**Retreating to the Countryside: Meng’s encounter with Jesus**

Amongst the small moulded rented rooms and piles of rubbish littered along the dirt road that proved to be nearly impassable during the rainy season stood Jesus Village Church’s (JVC) four-story barricaded and vibrant church complex. The church operated as a dormitory for university students and a Christian school run by Chanthol in addition to being the church’s sanctuary. It was a hub for the nearly two-hundred church members to meet, fellowship, worship, and play together. Children of the neighbourhood would come and play and fight through the gates with the children of Chanthol’s school during the day. Four nights of the week children who were not enrolled in the school could come and learn English and computer skills for a small fee. The church was meant to be a beacon of hope to the residents of Toul Sangkae. Programmes were designed to invite non-church members to attend. Very few people were enticed to join unless they were guests of a church member. The most vibrant and active members of the church were those without a job, such as elders, or the university students who, currently or formerly, dwelt in the church’s dormitory.
Every year, JVC organises a weekend evangelistic programme called, in English, “Come and See.” Come and See 2016 was held at the seaside town of Sihanoukville (Kampong Saom) in August and funded by a Korean professor of biology who had a close relationship Peter and Sun. The young adults of JVC were encouraged to invite their non-Christian friends and colleagues to join them during the retreat as it was designed to give participants an introduction to Christianity through multiple seminars. Several members of the church joined the event to cook for and serve the guests. Peter, Sun, and a mission team from Korea consisting of the event’s benefactor, his wife, their pastor, and seven talented and enthusiastic university students organised the event. Their “mission” was to prayerfully mingle, play with, and encourage the Khmer participants. Irrespective of the evangelistic thrust of the programme, Come and See was a fun-filled weekend of playing, relaxing, eating, and being together with new friends and old away from Phnom Penh and at the beach.

During Come and See I met a charismatic and bright university student of electrical engineering called Meng. He was the model participant, as this was his first experience with Come and See and, more importantly, he was not a Christian. Meng was enthusiastic to participate in the weekend’s programmes, dancing and playing the silly games we played throughout the weekend. During the second day, the seventy-plus people loaded two buses and visited the beach. The weather was beautiful, temperate, and very welcomed for these city...
dwellers. After twenty minutes of swimming in the waves with a cheerful group, I found my way to Chanthol and his two children who were playing in the sand. Standing nearby was Meng. Chanthol introduced us and informed me that Meng had intended to join the event the previous year but was unavailable. Meng echoed this; however, as we chatted for a while, I soon discovered his reluctance to join.

Being the oldest child of two, Meng, like so many first-born Khmer, had great familial responsibilities and expectations. He was under the most pressure to become successful in order to take care of the family, especially financially. His family, he said, were Buddhists and did not like Christianity. While Meng was intrigued with Christianity, he did not want to join the year prior out of reluctance to shame his family by entertaining a foreign religion. Being from Phnom Penh, Meng claimed to be “modern,” indexed by his lack of experience with farming. His family was middle class and were established in the city. He was educated and, above all, he respected his parents, speaking highly of his mother and grandmother in particular. Away from Chanthol, he confessed that he did not really understand Christianity. He even critiqued Christianity by echoing what I heard from several others: Christianity teaches one to disrespect his or her family by prohibiting the offering of incense to his or her ancestors. Also, he heard that Jesus teaches Christians to hate their families, which is no doubt a reference to Luke 14:26: “if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (ESV). He was conflicted, as he wanted to show respect to his hosts but did not find any merit in becoming Christian. As Meng spoke to me, I became sceptical that the team’s hard work would produce the results for which they aimed.

The closing celebration of Come and See ended with a foot washing ceremony conducted by the Korean team. They presented bowls of clean water, clean towels, and chairs for participants to sit in the front of the conference room we had been using throughout the weekend. Participants took turns in groups dispersing amongst the empty seats to receive prayer and have their feet washed by one of the members of the Korean team. Throughout the weekend I struggled between being a participant, observer, foreigner, and researcher. Peter, for example, suddenly asked me to join the Korean benefactor for an impromptu question-and-answer session on academic life outside of Cambodia. I had a strong inclination that Peter might ask me to join them during the foot washing ceremony. While the foot washing stations were being set up in the
front of the conference room and the Korean team took their posts behind the chairs where their participants would soon sit, I tried not to make eye-contact with Peter. Washing dirty feet was something I was uncomfortable doing, even for research’s sake. My stomach soon dropped. Peter had called me up to join them. As I approached an empty chair to stand behind I did mental maths for the maximum amount of feet I would have to wash: seven groups times an average of six participants per group divided by twelve Korean ministers (plus me) made around six or eight feet to wash.

While awkwardly washing the feet of my first participant, I noticed amongst the next group in the foot-washing-queue was Meng in what looked like distress. He was rocking back and forth, hiding his head in the neck hole of his shirt, and fighting back tears. I assumed, like me, he found the foot washing experience awkward and uncomfortable. As my participant left I was given a new bowl and new towel from Chanthol for my new participant. Meng’s group was next and he remained sitting on the ground while his group found other chairs to sit in. I became hopeful that I might not have to wash someone else’s feet. Meng looked up at me, sprung up, and quickly sat in my chair. After Chanthol gave prayer for these new participants I moved around to Meng’s front and knelt down facing him. I looked in his eyes, which were now full of tears. I grabbed a new clean towel and gave it to him to wipe and perhaps hide his face, as he was clearly embarrassed and shocked by his uncontrollable emotions. “How do you feel?” I asked. “Nervous. Embarrassed,” he replied. “Why do you feel nervous?” I asked. “Don’t worry about crying, I cry often,” I tried to reassure him. He said that he never cries. Motioning to his chest, he said he felt something in his heart (cett) that he had never felt before. Sobbing by this point, all he could utter amongst the stream of snot and tears was, “love. There is so much love (sec’kt key sralaen, mien sec’kt key sralaen craen).” Gasping for air, “I’ve never felt this love before. I’ve never felt this joy before.” Surprised, I too became deeply moved and began to cry myself. Washing his feet became much easier for me. It felt like a privilege. He gave me a large hug and he sat back down back with his group. None of my other participants responded like him. Throughout the hour-long service, I would glance over to Meng who remained sitting with a towel over his head and sobbed. His story does not end there, yet I will pause for the time being.

Clearly this was an intense and highly emotional reaction from Meng. I do not want to attempt to analyse this event through a Freudian psychoanalytical approach, deducing it to be some sort of catharsis. Indeed, it was a cathartic
experience for myself. Yet I can only speculate what exactly he felt, why he felt it, and what was going on in his life leading up to that moment to cause such a reaction. Even if I could fit all those pieces together, Meng himself would perhaps be incapable of fully explaining his experience. Thus the problem with using such a moment of affect as ethnographic evidence. What is significant was not the intense affect, but the key components that fit into the broader framework for how so many Khmer evangelical Christians came to “know Jesus (skoal PreahJesu).” What happened to Meng was that he experienced Jesus in his heart. “Experiencing Jesus” often indexed not only Jesus’s reality but also the working of Jesus in the life of the person to help bring clarity of faith and order to the chaotic world. My aim is that by the end of the chapter, this event will be made clearer.

As explained in the previous chapter (Chapter II), the Khmer heart (cett) is no metaphor. It is understood to be the centre and leader of the person. Fickle and ever-changing, the quality of one’s heart shapes the quality of the person. An unstable, wild (prei) heart results in an unstable, wild person. A calm, stable heart (obpekkha) results in a state of equilibrium and balance. Religious praxis helps stabilise, centre, and purify the heart. Jesus coming to the heart of Meng fits into the larger model of Khmer worship outlined in Chapter II. There was great affect and clarity. Importantly, Meng’s experience was situated in a precarious context of religious uncertainty, confusion, and the like, which fits into the broader category of “agonism” explored throughout this thesis. Meng expressed to me his scepticism, reluctance, confusion, and his angst about entertaining Christianity. Even in the moment of experiencing Jesus was an element of embarrassment, surprise, and uncertainty. Yet it was through this agonism, I argue, that he came to experience Jesus in his heart. Having Jesus in the heart, in other words, is an example of the interplay between chaos and order. Additionally, experiencing Jesus, whether in the heart or working in the world, is the fundamental reason why the majority of my evangelical Christian interlocutors “believed Jesus.” This certitude, I argue, is necessarily connected to uncertainty. The intrinsic agonism of Khmer Christian faith is an important aspect of evangelical Khmer Christianity and helps shape Christian life. Before unpacking this argument further, we first need to situate conversion to Christianity in Phnom Penh.
Re-entering the Wild – the city and conversion

But before, I thought that when I had yet to come to Phnom Penh, when I was in the countryside, I thought that Christians are not good. Christians are not good because they are not allowed to go to the wat, they don’t offer incense, they don’t give respect to the monks. This is not good. But what happened when I came to Phnom Penh, I knew that God is good. – Sopheap, friend from NLF

Thus far, this thesis has explored how critical the Khmer “order,” rooted in images of the “countryside” and the “heart,” is important for understanding notions of Khmerness. This Khmerness, while abstract, remains important for many Khmer to hold onto. The trouble is that life in Cambodia, and specifically Phnom Penh, is situated in a globalised world that is constantly changing, perhaps too quickly for many to cope. As Chapter I explores, the countryside and home provide the image of the ideal Khmer world and locus of Khmer order. Dwelling in the city complicates this. Phnom Penh is a “wild” place like the forest (prei) where moral ambiguity flourishes and can influence people to become wild through sinning. Homes are barricaded. Neighbours are unknown. The wealthy do not share their resources. Dangers lurk, especially in the night. The fear of fire or government forces destroying homes and life are ambient anxieties in Toul Sangkae. A different sort of precariousness is a part of urban life in Phnom Penh compared to the presumed safety of the rural countryside.

However, like the forest, resources and opportunities are available to those who venture into the city. The countryside, while stable, was described as “poor,” “ignorant,” “boring,” and “of a different time,” indexed by the lack of education, healthcare, jobs and in many cases electricity and modern farming equipment. While the idea of Khmerness was regularly described to be back “home in the countryside (naew srok Komnaet),” several of my Khmer interlocutors lamented how families were being fragmented due to individuals migrating to other Provinces, small cities like Battambang, Siem Reap, monstrous Phnom Penh, or even to other countries in search of economic opportunities. The liberalisation of the Khmer economy in 1993 initiated a boom in neoliberal industry and globalisation, which has produced a bourgeoning middle-class. Many provincial migrants to Phnom Penh initially find difficulty navigating life in the city; yet as they learn to navigate the city, they begin to adopt the modern and capitalistic dreams of the middle-class (Derks 2008).
To reiterate that which has been addressed in Chapter I, I am not suggesting that we ought to view the urban vis-à-vis the rural as a static dichotomy. Rather, while indexing order and chaos, the two work together to help animate Khmer sociality. Empirically, as Annuska Derks (2008: Chapter 1) notes, we can see this in the seventy-five percent migrant population of Phnom Penh who have created a village-like, “rice people of the city” sociality in Phnom Penh. The initial anxiety of city-life puts stress on the provincial migrant who longs for the stability and familiarity found in their home village. Village-city networks are used to navigate the city. Many migrants are able to find a balance between dwelling in the chaotic city while longing for the stability of the countryside. As Derks (2008) found for her poor provincial female interlocutors, this balance was achieved through “code switching” between being “proper” Khmer women of the countryside and “modern” and savvy women of the city. For my Christian interlocutors like Tari, Christianity played a central role in this balance.

Tari was charming and full of life. A charismatic member of NLF, she was the sort of person that had never met a stranger and filled the room with laughter. I was struck to see her one day swollen-eyed, as if she had been weeping for hours. She found out that two of her sisters were moving to Thailand as migrant workers. Her family, like so many Khmer, was close-knit, even though she, the eldest, lived in Phnom Penh and her family in the sleepy Province of Kampot. She understood the anxieties of leaving home for a new and unknown place. Leaving for a new country magnified this anxiety. Tari was filled with hope, sadness, and fear – hope for a better future for her sisters and family; sadness to have her sisters move abroad; fear for the worst.

While many Khmer women who migrate abroad find happy and successful lives by finding good wages or perhaps marrying a wealthier man, some have horrific experiences. The organisation my wife worked with throughout my research offered crisis pregnancy care and support. Several of their clients were known as “China Brides,” those who moved to China as a kind of mail-order-bride in hopes of a better future. After being abused, typically by their husbands and/or mothers-in-law, these women fled back to Cambodia. Some Khmer women were oblivious to these sorts of dangers. Raksmi, one of my female friends suggested that Khmer women have “white ears,” meaning they are naïve, gullible, and easily duped. Tari was, in my opinion, not such a woman with white ears.
Tari explicitly stated that “the reason why [she] believed Jesus was because of a job.” Her conversion to Christianity was directly linked to her migration to the city in pursuit of a job. Prior to moving to Phnom Penh, she “strongly hated Jesus” as well as Christians. She and her family were faithful Buddhists and she desired to be a teacher and “an ordinary person of the countryside (srok srai mneak).” After finishing Secondary School in 2008, she had difficulty passing her university qualifying exam. Failing her exam drastically hindered her chances to receive funding and ultimately to become a teacher. Her mother wanted her to study in Phnom Penh but could not afford the university fees, requiring Tari to move to Phnom Penh and find a job to save for university. She initially worked in a garment factory making only sixty US dollars a month, not nearly enough to have any left for savings. In 2009 she met her childhood friend who became a Christian through working with a Christian NGO. She told Tari that they were hiring and that they paid significantly more than factory wages. She compelled Tari to apply for the position and that “when they ask if you are a person who believes Jesus, you should say, ‘yes, I believe.’” Tari lied during the interview, suggesting she was a Christian, and got the job. Upon working with the organisation she “began to watch those who believe d Jesus, but I did not offer myself. I only did as they did. I worked there for one year. I saved some money and I stopped working there in order to come study in Phnom Penh.” She claimed that her faith was “unclear (ot cbah)” at that time.

It is imperative to understand that this sort of insincerity of faith was a part of the Christian milieu in Phnom Penh. Christian organisations and churches alike were very accustomed to people like Tari who falsely claimed to be a Christian in order to gain from their resources. Evangelicals allowed this sort of behaviour because their hope was that through time and exposure to Christianity, the person might have a profound experience that would compel him or her of the truth of Christianity. This is precisely what happened to Tari.

After working a year for the NGO, Tari saved enough money to begin studying at university. Unfortunately, upon beginning her studies her family had an emergency that required financial assistance. By this time she was caught in the economic gravity well of Phnom Penh. Remaining in Phnom Penh was likely to deliver a job; however, the ratio of saving versus spending seemed to always be even. She gave her family all of her savings. After which she claimed she, did not have any money to pay the school once again. I said that, “if Jesus is true, please let me study and give me money to pay the school as well.” At that time, I needed to find a job in Phnom Penh once again. But I could not find any. I heard my friend say that [a Christian-owned
A café that employed female sex workers as a means to exit the sex industry was looking to hire, but they only took those women who have problems and difficulties. But I did not have difficulties and I was not a woman who was having a problem (meaning, she was not a part of the sex industry). Then a miracle happened: I put in my CV there and they looked at my CV. They saw that, “oh, she believes Jesus.” They phoned me.

At that time I was truly having incredible difficulties, because I did not have money and I did not have a home to stay. Sometimes I did not have food. But I said that, “God, please prepare the way for me, to have what I need – money to pay the school, a home to stay.” A miracle happened! The boss of [the café] helped me. They gave me money. They gave me money to look for a home to stay. At that time, I was truly having incredible difficulties, but I was not without hope because I believed that Jesus had helped me. I offered myself in 2010. Praise God, I had money to study at university for myself. Praise God, I had a good place to work. God really did a miracle!

One of the reasons why I choose to use Tari’s conversion narrative as an example is that it captures so much of how others also experienced conversion. Christianity was a way for her to bring a balance to the agonism of living in the city. Tari especially displays how doubt and faith are entangled. She claimed to not be a Christian, yet put on her CV that she was one, clearly presenting herself in a certain way to boost her chances for the job. Yet she also goes along with faith, testing Jesus to provide a miracle and asking God to “prepare the way.”

Like Meng and Tari, experiencing Jesus was the central reason why many Khmer people became evangelical Christians. This experience did not happen in a vacuum.

Dormitory ministry along with offering English and computer classes were prominent evangelistic tools amongst Evangelical churches in Phnom Penh. Every Christian community I researched had a dormitory ministry associated with their church. In part, this was due to share in the costs of renting a space for a church building. Moreover, it was an evangelistic strategy to offer young, poor migrants to the city affordable rent. By becoming enfolded into a caring, close-knitted community, so the strategy went, one would experience the love of Jesus.

One did not need to be a Christian to live in the dormitory so long as they abided by the rules and “regularly” participated in the religious life of the church. Not all residents became Christians, though. NLF’s dorm had a few residents who rejected converting. One resident and student of mine confessed that he was simply disinterested in Christianity. I asked him if he felt obligated to attend the effervescent, Sunday evening worship services that took over the church.
complex. He did not. He found the Christians of NLF to be kind, but his stay in the church dormitory was a means to an end. JVC’s dorm life was slightly more rigid. Regardless if one was a Christian or not, they were obliged, though not “forced,” to attend worship meetings and early morning prayer and Bible studies. The offering of affordable rent and being a part of a community, offering English and computer classes, praying, worshipping, sharing meals, and playing together helped train the person to “trust” Christians and, thus, Jesus.

Sopheap, mentioned in this section’s epigraph, provides one more example of someone who joined a Christian community for their resources and eventually began to trust Jesus through his providing miracles. Though sceptical of Christianity, she moved from the countryside into a Christian dormitory that offered affordable housing with peers her age and social status. She attended the mandatory Bible studies that so many Christian dormitories demand. During her second year her funding ran out. Being deeply troubled by her situation, she prayed:

“are you/God the real God or not? Because I heard them (her friends in the dorm) say that when we have problems and we pray to you, you answer, you help.” So when I ran out of money for school, I prayed to God. The next day I had to pay the school, but I didn’t have any money. I told my brother that I did not have money. He said, “sister, so where are you going to get the funds in order to pay the school?” So I prayed to God. The next day came, my brother he called me and said that he now has enough money and gave me money to pay the school. I felt that, “oh! God must be Lord because of this!” I thought that, “this is impossible! I thought that perhaps when I pray God would not actually answer, because I thought that there cannot be a God like this.” When I listened, I began to pray and became interested in God – God blessed me that week. I saw a miracle of God. When this happened, God, he did a miracle more and more so I can study well. I prayed to God when I had exams and I did well! I had a feeling, “God, you are truly Lord.” I thought this is a miracle, because God did a miracle for me. He blessed me. He blessed me. After this, I chose to receive God. I got baptised. I got baptised and received God. I think that God did a miracle for me.

Sopheap displays how surprised she was after each miracle. This surprise was how she knew it was a miracle from God. “Surprise” clearly plays a large role in experiencing Jesus’s miracles (cf. Bialecki 2017). Also, it is clear that experiencing Jesus is connected to the economic instability these Khmer people find themselves in, especially in Toul Sangkae. Prior to investigating the linkage of surprise with the miraculous, we need to understand how this economic dynamic fits in with the broader anthropological work of Christian conversion in the global south.
On Conversion

There is little doubt that the rise of evangelical Christianity in Cambodia coincides with the ratification of a new constitution in 1993 that liberalised the economy and opened its borders to foreign investors. Evangelical Christianity, and especially Pentecostal Christianity, has dramatically increased in the global south since the advent of globalisation (Robbins 2004b). Additionally, post-colonialism and neoliberalism have been directly linked to the increase of religious change and the rise in intensity of cosmological activity. For example, Jean and John Comaroff (1999) argue newer and more robust experiences of the occult in post-colonial South Africa, while inscrutable, were direct results of a post-colonial and neoliberal processes. They argue the demand for an occult-like market was linked to the rise of modernity and the free market. “Gruesome trade,” they suggest, was “nested comfortably within the orbit of everyday commerce, circulating human organs to whomever had the liquid cash to invest in them – they are, after all, a materialized form of cultural capital – in order to abet their undertakings” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999: 287). In this case, an economy for the occult grew in attempt to achieve the unachievable goals of capitalism while dealing with new forms of power. Similarly, Christian conversion, according to the Comaroffs (1990), is an extension of colonial oppression. Thus for those exploring Christianity in the global south through a similar Marxist vein, Christian conversion is simply a way to cope with the tensions of capitalism and the unachievable goals of a new middle class (cf. Taussig 1977).

It is tempting to view Christian conversion in the Khmer context through a similar logic to that as Comaroffs and Taussig. Stories like Tari and Sopheap certainly resemble their logic. Becoming a Christian was a means for a job and a way to navigate unfamiliar and modern life in the city. Again, the vast majority of the young adults I came to know were introduced to Christianity through dormitory ministry or free English and computer classes. Tari herself admitted that she came to “believe Jesus because of a job.” Christianity indeed does something for Khmer Christians. It gives meaning to their changing lives, a sense of belonging in such a precarious context as Toul Sangkae, and provides networks that are tied to modernity through foreigners in the form of medicine, education, and jobs. Yet, looking at conversion through this sort of functionalist lens strips the converted from their own agency and disallows a more nuanced
and ethnographic insight into Christian life. It also assumes a naïveté on the behalf of the converted, deducing them to be victims of continued colonial oppression in the form of Protestant Christian missionaries. What is striking amongst the Khmer Christians I had gotten to know was that many were very aware and concerned for these sorts of issues raised above.

