Introduction

How should we behave if we want to make ourselves pure?
—Ind, *Gatilok*

For a layperson, making one’s conduct “Buddhist” means behaving in compliance with the *Dhamma-vinay* [the Buddhist scriptures].
—Chuon Nath, *Gihivinaya Saṅkhep*

Merely chanting Pali is empty if one does not understand its meaning. This is so because [taking part in ] rituals . . . consists of clear belief and a wisdom involving right views, for which the measure is true knowing and true and correct understanding.
—Chuon Nath, *Gihivinaya Saṅkhep*

The 1920s in Cambodia saw an exuberant burst of new printed writings by Khmer Buddhist modernists on the subject of how to behave, as good Khmer Buddhists and moral persons, and simultaneously, how to purify themselves in the context of everyday life in a modernizing world. This book examines the intertwined ethical and historical questions of what Khmer writers articulated as the Buddhist values most important and relevant to their times, how these interpretations were produced, and how they represent Southeast Asian ethical and religious responses to the modern circulation of local and translocal events, people, ideas, and anxieties. In sum, the book attempts to understand how ethical ideas are produced in a particular historical moment, in this case the “moment” of Southeast Asian colonial modernity.

The three passages above, written in the early 1920s in Phnom Penh by Ukñã Suttantaprījā Ind and Braḥ Śānasobhaṇa Chuon Nath, suggest the ethical preoccupations of this self-described Buddhist “modernist” movement with purification, authenticity, and rationalism. Being a Buddhist and a moral person in the modern world required a new and different kind of knowing from that required in the past. This knowledge was based on correct understanding of
scripture; it was demonstrated through moral conduct in religious ritual and everyday life.

The ideas that modernists were articulating in Cambodia were resonant with forms and expressions of religious and literary modernism emerging elsewhere in Southeast Asia during this same period. Their emphasis on purification and rationalism as means for achieving “authentic” understanding of the Buddhist scriptures reflects the religious reformism adopted by Mongkut (later Rama IV) of Siam and his sons Chulalongkorn (Rama V) and Prince-Patriarch Vajirañāṇa, whose Buddhist modernization program has been described in terms of “scripturalism,” the privileging of canonical texts as the definition of religious authority.1 Vajirañāṇa recalled that when he was a young novice studying for ordination he had determined that “in order to know Dhamma firmly” he needed to learn Pali and to read the *Tipiṭaka* for himself. Equipped with up-to-date grammatical methods for reading and translating Pali, Vajirañāṇa came to believe that the *Tipiṭaka* itself advocated rational knowing. “One work which struck me,” he wrote, “was the *Kālāma-sutta*, which taught one not to believe blindly and to depend on one’s own thinking.”2

Strikingly, these Khmer and Thai modernist concerns are similar to those voiced by Southeast Asian Islamic modernists. In his *Soal-Djawab* (Questions and answers), written in the Dutch East Indies in the early 1930s, Ahmad Hussan argued that the Qur’an itself contained passages that exhorted readers to “apply their minds to its revelations” so that they could accurately comprehend its meaning. These verses, he noted, “indicate clearly that the Qur’an is not to be recited without thinking about it and properly understanding its content.”3 Given the deficiencies in the “traditional manner of gaining knowledge” in Dutch colonial schools, wrote another Indies modernist, Hadji Agus Salim, in the *Fadjar Asia* (Asian dawn) in 1929, “our people simply become imitators,” unable to understand “the essence of the matter.” Instead of learning the Qur’an by rote, they needed to understand “each word and the meaning conveyed.”4 Authentic knowing enabled one to perform religious ritual correctly.