Some Khmer Christians leaders were especially leery of missionaries, primarily due to foreigners’ ignorance of Khmer culture and the control they demanded in church life. One friend and pastor called Dara told me of a Korean missionary who enticed people to attend his church by giving out five-kilogram bags of rice for each family who attended. The missionary would supposedly lock the doors during the church service preventing people from leaving early. Dara found this completely absurd not simply because of the obvious attempt to coerce Khmer people to attend the church, boosting attendance records, but also these “rice Christians” were exploiting Christianity for their own gain. On the same lines, another Christian friend whom I call Samay and who was overtly cynical of missionaries, mockingly suggested (in English):

So you set up a big camp, “(mockingly) Oh, come and hear the word of God! The teaching! Blah blah blah.” Cambodians are clever. They’re very clever. They know what you’re trying to do. They know what you are pleased with, so they’ll do things that will please you. My society is a society that pleases people. Because they can manipulate you. [It’s all about] the money.

Many Khmer were very aware of the link between Christianity, globalisation, and modernity. Some, especially those in NLF, actively embraced it. Samay was not fond of those Christians. Samay went on to say how his fellow Khmer people knew how to manipulate the missionary: “(in a feeble voice) ‘I’m poor. I’m poor. Help me. Help me!’ But the money [missionaries give] goes [straight] into their pockets.” For Samay and Dara, it was the missionaries who were naïve and the Khmer who were exploitative. Additionally, Khmer Christians initially understood Christianity to be a western religion and Jesus to be the God of the “white foreigner (barang).” Most of my Christian interlocutors noted how this foreignness created a tension that was difficult to reconcile. They were deeply concerned with remaining Khmer and not becoming foreign. They, in other words, simultaneously embraced and rejected the cultural continuity of Khmerness.

Utilising the continuity verses rupture debate described in the thesis’s Introduction might not be the most productive framework to unpack Christian
life within the milieu of Cambodia and other Southeast Asian contexts. Liana Chua (2012a), for example, stresses that the “rupture” vis-à-vis “continuity thinking” is inapplicable for the Bidayuhs of Malaysia, who gradually converted to Christianity in the 1960s and 1970s. Christianity, she found, allowed for the Bidayuhs to navigate their own ethnic and cultural identity around a robust Malay state apparatus without having to assimilate into the broader Malay national framework that was directly linked to Islam. Becoming Christian allowed the Bidayuh to remain ethnically distinct from Malay society. Importantly, conversion in Borneo was gradual and “piecemeal” (2012b: 515). This gradual conversion is similar to how many of my Khmer interlocutors became Christian. Very few people had rapturous conversion experiences. Even for Meng, whose initial encounter with Jesus was rapturous, conversion took more time. Experiencing Jesus was an important event in the long process of becoming Christian.

The Sunday after the Come and See event, I met Meng parking our motos at JVC. We greeted each other and walked toward the stairwell that led to the sanctuary on the second floor. Meng brought his mother with him who wanted to come and investigate the church. That Sunday Dr Chinn, whom I will introduce below, gave a fiery sermon – about heaven and hell and being careful not to entertain evil spirits. I was anxious to get Meng’s mother’s reaction after the service, but they both left early. It was evident that Meng discussed his interests in Christianity with his mother. Inviting her to join him to see for herself a worshiping Christian community was an important step for him. Not every young adult sought the consent of his or her parents to join a Christian community, causing great tension in the family relationship.

Around a month later, Meng brought his mother back to the church. This time I was able to ask her of her impressions. She said with a smile that she “thinks this is good. It helps people do good.” With his mother’s approval, Meng became active in JVC church life. The following Sunday Meng attended JVC alone and was busy helping out with the service. He conducted a Facebook livestream of the sermon and also helped prepare a foot washing for the service that honoured three church elders. After the service I asked Meng what his mother thought when she visited. Mirroring what I was told, he said she liked it. She said that it was a good thing for the youth to come to in order to learn to be good. Even today Meng can be seen making Facebook Live videos of the church’s activities. Curiously, I am not confident Meng even had a “conversion moment.”
Step by step Meng became Christian, and experiencing Jesus was an important step amongst many to overcoming his reluctance.

**Stress, Failure, and Agonism**

One of the many things I learned about Christians in Phnom Penh is that being a Christian was hard work. The demands of Khmer Christians imposed by Christian leaders were many. Working for a Christian organisation or dwelling in church dormitories required attendance to bible studies, early morning and late night prayer meetings, and of course attending Sunday activities. Church leaders insisted on imposing these forms of discipline due to the “freshness” of Christianity in Cambodia. Training and discipline was needed to keep people Christian. The benefits seemed to have outweighed the demands. Most Christian youth I had gotten to know enjoyed living in church accommodation. There was a community and a family with whom to share meals and sleeping quarters. Yet, many Khmer young adults were stressed and busy casting their nets wide, so to say, to attain a skill that would translate into a good job. The Wednesday night Bible study at JVC was often attended by exhausted and hungry young adults who worked multiple jobs, were in full-time study at university, and were then asked to reflect on, for instance, how their lives were like Moses’s in the wilderness needing the help of his friends’ encouragement (see Exodus 17). My co-teacher at JVC, Socheat, worked every evening teaching English at the church while studying to be an electrician, on top of facilitating a children’s programme for one of OMF’s rural churches every weekend. Socheat had no interest in becoming a Christian leader after his time in the dorm. As one can imagine, stress often led to failure, as was the case for Sela.

Sela was a young man of nineteen years of age who attended NLF. I had taken a liking to him as he always had a warm, genuine smile toward me. He was also eager to help advance my Khmer language skills. We first became friends when a group of us went to a picnic-style restaurant along the Mekong River one Saturday afternoon. Sela and I lounged with our feet hanging over a wooden platform onto the riverbank for hours. We chatted about our families and our homes, typical things people discussed when becoming acquainted. He was very poor and was from a poor family from nearby Tekcao Province. His home village was only an hour and a half motorbike ride away from Toul Sangkae, but he rarely went home to save money on petrol. He loved and
missed his family. Sela was enthusiastic and keen to participate in church events like prayer meetings and greeting people at the door prior to church services. He was a new Christian, having been introduced when he moved to the city.

The last I saw Sela he was self-learning how to code HTML on a crummy laptop computer. He asked if I knew HTML and if I could teach him. Unhelpful, I tried to be encouraging. Sela looked sickly, over-stressed, and seemed like he had missed several meals. I asked him how he was and he replied “stressed but happy (sabay)” with a smile, though he confessed that he was having trouble sleeping. During our time at the Mekong a few months prior he disclosed that he moved to Phnom Penh in hopes for a job so he could help support his family through remittances. Things were not going so well for him. He desperately wanted to attend university to study information technology, but could not afford to do so. I did not enquire, but I suspected he could not even afford the small fee to stay in the church’s dormitory.

I never saw Sela again. Soon after our visit he moved away. I asked another friend at NLF about Sela. Saddened with a hint of smugness, he responded that he “had many problems.” In addition to struggling to navigate city life, Sela turned out to be in love with Sopheap, mentioned above. I am not certain whether Sopheap was aware of his affections toward her. My single male friends intimated that the “proper” way to pursue a romantic interest was to wait until he had all his ducks in a row before pursuing her. Did he have enough money to take her out on dates? Did he have the potential for a nice job in the future? Did he have enough free time to invest in her? Would his parents approve? The biggest problem was that Sela’s mother did not approve of Sopheap because she, Sopheap, dyed her hair red. This was not what proper Khmer women ought to do, apparently. My friend suggested that this forbidden love was the straw that broke the camel’s back. He left Toul Sangkae and the church. Expressing my concern for Sela’s wellbeing, my friend’s response surprised me. He accused Sela of being “lazy.”

He was not the first to accuse Khmer Christians of being lazy and complacent. Khmer Christians were not oblivious to the challenges and difficulties they faced for being Christian. They were aware of “rice Christians.” They were concerned that when people go away from their church communities they might stop being Christians, like Sela. They knew it was hard work. It was the mark of a “true” Christian. To this NLF member, Sela was not cut out for the challenge of being Christian. Foreshadowing the next Chapter (Chapter IV), the perceived difficulty and hardship of being a Christian in Khmer society is crucial.
to understanding Khmer evangelical Christianity. Yet, I wish to continue focusing on the challenges one deals with to remain Christian, namely the agonism of Christian faith. To make this agonism more interesting, people did not really know what being a Christian entailed. Stress, failure, and confoundment were part of being Christian.

Here, Nils Bubandt’s (2014) engagement with the predominantly Christian community of Buli in eastern Indonesia is helpful to bring into the discussion. Bubandt traces the history of Christian conversion in Buli when in 1901, a mass conversion occurred after Dutch missionaries promised the resurrection of the dead and the end to witchcraft. Witchcraft was and continues to be a prevalent feature of Buli society. However, after conversion, witches became even more active and destructive. Additionally, none of the Buli ancestors returned from the dead. For many Buli, Bubandt argues, these failures created a bitter disappointment and confusion with Christianity. The failure of the Christian promise to rid Buli of witches resulted in confusion, doubt, and “aporia.” Importantly, this aporia – “an experiential conundrum that has no resolution and that cannot be determined, categorized, or placed within a meaningful order” (Bubandt 2014: 6) – became deeply entwined with how the Buli came to know and understand witchcraft. For the Buli, it is not faith and certainty that animates Christianity and witchcraft, but it is doubt and aporia.

I wish to not entirely privilege “aporia” to Christianity in the Khmer context. Bubandt’s deconstructionist approach, however, does allow us to see how these moments of failure and aporia are important in understanding Christian life. Aporia denotes an experience that is so extraordinary and confounding that it has the potential to dissolve “the subject’s own identity” (ibid.: 6). Recalling Meng’s encounter with Jesus, the moment was indeed surrounded by an ambient sense of anxiety, confusion, reluctance, and angst. This was one reason why the immense affect was so “aporic.” Yet he understood the experience to be of Jesus. The surprise of Jesus’s presence was welcomed, unlike the immense fear and confusion that the Buli experienced with witches. The benefit of deploying my usage of “agonism” is that it allows us to see how, similar to aporia, angst, difficulty, uncertainty and the like play a role in the shaping of Christian life and demonstrates the interplay between chaos and order. Unlike Bubandt who argues that the intensification of malevolent forces grew as a result of the aporia of Christianity, I argue that the intrinsic agonism of Christianity rebounds with experiencing Jesus in the heart of the person, clarifying Christian faith.
Yet, how does one overcome this agonism? Phearum, a Christian leader, helps shed some light. Phearum lived in Siem Reap but had visited Phnom Penh in December 2015 to attend a conference for the regional leaders of the Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA), an Evangelical denomination that stresses mission work. His father, mother, sister, and himself were all regional leaders of differing roles among the Khmer Evangelical Church of the CMA. The CMA is considered to be the first Protestant denomination to send missionaries to Cambodia having some success (see Cormack 1997). While much of the Protestant churches in Cambodia are fragmented from one-another (see Introduction), the nominal presence of evangelical Christianity in Cambodia allowed for a practical network.

I was surprised to see Phearum several months later leading the evangelism conference at JVC mentioned in Chapter I. The evangelism conference was attended by elder members of JVC and some church leaders from JVC’s sister churches in nearby provinces. The second-floor sanctuary was made into a seminar room with seven round tables for participants to sit around and do collective assignments such as reading a Bible passage and answering a question about how it related to evangelism. During one such exercise, Phearum and I visited with each other in the back of the sanctuary. I asked him what he thought was the most common hindrance that prevented Khmer people from evangelising. I had asked others their thoughts, most replying that they are mocked and "persecuted" when doing so. Phearum’s response echoed this pushback, yet he went further and suggested that Khmer Christians were lazy and apathetic. “They need Jesus Christ in their heart (treuw mien preahJesu khrith khnong cett),” motioning to his chest. This was no metaphor to Phearum. Phearum recognised that Christianity could not work unless Jesus was a part of the heart. Otherwise people leave, become too lazy, or simply become disinterested.

Murkiness and Clarity

At the conclusion of the evangelism conference, each participant received a certificate and was encouraged to preach the Gospel to their friends and family, being forewarned that they would receive much pushback. Dr Chhin, an elder member of JVC, graced the participants with his presence throughout the conference when he had spare time from his teaching responsibilities. Dr Chhin
was a paragon of Christian faith. His children and grandchildren were active members of the church. He chaired a Sunday morning Bible study to a group of typically fifteen faithful elders of the church prior to the Sunday morning worship service. He often led corporate prayers, performed special music, and preached on occasion (fiery sermons to boot). He was always asked to participate with special occasions, such as praying for a baby’s naming ceremony or a prayer-blessing for a visiting short-term missionary, signifying his position of respect and authority. As a medical doctor and trained researcher of HIV/AIDS from Brown University, he taught in the nearby medical school, which he boasted was a great platform to evangelise students. His faith was “strong (khlang)” and “clear (cbah).”

Dr Chhin’s Christian journey began in 1990 when he and his wife returned from Russia after studying medicine. They returned wishing to restore their Khmer lives that had been stripped away after nearly two decades of conflict. By that time, Buddhist institutions had undergone considerable change. The Khmer Rouge’s extreme Marxist goal of eliminating religion in Khmer society saw the destruction of a key institution “through which,” Alex Hinton (2008: 62) suggests, Khmer collective “memory was ritually, formally, and informally transmitted.” The Vietnamese-controlled People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) of the 1980s saw a slow resurrection and reconfiguration of these Buddhist institutions. Due to their volatile pasts, the Khmer were (and remain) sceptical of any Vietnamese influence in Cambodia (see Chandler 2008). One device the Vietnamese regime used to impose their occupation during the PRK was discourses of remembrance such as genocide monuments, which Hinton (2008) argues were strategically created to contrast the benevolent Vietnamese with the ultra-violent Khmer Rouge. In response, remaining Khmer Rouge factions deemed these discourses as propaganda that justified foreign occupation and, thus, propagated the conflict further until the UN Peace Treaty of 1991.

Hinton further argues that the Vietnamese PRK controlled and influenced the reconfiguration of Buddhist institutions by stressing the need to heal oneself from the past in order to rebuild. Through this, Buddhism’s key tenet of salvation-through-the-self was exploited to help justify the PRK by forgetting past conflicts with the Vietnamese. In Phnom Penh especially, it was mainly the wealthy elite that were propped up by the PRK who helped rebuild important wats and partook in the fundamental rituals described in Chapter II. In this way, Buddhism became politicised. Ming Kinal (see Chapter I), resident of Toul Sangkae’s railroad village, lamented during an interview that many urban Khmer
people distrusted the monkhood and failed to engage Buddhism because of the political loyalties some wats display. Several wats in Phnom Penh have known loyalties to certain political entities. Wat Toul Sangkane’s leadership (both acars and head monk), for example, were unabashedly loyal to Prime Minister Hun Sen and his CPP, having several buildings donated by and dedicated to CPP ministers. Foreshadowing what will be discussed in Chapter V, Hun Sen was a defector of the Khmer Rouge, who, with the backing of the Vietnamese, partook in the Khmer resistance against Pol Pot. His rise to power has been in direct opposition to the royalists, and many of his critics accuse him of being a puppet of the Vietnamese.

When Dr Chhin and his wife returned to a tattered Phnom Penh in 1990, they experienced first-hand these shifts in Buddhist institutions. The effects of the PRK’s push to remember the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge as a means to heal oneself through Buddhist praxis had a contrary effect on Dr Chhin. Living in poverty, being bombarded by images of violence, and the politicisation of some Buddhist institutions were a recipe for many, like Dr Chhin, to become disenchanted with Buddhism. However, while Buddhism had changed since the 1970s, the embodied habitus of religious praxis had remained for the Khmer people (see Chapter II; cf. Ledgerwood 2008). The embodied practices of Buddhist ritual, Judy Ledgerwood argues, is what primarily propelled the laity to restore their Buddhist commitments. Dr Chhin and his wife attempted to go to the wat to participate in worship, yet they could not afford to provide offerings that could be turned into bon. “It’s unjust! (In English) ‘No Justice!’” he recounted. He resorted to giving small offerings to a local tree spirit: “in the evening I would offer incense (a common form to thwoe bon), and worshipped a tree. I asked the tree to help me,” he laughed as if the thought were absurd. He continued, “I wanted to have money in order to thwoe bon too, but because I was born poor I could not thwoe bon.” He contemplated, “I thought over and over thinking, ‘Europe, America, do not believe Buddha at all. They do not thwoe bon for their ancestors. And what did their parents become? In Buddhism it is only a very small number who can thwoe bon,’” for only those who had the means to provide offerings were able to participate. He deemed those who gave offerings had the means through “black money (luy khmaw),” money that was acquired through illegal means. Not only were these elites becoming wealthier through corruption, they were able to make more bon. This was unjust and distressing to him.
One day in late 1990 a motorbike taxi driver (motodup) approached him during a break and asked him if he wanted to “watch the story of Jesus.” Intrigued with the idea of watching a free film, he agreed. He told the driver that he was available during the afternoon. The driver returned to pick him up and took him to the screening. There, he “saw three motos. The first had a TV, the second had a generator, and the third had the evangelist. I thought [after watching the film], ‘eeee, this can’t be!’” Confused, he asked if they could watch another film. The evangelist told him he had more films, but that they would only watch the “Jesus story.” He explained,

They asked after watching, “do you understand? Do you want to offer yourself (thway kluen)?” I replied, “I don’t understand at all, but I accept. ‘Offering yourself,’ what does that mean? Please explain to me.” He answered, “do you believe Jesus died on the cross for people’s sins?” I said, “I don’t understand.” But I accepted. I accepted first. I accepted because they let me watch the TV. They gave their time for us. I thought, “well, maybe this story is good.” I offered myself, only myself. My wife did not. After I received/accepted, I searched who Jesus Christ is.

The Jesus story made no sense to Dr Chhin. He did not understand Christianity, what Jesus’s death on a cross had anything to do with sin, nor what “offering yourself” was all about. He admitted that he accepted their message out of respect: “they gave their time for us.” Yet like many of those discussed above, Dr Chhin began to experience Jesus after taking that initial step to becoming a Christian.

Sometime after watching the Jesus film, he had a patient that was sick caused by a particularly malevolent spirit. His nursing staff told him that it was “the boss of evil (me a’krok).” He noticed that the patient wore three red traditional strings around his waist called a ksaeckeh. This string is often worn by people as a good-luck charm, bringing protection from evil spirits and ghosts as well as good health. With the patient’s consent, Dr Chinn cut off the strings. As he cut off the last string, he witnessed the spirit leaving the patient. Confused, he asked “‘why did this sick person, when I touched him, stopped being sick? Why did this person have an evil spirit enter him? I touched, the evil spirit left!’” He suggested that he “did not have the power, but the Lord Jesus within my heart had the power. After then, I was interested to study about faith and I began to serve God.” Crucially, Dr Chinn understood his faith to be “murky/unclear (ot cbah)” during this time. He repeated that even though he did not understand nor “know Jesus clearly,” he was willing to pursue Christianity and began attending Bible studies, to his wife’s disapproval.
Notice the pattern of uncertainty, confoundment, and surprise displayed by Dr Chinn. Dr Chinn “did not understand,” but he accepted. Khmer people generally did not understand what being a Christian entailed. Initial engagement with Christians was marked with dissonance, talking past one another, confusion, success, and failure. Keeping up required hard work and dedication. Stress and laziness often led to failure. What was required, as articulated by Phearum, was that Jesus needed to be in the heart so that they could “know clearly.” Not only is locating Jesus in the heart of the Christian ethnographically relevant for Khmer religious life (cf. Chapter II), but we also ought not dismiss these sorts of experiences to understand evangelical Christian life. Here in the Cambodian context, it is clear that these experiences were what helped perpetuate and maintain Christianity.

Conclusion: Clarifying (Creahthlah) the Agonism of Christianity

More often than not, it turns out that the Cambodians keep their faith. This is amazing to me too: it’s real! It’s Real. To. Them! If it wasn’t real then they would abandon it. – Charles, missionary and founder of NLF

Figure 17: The “aporic” and “surprising” experience of Jesus’s presence at a NLF event
NLF, being a charismatic church, heavily valued emotional and visible expressions of faith. Oftentimes after the welcoming announcement to newcomers during Sunday worship (typically after the third song), the worship leader would say something to the effect of “we want you to experience God tonight!” They expected to experience Jesus and actively sought to “see” him, “feel” him, and “hear” him. Experiencing God has been a well-explored feature of Evangelicalism. Protestant Christians do a lot of work to mark the presence of God in the world through material signs (Bialecki 2017; Coleman 1996; Keane 2007). Grounding their abstract faith through material signs, in other words, is an intrinsic aspect of Protestant Christian life.

The “miraculous” is an especially potent sign for Christians to materialise their beliefs. Importantly, for Khmer evangelical Christians, these miracles typically served to improve their lives, helping them deal with the chaos and radical uncertainty of city-life. Referring back to the miracle described in the thesis’s Introduction, crushed brick was a miracle that was evidence (sign) of Jesus working within the world. The seemingly mundane blessing of crushed brick signified that Jesus was at work for these Christians to bring order and stability in such an uncertain and precarious context. These works displayed the truth and reality of the Christian God amongst a population that scoffed and rejected those who followed Jesus. Tari and Sopheap experienced “miracles” in the form of economic stability. Dr Chhin experienced the miraculous through a healing touch. “Hearing” Jesus and “feeling” him in the heart are other forms of the miraculous.

Tanya Luhrmann’s (2004; 2012) engagement with American evangelical Christians explores how God can be experienced to be real, personal, and even intimate for the American evangelical Christian. Evangelical Christians believe in God as a vividly close, public, and supernatural God who wishes to have relationship with his creation, yet God remains an empirical anomaly. Bridging the ontological gap between the abstract and concrete is a normalised practise for many faithful Protestants (Keane 2007). The challenge Evangelicals face believing in a real and intimate God is not necessarily why believe, but learning how to believe (Luhrmann 2012: 38). Worship and prayer train the Christian to hear God. God, therefore, is an important actor in Christian life. If we are able to take God as a serious agent, like bon, we can further understand how Christians and God relate to each other (cf. Bialecki 2014a).

Luhrmann attempts to psychologically unpack how God can be made real and even intimate for the American evangelical. She argues that through
religious practices like prayer and worship, the believer trains his or her mind to experience God’s voice in the mind. For example, once the believer understands his or her mind to be no longer a private space outside of the world and where God can infiltrate his or her thoughts, he or she develops a new “theory of the mind” where God is able to hear his or her thoughts and speak to him or her (Luhrmann 2012: Chapter 2). Yet, for Khmer Buddhists, Buddha is no intimate or personal God that can be directly experienced (cf. Cassaniti & Luhrmann 2014: S336). Thus, there is a reconfiguration of how Khmer Christians understand the possibilities of what God can do, initiating an important level of surprise that occurs when they experience Jesus. What was apparent amongst my Christian friends was that there was a key moment of surprise when they experienced Jesus.

Here Jon Bialecki’s (2017) excavation of the nature of miracles within an American evangelical movement can greatly contribute to the argument at hand. Bialecki unpacks the logic behind the miraculous for the charismatic-evangelical Christians of the Vineyard Movement in Southern California. Like Luhrmann’s Vineyard interlocutors who expected to experience God in their minds, Bialecki’s Christian friends expected to experience God in charisms. Surprise, he found, was a key factor in determining whether or not a certain experience was a miracle. He even suggests that “God is all about surprise” (2017: 96) and that surprise is what indexes divine causation (ibid.: 97). Without surprise, the miraculous event is flattened and normalised, which can cause it to move outside of the realm of the miraculous and into the ordinary (ibid.: 169). So, for example, if Sopheap was not surprised by her brother’s sudden financial provision, say if it was a normal occurrence, then it would not have not been seen as a miracle. Keep in mind, this is in a context of radical uncertainty. Things are bound to surprise people. Thus, people are bound to experience Jesus’s miraculous blessings in a variety of locals. Like Bubandt’s usage of “aporia,” “surprise” helps us understand how Christians experience God.

Khuntie, a member of NLF who lived in the NLF complex in Toul Sangkae, led a “small group (krum touc)” Bible study meeting. The small group was mainly a time of prayer, worship, discussion, and eating snacks with a five-minute Bible study tucked somewhere during the meeting. Like so many evangelical Christian meetings, the small group was bookended with worship while prayer transitioned the flow of the meeting. At the conclusion of one small group meeting, Khuntie asked how we felt both before and after the meeting. One participant said, “before, I had an angry heart, but now I am happy, clear
hearted (sabay creahthlah cett).” Another participant repeated her response, “Yeah, I am happy, clear hearted too.” What was striking was their use of creahthlah for “clear” as opposed to the common form of cbah that so many Christians used. Creahthlah is a term that I had only heard in Buddhist circles. Using this term to describe the condition of their heart regarding their relationship with Jesus is very revealing.

Khmer Buddhists rarely used “belief/faith (comneuw)” to frame their religious commitments. Recalling Chapter II, we are told directly by Lok Hul Sowan that “satthie is faith (satthie kewcia comneuw).” Satthie is the sincere will to do religious praxis, thwoe bon. Without it, no bon can be produced. The sincere will that propels the person to do good deeds (thwoe bon), in other words, is faith. Here, Talal Asad’s (1993) critique of western notions of “religion” that privileges “belief” over practice rings true in the Khmer context. Assuming “belief” to be a state of mind is an individualised, modern, and “Christian” assumption that ignores the practise and concrete products of religious commitment (Asad 1993: 47). Additionally, and as we saw in Chapter II, religious praxis is understood to create the substantive thing of bon that, in addition to being a form of “merit” one possesses, clarifies and purifies the heart from sin. Creahthlah (“clarity”) signifies the cleansing of the heart, bringing equanimity and stability of the heart – a form of enlightenment. Therefore, we can better understand the Christians’ reaction to worship: “before, I had an angry heart, but now I am happy, clear hearted.”

Throughout this chapter we have seen how Christians framed their commitment to Jesus through the logic “clarity.” Initially, they did not “know clearly,” “understand clearly,” or “believe Jesus clearly.” It was not until Jesus brought clarity that their Christian commitments were stabilised. For the Christian, having “Jesus in the heart” is how a Christian’s agonistic faith is stabilised and “clarified.” Importantly, Jesus, instead of bon, becomes the critical actor in the Christian’s heart. To the theologian, having Jesus in the heart resonates with the prominent Pentecostal and Evangelical pneumatology that considers the “infilling” of the Holy Spirit to be the marker of a true Christian. While Khmer Christians recognise the Holy Spirit (Preahwi’nien Borisot), having Jesus in the heart was the central marker of a “strong” Christian who “knew Jesus clearly.” Dr Chinn, for example, suggested that, “when I was interested learning the word of God, the book grabbed my heart […] I had a feeling like I had a movement within myself.” It was not until he became sincerely interested when things became clear.

Chapter III– “They Need Jesus in Their Heart”: the Agonism of Christian Conversion | 133
To conclude, and to foreshadow the following Chapter, I return to Phearum. Phearum and his family converted to Christianity while living in a refugee camp on the Thai/Khmer border in the late 1980s. They were very impressed with the compassion and free aid they received from missionaries in the camps, which persuaded them to join Christian meetings. Phearum described a dream (in English, edited for tense and grammar) he had thought to be from Jesus that enticed him to convert to Christianity:

In my dream, I was flying everywhere at that time. And I realised that, “oh!” that vision and dream, that was what God wanted me to do – to serve him.” So, I realised while on my first flight on an airplane to another country, “oh! my dream and vision came true!” Yeah, it was true because God gave me this vision back then [in the refugee camp]. You know, he really... (deep in thought). And in the vision and dream I sometimes fell down. Yeah, that is what I am facing now, sometimes even among the people I am working with. Sometimes we have a problem, but it’s not a problem. But I realise some problems we face are also good to make us strong. I always say that, “they make us strong.” I never [complain of] any problem. I say, “ok good.” So it helps us to grow strong. It’s a blessing. I count all that is happening into my life, it’s a blessing from God. The good and bad together.

Phearum’s recounting of the dream was in response to a question on what exactly convinced him to convert to Christianity. The dream was an invitation from Jesus to serve him. In other words, he experienced something from Jesus that had great affect. Throughout his recitation he would pause and would be in deep thought, as if revisiting the dream after years of forgetting. He was both retelling and realising the meaning behind it. Phearum’s story encapsulates so much of how Christians explain their Christian lives. Firstly, they encounter Christianity in times of distress and need – as refugees, prisoners, lost in a city, hungry, in need of a job, and so on. Many engage with Christians or missionaries who offer free English lessons, aid, and other forms of care. They begin, perhaps out of feeling obliged, to attend Christian meetings. If they persevere and “walk the path/way of God,” common religious framing for the Khmer, they will experience Jesus, maybe even through help with their problems and difficulties. Paradoxically, as Phearum highlights, Jesus will give the follower other sorts of problems that help strengthen them and brings salvation to the world, which will be the focus of the following chapter.
Chapter IV: Witnesses and Warriors: Christian Agonism in the Khmer World

Introduction

This chapter is ultimately about the conflict and the chaotic positionality Khmer Christians have as being an adversary of the Khmer world and its healer and co-saviour with Jesus. It ethnographically explores how Evangelicals position themselves against an adversarial world. As explored in the previous chapter, the Christian project in the Cambodian context, framed in empathy, love, and compassion, aims to eradicate sin from the individual person and the world through religious belief and praxis. Following the logic of Mary Douglas (1984) and Maurice Bloch (1985; 1989; 1992), this chapter argues that the perceived aggression and hostility of being Christian are used in order to remove oneself from the crumbling Khmer order so to patch it back together anew.

In order to unpack this logic, this chapter explores several instances in which my friends linked their adversarial position in the world to their Christian identity through discursive practices. It is highly discursive, relying heavily on the words of my informants. As John Bowen writes regarding how Islam was experienced by the Gayo of rural Sumatra, “Studying religion through discursive practices does not deny the importance of semantic and experiential qualities of religion [...] but it looks for those qualities in specific events of speaking, commenting, and reflecting, rather than in the general qualities of symbols and meanings” (Bowen 1993: 9). Discourse is indeed productive in creating an imagined world (Foucault 1991). In other words, we can learn a great deal about Christian life by observing how these Christians discuss their religious activities in addition to observing what they actually do. This chapter also explores a crucial ethnographic moment of ritual spiritual warfare where a group of Khmer ‘prayer warriors’ actively created a hostile Khmer world through discourse and sought to wage war against it in order to save it.
Reverend Heng Cheng

Reverend Heng Cheng was famous amongst Christians of a certain generation in Phnom Penh. He was a survivor of the Khmer Rouge and an organiser of “underground” churches during the Soviet rule-by-proxy People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) in the 1980s. On a larger scale than Dr Chhin of JVC, Rev Heng Cheng was often venerated by being an honorary participant in large Christian meetings, such as revival services in the early 2000s and the recent Jubilee Cambodia, a ritual making Jesus ruler of Cambodia organised by Pastor Senna of Jesus’ Church Phnom Penh (JCPP) and my friend Pastor Dara (see Chapter V). Like so many Christians I had gotten to know, Rev Heng Cheng framed his Christian life and “walk” with Jesus as one with conflict, struggle, danger, and controversy. His life even began in controversy when his father, having fled to Cambodia from China during the Chinese Civil War in the early part of the 20th century, married a Khmer woman. His family was against the marriage because not only was she Khmer and he Chinese, but also she was Buddhist and he Christian. In an interview (primarily in English), Rev Heng Cheng disclosed the significant conflicts in his life that helped clarify his faith.

When my father wanted to marry my mother, there was a conflict. What is the conflict? One, because of religion. My father was Christian and my mother was Buddhist. At that time in 1945, 46, very few people [were Evangelical] Christian, at that time. So, there were very few churches in Cambodia. Around Cambodia there were only around 9 [Evangelical] churches in all the country – very few. And so, the conflict: my father’s family did not accept my mother[...] Secondly, the mindset with the Chinese people with the Cambodian people is not the same. And so, there was difficulty with my father.

His father married young without either family’s consent and isolated himself from their families, moving to another Province. Their marriage was controversial because of the mixing of ethnic and religious identities, but even
more, scandalous because of the betrayal of kinship ties, which remain especially important in Cambodia today (Ledgerwood 2012). Sadly, Rev Heng Cheng’s mother died three days after his birth. Not wanting to reunite with his family, his father moved to the border of Vietnam where he met Ho Hon Sen, a general of King Sihanouk. Having no children of his own, the General paid his father a small sum of money to raise him as a “godson.” The General took him to Phnom Penh and raised him for over one year until his paternal aunt, having searched for his whereabouts after the news of his birth, demanded he live with her, but allowed him to remain the godson of the General. He claimed, “the Chinese mindset – they don’t want their blood of their children to go anywhere [...] So from my childhood life, I don’t know who is my real mother or my father. So, I only know my uncle and my aunt as my [parents].” His mother-aunt died from a serious injury during the Khmer Civil War in 1970 and his father-uncle died five years prior. On her deathbed, Rev Heng Cheng’s mother-aunt revealed his origin, which had been kept secret to him up to that point. His mother-aunt’s death, compounded with his secret and scandalous past, devastated him.

He continued the interview by recounting his plight with the Khmer Rouge. His story sounded all too familiar for those caught up in the Khmer Rouge’s experiment of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK). After his mother-aunt’s death, he moved to Phnom Penh to study economics at university following a one-year stint as a soldier. While in university, his father tried to reach out to him, but he refused to reconcile. He lived in a small flat with fellow students until on 17 April 1975, Khmer Rouge forces entered Phnom Penh and purged the city of those who dwelt there. Alone, he fled to the central Province of Kampong Cham to find refuge in a forested community.

Fearing for his life, he ceased wearing spectacles and a wristwatch and went by a different name to conceal any sense of foreignness. He claimed he was a target of the Khmer Rouge because his life resembled “one of a businessman in the city. My background [was] not a farmer. [Eventually], one of the community officials found me secretly and told me to run away” (see Chapter I for more of this city vis-à-vis countryside of Khmerness). He fled to Prey Wen Province on the Vietnamese border and remained there for half a year. In mid-October 1976, three Khmer Rouge soldiers captured him for execution. Significantly, he continues his story by weaving his Christian narrative within the larger conflict. As they marched him toward execution:

I remembered my God. “Oh! I’m a Christian. I heard the Bible through my parent’s devotional. That’s the God I worship. I follow the living God.”
So at that time I prayed – I prayed all my heart because I know I cannot stay alive, because every person who came upon the Khmer Rouge was killed. So I pray: “oh, Lord Jesus, my [entire] family worships you. It’s not just me, all my family worship you. If you [are] really alive, then save me. And if I am to be saved I [will] serve you all my life.” I was really surprised! After 15 minutes, these three men of the Khmer Rouge led me to the border of the Mekong and [did] not kill me. They took my watch [that I had kept hidden] and told me that I must swim across this river. In October, the Mekong is high because the Mekong River shoots down to Vietnam. I didn’t know how [far it was] from this side to that side. I only knew to swim and I knew that side was Vietnam.

During the rainy season, several bits of vegetation float down the swollen rivers. He found a loose mangrove vine and clung to it in order to navigate across the raging river. As he approached the Vietnamese side, a few soldiers spotted him and shot him in the leg. They captured him, took him to a prison for over one month, and interrogated him to confirm that he was not a defected Khmer Rouge soldier. Afterward he eventually moved to Ho Chi Minh City and found other Khmer refugees living in a Khmer wat. He began going to meetings with, then defector of the Khmer Rouge Hun Sen (present-day Prime Minister) to plot a resistance against Pol Pot. Having gone through this incredible experience and his enlightenment to the reality of Jesus, he became more concerned with continuing his faith. “I tried to keep in prayer with God, but in Vietnam I don’t know. ‘What church is [an] Evangelical church?’ I [didn’t] know.” He attended a Catholic church and continued to fellowship with other Khmer people in Ho Chi Minh City who were also planning a resistance against the Khmer Rouge.

He faced a conundrum on the morning when the Khmer resistance were to mobilise against Pol Pot: “We knew the day of attack was very near. And Cambodian people when they are [in these sorts of imminent and dangerous situations], they go to many people – the monk, they go to the kru tiey – for something to protect [themselves with]. But for me, I don’t know, ‘who is protecting me?’ I remember only God.” Standing afraid, anxious, and conflicted on a street corner in District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City, he contemplated whether or not to join the resistance when a stranger on a bicycle stopped and spoke to him:

“Brother, where do you want to go?” I said, “no, I don’t want to go anywhere – only rest here.” “If you have time, I invite you to the church.” “What church?!” “Evangelical church.” “Wow! I follow Jesus for a long time but where is there a church?” [...] So, I go to the church [instead of joining the Khmer resistance]. At that time, really, God touched my heart (motioning to his chest). Many of the years I follow Jesus Christ but no
feeling anything or touching my heart. But at that time, he touched my heart.

Just as Jesus’ auspicious timing at the Mekong riverfront one year prior, this stranger’s invitation at the street corner was evidence that Jesus was directing him to a closer walk with him and to believe clearly. He knew he needed to abandon his Khmer cohort and stay in Vietnam in order to follow Jesus more closely. Through this perseverance, God “touched his heart,” helping to clarify his faith (see Chapter III). There in Ho Chi Minh City, he became active in the Evangelical church and eventually became the church’s youth leader. He met and married his wife, and they had their first child. His life as an illegal Khmer in Vietnam was fruitful and prosperous. Meanwhile in Cambodia, the Khmer were struggling with continual warfare, starvation, disease, and religious oppression by the People’s Republic of Kampuchea: “At that time it was a difficult time – the time of the Communists and also the Vietnamese Army – it was very strict.” Heartbroken for his fellow Khmer, he “felt God call [him] back to Cambodia” in 1984. He moved back to Phnom Penh and organised ‘underground’/secret church meetings, which were illegal at that time. By the 1990s he was a prominent Christian leader, becoming the Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship in Cambodia, and remains an important Christian figure today. It is important to note that prior to his plight with the Khmer Rouge, he considered himself to be “so far from my God. In one month, I would go to church one time – not often to the church. I lived in another way.” It was through these difficult events that God “touched his heart.” He concluded this part of the interview by stating, “That’s my brief history. It was very difficult.”

I had previously met Rev Heng Cheng in passing at a prayer meeting organised by my friend Dara who is a young pastor of a church in a neighbourhood just south of Toul Sangkae. He insisted I meet with Rev Heng Cheng because of his respected position and difficult story. His story is indeed compelling. His perseverance and conquering of his adversities – from a family of secrecy and conflict to escaping death with the DK and PRK – resonates well with the larger discourses surrounding the Evangelical’s place in the world. Listening to his story in concert with how my Khmer Christians interlocutors framed their position in the world, I began to understand how important difficulty, hardship, adversity, persecution, and the like were for these Christians. Ironically, while Khmer Christians boasted of Jesus’s miraculous provisions that helped them in their difficulties (see Chapter III), Jesus in turn
allowed Christians to face other difficulties in order to bring salvation to the world. Rev Heng Cheng was lauded as a paragon due to this dynamic.

**On Being Persecuted**

Sitting in the shade at the New Life Fellowship (NLF) complex, Ritty and I observed the mass baptism occurring while drinking a pomegranate sweet tea and eating roasted eggs. Sothea, NLF’s Toul Sangkae pastor, had erected a large waist-deep swimming pool for the baptism. Around twenty-five students were being baptised, male leaders baptising males and female leaders baptising females. It was the only baptism I observed throughout my fourteen-months of research, which I found surprising considering how important baptism is for Evangelicals. Even NLF’s Evangelical-American-influenced religiosity – offering calls for salvation at the end of every worship service, for example – recognised the need for a catechesis (theological training) for those who are new converts to Christianity prior to baptism.

We chatted about a variety of things, from his newborn son to his leadership role with NLF. With the sounds of prayer, strumming of a guitar, splashing of water, children playing, and the constant grinding of metal and crowing of roosters intrinsic to Phnom Penh, I noticed construction workers outside the complex gate peering in and smirking. A multi-level home was being built opposite the complex’s gate. Many of the construction workers in Phnom Penh are temporary provincial migrant workers who also dwell with their families in the structures they are commissioned to build. It was indeed an unusual spectacle for the Khmer. I reckoned that for these construction workers, as it was for my friends who migrated to Phnom Penh, life in Phnom Penh was strange, especially life in Toul Sangkae (see Chapter I).

I asked Ritty what he thought the construction workers might think of the church’s activities. Knowing I was recording our conversation, he took the opportunity to teach me about the difficulties of being Khmer and Christian:

*People in the Provinces/countryside (khaet), those who believe Jesus, they have a lot of persecution (karbietbien). Christians in the Provinces have more persecution than those in the city […] When I first believed [and in the countryside], I had a lot of persecution. My family wanted to stop me from believing. There were two reasons why. Firstly, Christian religion is foreign religion. My parents said that it is not the religion of the Khmer. When we believe, our neighbours do not like our family. The second reason is because my parents heard rumours/gossip about*
Christians, that when they believe Christianity, they do not give respect to the parents. They hate their parents.

This perception that Christians betray their families was a special concern and experienced by other Christians I encountered. Raksmi, a friend, told me how her Buddhist grandmother died terrified and saddened that there would be no one to take care of her in the afterlife after her entire family converted to Christianity when her first-born daughter (and, thus, matriarch) was healed from an evil spirit. She died resenting her family. Comran, a friend from JVC explains, Christianity is not a religion of the nation. We are Buddhist. To become a Christian is difficult. My family, parents, siblings, neighbours, friends are Buddhists. Therefore, it’s difficult to become a Christian. They don’t like Christians. They think we forget our religion. Stop believing Buddhism, begin believing Christianity. Normally Khmer culture believes Buddhism. Therefore, we must offer incense to our ancestors who have died already. They have to give offerings, have to give incense. But Christians, we don’t do that. They think that we do not love them. They think incorrectly about us. When we are Christians, we love them more than before. But they think when they die, they will not have anyone who will take care of them when they die. When they die it’s nothing. Christians, we love them when they have life. Having life, we serve, we watch them. But we have a lot of persecution from our neighbors. They go to the wat, but we don’t go. We go but don’t join. We accept Khmer culture, but we are not pleased to do so. It’s difficult to understand Khmer culture: a culture that is good, we receive. But a culture that is not good, we do not receive.

Offering incense to ancestors is a common religious practice for Khmer Buddhists and culminates during *Phchum Ben*. This fifteen-day Khmer Buddhist festival toward the end of the rainy season and, like Khmer New Year in the midst of the hot season, is a time when many city-dwelling Khmer have the opportunity to participate in Buddhist rituals. As discussed in Chapter I, much of Phnom Penh’s population spends the holidays of *Phchum Ben* and Khmer New Year in the countryside with their families. Importantly, it is a time of fun and relaxation. Asking my JVC students about what people do during *Phchum Ben*, they suggested it mimics Khmer New Year. Some go to the wat and participate in the ritual events there, but most of the people hang out with family, eat expensive food, children bless and respect their parents, and, of course, “play Facebook.”