Viewed regionally, Buddhist and Islamic modernist expressions in Southeast Asia were in part shaped by factors joined to imperialism. These included the relatively late arrival of print in the region, the gradual demarcation of national boundaries; participation in a global market economy, and engagement with discourses of Western science, rationalism, and secularism. But imperialism alone does not explain religious modernism and the accompanying educational modernization projects, which were also a product of the interactions between colonial subjects and other non-Western and pan-Asian alliances. Cambodian and Siamese modernism was influenced by a pan-Theravādin dialogue that reached to Sri Lanka.5 Similarly, Islamic modernists in Malaya and the Dutch East Indies were in conversation with their counterparts in the Middle East, just as Confucian and Buddhist Vietnamese reformers were part of an East Asian discourse in Japan and China as well as religious developments in mainland Southeast Asia.6
In this book, I argue for the central importance of Theravāda Buddhist ethics as a site for imagining and expressing modernity in Cambodia during this period. Among Southeast Asian locales, alternatives to religious education in early-twentieth-century Cambodia were particularly scarce. Buddhism remained the primary avenue for educational life as well as the dominant force shaping Khmer intellectual life until well into the 1930s. Parallel to similar developments in other Southeast Asian states, though somewhat chronologically later in Cambodia, the onset of print in the 1920s was marked by the emergence of a zealous new generation of authors, of new writing styles, themes, and modernist literary movements. But in Cambodia, unlike in Vietnam and Indonesia, these earliest print expressions did not take the form of novels, autobiographies, reportage, newspapers, or secular periodicals. Rather, the turn to print was focused into new styles of Buddhist writings—compendiums, critical translations, and written versions of oral folklore, almost all of which were concerned with issues of morality, of patipatti, or how to behave in accordance with the Dhamma, as moral persons and good Buddhists in the contemporary world.

These new print writings were the work of a group of Buddhist intellectuals in Phnom Penh whose efforts to purify current interpretations of Theravāda Buddhism began to crystallize into a modernist “movement” around 1914. Broadly summarized, their religious modernism emphasized rationalism, authenticity, and purification. They advocated new methods for Buddhist education and for the translation, production, and dissemination of new versions of Buddhist texts, which they “purified” from the grammatical and interpretive corruptions and accretions that had accumulated over time. They viewed these new textual practices as part of an effort to “modernize” Buddhist understanding itself. They believed that through a deeper, correct, authentic comprehension of the Buddhist scriptures, the Dhamma-vinaya, Buddhists would learn to purify or discipline the body, speech, and citta (heart and mind) to reflect the Buddhist scriptural vision of “what is right.” Cultivating bodhi-citta (the thought or aim of enlightenment) and purifying one’s own moral conduct would consequently result in a stronger, more purified Buddhist sāsana, the religion practiced by the fourfold parisāl, the collective body of monastic and lay Khmer Buddhists.

The Khmer Buddhist modernism that emerged in Phnom Penh in the first few decades of the twentieth century, I argue, is best understood in ethical terms as a rationalist shift in Buddhist intellectual sensibilities about temporality and purification, a shift that gave a heightened significance to the everyday actions and relationships of ordinary individuals in the here and now of modern life. Reading through modernist ethical writings, we can see precursors to the ways in which these values prefigured the emerging notion of a sāsana-jāti (national religion), although delineating the growth of nationalism is not my primary aim in this book. Rather, I examine the new ways in which Khmer Theravādins articulated values for living that joined their understandings of what it meant to live in the contemporary world with interpretations of what it meant to be a good Buddhist.
Studying ethical values does not mean, of course, that we are seeing all the ways in which people acted in the real world; but it does give us insight into how they made sense of the world, how they gave it order and meaning, and how they may have tried to structure their lives and relationships.

The production of these new values must also be viewed historically. In part, I examine Khmer Buddhist values as a product of reform movements in mainland Southeast Asia and the larger regional shift from manuscript to print culture. I also see them as Buddhist responses to experiences of social change and turmoil under colonialism and the interactions between colonial discourses on modernization and indigenous reforms in religious education. Within these frames, the ongoing translation of Theravādin ideas and symbols across three generations of intellectuals in the Khmer Sangha (monastic community) sought to produce vernacular idioms that had meaning and relevance for laypeople and monks in structuring their everyday lives.