Cettra, my research assistant and a former monk, explained how *Phchum Ben* began as a time during the rainy season when the monkhood was incapable of seeking offerings through *Benbat* (see Chapter II) and compelled the people to bring offerings to the wat. However, most Khmer understand the festival of
Phchum Ben to be a time when the dead visit their families in search of food and offerings to help them in their journey to be reborn. Khmer cosmology understands the braet to be those who are deceased and are in Hell (thanarueh) burning off their sin before they are reborn in a new life. No one can know for sure whether or not their ancestors remain in Hell or have moved on in their rebirths (Ledgerwood 2012: 180). Through the mediation of monks, the living provide the dead offerings of food to help them along their journey to rebirth and the dead provide their descendants with health and blessing. Thus, as Erik Davis argues, Phchum Ben is a ritual of exchange and “gift economy” between the living and the dead (Davis 2009: Chapter 4). Of the many rituals performed during the fifteen-day festival, faithful family members go to the wat every morning at 4:00 am to “toss balls of rice (bohbuybun)” around the central worship hall (preahwi‘hie) to feed the braets. Humorously, those Buddhists whom I had asked what happened to the rice balls after being tossed suggested rats, birds, and/or dogs eat them. But, like much of the Buddhist rituals discussed in Chapter II, the act of worship is what matters. Incense turns to ash. Bohbuybun might wind up in the belly of an animal. Yet, like incense, these balls of rice are forms of bon that are transferred to the braet. Those like Raksmi’s late grandmother whose families did not participate in the ritual missed out and perhaps suffered more. Neglecting to provide offerings angers the braets, which might lead to sickness, bad luck, and even death. It is of no surprise that the pagan nature of Phchum Ben – namely, worshipping the hellish sub-humanoid braet – causes it to become a great concern for Christians, which will be discussed below. The cosmological point of Phchum Ben is for the Khmer family to continue caring for one another (Ledgerwood 2012). Being prohibited from partaking in these Buddhist rituals that reinforce the Khmer family order is a large source of tension for the Christian.

Moreover, alienation from family was perhaps the highest concern for my Christian friends. Samphoa from JVC notes her conversion to Christianity caused her to no longer “fit in” the normative Khmer family order, which was a form of persecution:

One month after I was baptised I began to be persecuted by my family because during Sunday I wasn’t home. I was at the church. Normally I worked a lot on Sundays. I needed to prepare stuff to sell, cook, go to the market; but I took all that time to go to church. This made my family angry: “you (naeng – derogatory, impersonal, feminine form of ‘you’) take your time to Jesus church! You don’t work at home, you don’t help out! You don’t help sell things!” They began to gossip about me after I
came back from learning English or wherever [...] For example, my dad: “if I am Cambodia’s People Party and you are a different [political] party, in the society of the home, what will happen?” I answered, “there’s no problem. If you choose one party and I have the right to choose a different party. But in the society of the home we still fit together/are in order (cohsomrong).” My dad answered, “No! It’s the same if you are Christian and I am Buddhist – you no longer fit in!”

My dad made me choose: “if you believe Jesus by yourself, pack your clothes and go away!” My dad kicked me out of the home. Then, I was just in Middle School. [...] I asked my father, “why do you need to do this? I choose Jesus’s side, but I don’t want to do wrong. Then, why do you want to kick me out of the family?” “I don’t support other religions!”, he said. “Religion of Jesus is a foreign religion. Our ancestors, history is Buddhism. Why do you choose a different religion, obey it? [...] I saw the sun before you (meaning, he is wiser).” He gave me a choice, “do you want to live with your family or do you want to live in your church?!” I began to cry. I had lost my Bible and my dad said “that Bible is cut up and destroyed!” And I cried, cried, cried.

Notice the theme of being dislodged from the Khmer order. Samphoa’s persecution was that she no longer ‘fit in’ (cohsomrong). I asked Ritty what kind of persecution he experienced besides being chastised by his parents and being mocked by his friends. He answered, “Before, [when I was back home in the countryside], there was strong persecution. When praying at the pastor’s house they would throw stones occasionally, once a year. Sometimes they would throw shit in plastic bags. Very evil.” He went on to say, motioning to the construction workers:

Because Khmer people in the Province, they don’t understand about the rights. Even more, they don’t understand about the law that allows us to choose the religion we want. They don’t understand about this. Christians want to help develop and change the nation (emphasis mine). In the city, there is little persecution for Christians because Khmer in the city have a lot of education. In Phnom Penh, it’s ok, but when in the Province even though we learn a lot, if we believe Jesus, they say we betray. There are some people who think that those who believe Jesus just [convert] to have a job, learn English, etc. There are some families who allow their children to go to the church freely. They let the go freely because parents think that their kids work with foreigners and have a good job and have a good future and have a good salary. This is what they think.

As argued in Chapter I, the city, like the forest, allows for the Khmer order to be flipped upside-down. Ritty shows how being Christian in the city is allowable, as per the nature of the city; yet for those foreign to the city (i.e. the
temporal provincial migrant worker) things are strange. Moreover, the Khmer Evangelical begins to recognise their “otherness” as prescribed by biblical principles. Samphoa explains,

> When I began to receive Baptism, like when in the Bible it said after Jesus received from John, after this the Holy Spirit brought him to the desert to be tempted by Satan, 40 days 40 nights. Before I was baptised I learned about this story, when you become baptised you will be persecuted by your neighbours, your family, et cetera. At that time, my faith wasn’t clear.

As explored in the previous chapter, Khmer Christians are concerned with how to stabilise and clarify their faith. The ultimate goal of Evangelicalism, of course, is to proliferate the Christian faith – to become agents of change. Ritty continues, describing the persecution he faced from his friends: “Whatever I said, my friends did not agree. I said to myself: ‘I am not in their society.’ I am not discouraged because I heard one word of God (Bible passage) that says ‘those who follow God will always have persecution.’” He is perhaps referring to Jesus’s farewell discourse (John 13-16) where Jesus teaches his disciples that they, too, will be persecuted (see, especially, John 15). Ritty continued:

> Yet, I still evangelise. I have 4-5 friends come to learn English at my church. They believed and some walked away from God [...] I think Cambodia will perhaps change religion because before Khmer were Brahmin, they believed Buddhism, and now perhaps Cambodia is changing religion to Christianity. Each church has a goal, to collect people to come to the church. (In English) ‘Change Cambodia for Christ.’

We can begin to see through Ritty’s explanation that persecution is necessary for Christians and their evangelical project to change the world. Om Sreynet of JVC gives an illustration that best summarises the above discussion. She provides a double teaching moment during the testimony time of Sunday worship. By describing her recent birthday party, she teaches the church the need to push through the mockery and alienation of being a Christian to fulfil their ultimate evangelical calling of converting their families. On the verge of tears and clutching a microphone one Sunday morning, Om Sreynet gave testimony:

> I thank God for giving me the opportunity to share the Gospel to my family during my birthday. [...] I had plans for Gospel, I wanted to give the Good News so that it would enter into the lives of the grandchildren. I could see that they have many difficulties! After we ate, I wanted to evangelise. But I could see that it was very difficult (to share). After sharing the Gospel they did not receive the Gospel. I told them about Jesus and who he is but they did not respect [...] I knew how God
changed my life, they see my life, I believe Jesus, they see clearly, but they never choose to accept my faith. In order to give the Good News so that it can grow in the heart of the grandchildren, during my birthday, I saw the teacher/pastor. He is strong, and brave, and dares to teach. He is tall (meaning, highly respectable). He shares the Good News like Dr Chhin. I was happy. I was excited [...] One child who believed Jesus only by himself (meaning, his faith was shallow, weak, and unclear) said “I don’t dare to believe Jesus at all.” He does not dare to evangelise in the home, to enter into the home and evangelise. His friend told him “those who believe Jesus are like dogs! Those who believe Jesus turn into dogs [in their next life]!” And I asked, “why do you say Christians change into dogs?” “He said that when he became a monk, a monk taught him.” Because he only believes by himself, the Gospel has not entered (makes motion with hand to her chest). The Gospel has not entered the home.

Crying, which was unusual to see in a public setting, Om Sreynet concluded by teaching the need for her fellow Christians to evangelise their families despite the pushback they might encounter. Going even further, all of these stories illustrate the boomeranging effect of persecution – that is, difficulty, adversity, persecution and the like they face are flipped and used as devices to strengthen, clarify, and propel their evangelical faith. All of those discussed in this chapter illustrate how they perceive themselves to be at odds with the Khmer world, in particular, the Khmer family. In other words, the positionality of the Khmer Christians with their world allows them to be agents of transformation and change. Push through the shame and difficulty, those like Om Sreynet would say – That’s where the Gospel is.

Order through Sacrifice

Recounting Rev Heng Cheng’s tumultuous story, we see that he came from a controversial family; was abandoned; fled the terror of the Khmer Rouge; marched and was spared from execution; swam the Mekong; was shot; imprisoned, and interrogated; became a refugee; felt pressure to join the Khmer resistance against Pol Pot; and survived the Communist suppression of religious meetings during the PRK. Following the logic of Chapter III, all of these were moments at which he could experience Jesus. Moreover, they were opportunities for him to step outside of the normal Khmer order and become other. He abandoned his Khmer cohort and remained in Vietnam. Being ‘outside’, he was able to return to rescue the Khmer on a much more fundamental level – sin.
Mary Douglas has noted the tendency for people to order and arrange their world, and having those things (or matter) out of place can cause friction and perhaps threaten the order of the world (Douglas 1984). For the Lele of the Kasai, she observed, the pangolin “contradicts all the most obvious animal categories” (ibid.: 169). This strangeness and ‘otherness’ of the pangolin caused it to be a taboo. Yet when the docile creature wanders into the village and seemingly gives itself to the community as a sacrifice, it becomes a means of fertility when ritually eaten. That which was taboo becomes a mechanism of healing. This qualitative reversal and switch is the crux of the argument at hand.

Sacrificial language was often deployed by my interlocutors when describing their relationship with being a Christian agent in the world. Rev Heng Cheng even suggested that this is the nature of Christian salvation. Recounting his story: “Jesus says, ‘I give my life to you. But what you give back to me?’ So I ask [myself] ‘Jesus sacrificed himself and protects me all the time, but until now I have not [done] anything back to him.” He had not “offered himself.” Khmer Christians often refer themselves as ‘offerings’ to God – they “offer themselves” (thway khluen; see, also, Chapter III).

Maurice Bloch’s analysis (1985) of the Merina of Madagascar gives an example of those who understands sacrifice to yield vitality and blessing for the community. The aim of his essay is to resolve the discontinuities in two Merina myths. While initially the first myth suggests that the Merina would eat the corpse of the dead in order to assure ancestral vitality, Bloch argues that this is purely a metaphor (1985: 632-636). He claims that for the Merina, rice is considered to be the truest food that sustains life. Land is directly related to kinship where the dead are buried. Therefore, as the rice grows on the ancestors’ land where their corpses lay, the living eat the rice and, therefore, receive vitality from their ancestors.

The Merina perform a violent ritual of “sacrifice” by eating a sacrificial bull in order to receive blessing and prosperity. Although Bloch disagrees with the Merina use of the term “sacrifice” (ibid.: 643), he provocatively suggests that the killing and eating of the bull is a ritual of violence. The violent eating ritual inversely produces vitality and constructs a moral order. In other words, the means of the ritual has an inverse relationship with the end. Max Gluckman’s analysis (1963:119-131) of the Swazi incwala ceremony illustrates another form of ritual that produces an inverse outcome from the ritualistic mechanisms. The incwala is a ritual of rebellion when the King’s subjects ritually reject him. This
spectacle fortifies his political power by creating a sense of otherness and strangeness. The ritual of rebellion, in other words, legitimises his sovereignty.

Bloch’s (1992) chapter titled Sacrifice describes sacrificial eating rituals’ potential to enable social forms of power. The Dinka of southern Sudan implement a sacrificial cow eating ritual when a member of society has fallen ill due to what is thought to be “outside sources.” Cattle are thought to be closely related to humans with the exception of speech, which is closely linked with the divine (Bloch 1992: 33). During the ritual, the patient is urged to give into the sickness to allow the outside force to become a part of the body. Meanwhile, a cow is violently struck to near death. The cow lays wriggling and suffering as the patient squirms due to illness and pain. When the cow dies, it is thought to have taken the illness away from the patient. The community then feasts on the animal and vitality, more than just physically, is gained throughout the community. Thus, a person’s illness ultimately yields social vitality (ibid.: 31-38).

The Buid of Mindoro in the Philippines understand both animals and humans have bodies and souls, but only humans have a ‘mind’ that is displayed through speech (ibid.: 38-42). The Buid eat animals for their vitality. Spirits are thought to eat the dead human because a corpse becomes like an animal due to its incapability of producing speech. Chanting and singing keep the spirits away for, similar to the Dinka, voice has power; thus, it can keep the spirits away from eating the corpse. This singing displays the community to be of one ‘mind’ because speech is linked to the mind. When a child is ill, for example, the community comes around the child chanting and dangling a sacrificed pig over the child so that the spirits can ‘eat’ the pig instead of the vulnerable child. The community then eats the sacrificed pig, which revitalizes child. The sacrificial pig in this case is an intercessor for the child. This sacrificial ritual brings the community together into one ‘mind’ and brings vitality to the community.

By comparing these rituals with the near-child-sacrifices of the ancient Greek myth of Iphigenia and the ancient Hebrew myth of Abraham, Bloch proposes that the term sacrifice “cannot be defined cross-culturally and that the word is nothing more than a pointer to a cluster of phenomena which are contained within a wider family of rituals” (1992: 42). Nonetheless, these rituals share similar sequences: (1) a distinction is emphasized between different types of beings (i.e. humans and spirits, living and dead, God and human), (2) chaos and disorder between these different planes ensues, which affect the health of the person and community, and (3) order is recovered and vitality is obtained “from an external source” (ibid.: 43). The fourth sequence is the crux of his
argument: rituals that implement sacrifice reproduce ideologies of rebounding violence that reinforce aggressive political, economic, and military forms. These types of ritual, according to Bloch, create a false awareness of social power where the true source of power is misconstrued into a mystified false-reality. For instance, the Buid value aggression and anger, for they are in continual conflict with harmful spirits and must unite and conspire against their evil attacks. This manifests itself into “headhunting directed fairly indiscriminately outside the basic social group” (ibid.: 44). The Buid, in other words, reinforce their aggressive and violent behaviour due to these sacrificial rituals.

While not entirely convinced of his Marxist argument, Bloch helps us understand that things from the outside which are dangerous to the community can, in turn, be used for the vitality of the community. Like the order-from-chaos framework used throughout this thesis, the persecution and hardship a Khmer Christian encounters (or imagines) is used to not only stabilise themselves but also the world around them.

One hot afternoon in late October, Chanthol and I sat in his office at JVC and discussed the difficulties of marriage and finding a job. The Phchum Ben holiday was approaching and I asked what his family’s plans were. He was worried and stressed because his wife’s family wanted all of them to spend the holiday in the countryside. His and his wife’s Christian faith had always been a contentious point with her family. While his in-laws were wealthy and influential, Chanthol, being poor, felt a heavy pressure to acquiesce to her family’s demands. Like those mentioned above, he felt anxious that he might have to join the family in the ritual activities of the wat. Reflecting on his marriage, he told me (in English) he has “a good wife that wants to carry the cross with me. And I said to her, ‘if you want to marry me, you have to carry the cross with me through this school. Through the educational ministry. Don’t be ashamed. Our family is a sacrifice for God.’” After the holiday I saw my friend happy and refreshed. His fear of being coerced to participate in Buddhist rituals was not actualised. He saw this as a form of Jesus’s grace.

Attendance was sparse at JVC during the final Sunday of Phchum Ben when those like Chanthol were spending the holiday in the countryside with their families. Dr Chhin gave the sermon that week and used it as an opportunity to critique traditional Khmer belief. He boasted that Phchum Ben was a great topic to discuss with his students for its evangelistic potential. He claimed very few Khmer people understood what Phchum Ben meant and he used the inconsistencies of what his students knew of Phchum Ben to critique the festival
as illogical, satanic, and even ridiculous. Likewise, a visiting staff member from NLF’s main campus gave a sermon critiquing *Phchum Ben* at NLF Toul Sangkae the week prior to Dr Chhin’s sermon at JVC. In a much more jovial tone than Dr Chhin, the guest preacher began his sermon,

(Jokingly) Do you have any *bohbuybun*? (laughter) [...] Today is the 9th day of *Phchum Ben*, meaning from the 1st day till the 15th day, during the morning, people leave their homes that are far from the *wat* to meet with the *braet*. There are many who toss rice balls (*bohbuybun*). They toss rice balls to give to the *braet*. Have you heard about this? Have you talked about this? They all believe that *braet*, they believe that *braets* are ancestors. Are *braets* good? (Jokingly) Some tease/curse their children by calling them ‘hey, *braet!*’ (laughter). [...] Why do people want to go to a place that has *braets*? How can people still believe about this? [...] They think Buddhist faith says that during *Phchum Ben*, for 15 days, we go to 7 *wats* and the *braets* see their offspring give food and they bless them. All families strive hard to go to 7 *wats*. But not many people actually do it. I believe we live in the age of busyness. People don’t go to the *wat*. Why do people still believe in this stuff?! I want to read the Bible. In John, chapter 10, verse 10 ... I want you to understand, know clearly, about *Phchum Ben*. I want to explain the meaning because people don’t understand clearly about the word *Phchum Ben*, because I don’t know about the meaning either. [The *braets* come and go, but] who are these *braets*? I want you to understand what the Bible has to share.

He reads Jesus’s words in John 10:10, which read, “The thief comes only to steal kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10 ESV). He continued his nuanced critique of the important Buddhist holiday as a way in which Satan has deceived the Khmer people into worshiping the *braet*. The sub-humanoid *braet* fits well in both the Khmer Christian and Khmer Buddhist cosmology. He read Luke 16:19-31, a parable told by Jesus about a rich man who went to Hell and pleaded, unsuccessfully, with Abraham to allow him to visit his living family and warn them of Hell. Not only does Jesus speak of *braets*, according to this pastor, but also it is more evidence that people go and remain in Hell. Khmer Buddhism unfortunately teaches people to worship the *braet* and that Hell is a temporary, not eternal, place. Emphatically, he preached:

During *Phchum Ben*, *braets* come from Hell, but they are not healthy! If we saw them at the *wat*, they are emaciated, dirty. Their mouths are tiny (*braets* suffer even more because, while they are starving, their mouths are nearly closed, impeding them to eat). All the food that’s offered, they can’t even eat! Thy cry, weep, suffer! [...] The Bible shares clearly to us, when we die, if we believe on Jesus Christ, our spirits are reborn, we are with God in his holiness. But if we do not have God in our lives, we don’t
have new life. We die. This is what the Bible shares. [...] Why do people believe braets, ghosts, spirits, et cetera in our lives come and go? The Bible tells us that our spirits do not go, nor do braets come during Phchum Ben. If people are in Hell, they remain there.

Bookending his beginning quotation of John 10:10, he cited Isaiah 14:12-13 and claimed that the reason why the Khmer people believe incorrectly is because Satan has come into the world in order to deceive people. Importantly, he used his critique of Khmer Buddhism to propel the Christian message of salvation. As I will soon discuss, for many Khmer Christians, Buddhism, and thus Khmer cosmology is often reconfigured as evil (cf. Engelke 2010). This Khmer pastor’s critique of Phchum Ben shows us that not only are some Christians positioning themselves at odds with the Khmer world, they are also actively critiquing it, even vilifying it.

By understanding themselves as qualitatively different from other Khmer, Khmer Christians experience a shifting positionality of being simultaneously rejected and persecuted (made taboo) and becoming the agents of change and healing. In the following section, I explore a group of Khmer Christians who actively put themselves in opposition to the Khmer world by waging a ritual war against the perceived evil and sin that not only keep the Khmer people back from being saved but also perpetuates their hostility toward Christianity. The NLF pastor concluded his sermon by saying, “God commissions us. When you go to your home village for Phchum Ben, you must stand up with your mouth, make war with the spirits, because God (pounds his fists) is amongst us. God is the leader of our hometown (srokomenaet). God is the leader of our strength (meaning, our spiritual strength/power comes from God). Amen!”

**Warfare in the Wat**

Jesus’s Church Phnom Penh (JCPP) is a small-membered church on the northern edge of Toul Sangkae operated out of the home of Pastor Senna. Like many other Khmer Christian leaders his age, Pastor Senna converted to Christianity in 1984 in a refugee camp at the Thai/Cambodian border during the conflict of the late 1970s and 1980s of Democratic Kampuchea and the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. He worked for the UN during the Peace Keeping missions of the early 1990s when the borders were reopened and a new constitution formed. Newly converted Khmer Christians and foreign missionaries re-entered the nation, and it has been a popular destination for Christian work.
ever since. The ‘freshness’ of Christianity in Cambodia has not allowed for
denominational distinction to be well-developed with exception to the nominal
presence of Catholicism, which has roots in French colonialism. Evangelical
leaders did a lot of work, however, to separate themselves from Mormons and
Jehovah’s Witnesses, who have a presence in Phnom Penh as well. Pastor Senna
and my friend Pastor Dara, who invited me to the prayer-walk, had connections
with the Assemblies of God and were both of the Pentecostal persuasion, though
they would not label themselves as such. This is important to note as the
ethnographic moment explored below shares a lot in common with
anthropological engagements with Pentecostal and Methodist spiritual warfare
(see e.g., Marshall 2016; Tomlinson 2014, respectively).

Pastor Dara organised a prayer meeting most Friday afternoons that
strategically changed location in order to physically spread the presence of
prayer around the city. As I have argued elsewhere, Khmer notions of religion
considers religious praxis to be productive in substitutive things and blessings
(Chapter II). For both Buddhists and Christians, worship and prayer are not
simply a display of one’s faithfulness to God, but also discharge righteousness in
the heart of the worshiper. Christianity, I argue, aims to extrapolate this blessing
in the heart outward into the world. That week’s prayer meeting was hosted by
Pastor Senna of JCPP in Toul Sangkae who planned for the group to walk inside
the wat in Toul Sangkae and pray for the presence of God to be unleashed into
the world and, thereby, opposing the sin and evil that prevents the Khmer
people from experiencing it. Eight people in total, myself included, from differing
churches participated in the prayer-walk.

We met at JCPP and began by introducing ourselves and praying for the
afternoon. Dara, as the organiser, prayed for the people inside the wats to
“believe Jesus in their hearts and to have an experience with Jesus.” After this
prayer, Dara yielded to Pastor Senna, who then set the agenda by displaying his
knowledge of the wat. He explained that as a child he would often visit the wat.
Sometimes he attempted to evangelise the elders of the wat, but they were
reluctant to convert:

Wats have a lot of poor people in and around them, especially the wat in
Toul Sangkae. Wats have many evil spirits in them. I have seen them
before and they told me they do not help the people who come. Evil
spirits sin every day! People come to the wat in order to find help but
they do not find help. The evil spirits there do no help but only deceive.
After Pastor Senna’s teaching moment, the group began to pray for protection for the day in a common style that every Khmer church I experienced practices where each person prays their individual prayer out loud (see, also, Haynes 2017). The collective prayer was highly visceral and was building up to yelling and praying in tongues. Dara loudly and boldly prayed for protection from evil; for God to open the eyes of the Khmer people who are being deceived by the evil in the world; for God to save Cambodia.

After an hour of introductions, teaching from Pastor Senna, prayer, and being filled with enormous anticipation, we decided to split the group in two with one going to a wat in the neighbourhood just to the north and the other to Wat Toul Sangkae. Dara, myself, a male member from Dara’s church who drove a tuk tuk taxi, and a woman from another church went to Wat Toul Sangkae.

Traveling by tuk tuk, we entered the wat and came upon what seemed like a typical day in the life of the wat: kids playing with a rattan football, monks reciting the thoam in their dormitory, painters commissioned to paint a stupa, mourners mourning at the crematory, sounds of playing students at the adjacent state primary school, acars (lay Buddhist elders) sitting in the shade, taxi drivers talking on their mobile phone, and rummagers rummaging through trash looking for recyclables. It was a pleasant day as the wat was typically much calmer than the outside, bustling streets of Toul Sangkae. I acted ignorant of the wat, even though I had been conducting research there for several months.

Not knowing where to park, we circled the central worship hall and parked next to the monk’s dormitory. The tuk tuk driver and the woman began to walk together as Dara and myself casually walked together. We walked toward the school, and around an impressive monument dedicated to Cu Nat, the inventor of the Khmer script, past the crematory, around to the sala chan (lay worship hall), circled the preahwi'hie (central worship hall) and met up with the other two at the tuk tuk. I occasionally asked Dara questions, but tried to refrain as he was praying quietly to himself. We left and that was that. It was a very brief and seemingly uneventful ordeal. As we were walking I reflected how uneventful this occasion was. It was short-lived, quiet, with no controversy. I could not help but consider the awkwardness, embarrassment, and perhaps even confusion these Khmer prayer-warriors might be experiencing by going into such a deeply Khmer space and waging war against it.

The wat clearly has a deeply entrenched meaning and importance to Khmer society. It holds the locus of Khmer religion and has even be argued to help preserve Khmerness (Kent 2007; Kobayashi 2008; Ledgerwood 2008). It is
no surprise that, for most Christian missionaries asked, the wat is the quintessential symbol of Khmer paganism. Most would not even step foot into a wat out of fear that they, as one missionary from New Zealand suggested, "might be opened up to anything." I was naturally interested in what Khmer Christians thought of the wat. I generally found that they have an awkward relationship with the wat. Some vilify it like the missionaries do. Some find nothing troubling, for, as one friend said, it is a "dead place," meaning there is nothing productive, good or bad, happening there. Some are reluctant to engage with the wat. The most concise answer to this question I can give is, 'it’s complicated'.

We were soon back at JCPP awaiting the other group to return, who soon did. I reflected to myself how the mundane and brief prayer-walk did not match the intense anticipation and build up. As a typical researcher, I was confused about what to expect next. Regrouped, Pastor Senna began to lead a debriefing of our experiences. I was fortunate to record the debriefing as it provided a spectacular account. The following is an excerpt from the debrief:

One woman from Pastor Senna’s group began by commenting how a statue of a half lion, half elephant confused her: “The lion had the head of an elephant. I asked God, ‘Lord, what is this? It deceives people.’”

Tuk tuk driver: the spirits deceive.

Senna: Deceptive spirits, false sprits come from the wat. All of these are in the wat. All spirits cause people to become lost. These spirits deceive people to be lost from one place to another place until they die. Thus, these spirits make people become lost. Evil does not want people to know God. They don’t want people to worship God. Satan makes stories that cause people to become lost. The wat is the most evil place [...] Before, when I entered the wat, I had a feeling of tension in my heart. But now, it’s better. God is sovereign/lord (mchah’) in the wat too. What did you feel?

Woman 1: like you, Pastor. Before I had a similar feeling – tension within my heart. But now, when I enter [the church] I have no problems. I praise God and pray to God.

Friend Woman 2: (jovially and quickly) when I went, the acar was friendly. It was happy. I went with fellow Christians. Before I entered the wat I had a feeling my heart was being allured. I thought (laughing) that an evil spirit was alluring me to enter the wat. People within the wat, all of them have good eyes. They were friendly people. They looked at us in a good way.

Tuk Tuk Driver: when I first entered I had an immediate feeling of tension in my heart. When we were driving to the wat, the closer we got the
more tension in my heart I felt. I had a feeling that there was fighting in my heart. I saw evil spirits everywhere filling the wat, coming and going. I began to pray, asking God, “why does this place have so many evil spirits?” When I closed my eyes, I saw many spirits. I saw a huge one staring at me. I prayed because it was like a heavy war. When we left, the war continued. When we arrived here at the church, I heard a sound, “please, give glory to God.” We should pray and give God glory, Amen?

Here we can see how the tension in the heart has grown into fighting, even war.

Senna: This Church is on the border of 3 neighbourhoods. This wat (wat Toul Sangkae) is very cruel. Yesterday at 4 in front of the wat a thief robbed my moto […] At the front of the wat is the most evil place because it has drug dealers, thieves, now gangsters who kill each other. It has those who held my youngest child as a ransom […] It has people who shoot each other, kill each other […] If you use a normal saying, call it a place of dogs because when other people from another place come, they kidnap for ransom. They have a bongthom (gang leader) near there. He’s dead. I saw the bongthom and a younger person who has money and influence shoot each other. I witnessed this event, I saw them shoot each other and was asked to testify but I did not want to. I told them that I did not see. That place is full of darkness and evil […] that place has evil spirits, but we cannot see, but God lets us know. We do not see, but we see people fighting and killing each other, but we know it’s from evil spirits.

Woman 3 (who I joined at Wat Toul Sangkae): When we entered the wat immediately I saw the statue of the niek (a mythological, seven-headed serpent/dragon that Buddha tamed reciting his thoam, see Chapter II). In my heart there was a war. When we came back here, there’s still a war. When we arrived at the wat, I heard a noise speak to me ‘let’s have a war!’ The sound said to me ‘fight with me!’ I began to pray. After I began to pray the evil spirits had a change of heart. They wanted to plead with the head spirit. The minions began to retreat. I prayed and thought of God’s word. They pleaded and they left.

Dara then asked me what I felt. Both dumbfounded because I was amazed at what I was hearing and because I did not want to stop the flow of conversation, I said, “I don’t know. There were many people, it was noisy, and I was confused. But now I am happy (a common saying).”

Dara: this wat has many people, and noisy (repeating/following me), but other wats are quiet. This wat is busy because there are many people who live near the wat. When we entered the wat I had a normal feeling. I walked and prayed. My legs are a little tired now because of all the walking (laughing). Wats stupefy Khmer people. […] After I war, if I am careless I would be lost. But after the battle I have joy because I have victory.
Tuk Tuk Driver: when I entered the wat, I closed my eyes and I saw the niek and the serpent. So I prayed. They told me “remember this, one day I will take revenge.” But we have victory because we have God. We must be careful because spirits will take advantage if we are careless.

In addition to this fabulous display of spiritual warfare, Pastor Senna sheds light on the event by giving a final thought prior to a time of intense collective prayer:

Senna: In Daniel Chapter 1 or 2, Daniel worked with the King, two Kings. The Israelites were slaves in Babylon. And God prepared Daniel. Daniel was chosen to serve the King. Daniel said, “if you want a high position, you must fear God.” If we follow God’s heart, God lifts us up. God will anoint us as His people in order to glorify Himself. Daniel failed his people because they were slaves, but he was faithful with God. God appointed Daniel and his three friends to serve the King of Babylon. It’s the same with us. If we follow the way of God, God will lift us up too to give him glory.

By associating himself and other Christians to the Biblical character of Daniel exiled in Babylon, he is doing a rather interesting cross-stitching. The Israelites were God’s people who were either killed or exiled by the pagan Babylonians. The Khmer, as Buddhists, are understood by the Christian to be
pagan. So, the more accurate analogy would be that the Khmer are like the pagan Babylonians, not the lost Israelites. Daniel served a pagan King, yet Pastor Senna uses this as an illustration that they, Christians, serve a foreign God. Like Daniel, they betray their own people and serve a foreign God. As confusing as this might sound, the point is that this group of Christians, as articulated by Pastor Senna, is putting themselves at odds with their fellow Khmer people and the Khmer world – a world that is at times hostile towards them.

It is important to note that the warfare did not simply take place in the physical place of the wat. It happened predominantly in the build-up and debriefing of the actual event. The debrief recorded above provides an example of typical Khmer discourse where each speaker shows respect to the previous speaker and snowballs on the other’s contribution and spirals outward and larger. This exchange was productive in imagining the expansive nature of sin in the world and its link to the space of the wat. There is very little violent hostility towards Christians in Cambodia, but, as described above, those who do convert speak of the difficulties of being Khmer and Christian – mainly it is seen as a betrayal of their Khmerness. This example of spiritual warfare shows how such intrinsic spaces to Khmer society as the wat were being reconceptualised, engaged with, and used as a device that perpetuates a hostile world at odds with Christians. We can begin to see how hostility, persecution, and being put at odds with the world might be necessary to the project of Khmer evangelical Christianity.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the conflict, difficulty, and hardship that seem to be intrinsic to how Khmer evangelical Christians frame their religious lives. Rev Heng Cheng positioned himself outside of Khmer order, at times opposing them, in order to later save them. I am reminded of Douglas’ remark on the pangolin: “Like Abraham’s ram in the thicket and like Christ, the pangolin is spoken of as a voluntary victim” (1984: 170). The goal for evangelical Christians is to, as Ritty suggested, “change Cambodia for Christ.”

The following chapter continues this discussion by exploring this logic on the national scale. Politics, therefore, becomes enfolded into the salvation-from-agonism dynamic of Khmer evangelical Christianity. The political environment in
Phnom Penh has been described as violent (Springer 2010). Change from within is dangerous and impossible. But, change from outside can be possible. We can best see this through the political hopes and goals of Christians. By engaging from “outside” of politics, Christians are able to change it (cf. Spencer et al. 2014). Just like Rev Heng Cheng abandoning his Khmer cohort to come from the outside in order to save it, Khmer Christians become qualitatively different, as understood by their discourse surrounding people’s rejection and persecution toward their new identity. In a sense, they need a hostile world. In Khmer Christianity’s attempt to stabilise and save not only the individual person but also the Khmer world, we can begin to see through these ethnographic examples how hostility, persecution, and being put at odds with the world is necessary to the project of Khmer evangelical Christianity.
Chapter V – “God Has No Politics Here”: Evangelical Political Theology

Introduction

Throughout this thesis we have seen how Khmer notions of religion rooted in Khmer Buddhism understand sin (bap) to be a destructive, polluting substance that corrupts and destroys the moral person and is made when one “does sin (thwoe bap)” (Chapter II). Buddhist Religious praxis aims to purify the person from sin through acts of righteousness (thwoe bon), creating the redeeming substance of bon that conquers sin, elevating the person into a higher moral order, and providing blessings in the everyday life of the person. For Khmer evangelical Christians, Jesus becomes the ultimate source of bon, vanquishing sin not only in the life of the person but also in the life of the world. Evangelical Christians do a lot of work to bring forth the presence of sin and evil in the world in order for Jesus’s redemptive work to take place there (Chapter IV).

This chapter follows three lines of thought. First, for evangelical Christians, the relationship between the religious sphere and the political sphere has an opaque and plastic boundary that bleeds into one another. Second, a fitting way to frame the political milieu of Cambodia is through agonistic pluralism. Third, the first two observations then help us understand how Khmer Christians deploy a political theology that bolsters Jesus as the true Lord and Sovereign of Cambodia. While being framed as apolitical, this political theology is understood to be outside of the political sphere, allowing Jesus to effectively save the Khmer people from the political agonism that continues to haunt the nation.

This chapter essentially explores Khmer evangelical Christian political theology. I make use of Hent de Vries’s (2006) concept of political theology that hinges on the central figure of a sovereign whose power and authority is capable of bringing forth salvation. Now in a “post-secular” world, where the myth of
secularism has been thoroughly scrutinised, we can view a pluralisation of the term political theology (de Vries & Sullivan 2006). A singular political theology is impossible due to the pluralities of religion (cf. Das 2013). What is significant about how Khmer evangelical Christians engage the political is the ways in which the agonism of working out power and salvation deal directly with the notion of sin.

In the previous chapter, we saw how important conflict, sacrifice, hardship, and persecution are for Khmer Christians to clarify and strengthen their faith. In their attempts to clarify and reconcile their new religious lives in such a precarious world as Phnom Penh, Khmer Christians are able to use the momentum of conflict to stabilise themselves and the Khmer world. This ability to harness seemingly diametric and competing forces is intrinsic to the Khmer logic of religion, as explored in Chapter II. This present chapter ultimately explores how this dynamic extrapolates into the broader Khmer world and beyond. The Khmer Christians I had gotten to know were, at times, at the mercy of rapid change. At other times, they willingly aimed to become the very agents of change.

Current ethnographic engagements with Cambodia will intersect the decades of political calamity. This naturally propelled one of my research interests to understand how Khmer bystanders of the current governmental regime understand, conceptualise, and engage politics. Khmer people, I soon discovered, hold their cards very close to their vest regarding their political opinions. It took time and rapport to gain trust. People were reluctant to discuss such things with a researcher. Nearly all of my conversations with friends about the activities of the Khmer government were when hanging out and relaxing, rather than in any formal interview or setting. One of the aims of this chapter is to provide a snapshot of the political context of Cambodia in 2016 that is foreground to the discussion.

This chapter begins by exploring the planning meeting of Jubilee Cambodia, a large conference organised by a group of Khmer Christians that aimed to ritually declare Jesus as the true ruler (mchah’) of Cambodia, thereby healing the nation from the “curse” of sin that has plagued the nation from its inception. Through the description of the planning meetings, we see how the political is purposely mobile. Leaning on the work of Jonathan Spencer (2012; Spencer et al. 2014), I suggest that religion provides these Christians a privileged ground to critique the political.
The chapter then describes the political landscape of Cambodia that foregrounds *Jubilee Cambodia*, illustrating the precarious and agonistic nature of politics in Cambodia. Following this soundscape of the political strife, the discussion moves to the nature of democracy, arguing that Chantal Mouffe’s (1999) model of “agonistic pluralism” is an appropriate way to frame the political milieu of Cambodia. This chapter concludes by suggesting Evangelical political theology understands sin to be able to penetrate the political sphere and, thus, is capable of being saved. Also, political theology helps scaffold Jesus as sovereign, realigning Christians’ understanding of power.

**Planning the Jubilee – an Awkward Relationship between the Religious and the Political**

Pastor Dara was a humble, young, and ambitious pastor who ran his own church-cum-dormitory in the district just south of Toul Sangkae called Toul Kork. We had met briefly at a prayer meeting he and his pastoral colleagues organised every first Friday night of the month. Those who partook in the prayer meetings were typically from charismatic, independent Khmer-led churches in and around Phnom Penh and gathered at the International Christian Assembly (ICA) – a large, international Christian organisation associated with the Assemblies of God. Many Christian worship meetings were segregated between the Anglophone international community and the Khmer. In other words, it was unusual, though not unprecedented, for non-Khmer speakers to participate in Khmer-led Christian meetings. Initially, the Friday night prayer group met in one of their churches until the gathering became too large for the small church spaces Khmer leaders could afford. ICA’s facilities were large and modern and were available to Christian conferences at an affordable cost.

Dara’s conversion to Christianity follows the similar rubric explored in Chapter III of this thesis. Growing up in the countryside, he knew there was very little opportunity for a job and success if he were to remain in his home village. He began attending free English lessons offered by a missionary who gradually invited him to Christian meetings and Bible studies. From there, he “experienced Jesus in [his] heart” and his “faith grew.” He moved to Phnom Penh to study at university and joined a Christian dormitory. During his third year of university, he “felt a burden and knew God was close to [his] heart.” He began working for ICA as a translator, and upon graduation, he attended a six-month Bible training...
programme in the Philippines. Both his experiences with ICA and the Filipino Bible school influenced his Pentecostal religiosity, though he would not label himself as such. He prefers to be known as “non-denominational”.

Naturally assuming I was a missionary, Dara introduced himself to me in fluent, crisp English and asked with which organisation I was affiliated. I told him that I was a researcher and I was interested in how Cambodians understood Christianity as opposed to what missionaries assumed. I found this strategy of positioning myself juxtaposed to missionaries to be effective when introducing Khmer Christians to my research. I was surprised to receive a call from Dara the following day asking if we could meet. He later explained how many Khmer Christian leaders feel patronised by missionaries, distrusting them to take on leadership roles, especially considering the vast financial inequality between the local Khmer pastor and the foreign-funded missionary. He and the local pastors of the Friday night prayer group aimed to localise Christianity in the Khmer context, hoping for the “sound of Cambodians (somleak khmaer)” to burgeon in the Christian world (cf. Howell 2008). Dara was not cynical toward missionaries. He understood the need for a healthy partnership between local Khmer Christians and foreign mission organisations. Moreover, he was particularly interested in unifying Khmer churches, which he accurately understood to be fragmented due to the extreme flux and diversity of global Christian actors in Cambodia (see Introduction).

Dara and his pastoral cohort organised a large conference held at ICA called, in Khmer, “The year of the Lord God for Cambodia (chnam nay preahamcah’ somrab’ Kompucie),” but in English “Jubilee Cambodia.” The “Jubilee” is based on the Levitical code that ordered the Israelites to “consecrate every] fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” (Leviticus 25:10a ESV). It was supposed to be a year of emancipation when slaves were set free, debts were cancelled, fields were to remain fallow, and peace was to reign (Wellman 2014). Jubilee Cambodia not only aimed to unify Khmer Christians, but it was also crucially designed to ritually declare Jesus the true ruler (mchah’) of Cambodia. The timing of the conference was strategic. It was held 24 September on Constitution Day, the day commemorating Cambodia’s return to a constitutional monarchy in 1993 following King Sihanouk’s abdication of the throne in 1955 and decades of calamity (Chandler 2008: 289). Jubilee Cambodia also took place in the midst of Phchum Ben, the largest Buddhist festival of the year (see Chapter IV), and significantly one week after New Life Fellowship’s (NLF) massive ACC conference.
The Asian Christian Conference (ACC) is the largest Christian event in Cambodia, held each year for the past several years by NLF. All the keynote speakers of the 2016 conference were pastors from large North American charismatic churches resembling that of Bill Johnson’s Bethel Church in Redding, California (cf. Bialecki 2017: 171-181). Dara later admitted that he and other Khmer leaders tended to avoid ACC due to its obvious American/Western religiosity and the lack of involvement with Khmer Christian leaders outside of NLF’s web of influence. Jubilee Cambodia was to be distinctly Khmer, relying on such well-respected Khmer evangelical Christian leaders as Rev Heng Cheng (see Chapter IV) and Barnabas Mann (see Mann 2012); representatives from every Province in Cambodia and every District of Phnom Penh were to lead a prayer declaring Jesus to be the true ruler of their Province/District; and a special “indigenous/tribal/ethnic (cunciet)” worship performance by a church from the North-Easternmost Province of Ratanakiri was to be performed.

The first planning meeting of Jubilee Cambodia took place in late August in the third-floor food court of Ratana Plaza, one of the several modern (tumnuop) Khmer-style shopping malls in Phnom Penh. Khmer people generally did not do their shopping in these types of malls as the prices were much cheaper in the common markets; yet, they provided modern spaces from which city dwellers could benefit. Meeting, “hanging out” (daeleng), and/or having a romantic date out of the sun and in air conditioning were luxuries not found in the countryside (cf. Derks 2008: 146-147). Mall security guards were peripheral, though actively deterring thieves and ensuring people did not loiter too long. Thirteen Khmer Christian leaders (five women and eight men), a missionary from Malaysia whom I refer to as Lei, and myself met mid-afternoon in the customer-less food court. The only purchase any of us made were the bottles of water Dara had purchased from an idle and seemingly bored food vendor playing on her smartphone.

As explored in the previous chapter’s description of a “prayer walk” inside a Buddhist wat, evangelical Christians like Dara considered religious praxis in public settings to be essential for their Christian witness. The planning meeting not only discussed the logistics of Jubilee Cambodia, but it was also book-ended with corporate prayer and worship. It was productive, in other words, on multiple layers of evangelical religious practice. These sorts of public meetings acted as, to borrow from James Bielo’s work with public Bible studies, “an event that accomplishes its own cultural work and appreciated as such by its participants” (2009: 9). Praying, worshipping, and discussing Christian themes in
the awkward and sterile setting of a Khmer food-court enriched and emboldened their evangelical faith. Also, being physically present in the public food-court accomplished the Khmer evangelical goal of “spreading prayer” and righteousness in non-religious spaces. This description of the spatial context of the meeting is critical to understand the work that was being done there.