I also examine the older inheritances that contributed to Khmer Buddhist modernism. These include the influence of nineteenth-century Khmer literary understandings of purification and moral development in older jātaka (stories of the Buddha’s past lives) and other literary texts, as well as the “traditional” Buddhist purification movement that had been put in place by the Khmer king Ang Duong in the mid-nineteenth century. All of these factors led to the self-conscious effort by a group of Khmer monks and scholars in the second and third decades of the twentieth century to put forward a new articulation of Buddhist values, expressed in new print literary styles and forms.

I situate the study in the years 1860–1930 for several reasons. This longue durée enables us to see the complex historical, generational, and ideational underpinnings of modern Buddhist values in Cambodia. The death of King Ang Duong in 1860 marked a broad shift from more traditional notions and practices of Buddhist purification and revival to the intensification of new currents of thought among Buddhist intellectuals. The 1860s also saw the resumption of social unrest that had temporarily abated during Ang Duong’s reign. The spread of millenarianism and the introduction of French administrative reforms—France declared Cambodia a protectorate in 1863—increasingly undermined Khmer social order and the monarchy. These events created a disjuncture between older Buddhist visions of social order and the lived experience that modernism was attempting to redress.

The period between 1860 and 1930 also roughly coincides with the lifetimes of two of the Buddhist intellectuals who figure prominently in this historical narrative: Brahmā Mahā Vimaladhamm Thoñ (1862–1927) and Ukñā Suttantaprijā Ind (1859–1925). Both were highly respected Pali scholars in the Mahānikāy order in Cambodia who were educated in the established monastic traditions of the late nineteenth century. They were exposed to reformist and modernist discourses through travels to Bangkok and studies with Siamese-educated teachers. Although trained in older schools of thought, they ended their scholastic careers by
contributing to the construction of Khmer modernism. Both Thoān and Ind were closely aligned with the highly politicized “modern Dhamma” group in the Buddhist Mahānikāy order.

My study culminates in the 12 May 1930 inauguration ceremony of the Buddhist Institute, a scholarly center established in Phnom Penh for the promotion of research on Southeast Asian Buddhism. Once modernist intellectuals and ideas became firmly associated with influential Khmer Buddhist educational institutions such as the Sālā Pali, the Royal Library, and the Buddhist Institute, the transformation of their “new doctrine” into a new officially sanctioned religious orthodoxy was assured. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the Buddhist Institute became emblematic of and instrumental in the intertwining of modern Buddhist values and national identity in Cambodia, a position it held through the early 1970s until the descent into the chaos of the Khmer Rouge–led Democratic Kampuchea. Although modernists talked about their visions of social cohesion and social ethical responsibility in very different ways from Communists, the trope of “purification” of the individual and community that runs throughout the development of modern Buddhism during this entire period is one that is perhaps salient for the interpretation of Khmer Rouge ideologies as well.14

RELIGIOUS MODERNISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Although focused on religious modernism in the Khmer context, this book situates these developments in a broader regional historical perspective. In different parts of Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a shared perception of moral decline and the disintegration of the religiously inspired values that were understood to have given cohesion and order to previous generations. At the same time that the loss of these “traditional” values was being lamented, however, they were also being critiqued in some arenas as inappropriate or outdated in respect to contemporary culture. Southeast Asian reflexivity about this tension is lampooned in Vu Trong Phung’s satirical novel Dumb Luck, published in Hanoi in 1936.15 It portrays the travails of an upper-class family with the invented surname Civilization as they negotiate between modernity and traditional Confucian values. One episode in the novel highlights the tension between the family’s efforts to modernize Vietnamese society through the sale of provocative Western-style lingerie at their Europeanization Tailor Shop and to protect the chastity of their own wives and daughters against rampant sexual infidelity in modern urban society. “How can one tell what is real these days?” Red-haired Xuan, the “common man” of the novel, asks sardonically as he surveys a set of rubber falsies in the Europeanization Tailor Shop. “Everything is so artificial! Love is artificial! Modernity is artificial! Even conservatism is artificial!”16 In other less satirical Southeast Asian contexts, the tension between modern and traditional moral values played out in the form of debates about
whether or not it was permissible for good Muslims to wear European clothing, whether sermons should be preached in the vernacular, and whether secular subjects such as science and geography should be taught in traditional religious schools.\textsuperscript{17}

In Buddhist Southeast Asia, particularly in the late nineteenth century, the perception of moral decline was sometimes represented in terms of the degeneration of the power of the Buddhist Dharma or Dhamma, the truth about the nature of the world recognized by the Buddha at his enlightenment and communicated through his teachings.\textsuperscript{18} This concern with moral decline in Southeast Asian Buddhist modernity may reflect a wider pan-Asian current as well.\textsuperscript{19} The term “Dharma” or “Dhamma,” as it is known in the Pali Theravādin literature of Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, has also been translated simply and eloquently as “what is right.”\textsuperscript{20} The inevitable decline of the power of the Dhamma to transfigure human moral conduct is a problem of Buddhist history. Although all human beings are understood to have the capacity for perfection and enlightenment in the image of the Buddha, according to various Buddhist textual and oral accounts in circulation in the nineteenth century, the Buddha himself predicted the eventual dwindling of his Dhamma, accompanied by a degeneration among all human beings, including monks and kings, of their ability to do what is right.

Perceptions of social and religious decline, which scholars have widely associated with the changes brought about by the political, social, and economic realignments associated with imperialism, flared up in some instances in the form of religious millenarian movements. They also coincided with the rise of revivals or purification movements, evident across the Islamic world as well as in many parts of Buddhist Asia.\textsuperscript{21}

Shawn McHale has argued that historians of Vietnamese nationalism have been too reluctant to consider the role and place of religion—particularly Buddhism—in histories of colonial nation building and modernity.\textsuperscript{22} Part of the explanation for this omission, I think, lies in the fact that religious traditions are not inherently national. They cross national and regional borders, they manifest themselves differently at different points in history, they involve translation of texts and ideas across linguistic boundaries, and they are not secular, as modern political discourses of the nation supposedly are.\textsuperscript{23} Understanding the development of Islamic modernism in the Dutch East Indies, for instance, necessitates studying the influence of Egyptian modernist Muhammad ‘Abduh and Javanese pilgrims in Mecca;\textsuperscript{24} studying Khmer Buddhist modernism has to be understood with respect to the regional influences of the Siamese Dhammadayut nikāya (religious order) and French fears of Vietnamese-inspired religious movements such as Caodaism. In spite of the complex networks that the study of Southeast Asian religious modernity entails, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued with regard to India, the re-enchantment of our understanding of the colonial world in Southeast Asia may be necessary if we are to understand the diverse ways in which people have experienced the shift to modern ways of thinking and being.\textsuperscript{25} This book seeks to add to
the investigation of these issues in the fields of Southeast Asian history and religion and, further, to argue for the analysis of such movements—in this case, a Buddhist modernist movement that emerged in colonial Cambodia—to help us understand the contours of Southeast Asian modernity.

Although scholars have only recently begun to turn their attention to the study of colonial Southeast Asian expressions of Buddhist modernism, there is more extensive literature on Islamic religious modernism, and it provides a helpful comparative frame for examining Buddhist modernist expressions in the region. As in the case of Theravāda Buddhism, reform movements in and of themselves were not a new feature of Islamic history. But in the mid-nineteenth century, as Muslim reforms in various parts of the Islamic world became intertwined with attempts to understand and articulate modern experience, they spawned the religious discourses associated with Islamic modernism. Modernists were not simply responding to the experience of modernity, which they associated with European ideas, values, and customs, particularly rationality, Western science, and constitutionalism. Often, modernists advocated, to different extents and in different ways, accommodation between Islam and modern values.