After the initial prayer and abridged acapella worship led by a young pastor called Mekera, Dara passed out the bottles of water, thanked the group for attending, and introduced Lei who was there to explain the meaning behind Jubilee Cambodia. She was one of several missionaries I had met who considered her role to be serving the Khmer people, especially Christian leaders, through intercessional prayer and prophetic direction. Dara asked her to explain the “vision” they had regarding Jubilee Cambodia. The missionary explained in English while Mekera translated into Khmer:

In May this year God brought [me, Dara, and another Khmer pastor] to Mount Kulen [near Siem Reap]. God commissioned us to go to Mount Kulen to open the ancient gates and let the King of Glory come in. Because at Mount Kulen Jaravaraman the Second [[one of the first kings of the Khmer Empire at Angkor]] made a covenant with Siva and instituted the cult of the Hindu idol, the god-King […] He became the “god-King.” The Lord led us to institute, to cut off, ok, to cut off the old covenant. And open the ancient gates and let the King of Glory come in. We went to the source of contamination, the source of the curse of the nation. To cleanse and reverse the curse. So we believe that God showed pastor Dara this date, Constitution Day. Because the King of Glory has come in and he is ready to take his place. To take the throne, to rule, and reign. We believe that Constitution Day is the day where a new Constitution was written. So God wants to write a new covenant. He wants to have a new covenant with his people. In May when we went to Mount Kulen it was the King’s birthday when we came back to Phnom Penh. So this is the next step where God is going to take his place here in Phnom Penh. As you have been praying for this day, 24 September, the number 12 is very significant for us. Because when Pastor Dara spoke about the 12 Districts of Phnom Penh, this 12 speaks about government. The Lord has been speaking to me about the seat (emphasis hers) of government, the place where the government sits. Even last night as we were worshiping in preparation for this I saw the Ark of the Covenant of the place where God sits and a crown above it. So, really, that is the declaration of what God wants us to make on that day.

The point of Jubilee Cambodia was simple: to announce Jesus the true ruler of Cambodia, thereby healing the nation from the social and political turmoil the Khmer have found themselves subject to for centuries. By reaching to the history/mythos of the Khmer Empire’s genesis at Mount Kulen where King Jayavaraman II performed an “auspicious magic rite” with Siva in 802 CE (Chandler 2008: 39), Lei was locating the “source of contamination” that plagues
Cambodia. The tyrannical presence of sin can be traced throughout Cambodia’s pagan history. I had heard this logic before from a visiting pastor from the US who preached one Sunday night at NLF in Toul Sangkae. According to him, child sexual exploitation, abject poverty, and the genocide were all results of this “covenant” made between Jayavarman II and Siva. There is an important enfolding of temporalities being deployed here by those like Lei and the American pastor, which will be discussed below. Additionally, a critical multi-layered and fluid understanding of the political is also being deployed.

The 1050 CE Sdok Kak Thom inscription has been the primary historical evidence of Jayavarman II’s events on Mount Kulen; yet, ironically, there is no mention of the word “covenant” (see Chandler 2008: 38-39). The Sanskrit inscription does, however, point to an “auspicious magic rite” that Jayavarman II performed for Siva that made him the “universal monarch” and “king of the gods” (ibid: 39). Jayavarman II’s performance of a magical rite with a pagan god on a mountaintop is easily juxtaposed with Yahweh making covenant with Moses and the Israeletes on Mount Sinai. The use of “covenant” was a common feature amongst the social milieu of the Ancient Near East that had significant political implications (Kitchen 1966: 89-106). It was specifically an agreement and “contract” (Richter 2008: 70) between a suzerain (ruler) and his vassals (subjects), initiating an abiding relationship between the two (ibid: Chapter 3). At times, covenants were small-scale when, for example, a clan dominated and conquered another lesser clan. At other times, they were large-scale and used in nation building. What is unique about the formation of ancient Israel was the suzerain/vassal relationship was between a god and humans.

The politically charged usage of covenant has carryover into the Christian world. Gospel-writer Matthew carefully portrays Jesus of Nazareth on a "mountaintop" (Matthew 5-7) announcing a new covenant, a new law, a new rule, and a new way of life. Present-day Zambia’s declaration as a “Christian nation” is understood by prosperity gospel Pentecostals as a covenant between Zambia and God reflected in their individual covenants made with God (Haynes 2015). For these Pentecostals, Naomi Haynes suggests, “religious actions have political import; in other words, religious engagement is political engagement” (ibid.: 6, emphasis original). There is something intrinsically political about the notion of covenant. Lei et al.’s usage of covenant clearly reflects how they reckoned an ontologically absent God and the unseen spiritual world to intersect and engage the concrete world through the actions of a central political figure. Covenants can be made between any god and any leader. The problem with
Cambodia is that from the get-go, the ruler made a covenant with the wrong god. Their symbolically rich chronicle of Jubilee Cambodia indexes the development and deployment of a political theology that deals with sin, “cut[ting] off the old covenant,” thus “cleans[ing] and revers[ing] the curse” that contaminates Cambodia. What is less apparent, however, is how these Christians understood the “political.”

A (purposefully) plastic boundary between the religious and the political

Lei’s organic intertwining of Biblical themes with the current and historical political Khmer context is a classic example of how Protestants work to impose the Biblical narrative onto their everyday lives. The Evangelical and Protestant effort to understand and engage the world through a Biblical hermeneutic has been thoroughly discussed within the anthropology of Christianity (e.g. Ammerman 1987; Bialecki et al. 2008; Bielo 2009, 2011; Crapanzano 2000; Engelke 2013; Harding 2000). As one missionary whom I shared lunch with at ACC cynically divulged, understanding the Khmer world through the empirical and epistemological tools I was using were of no interest to her. She was ultimately interested in “seeing the world through the Kingdom of God and a Biblical lens.” It should be of no surprise that those like the visiting American pastor, Lei, and Dara interpreted the workings of covenant to be productive in both blessings and curses as portrayed through the biblical metanarrative.

Borrowing from Bauman and Bridges (1990), these Christians entextualized the notion of covenant into the historical, social, and political context of Cambodia. Entextualization is a fluid and dynamic “performance” of taking an original discourse (most fundamentally, a text) from its original context, decontextualizing it, and recontextualizing it in a new context, thus blending, mutating, and shifting its meaning. While not venturing too far down the linguistic rabbit trail, looking at how “covenant” was being deployed helps us see how for these Christians, the political was being enfolded into the multi-layered temporality (i.e. the ancient biblical narrative being imposed on Cambodia’s history) of this entextualizing work. Lei’s explanation illustrates how notions of the political can simultaneously parallel, mirror, be separated, and even contradict themselves: Jayavaraman II’s polluting covenant contrasted Jesus’s redeeming covenant; Cambodia’s (democratic) constitution reflected a new covenant; King Sihamoni’s birthday signified Jesus’s readiness to become
Cambodia’s true ruler; the number 12 (the original twelve tribes of Israel) reveals how the “seat of government” is pregnant for change. These slippages were not logically problematic for these Christians. Rather, they were necessary.

After Lei’s explanation of what she, Dara, and the other Khmer pastor had envisioned as the thrust of Jubilee Cambodia to be, she asked if anyone had questions before she rushed off to another meeting. Where Lei and Dara stressed their political theology of Jubilee Cambodia, the other Khmer pastors seemed to be humdrum about it. No one further enquired about the meaning behind Lei’s elaborate explanation. Rather, the Khmer pastors were seemingly more excited and interested in pinning down the logistics of hosting Christians from every province in Cambodia. Excitement grew as it was discovered that all of the local churches represented in the meeting had, collectively, members from nearly all twenty-five provinces of Cambodia who could help host the provincial guests and/or coordinate their navigation within the city. As explored in Chapter I of this thesis, the majority of Khmer city-dwellers were provincial migrants, many of whom actively kept close ties and networks with their home villages in the countryside so as to not completely eradicate their “traditional” Khmerness, which city-life erodes. In other words, the pastors seemed more excited to create a virtual and unified web of Christians in the Khmer nation than to engage with Lei’s political theology. Having a representative from each Province ritually declare Jesus the true ruler was, in their opinion, the most significant feature of Jubilee Cambodia and the central tool to usher in Jesus’s new covenant.

I had at other times witnessed these types of slippages between how missionaries and Khmer Christians approached religious life. These contours helped make fieldwork interesting and easy. Certainly, most of my Khmer friends did not view their Khmer history from a genocidal-lens as many missionaries did. It could be argued that this ethnographic moment is looking at two different types of Christianity (i.e. the missionary vis-à-vis the local Khmer), surmising that these slippages and contours cannot work together, and thus illustrating the impossibly of Christianity (cf. Derrida 2008). However, as discussed in the thesis’s Introduction, I argue this is not the case. Instead of viewing the missionary and the Khmer as radical alterities due to their differences, it is important to consider that some of these differences worked together. What I propose is that the evangelical Christians I had met, foreign and Khmer, had a robust, dynamic, and multi-layered understanding of the political. I am not suggesting that evangelical Christians in Cambodia had a sophisticated and developed political theology as Ruth Marshall (2009) reports of in urban Nigeria;
though, I do suggest that like Marshall’s Pentecostal interlocutors, my Christian friends hoped for a just government that was potentially on the horizon with the advent of Christianity in Cambodia. Also, Christians understood their religious activities to effect this political change.

Importantly, during the hour-long Jubilee Cambodia planning meeting there was no discussion of Prime Minister Hun Sen, his self-perpetuating CPP party, or the looming political conflict Cambodians faced. Only King Sihanomi’s birthday was used to index Jesus’s readiness to “take his place.” Lei’s narrative further illustrates that the political is located in an abstract sphere, somewhere on mountaintops with gods, rulers, mystical rites, blessings, and curses. The everyday experiences of living in the nation’s capital and being subject to an authoritarian government were seemingly ignored in the politically charged Jubilee Cambodia meeting. However, as I will discuss below, these political realities were foreground to Jubilee Cambodia. The abstract, political sphere, in other words, has manifestations in the concrete world.

Understanding how Lei used Biblical themes to overlap the Cambodian political landscape can be related to how the miraculous was experienced by charismatic evangelicals in the US. Jon Bialecki (2017) uncovers the logic behind miracles, suggesting that for his Vineyard interlocutors, inexplicable phenomena could interchangeably be understood as a miracle or not. What counted as a miracle was constantly in flux. For example, at one moment headache relief could have been a result of Jesus’s miraculous healing power while at another moment it could have been attributed to consuming an adequate amount of water. Bialecki suggests these radically different interpretations are not competing against each other. He convincingly argues that notions of the miraculous, with their ambiguous and fluid meanings, are able to bleed into other models, or “diagrams,” of understanding the world. Like the miraculous, notions of the political, I argue, are strategically mobile for the Evangelical. At one moment a certain phenomenon can be seen as “political” and at another moment it can somehow be divorced from the political. To illustrate this point, we look at the conclusion of the public planning meeting.

Toward the end of the hour-long meeting, Mekera raised his concern that those who lead prayer typically use that time to give a mini sermon: “they preach a lot and pray only a little.” While everyone was agreeing that order was needed throughout the Jubilee, a young security officer came and hovered over the group. The meeting was indeed unusual. There was prayer, worship, and no one was eating or drinking except for the bottled water. Mekera, who I sat next
to, said under his breath to those of us sitting near him, “I bet he is afraid that this is a political meeting. (In English, perhaps directed toward me) We are *not politicians* (laughing). *He’s afraid we are politicians, especially the opposition.*” A female pastor sitting across from us prayed to herself quietly yet concernedly, “Oh, I am going to pray. ‘God, help.’” Dara approached the guard and the tone of the group was tense yet purposefully cheerful with nervous laughter. I had grown accustomed to the Khmer’s ability to lighten tense situations with humour and laughter early in my fieldwork. Dara returned to his seat next to me and explained that the guard was questioning why we were meeting without purchasing food. He was just doing his job, I thought. Mekera, now knowing the situation was not as threatening as initially thought, stood up and approached the guard. After a moment of joking, he returned back to his seat laughing, saying to the group, “It’s ok. I told him we are Christians. This is a meeting about church, learning about prayer. *God has no politics here.*”

What struck me was Mekera’s earnestness. Even though kings, rulers, authority, covenants, constitutions, and seats of government were constantly being used to frame this religious event, *politics* was elsewhere. How can we begin to understand Evangelical notions of the “political” when politics seem fluid and abstract? There we were, strategically located in a public place planning what seemed to me a very political event – replacing old covenants with a new one, announcing Jesus to be the true ruler of Cambodia, cutting off curses that plague the nation – yet Mekera displays the ability to be talking about political things while divorcing oneself from it. Even Dara admitted when he and I debriefed Jubilee Cambodia sometime after the conference that this was not a political event. Politics in that moment was something else. It was evident to me that Jubilee Cambodia was a political ritual; yet somehow, God had no politics there. These Evangelicals seemed to have been using the political in bifurcated, competing, and contradictory ways. I propose that the flexibility of the political is crucial for evangelical Christianity’s thrust to tease out the sin in the world and superimpose Jesus’s sovereignty in the world. Additionally, I propose that religion gave a space for these Christians to be political in a context that does not allow such dissent.

Here, Jonathan Spencer’s work on social and political change in Sri Lanka is helpful to understand the fluid and ambiguous relationship between religion and politics in such volatile and precarious contexts (Spencer 2012; Spencer et al. 2014). Sri Lanka’s political transition in the 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of violent nationalism and civil war. Buddhist nationalists, Tamil militant groups,
government and non-government actors, as well as Catholics, Muslims, and Buddhists all competed in the democratic process. Spencer suggests that “people in Sri Lanka made frequent use of the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ as two key terms in their practical journeys through the world of war” (Spencer et al. 2014: 10). Similar to my Christian friends, Spencer found his interlocutors to be able to speak of political issues in religious contexts, allowing the act to be considered apolitical (Spencer 2012). Churches, mosques, and pagodas became contexts where people could step outside of the dirty political sphere and engage in politics through religion. In that way, religion helped make the political possible (Spencer et al. 2014). Returning to Cambodia, Christianity seemed to allow these Christians to circumnavigate the political agonism that was foreground to their lives in Phnom Penh. This plastic relationship between the religious and the political tells us something about how evangelical Christians understand power, resistance, and the sovereignty of Jesus. They deploy a political theology that places Jesus above the political sphere in order for Jesus to address the political agonism of Cambodia. Prior to unpacking this logic, we need to look at the political context my Khmer interlocutors found themselves in.

**Parties, Libations, and Assassinations: a Political Soundscape of Phnom Penh in 2016**

The late evenings were becoming more pleasant as the hot season was waning into the rainy season. My wife and I had returned from dinner one Saturday night in mid-July when I saw Bona, the day guard, and Ream, the night guard, sitting at our apartment building’s entrance with Sopha, the neighbouring radio station’s guard playing cards and drinking beer. This was one of the few times I saw the three of them together literally putting down their guard and in such a happy mood. “This,” I thought, “is a good night.” Little did I know that I was soon to be privileged to political speech. We received a jovial “hello! Join us!” as I drove my motorbike into the parking area. My wife, smirking and knowing it would be a long night, said her goodnights and left me behind to join the happy group. The four of us laughed, joked, and I received the gossip into what was happening on the rooftop. My landlord and his family were celebrating his nephew’s acceptance into a university in New Zealand. Having a family member attend a foreign university brought great honour to the family, marking their higher status and prestige. My landlord, who I addressed as *Pu*
(&ldquo;younger uncle,&rdquo; also &ldquo;sir&rdquo;), was like so many upper-middle class Phnom Penhites who were of Chinese-Khmer descent and worked multiple jobs to maintain their higher positions. As if struck with an epiphany, Ream sprang up and ran to the rooftop. A few minutes later Pu came accompanied with an entourage of jubilant male family members. The three guards immediately gave their chairs to him and we all sat next to the apartment building’s large spirit house (*phtea tevata*), which was decorated with faerie lights.

We had fun. I sat watching Pu’s family and friends come to congratulate him and I marvelled at the beautiful humour, intimacy, and teasing Khmer family and friends share with each other during times of celebration. Drinks and snacks were passed around as well as stories. I learned that Pu was the only male sibling that had survived the Khmer Rouge. Khmer kinship has been noted for its shared, bilateral structure (*Ebihara 1977; Ledgerwood 1995*). Disrupting the abiding relationship between the male and female roles in the family is how some Khmer people mark the destabilisation and “imbalance” of the Khmer order (*Frieson 2011; see, also, the present thesis’s Introduction*). My landlord, in other words, had a particularly important role in his family as seen not only in his hosting of his nephew’s party but also in his role during the Democratic Kampuchea days. Like most families, his was caught up in the chaos that descended on Phnom Penh 17 April 1975. His family’s Chinese-Khmer heritage, education, and affluence made them obvious targets for the Khmer Rouge, who radically favoured the poor provincial farmers (*Chandler 2008: 255; cf. Hinton 2005*). Both of his parents and his two brothers were murdered during the evacuation of Phnom Penh. He and his surviving three sisters scattered into the countryside. Pu spent the following three years searching for his dispersed sisters. He was elated and proud, as he should have been, to be reciting this story to the audience around the spirit house. His sister (mother of the honoured nephew) made an appearance as he was explaining his heroic story. I greeted and congratulated her. Happily Pu cried out, “do you remember?! Do you remember when we fled to the countryside and I came finding you?” “Of course!” she replied. To me in English she said, “My brother is a great man!” The younger generation sat and marvelled at him and I wondered if they felt as I did, privileged to hear these first-hand accounts of survival and heroism during that dark time in Khmer history.

During the Soviet rule-by-proxy People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) of the 1980s, Pu attended university in Moscow and returned to Phnom Penh to work as a safety and infrastructure engineer. Soon after the liberalisation of
Cambodia’s economy in 1993, major global actors began to invest and give aid to the newly formed Khmer government, banks, and businesses. The garment industry was especially responsible for the migration boom and unplanned growth in Phnom Penh (Derks 2008: Chapter 3). The competition between global investors, such as the US and the People’s Republic of China, has been a significant boon for Cambodia’s economy and an important mechanism that the current political regime uses to legitimise itself (Sophal 2009). Pu had a distrust for the US due to its invasive history with Cambodia and the CIA’s activities during the Cold War that were partially responsible for the rise of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge (cf. Springer 2010: 57). He favoured China’s involvement in Cambodia, which I found apropos as we were only a few hundred metres away from the massive construction project underway by a Chinese company, with its company’s name proudly overlooking the neighbourhood on the several cranes in Lake Kok. Towering even more ominously opposite the sandy remains of Lake Kok were the Soviet-style Office of the Council of Ministers, Ministry of Defence, and the Government Offices of the Cambodia’s People Party (CPP).

The conversation turned more political. He told me that one thing he does admire about the US and other “foreigners” (barang, literally “French” and used when referring to white foreigners) was that we, according to him, did not experience the level of political corruption the Khmer people experienced. He lamented how the local commune (sangkat) extorted fifty US dollars from him every month since my wife and I moved in. He, perhaps rashly, disclosed that my neighbours who shared the same landing as me were members of the royal family who dwelt modestly and inconspicuously due to the volatile tension between the CPP and the royal family. The level of inequality between high government officials and the “common person (neak thommota)” was stifling. Prime Minister Hun Sen’s CPP was a fraternity that only helped each other at the expense of the Khmer people. In good company, Pu damned Hun Sen by venting an expression I heard throughout my research from multiple people who were zealous enough to provide their critique of the CPP: Hun Sen had “the face of a Khmer and the head of a Vietnamese (mok Khmaer kbal Yuen),” meaning he was a puppet of the Vietnamese. Yuen is a common male Vietnamese name to the likes of “John” in Anglo contexts and used as a racially charged, derogatory term for the Vietnamese. Being called Yuen, in other words, was a deeply cutting insult. It insinuated that Hun Sen was not one of them – an outsider.

A key consequence of gaining independence from the French in 1954 was the development of political parties (Chandler 2008: Chapter 10). As discussed
in Chapter I, factions of differing political loyalties began to pop up throughout the country leaving King Norodom Sihanouk in charge with a high level of political uncertainty. One thing was certain after gaining independence from the French, “Politics in Cambodia between 1955 and 1970,” Chandler explains, “were characterized by Sihanouk’s monopoly of political power and the emergence of Cambodia onto the international stage” (ibid.: 231). Sihanouk’s policies and loyalties seemed schizophrenic, swinging between remaining loyal to the French while being loyal to the communists of North Vietnam and China. By 1963, Sihanouk had cut off economic and military ties with the US as a sign of solidarity with the communist bloc during the Cold War (ibid.: 237). Conservatives and the wealthy elite objected to this move, creating tension that would lead to conflicts set in Phnom Penh during the 1970s.

Removing US support from Cambodia created significant economic deterrents that would later inspire Sihanouk to reforge ties with the US in the late 1960s. At that point, the US had dropped over a hundred thousand tons of bombs throughout Cambodia’s countryside (ibid.: 252), further persuading the people of the countryside to become loyal to the communists. Civil war soon broke out between those loyal to Sihanouk (the royalists) and the communist bloc following the March 1970 coup against the US-loyal prime minister Lan Nol. By the end of 1972, the only remaining sections not controlled by the communists were “Phnom Penh, a few provincial capitals, and much of Battambang” (Chandler 2008: 252). This political turmoil paved the way for not only the rise of the Khmer Rouge but also the neutering of the monarchy. Of those Khmer Rouge soldiers was Hun Sen, who defected to Vietnam to plot a resistance against Pol Pot (see Chapters IV). The Vietnamese invasion on 25 December 1978 that took control of the nation initiated further clashes between those loyal to the Khmer Rouge, the royalists, the Vietnamese, and other small pockets of resistance. The UN Peace Treaty of 1991 aimed to disarm and stop the continual violence, carving a path to the first elections in 1993 and the creation of a new constitution (as mentioned above). The result of the well-attended election was, in addition to a lacklustre performance by other political parties, a near split between Hun Sen’s CPP with 38.2 percent and the royalist Front uni national pour un Cambodge indépendant, neuter, pacifique et coopératif (FUNCINPEC, the National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia in English), led by Prince Rannaridh with 45.5 percent of the votes (Springer 2010: 72). Hun Sen rejected the outcome, indicting electoral fraud and threatened to reignite civil war (ibid.). The UN
The co-prime ministership lasted four years until Hun Sen, using a spectacular campaign of fear and intimidation, staged a coup against Prince Rannaridh in July 1997. The FUNCINPEC has since been virtually annihilated while Hun Sen and his CPP remain in power. New parties have come and gone. The Cambodia’s National Rescue Party (CNRP) lead by Sam Rainsey gained popularity in the 21st century and was projected to win the recent July 2018 elections until it was suddenly outlawed and dissolved by the Cambodian Supreme Court, essentially allowing the CPP to run uncontested (Holmes 2017). The measured snuffing out of any opposition of the CPP has been Hun Sen’s modus operandi, of which most Khmer people are aware. The substance of Pu’s damning soliloquy was of no surprise and we can see further the merit behind Mekera’s anxiety that the mall security guard could have seen them as “the opposition.” Pu even admitted that there was little chance for change. His hope and the hope of several youth I had gotten to know were in foreign-educated Khmer like Kem Ley, a popular critic of the CPP authoritarian regime.

On Thursday, two days prior to Pu’s party, Global Witness had published a scathing report that “provides the evidence base to prove what most Cambodians suspect – that Hun Sen has abused his position as prime minister to allow his relatives control of, or major stakes in, most of Cambodia’s key industries” (Global Witness 2016: 3). Essentially accusing Hun Sen to be a ruthless dictator who supresses the democratic process in Cambodia, the fifty-four page document details how the Hun family has used global aid and industry to monopolise control over the nation’s economy and secure hegemonic control over the legal system. The following day (Friday) Kem Ley appeared on a local radio programme to discuss the report. Pu told me about the interview and report during his lamentation of the Khmer political climate that Saturday night, challenging me to find and read the report, which I did (see Global Witness 2016). Kem Ley was a hero to many Khmer people, according to Pu, because he was bold and dared to critique the government. The next morning (Sunday), Kem Ley was shot twice in the chest at close range and killed while drinking coffee at a busy petrol station near the city centre. The killer was a poor provincial farmer who claimed Kem Ley owed him a relatively small sum of money, though most suspect he was a proxy of the CPP coerced to carry out the assassination. The Khmer government has provided little justice and has failed to investigate the assassination (Burnett 2017).
At the risk of oversimplifying a very complex history, I venture a tentative conclusion. The volatile political climate was a very real threat. People dared not directly push back against Hun Sen’s political regime, lest they suffer similar consequences as Kem Ley. Also, the Khmer people wanted change, yet at the same time they were, understandably, weary of war. Even if the CPP lost the 2018 election, people were sceptical that Hun Sen would actually step down. While beloved, the Khmer people recognised King Sihamoni to have no real political authority. As one friend divulged, “the King is the highest [Khmer person], but Hun Sen is the real leader/lord (mchah’) of Cambodia.” The desire for change, peace, and to become “developed” was in competition with the corruption, violence, and enemy-making that made up Cambodia’s political sphere. Therefore, “agonistic pluralism,” à la Chantal Mouffe (1999; 2006), is a fitting way to frame the political milieu in Phnom Penh. It is from this political agonism that we can more fully understand how Jesus’s sovereignty plays a role in the salvation of the Khmer nation.

Cambodian Democracy as “Agonistic Pluralism”

I never heard Pu talk about politics or Hun Sen again. Kem Ley’s assassination sent ripples throughout the Christian communities I researched. It was difficult to have even my closest friends discuss it. A silent protest became popular in Phnom Penh in 2016 called “Black Monday” where participants wore black shirts in solidarity with those who opposed the CPP. A crackdown of protesters escalated after over a hundred thousand mourners attended the funeral procession, against the government’s warnings, from Phnom Penh to Kem Ley’s home village in Tekcao Province. There were reports of non-protestors being harassed by the military police for wearing black shirts. Again, in tense situations Khmer people often quelled anxieties with humour. I heard jokes that everyone with a black motorbike would soon be arrested on Mondays (black is the favoured colour moto for Khmer people). One of my students at NLF laughingly declared in English, “I don’t hate Hun Sen. I hate him very much” when asked about his opinion of the political situation in Phnom Penh.

All of my friends were hush hush about their opinions about Kem Ley’s death. Eve Zucker’s (2006; 2007; 2008; 2011) extensive work found that keeping silent of the past atrocities has been a common technique for the Khmer people to regain order after the aftermath of decades of chaos. Her research
(2011) in the southwestern rural village of O’Thmaa revealed the high levels of distrust between those who were former soldiers of the Khmer Rouge and civilian villagers. While seeking to rebuild their lives together, inhabitants sought to keep their opinions hidden from one another, lest tension and violence escalate. Talking about the atrocities and, thus, accusing each other would result in chaos. In this sense, feigning ignorance was bliss. Asking my friends why people were reluctant to talk about Kem Ley’s death resulted in a common saying: “Act as if you know, you’re quick to die. Act ignorant, and you will live a long time (thwoe jeh, cap slap. thwoe ot deng, rueh yu).” By keeping one’s mouth closed and acting ignorant, chaos could be held back. Kem Ley, while bold, was swallowed up by the repercussions of “knowing.”

I asked Comran of JVC who I knew participated in Black Mondays about Kem Ley’s death. He, too, remained silent about the event until a month later when we shared a seat together on a bus to the seaside town of Sihanoukville. On holiday, physically and temporally removed from Phnom Penh, Comran somberly disclosed that Kim Ley’s death was “like losing a family member.” He was certain that Hun Sen was responsible for Kem Ley’s assassination because only government officials had access to guns. Like Pu, Comran compared his perception of the lack of political strife in the US to Cambodia. I assured him that the US has a serious problem with guns, giving examples of the legitimised violence against black communities and the perpetual mass shootings that plague the US. I asked him what he thought the difference between the Khmer and US governments were, both being democracies and both experiencing targeted violence from state actors against particular populations. He suggested that the US is a true democracy and is a “developed” nation, whereas Cambodia’s democracy is a fiction. Importantly, Comran understood the US and other Western nations to be predominantly Christian. His hope, along with the vast majority of my Christian interlocutors, was that the Cambodian leadership would be filled by “true” Christians. He claimed:

> This is what we want for the future. When there are true Christians, Cambodia will be developed. If there are many Christians there are no problems. Now it’s difficult. Later, when there are Christians who work in the state/government (roat), who are doctors, who are skilled, Cambodia will be developed. When government leaders are not good, they make bad families, the country has a problem. I have hope that, later, God will put Christians in leadership. When leaders are Christians, they have a lot of love, love the nation.

For those like Comran, democracy, development, and Christianity are clearly linked together. This should not be a surprise considering how thoroughly
recognised globalisation and Christianity have been linked throughout the global south (see Chapter III). Christianity is the hope for Cambodia to come out of the doldrums of political, social, and economic instability and become “truly democratic” and “developed.” Additionally, according to Comran, democracy in Cambodia is a myth, and Khmer people are kept in their precarious states due to poor leadership.

Comran mirrors much of the liberal critique of democracy in Cambodia. Such critiques have argued Cambodian democracy to be a fiction, citing the Hun family’s systematic tightening of control (Global Witness 2016), the hasty and forced deployment of “democracy” after decades of turmoil and conflict (Öjendal and Lilja 2009), and the continued violence in the public sphere perpetuated by an authoritarian regime and global neoliberal industry (Springer 2010). These critiques illustrate the Habermasian, liberal understanding of “deliberative democracy” that rely on notions of equal participation, equal rights, and a robust public sphere in order for democracy to work. Deliberative democracy envisions conflict and power to be eradicated as well as authority to be legitimised through a naturalised rationalism in a true democracy (Mouffe 1999). Thus, in a context such as Cambodia with an authoritarian regime that does not allow equal participation and controls the public sphere, democracy is a myth. However, as will be discussed below, “deliberative democracy” is an inadequate way to frame the political sphere in Cambodia.

It is important here to note that, for the most part, my Khmer interlocutors did not consider the political quagmire of Cambodia to be fuelled by malevolent, satanic forces. In the previous chapter (Chapter IV), we see how such malevolent forces are understood to “blind” and “stupefy” the Khmer people from believing Jesus. Yet, that sort of evil was not understood to animate politics contrary to those malevolent forces of which Peter Geschiere (1997), Harry West (2005), and Ruth Marshall (2009), for example, report. In all of Geschiere’s, West’s, and Marshall’s contexts of post-Communist Cameroon, post-civil war Mozambique, and post-colonial urban Nigeria, respectively, behind-the-scenes satanic or occult forces were often attributed to the rise of power for certain political figures. While this was certainly the logic for many evangelical missionaries, Khmer Christians, for the most part, did not consider such malevolent forces to be at work behind the scenes. State politics, in other words, was not purely identified as evil. “Secretive,” yes. “Corrupt,” indeed. The problem was that the Khmer government was a self-perpetuating, self-indulgent fraternity that was only out for their own gain at the expense of the Khmer
people. Thus, for those like Pu to paint Hun Sen as an outsider, a Vietnamese proxy, made the agonistic nature of Cambodian democracy more comprehensible than attributing it to unseen satanic forces. Additionally for Christians, chaos was indeed a core issue that Jesus could remedy.

As explored throughout this chapter, the issue with the Khmer political landscape was the tinderbox tension between “oppositions,” to cite Mekera, that could quickly reignite chaos. Here, Mouffe’s (1999; 2006) political theory of “agonistic pluralism” is helpful for us to summarise Cambodia’s political climate. As explored in Chapter I, Phnom Penh’s perceived chaotic nature is due to, in part, the constant flux and plurality of life in the city. Such pluralism indicates a profound transformation of social ordering between different and competing visions of what the good life entails (cf. Mouffe 2006: 319). For those Christians like Comran, “true Christians” were the only people who could bring forth what was best for the Khmer nation. As will be discussed below, Christians were the ones who could bring Jesus into the political sphere, thus overcoming the political agonism that defines Cambodian politics. The wrong people were in charge because their hearts were void of Jesus, causing them to wreak havoc on the Khmer nation. Rev Heng Cheng claimed that Hun Sen was simply “taking care of his family.” His corruption was not unlike anything else the Khmer people had already experienced. Comran deployed a similar logic and stressed that government officials “make bad families,” which will certainly spiral into further corruption due to nepotism. Politics requires tension, exclusion, and conflict between different groups (i.e. “families”).

For Mouffe, the political can be understood as “the dimension of antagonism that can take many different forms and can emerge in diverse social relations” (1999: 754). “Politics”, she continues, “refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’” (ibid.). It is precisely the dimension between power and antagonism that animates democracy. Democracy, therefore, relies on enemies, opposition, and tension. The political process is a precarious endeavour that aims to create defined boundaries between groups that compete for legitimacy of power. The recent political history of Cambodia has been certainly marked by this sort of agonistic pluralism in which exclusion, antagonism, strife, conflict, and the like between different factions can be used to define the democratic process (cf. Mouffe
Christian political theology aims to resolve this agonism by short-circuiting this political process through Jesus’s intervention.

**Political Theology**

When asked about his perspective on Cambodia’s political climate, Rev Heng Cheng surprisingly turned the question on its head to critique the Christian church. He warned the Christian church against becoming “political,” suggesting Christians are capable of resembling corrupt politicians:

> Christians call the government corrupt, but so is the church [...] Church is filled with [nepotism], drinks alcohol (a sign of hypocrisy), adultery, just like the government. The church is the same [...] King Sihanouk, Lan Nol, Pol Pot, Communists, Democracy – it’s all corrupt and the same [...] **Christians ought not make sides.** Trust God in these situations. Look at ourselves first. [Recall the] history of [ancient] Israel: when they followed God, the nation was blessed and God gave them good leadership. But when they did not follow, then the Exile.

Rev Heng Cheng’s collapsing of government corruption onto the Christian church is revealing of how Khmer Christians understand the ambiguous definition of the “political.” His distinction pivots on the notion of “making sides.” He suggested, like so many Christians I asked, that “everything in politics is hidden.” Politics is secretive and polemical by nature. Thus, we can further understand the salience of silence in keeping chaos at bay. Revealing oneself to belong to a certain group creates distinction and divisions. Rev Heng Cheng teaches Christians to not be political, that is, not corrupt, hypocritical, adulterous, choosing sides, and thinking only for themselves. This apolitical stance is all for the sake of the Khmer nation, which in and of itself is a political effort. Following Jesus and allowing God to be the true Lord of the nation, like the ancient Israelites, would result in God putting the right people in leadership.

There is a great sense of irony in Rev Heng Cheng’s position. He claims that Christians ought to remain apolitical. Politics is a nasty, hypocritical, secretive, and divisive enterprise. Such polemic divisions, tension, and friction are what animate the agonistic pluralism of Cambodian democracy. However, as argued in the previous chapter (Chapter IV), Christians do a lot of work to conceptualise themselves as other in Khmer society. The agonism they experience through persecution initiates a process in which they understand themselves to be in opposition to the Khmer social order, thereby allowing themselves to manoeuvre within society as Christian redemptive agents. I argue
that this is the same logic as the political theology they deploy, which enables Jesus as well as themselves to become political actors. In that way, their religion makes the political possible (cf. Spencer et al. 2014).

Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan’s edited volume (2006) on political theologies in a post-secular world richly and historically explores how the diverse and pluralised usage of theology have intersected with the political. The “theologico-political” ought not be constricted to religious communities, but should be considered to be used in secular spheres, further collapsing the secular/religious divide (de Vries 2006). The Christian triste trope of the fallen world traced back to the Genesis account of Adam and Eve’s disobedient act has been noted to be fundamental to Christian (and secular) cosmology (Sahlins 1996; see, also, the present thesis’s Introduction). Evangelical soteriology understands that God’s redemptive work in the world aims to restore order, organising the chaos that has engulfed the world due to sin (Boyd 1997).

Evangelical political theology stresses that Jesus’s sovereignty ought to bleed into every sphere of life.

It is here that we can begin to see how evangelical political theologies play a role in the salvation of the Khmer nation. The wicked people who have sovereignty are the problem. As has been explored throughout the thesis, sin is the foundational critical mechanism that creates instability and chaos in the world, rooted in the heart of people and created through sinning. “True Christians” are those who have “Jesus in their heart,” and thus accept Jesus’s lordship over their individual lives (Chapter III). In this way, Jesus’s salvation from sin bleeds outward onto the nation level through the (hopeful) salvation of those in leadership. In other words, if Christians were in leadership, “there are no problems,” as proposed by Comran. What is needed is a sovereign who is capable of coming from outside and above the political agonism. At the heart of de Vries’s interrogation of political theologies is the figure of the sovereign who is suspended above the divide between the theologico (theological thought and conviction) and political phenomena (cf. Ben-Dor Benite et al.: 28). Sovereignty, in other words, is at the heart of political theology.

**Conclusion – the Scaffolding of Jesus’s Sovereignty**
I conclude this chapter by returning to Jubilee Cambodia. Jubilee Cambodia went off without a hitch. Constitution Day, September 24, was on a Saturday and less than one week after ACC’s conclusion the previous Sunday. I had met several Christians from the countryside at ACC who also attended the Jubilee. There were ordinary worship and prayer meetings the day prior, but Constitution Day was the appointed moment to declare Jesus’s reign over Cambodia. At 10:00 am, ICA’s large sanctuary was filled with several hundred Khmer Christians who were there to declare Jesus the ruler (mchah’) of Cambodia. After an opening prayer and a summary of the previous day’s events, an Indonesian music team led the auditorium of several hundred Christians in prayer and worship. Chairs were oriented to split the centre of the auditorium in two, making a processional lane. The worship began subtle and gentle, but quickly erupted in effervescent and spontaneous activity common among Pentecostal circles. Colourful flags were waved around the sanctuary while the Cambodian and Israeli flags along with a red flag that was etched in white with “Lord Jesus (PreahJesu)” were waved in the centre. Behind these flagbearers were twenty-five representatives holding a golden flag with their corresponding Province etched in sparkling, golden letters. Soon, four young women processed a metre-wide papier-mâché purple crown that resembled the emblem of a popular Canadian whiskey up and down the aisle. Shofars blew. Loud shouts and stomping of feet grew louder. The theatrics were intended to mimic a reaction as if Jesus himself entered the auditorium.

After a collective breath and natural pause of the effervescent activities, Pastor Senna of JCPP invited the twelve representatives from Phnom Penh’s twelve districts to stand in front of the provincial delegates. The Cambodian, Israeli, and “Lord Jesus” flagbearers relocated onto the stage where the worship band performed. By this time, I had tucked myself in the front corner of the stage next to Dara who was in a deep state of prayer. As was typical in Christian meetings, every transition of activity was marked with prayer and a mini-sermon, just as Mekera suspected at the planning meeting one month prior. After Senna spoke, an elder pastor led the assembly with each declaration.

What followed was an hour-long, exhausting, visceral, and methodical corporate declaration of shouting, stomping, and waving Jesus as the true ruler of Cambodia. The elder pastor began with the twelve districts of Phnom Penh, calling out each name one-by-one – Russey Keo, Toul Kork, Mean Chey, Chbar Ampov, and so on – and moved outward to each Province – Battambang, Kampot, Siem Reap, Steng Treng, all the way eastward to Mondulkiri and
Ratanakiri. After calling out each name, he would declare something to the effect of “we declare you Lord of [this district]!” and would pray for peace and that those who dwelt there would “come to know Jesus.” Loud shouting, trumpeting of shofars, erratic beating of a bass drum resembling a war beat were performed throughout the auditorium for an extended time after each declaration. It was a physically exhausting ordeal.

A special time was demarcated after the hour-long coronation to situate the Khmer Church in a global community. Rev Heng Cheng led the auditorium in communion and stressed that the Khmer Church was a part of the global church. The remaining session of the Jubilee was focused on the global implications of the Christian faith with a special prayer that Jesus would “call” Cambodians to become missionaries themselves. As discussed earlier, during the planning meeting of the Jubilee, the Khmer pastors were excited to create a virtual web of Christians throughout the Khmer world. That sort of unity was what held the potential for Jesus to become their ruler.

Imagining a connection to and participation with a (global) community is a cornerstone of Christianity. Such effervescent religious rituals like Jubilee Cambodia are productive in shaping the community and help create a great sense of social cohesion (Durkheim 1995[1912]). Ironically, while “politics” is
made of differing “groups” who compete against each other for power and legitimacy, these Christians understood their “group” to be above and outside of the political sphere. However, there was a great deal of political import to this sort of theatrical event.

At its core, Jubilee Cambodia was a ritual that provided the scaffolding to Jesus’s sovereignty. By “scaffolding” of Jesus’s sovereignty, I borrow directly from Ben-Dor Benite et al. who suggest, “sovereignty is established and maintained as much by aesthetic, artistic, theatrical, and symbolic structure as by political claims over everyday life […] Sovereignty is mutable and fragile, requiring continual care and support” (Ben-Dor Benite et al. 2017: 3). Ben-Dor Benite et al. understand that “scaffolding” is necessary to sovereignty, for the sovereign’s power needs to be upheld and legitimised. The ancient Assyrian rulers, for example, would keep scaffolding around their temples and palaces in order to create a sense of progress, power, and ingenuity as if his sovereign repertoire was constantly expanding (ibid.: 1-2).

Spectacle and ritual have been long noted to legitimise political power. Political spectacles that overlay local cosmology, a royal funeral for example, help condense power to a single sovereign in contexts where power is diffused and ambiguous (Geertz 1980). Theatrical political rituals help elevate the sovereign above his subjects (Gluckman 1963) and/or identify him as strange and other from his subjects (Sahlins 1981). In that way, sovereigns can have a semblance of divinity (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 188-204). Such rituals of collapsing the divine onto a human sovereign have been argued to perpetuate violence within societies (Graeber 2011). Thus, for those anarchists like David Graeber, sovereignty can only be achieved through violence. Yet to contrast Graeber, Khmer Christians engaged the political in an attempt to circumnavigate the violent agonism of Khmer democracy. Making the situation more interesting, they were expecting Jesus himself, not a human, to become the sovereign of Cambodia. They, of course, expected human leadership. Yet this leadership was imagined to be under the umbrella of Jesus’s sovereignty. To recount Rev Heng Cheng, “when they followed God, the nation was blessed and God gave them good leadership.”

In addition to spectacle and aesthetics, political theology is scaffolding that props up a central figure as a sovereign (Ben-Dor Benite et al. 2017: 26-29). Jubilee Cambodia was all about sovereignty, addressing the question of who has the right to power and to rule. The agonism of Cambodian democracy has been animated by “politics.” The Khmer evangelical Christians explored
throughout this thesis understand the *political* is essentially the relationship between power and salvation. Their goal as evangelical Christians is to work out power and authority in its proper place. In other words, politics is a theology. Understanding how political theology unfolds, it should be no surprise that Lei conceptualised the “curse of Cambodia” as rooted in a covenant made on a mountain; Mekera understood that “God has no politics [there]”; Dara did not see *Jubilee Cambodia* as a political event; and Comran’s theory of development and change hinged on the proliferation of Christianity. It all allowed these Christians to speak theologically about the political, thus allowing Jesus to “take his place” as Cambodia’s true Lord.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen how Christians in Phnom Penh live in political precarity and are subjected to the actions of political actors. They also develop and deploy a notion of the *political* that addresses the problem of power and authority in theological terms. By keeping the political in the abstract, politics is made possible due to its fluidity and mobility. Stepping outside of the political sphere, Khmer Christians are able to re-enter through the same anomalism explored in the previous chapter (Chapter IV). The Khmer context helps demonstrate that a part of evangelical Christianity straddles the secular and the religious. At times, Christians choose to separate themselves from wider society, rejecting its “secularisms” while at other times they assume there is no boundary. At times, they willingly ignore politics, assuming that the murkiness and bureaucratic complexities of the political is a “secular” problem – “God has no politics here.” At other times, they full on try to address it. They simultaneously accept and reject the myth of secularism. The goal of democracy, as explored through “agonistic pluralism,” is to use the friction of conflict to achieve political order and stability. This is precisely the work that Evangelicals do in Cambodia to vanquish sin from the world. This chapter, in other words, has explored how the domesticating, soteriological project of Khmer Christianity collapses onto the national frame.
Conclusion

In the Dark

God said: Let the dark be dark.
Let the stars shine properly.
And let darkness with no stars
heal the damage caused by light.