While scholars have pointed to the variety and sometimes conflicting perspectives of Islamic modernist discourses, several central issues emerge as shared themes, many of which also parallel modernist concerns in colonial Cambodia. New interpretations of Islam sought to “purify” Islam from older corruptions and accretions and to situate the definition of what was “authentic” religious practice and doctrine in the Qur’an itself. Like Buddhist modernists in Cambodia, Islamic modernists espoused rationalism and showed interest in Western science, but in other respects they took an inherently critical stance toward modern morality. Yet Islamic modernists, some of whom were influenced by social Darwinism and the civilizational discourses of the day, approached the problem of moral decline in a highly reflexive way, seeing it as an opportunity for revitalizing religion. Consequently, they exhibited a similar zeal to that of Khmer monks intent on modernization and, like Khmer monks, used the imagery of “awakening” to refer to the new sense of possibility they saw in their reinterpretations of religion.

The focus of Islamic modernization efforts in Southeast Asia on implementing educational reform is similar in many respects to the Khmer modernist goals for revamping Buddhist education, discussed in chapters 3 and 4 of this book. In colonial Indonesia, for example, the Islamic modernist vision for updating religious education involved the promulgation of new methods for teaching and learning Arabic grammar and translation, the introduction of secular subjects into religious school curricula, and a move toward replacing rote learning with more discursive methods of teaching. Especially as they tried to introduce these new ideas into village schools, Islamic modernists in Indonesia and Malaysia came into conflict with proponents of traditional religious practices and interpretations. This conflict was asserted in disagreements that arose between kaum muda, the “young” or “new group” of modernists, and the kaum tua, the “old” or “traditionalist group.”
LOCAL BUDDHISMS AND “PRACTICAL CANONS”

Along with extending this translocal and regional context to understanding religious modernism in colonial Cambodia, this book also seeks to contribute to recent cross-disciplinary scholarship in the intersection of Southeast Asian studies and Buddhist studies that has begun to reappraise the importance of late vernacular Buddhist literature and the whole notion of a Buddhist “canon.” This conscious opening of the field of Buddhist studies to include greater consideration of vernacular texts, particularly in Theravādin studies, is a rather recent development, signaled by work such as Gananath Obeyesekere’s seminal essay “Buddhism and Conscience” and the volume *Curators of the Buddha*, which raised the question of the effects of colonial European encounters with Buddhism on the development of the field of Buddhist studies. The growing interest in the construction of “local Buddhisms” reflects the influence of wider scholarly attention to local and global interactions, particularly in according a wider prominence to local, regional, and subaltern actors and forces. Orientalist studies of the history and development of Buddhist literary cultures, including Cambodia, mapped a kind of core-periphery model of Buddhist history that was both temporal and linguistic, situating the core in the Indian origins of the religion and the periphery in the vernacular interpretations and practices of later Buddhists. More recent scholarship on the processes of vernacularization and the literary regions or cultures of Buddhist history has increasingly focused on the two-way process of cosmopolitan-vernacular interactions in the production of religious imaginaries and on the ways in which these processes are often politicized.

The most far-reaching study of Khmer Buddhism to date, François Bizot’s extensive work on Khmer Tantric texts and practices, contests received narratives of Theravādin history in Cambodia. Bizot argues that Buddhist practice and knowledge in Cambodia before the mid-nineteenth century did not necessarily conform to the reified scholarly construction of the Theravāda in terms of the Pali canonical sources known as the *Tipiṭaka*. His scholarship calls into question the distinctive development of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Tantric forms of Buddhism. If the Theravāda in Cambodia had not always existed in its present-day “scripturalist” form, where did it come from? Bizot links the development of contemporary Buddhism to the importation of the Dhammayut order from Siam in the mid-nineteenth century. Although this expression of Buddhism eventually came to represent “mainstream” Buddhist thought and indeed even “Khmerness” in postcolonial Cambodia, it had simultaneous to its own rise suppressed other aspects, traditions, and lineages of Buddhism, particularly those most associated with Tantric practice and esoteric forms of teacher–student transmission.