Men said: Let there be light all
night through, where there is no-one
much or no-one at all, let
the gathered haze from street-lamps,
undying brand-names, full-blace
unpopulated windows
stain the undersides of clouds
even when nights are cloudless.

God said: Light itself needs rest.
Some things are best seen, unseen,
in darkness unhindered by
Great Light. Me, for example.

--- Robin Fulton Macpherson (2006)

I begin with the poem of Scottish poet Robin Fulton Macpherson that captures the essence of this thesis. Khmer notions of religion rooted in Khmer Buddhism understand sin (bap) to be a destructive, polluting substance that corrupts and destroys the moral person and is made when one “does sin (thwoe bap)” (Chapter II). Religious praxis aims to purify the person from sin through acts of righteousness (thwoe bon), creating the redeeming substance of bon that conquers sin, elevating the person into a higher moral position, and provides blessings in the everyday life of the person. For Khmer evangelical Christians, Jesus becomes the ultimate source of bon, vanquishing sin not only in the life of the person, but in the life of the world. Evangelical Christians do a lot of work to mark the presence of sin and evil in the world in order for Jesus’s redemptive
work to take place there. “Darkness,” as Macpherson conveys, helps the “light” have definition. Humans’ attempt to mask the darkness through their own means creates an artificial and polluting light that hinders the radiance of the true light. Artificial light can be harmful as it dulls and blurs the true potential that is articulated through darkness.

In Khmer evangelical Christians’ attempt to become righteous agents in the world, following the way of Jesus Christ, and thus stabilising the precarious world they find themselves in, they actively address the sin in and around themselves. Through this approach, we see how “sin” becomes a necessary devise to create a moral world. Light needs darkness to be articulated. Christian morality is partially a reaction against something, namely sin (Robbins 2004). This thesis explored sin in its many forms and how evangelical Khmer Christians in Phnom Penh react to and engage with sin. Sin can take shape in the heart of the person, can be a part of the chaos along a decommissioned railroad-turned shanty village, and can be found in politics. This thesis also explored how Khmer evangelical Christians deploy a political theology that scaffolds Jesus as their true sovereign who is then capable of saving the Khmer world.

This thesis set out to investigate religious experience in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I became active in the religious lives of Khmer evangelical Christians and, importantly, traced how they extrapolated the urtext of ritualised church services into their engagement with city life. A part of my research design allowed the city to become an actor in this thesis. The urban neighbourhood of Toul Sangake provided an ideal site to investigate due to its precarity and social difficulties where Christian missionaries intentionally engaged. “Order” and “chaos” were two key terms Christians used to help navigate their precarious and uncertain lives in the city. Jesus’s salvation brought order out of chaos.

Chapter I argued that the city of Phnom Penh is like the forest – a site of chaos that allows for new orders to emerge. There is an abiding relationship between the tamed, civilised order and the wild, natural order. The deforestation of the Cambodia’s forests at the hands of the Khmer government was beyond an ecological tragedy for the Khmer people. It was changing the Khmer world. Much like the theory of order-from-chaos, the Khmer understand that such sites of the wild makes the tamed Khmer world possible. The image of the countryside (srok) holds the locus of Khmerness. City-dwellers often romanticised the countryside, longing for its stability and place of home.

City life, on the other hand, is marked with radical uncertainty and chaos. The city of Phnom Penh has historically been treated as the forest. From its
foundation of a colonial city, Phnom Penh has been marked with a sense of otherness. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge’s purging of the city in April 1975 was an act of deforestation. They recognised Phnom Penh as a symbol of foreign oppression and aimed to return the Khmer people back to being the people of the srok. Ironically, Phnom Penh became the headquarters of the Khmer Rouge during the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) experiment. Even during the 1980s Vietnamese-controlled People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), Phnom Penh was highly regulated and censored. It was not until the formation of a new constitution in 1993 that liberalised the economy when Phnom Penh began to be repopulated (reforested). The new neoliberal order caused a great migration boom from the countryside to the city. Neighbourhoods like Toul Sangkae was caught up in unplanned growth and development.

Many residents of Toul Sangkae lived in a state of radical uncertainty while searching for new opportunities. Toul Sangkae was marked with chaos that translated into a type of agency and “force” to affect the city-dweller, especially the poor and vulnerable migrant. The city’s potential to shape and alter a person’s Khmerness was not unlike the possibilities of forest. The moral ambiguity of the forest and the city allowed for new orders to be possible. Residents like Ming Kinal lamented of the daily instability and a disorder they experienced. Importantly, they attributed much of this agonism to the Khmer government’s lack of concern for the Khmer population. Everyday life in Toul Sangkae oftentimes seemed “backwards” to the Khmer order, while other times the residents strived to keep a semblance of Khmerness that was imagined to be in the countryside.

I’ll never forget the look on Dani’s, Ming Kinal’s daughter, face one Tuesday evening in mid-May after hearing of her friend’s murder. I was teaching English for Chanthol’s youth that evening at JVC. Chanthol abruptly entered our class and announced that their colleague was found murdered in an unfinished apartment building. Though she would occasionally join the youth of the church, I had never met her. Chanthol gave the gory details of how her cousin invited her to a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city near the airport. There they consumed methamphetamine with his friends. After some sort of conflict, he attacked her with a brick, raped her, stole her phone and motorbike, and left her to die. I gasped in horror and was shocked that Chanthol could recount the story in such graphic detail to a class of teenagers. Dani and the five other students stared glass-eyed at their feet not making a sound. After Chanthol left, I, in a state of mortification, asked the class if they wanted to go home for the evening.
Dani looked up and confidently stated that they would rather stay. The class agreed.

For these youth, JVC offered them a place of stability, safety, and comfort. I am not suggesting that this sort of horror was a regular occurrence. Yet, it was not out of the ordinary. Chanthol, when asked why he chose to be so graphic in his announcement, suggested that his students were not so naïve as I thought. Their lives were difficult. Their friend’s murder was yet another apology for the need of Jesus’s salvation. Jesus’s salvation was not simply something experienced after death. Chanthol meant that Jesus’s salvation had everyday implications – safety, good health and sound mind, making good decisions, and having everyday provisions. *Religion* played an important role to bring order to the chaos of the world.

Chapter II explored the logic of Khmer religion (*sasna*) to better understand how religious thought and praxis is crucial in shaping not only the moral person, but also the Khmer world. This chapter was ultimately about sin. By taking a synchronic approach to how city-dwellers experienced religion, I moved away from traditional anthropological engagements of *bap*, or “demerit,” and stressed the polyvalent, quotidian, *thing*-like quality of *bap*. Anthropologists have rightly chosen to avoid using “sin” as a translation of *bap* due to its Christian connotations. Protestant missionaries typically understood “sin” to be a signifier for poor behaviour – behaviour that is unacceptable in the eyes of God. However *bap*, is not simply a static notch on a Karmic belt, nor a metaphor for bad behaviour. Sin, I argued, is a chaotic *thing* that has an agency of its own that people can have and create. I chose to use “sin” of a translation of *bap* for its ethnographic salience. Khmer Christians used “sin” to translate *bap* into English. My objective was to define “sin” from an emic perspective, attempting to move away from Protestant paradigms that consider “sin” as signifier for bad behaviour. Sin is an agent of chaos, polluting the person’s heart and wreaking havoc in the life of the person and the world. The aim of religious praxis is to manage sin by producing the redemptive substance of *bon* that works to restore order from the chaos that sin causes.

The Khmer people understand that the human person is composed of several parts that are unstable and prone to harm. The heart (*cett*) is conceptualised to be the centre and leader of the person where sin is rooted. Cosmological beings, such as fierce serpent-dragons (*niek*) and wild spirits, are capable of being tamed through certain practices as well as the teachings of Buddha (*thoam*). Humans, too, are capable of becoming tamed through religious
praxis. People are in danger of becoming wild and sub-human if their heart(s), soul(s), spirit, mind, or body are left in a state of chaos. The Khmer people understand that a “high/perfect person (Odam)” is one who has equanimity of the heart (obpekkha) and is purged of sin. Being completely purged of sin elevates the person into a god-like being who is capable of cutting off the cycles of life-and-death (kaet slab kaet slab) and will join Nirvana.

*Bon* is the purifying and redemptive substance that stabilises the heart and the person. Religious praxes such as giving offering during *Benbat*, reciting the sacred *thoam*, or even being present during the recitation of the *thoam* are forms of *thwoe bon*. However, *bon* is only produced if one holds on to *sel* and has the “will (satthie)” to *thwoe bon*. Sinning loosens one’s hold on *sel*, thus impeding him or her to produce *bon*. The weekly ritual of The Day of Sel is an opportunity for lay Buddhists to recover the *sel* they might have lost throughout the week. Crucially, the giving and receiving of *sel* is done through the recitation of the sacred *thoam*. In that way, we are able to see how, like language, sin has a *thing*-like agency. Religion, therefore, manages sin, bringing balance and salvation to the Khmer people. For Khmer converts to Christianity, Jesus replaces *bon* as the agent of salvation from sin.

Chapter III explored the agonistic nature of Christian conversion and argued that through this agonism, order and salvation is achieved through Jesus who “clarifies” the heart. This chapter begins by exploring Meng’s experience with Jesus during the Come and See event hosted by JVC. His story of becoming Christian, like so many Khmer Christians, was marked with angst, confusion, and reluctance. This sort of agonism paved the way for Meng to experience Jesus in his heart. The surprising and aporic moment of experiencing Jesus, in other words, was crucial for Meng’s conversion to Christianity.

Conversion in Phnom Penh does not happen in a vacuum. We see through stories like Tari and Sopheap that migration to the city and economic precarity were crucial for their conversion. Entertaining Christianity, whether through finding affordable accommodation in Christian dormitories or falsely claiming to be a Christian to gain employment, were common techniques to navigate city-life. To their surprise, many experienced Jesus’s miraculous provisions that further enticed them to convert to Christianity. Conversion to Christianity in the global south has been well connected to social change, globalisation, and entering into modernity. Khmer Christians were not so naïve to these connections and many were concerned with the *foreignness* of Christianity. Other Christians like Pastor Dara and Samay were leery of the foreign missionary who
were ignorant of Khmer culture and were prone to exploitation by the Khmer people.

Being a Christian was hard work. In addition to the stress of living in the radically-uncertain city, Christians were subjected to many commitments imposed by Christian leadership. Stress and failure were common. People often abandoned their Christian faith when things were not working out. Additionally, being a faithful Evangelical entailed evangelising to a resistant population, causing even more anxiety and angst. Christianity, therefore, was marked with confusion, anxiety, aporia, and agonism. The only way that Christianity could work is if the believer had “Jesus in their heart.” The agonism of Christian conversion can bring forth order through Jesus who brings salvation to the chaos of Christian conversion by clarifying the heart.

Following the story of Dr Chhin, a recognised Christian paragon, we are able to see how Jesus works to clarify one’s heart. Upon returning to Phnom Penh in the late 1980s, Dr Chhin and his wife longed to regain their Khmerness through Buddhist ritual. Buddhism in Phnom Penh, he found, had slightly changed and did not accommodate for the poor to participate in the important rituals described in Chapter II. Even though he did not understand Christianity, he converted to Christianity after watching a “Jesus Story” presented by an evangelist. To his surprise, he began to experience Jesus through miracles. His “heart was grabbed” and he began to “know Jesus clearly.”

Experiencing Jesus has been a well-explored feature of Evangelicalism. Whether through training the mind to “hear” God’s voice or training to expect and discern charisms, Evangelicals do a lot of work to experience the presence of God. This chapter ultimately displayed how Khmer evangelical Christians experience Jesus in the heart through the intrinsic agonism of evangelical Christianity. Jesus works in the heart similar to bon, bringing clarity and equanimity of the heart. Clarifying one’s heart gives rise to higher levels of chaos. Jesus’s salvation brings new levels of disorder in that he will bring on new challenges and difficulties for the Christian to experience, further clarifying their faith and further redeeming the world.

Faithful Christians who have a stabilised faith and who know Jesus clearly experience a rebounding agonism in the form of persecution. Chapter IV ultimately explored this interplay between persecution and salvation. By using Mary Douglas’s theory of anomalism, we see how Christians are capable of becoming the anomaly-turned-saviour through the agonism they experience. Chapter IV begins by following the incredible story of Rev Heng Cheng, whose
story is revered due to it the adversity he had faced throughout his life that Jesus used to bring salvation. Rev Heng Cheng came from a controversial family; was abandoned; fled the terror of the Khmer Rouge; marched and was spared from execution; swam the Mekong; was shot; imprisoned, and interrogated; became a refugee; felt pressure to join the Khmer resistance against Pol Pot; and survived the Communist suppression of religious meetings during the PRK. Following the logic of Chapter III, all of these were moments at which he could experience Jesus. Moreover, they were opportunities for him to step outside of the normal Khmer order and become other. He abandoned his Khmer cohort and remained in Vietnam. Being ‘outside’, he was able to return to rescue the Khmer on a much more fundamental level – sin.

His history with extreme hardship helps frame how many evangelical Christians understood their position in Khmer society. Ironically, while Khmer Christians boasted of Jesus’s miraculous provisions that helped them in their difficulties (see Chapter III), Jesus in turn allowed Christians to face other difficulties in order to bring salvation to the world. Rev Heng Cheng was lauded as a paragon due to this dynamic. Ritty explained how important persecution (karbietbien) was for Christians’ witness in Khmer society. Many, like Samphoa, perceived themselves as to no longer fit into the Khmer order. Chanthol and Rev Heng Cheng showed us how the Christian is a “sacrifice” for the sake of the Khmer nation.

By revisiting classic anthropology on sacrifice and taboo, we saw how sacrificial anomalies become the very means for healing and social revitalisation. Mary Douglas’s discussion on the pangolin-as-anomaly helps us see how for Khmer Christians, they too understand themselves as the anomaly-turned-healer of the Khmer nation. Maurice Bloch’s analysis on sacrifice helps us ground how Christians understand that by “offering themselves (thway khluen),” they are like sacrifices that, while being treated as an outside danger, they become the very agents of healing and revitalisation.

Not being able to participate in such important Khmer rituals as Phchum Ben that have been noted to refortify the Khmer and family order causes a great sense of angst for Christians. In an ironic turn, several Christians use the momentum of this angst to critique Khmer society and to highlight areas of sin in the world. Dr Chhin and the visiting Khmer pastor of NLF both used the holiday season to mock the traditional Buddhist holiday in order to further carve definition to Christian life. Chapter IV concluded by following a group of prayer-warriors who actively waged a spiritual war with the evil that kept the Khmer
people from believing Jesus. By going into the important Khmer space of the *wat* that has been noted for its important role in creating and maintaining Khmerness, these Christians positioned themselves in opposition to the Khmer world so to bring salvation to it. Therefore, we can begin to understand how salvation can be extrapolated to the Khmer nation.

Throughout this thesis, we have seen how important conflict, sacrifice, hardship, and persecution are for Khmer Christians to clarify and strengthen their faith. In their attempt to clarify and reconcile their new religious lives in such a precarious world as Phnom Penh, Khmer Christians are able to use the momentum of agonism to stabilise themselves and the Khmer world. This ability to harness seemingly diametric and competing forces is intrinsic to the Khmer logic of religion, as explored in Chapter II. Chapter V ultimately explores how this dynamic extrapolates into the broader Khmer world and beyond. Khmer Christians use the momentum of the political agonism that animates Cambodian democracy to place Jesus as the true ruler of Cambodia. While Christian life is understood to be apolitical, this chapter explored the intricate interplay between the “theologico” (theological thought and conviction) and the “political” that is cornerstone to evangelical Christianity. Evangelical Christianity aims to bring the Gospel into every sphere of life.

As Matthew Engelke (2013) richly shows, some evangelical Christians do a lot of work to weave their evangelical faith throughout secular society. The boundaries between the secular and the religious are blurred and ambiguous. He notes the innovative techniques some Christians perform in order make the Bible readable and relevant to an English society that, while has a subconscious understanding of the Biblical narrative, dismisses it. The boundary work needed to conceptualise the secular vis-à-vis religious in both Engelke’s case and the Khmer context is constantly shifting. At times the boundary is clear. At times they buy into it politics as separate from God’s work. At other times they see the political as necessary (i.e. a new government with a Christian Prime Minister). They simultaneously create the boundary and shatter the boundary between the political and theological. As Khmer Christians grapple with their new religious lives they become anomalies and are able to come from the outside of the *political* in order to engage the political (cf. Spencer et al. 2014). By Jesus becoming the true sovereign of Cambodia, he is able to stand in the gap of the theologico-politico and mediate power and authority.

Chapter V begins by exploring how a group of Christians planned to “scaffold” Jesus as sovereign through the celebration of *Jubilee Cambodia*.
Jubilee Cambodia was an auspicious event that was held on Constitution Day, 24 September. It was the opportunity for Christians to declare Jesus as the true Lord of Cambodia, cutting off the old covenant an early Cambodia king allegedly made, and cleansing the Khmer nation from the curse of sin that has plagued the nation since. Having representatives from every Cambodian Province and District in Phnom Penh stand and declare Jesus the ruler over their particular area was the mechanism to put Jesus on his “seat.” The visible unity of the Khmer Christian world is what held the potential to coronate Jesus as Lord.

During the planning meeting, we see the flexibility and slippages of how Christian theology mapped onto the political sphere. While new covenants, constitutions, kings, and the “nation” were constantly being used to frame this important event, we were told that “God has no politics [t]here.” The plasticity of the “political” helps us see that Christianity makes political activity possible in contexts where the political sphere is fraught with violent conflict.

The agonistic political climate of Cambodian democracy was foreground to Jubilee Cambodia. The catastrophes of the 1970s and 1980s led to the political quagmire that has been in place since the formation of a new constitution in 1993. Hun Sen, a defected member of the Khmer Rouge, and his Cambodia’s People Party (CPP) has since tightened hegemonic control over the nation. Any sort of opposition or ill speak toward him or his CPP could result in violent conflict, as we saw with the assassination of Kem Ley. While many damned Hun Sen as an "outsider," they dared not directly oppose him lest they face the same sort of fate as Kem Ley. Silence and seeming ignorant were ways to keep chaos at bay. Christianity aims to short-circuit the political agonism by bringing Jesus’s salvation to the political sphere.

While many have called democracy in Cambodia a fiction, I propose that "agonistic pluralism" is a more fitting way to frame the Cambodian political milieu. Mouffe’s political theory understands that democracy is animated by the friction between different political groups who compete for power and legitimacy. Competing and corrupt “groups” is precisely how many Christians understand what animated politics. Oppositions, families, and groups fight and compete in the political process; yet God had no politics there. Rev Heng Cheng suggested that Christians ought not be political. Following God like the ancient Israelites would put everything in order.

Khmer evangelical Christians, therefore, deploy a political theology that places Jesus above the political agonism of Cambodian democracy. Jubilee Cambodia provided the scaffolding to place Jesus on his sovereign “seat.” Such
rituals of spectacle like Jubilee Cambodia support Jesus’s sovereignty. Christians develop and deploy a notion of the political that addresses the problem of power and authority in theological terms. By keeping the political in the abstract, politics is made possible due to its fluidity and mobility. Stepping outside of the political sphere, Khmer Christians are able to re-enter through the same anomalism explored in Chapter IV. The goal of democracy, as explored through “agonistic pluralism,” is to use the friction of conflict to achieve political order and stability. This is precisely the work that Evangelicals do in Cambodia to vanquish sin from the world. This chapter, in other words, explored how the domesticating, soteriological project of Khmer Christianity collapses onto the national frame.

For three days in late November, my neighbourhood became eerily quiet. It seemed the entire Khmer nation was at Phnom Penh’s river front celebrating the 2016 Bon Om Tuk (Water Festival). During the festival, I spent one afternoon visiting with Pu Sopha, the neighbouring radio station’s guard. Typically he would be hiding in the shade, but the weather had been very pleasant that day. I was happy to finally get to know him after living in the neighbourhood for a year, but not having the opportunity to become properly acquainted. We chatted about our lives, my research interests, his impressions of city life. Anyone older than myself, like him, had lived through the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge and, out of respect, I never asked them of their experiences, with the exception to Rev Heng Cheng. God only knows what they experienced.

Sopha thought it was great that I had come to Cambodia to learn about Khmerness and to help the Khmer people by writing this thesis. He had little hope for Cambodia’s future and even intimated that outsiders/foreigners like myself are the only ones capable of changing the nation. I tried to reassure him that I had met many exceptional Khmer youth with high ambitions. He was sceptical. He suggested that the only tangible thing these youth could do was being dutiful to their families in the countryside by sending them remittances. Nothing could change because the Khmer government was too powerful. “Politicians in Cambodia are for life and they put their children in charge. They raise them up to be leaders. We have no choice,” he lamented. Sopha seemed resigned to Cambodia’s fate. If I were an Evangelical, then I surely missed my opportunity to evangelise Sopha. I could have told him that Jesus can save the Khmer nation and could bring Cambodia to peace and prosperity. Salvation and redemption just took time and was also a precarious endeavour. That was what my Christian friends were showing me.


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