In another significant contribution to the dislodging of Orientalist paradigms, Charles Keyes argued that instead of pointing to the inconsistencies between canonical Buddhism and Buddhism as practiced by Southeast Asians, we needed to reevaluate what we assumed we meant by the contents of the Pali canon. Through a study
of rituals of merit transference, Keyes observed that the texts owned and used in Thai monasteries not only vary widely but in fact do not necessarily include Pali canonical texts at all. Instead, he noted, Thai villagers refer to a variety of other noncanonical texts as Dhamma, held to be sacred scriptures endowed with all of the same efficacious powers, such as the production of merit, attributed to canonical texts.

Keyes’ ethnographic findings influenced the development of Steven Collins’ persuasive argument that the equation made by earlier scholars between the notion of a preexistent Pali canon and “original” or early Buddhism can hardly be historically supported. Rather, present-day versions of the Pali canon, he suggests, are the product of the Sinhalese Mahaviharin sect’s efforts at self-preservation and legitimation during periodic downturns of royal patronage for the sect in Sri Lanka. These efforts resulted in the introduction of the concept of the Tipitaka as a closed and authoritative body of Theravadin scriptures. Sinhalese forms of Buddhism imported into Southeast Asia maintained the idea of the Tipitaka as a canon in an abstract sense only, without necessarily conflating the concepts of scriptural authority and a closed canon. Collins comments that further ethnographic and historical work is needed to fully understand the actual texts that have commanded scriptural authority in particular Theravadin contexts:

If we wish to delineate the actual “canon” or “canons” of scripture . . . in use at different times and places of the Theravāda world, we need empirical research into each individual case . . . on the actual possession and use of texts, in monastery libraries and elsewhere, and on the content of sermons and festival presentations to laity, to establish more clearly than we currently can just what role has been played by the works included in the canonical list.

Collins concludes by suggesting that the importance of the Pali canon be understood as an authoritative notion rather than a closed body of texts.

Building on Collins’ argument, Anne Blackburn’s analysis of texts and training on monastic discipline in medieval and eighteenth-century Sri Lanka includes a carefully articulated distinction between formal and practical canons in the Theravāda. Blackburn designates Collins’ notion of canon as an authoritative concept as “formal canon,” while referring to the texts in a given historical contexts that are produced, used, collected, copied, read, recited, interpreted, and understood as expressions of this larger authoritative concept as the “practical canon.” Charles Hallisey has further nuanced this discussion by demonstrating that the scholarly construction by Orientalists of certain texts, values, and ideas as authoritative was often influenced by colonial Buddhists themselves. His theory of “intercultural mimesis” (discussed in more depth in chapter 4) grants more agency to Buddhists themselves in the representation of what constitutes Buddhist sources of canonical authority.

Drawing on the work of these scholars, my discussion of local, vernacular Buddhist interpretations of the Theravāda tradition in colonial Cambodia exam-
ines not only the outlines of the practical canons current among Buddhist intellectuals in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Cambodia, but also the ways in which they drew on the idea of a formal canon as a basis of authority to transform one practical canon into another, interestingly, into one that more closely resembled the Orientalist conception of authoritative scripture.

MODERNITY AND BUDDHIST MODERNISM IN COLONIAL CAMBODIA

Modernity has been associated with certain hallmarks. Among these are changing modes of production and exchange; changing conceptions of temporality and of the physical representation of the world; mechanization and bureaucratization; rationalism, disenchantment, or demystification; the demarcation of the secular; and historicist views about progress and civilizational development. "Modernism" as it has sometimes been defined in art and literature, is understood to both express and critique these hallmarks and to exhibit reflexivity about the experience of being caught up in shifts of history. While Buddhists in many different cultural and historical contexts have been adept at representing the tensions between the “interiorized” sensations of impermanence and permanence sometimes associated with modernist expression,45 Khmer Buddhists during the late nineteenth century faced the particular problem of how to give meaning to the experience of flux and change when older Buddhistic ways of understanding and representing the world were coming unglued.

This is the context in which I see Khmer Buddhist modernism developing. In late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Cambodia, Buddhist thought acted as a cultural medium for response to and critique of the sociopolitics of modern experiences in ways that parallel David Harvey's approach to the rise of modernist art and literature. I follow Harvey's analysis of modernism in Euro-American art and literature in supposing that modernism cannot be understood without reference to the sociopolitical context in which it developed.46 Harvey sees modernist art and literature in the late 1800s–early 1900s as part of a social movement that simultaneously interpreted, represented, critiqued, and advanced new sensations and experiences indicative of modernity. The mood, aesthetic, and politics of modernism in prewar Europe and the United States were, in Harvey's analysis, a reaction to new factors such as the experiences of mass production, mass markets, mass media, new forms of circulation and transportation, and urbanization.47 An underlying question during this early phase of modernism, he suggests, was the tension between two perceived qualities of modern life: the sense of the world as fleeting, ephemeral, and chaotic on the one hand, and on the other hand, the belief that it contained the “eternal and the immutable.” Emerging currents of modernist thought in art and literature served as a source for working out this problem, as well as for providing “ways to absorb, reflect upon, and codify these rapid changes” and to “modify or support them.”48
In his analysis of non-European experiences of modernity, Thongchai Winichakul explores the shifts between premodern and modern Siamese notions of cartography and geography. Whereas older maps represented “an illustration of another narration, be it a religious story or the description of a travel route” and not a “spatial reality,” the modern map focused on existence in the material world. The differences in the two kinds of maps reflected not only changing technologies but also “different kinds of knowledge and the conceptions behind them.”49 By comparison, Dipesh Chakrabarty has suggested that for Indians, the point of reference for understanding the modern is necessarily different from what it is for Europeans, since “being human” in India “involves the question of being with gods and spirits.”50

I draw on both these approaches in examining Khmer Buddhist modernism in terms of the production of different kinds of knowledge and indigenous conceptions of ways of being. In colonial Cambodia, being human necessitated living in a world shaped by action, or kamma.51 For modernist thinkers, this construction of reality necessitated awareness of and responsibility for one’s moral conduct, choosing a road or path to follow, a way of directing the actions constantly being performed by one’s mind, speech, and body. Modernist moral perception also involved a collective or communal sense of relationship. The actions of one person affected those of others, and purification thus required collective effort. This was clearly an “imagined community,” not of a nation but of fellow adherents of a religion (qanak tam sāsana), the fourfold religious community (parisāl) comprising the assembly of all four groups of monastic and lay Buddhists, male and female: bhikkhu-bhikkhunī-upāsak-upāsikā.52

If modern expression can be said to involve an altered knowledge of reality and of human ways of being, a revision of values reflecting these changed modes of imagining oneself in the world, reflexivity about change, and a transformed experience of temporality, these new ways of knowing and being were articulated through Buddhist ideas and literature. The Khmer writer and Pali scholar Ukñā Suttantaprijā Ind wrote, “What is Dhamma in these times?”53 He went on to consider the moral values most necessary for living elūv neh, “right now,”54 contrasting the “old” with the “new,”55 and examining the gatilok tmī dael koet mān löñ, “modern morality that has arisen.”56 It is necessary “in these present times,” he wrote, for “persons who are trying to be good and pure” to be able to clearly recognize “what is worldly [behavior] and what is Dhammic [behavior].”57 This framing of moral conduct in terms of time, delineating elūv neh, “right now,” from ‘cās’ or purān, “past or ancient times,” or mun, “all previous time before right now,” in combination with his division between the worldly (or secular) and the Dhammic (or religious) is expressive of the kind of self-consciousness of temporality that Harvey has associated with modernism.58 Yet at the same time that Ind emphasizes the present-ness and even the newness of this time period through references to what is tmī, “new” or “modern,” his transhistorical claims about Buddhist moral values are also made evident.
In recent decades, postcolonial studies of modernity and colonial encounter have moved from the assumption that forms of modernism were imposed as a result of European colonial influence to considering whether and how they arose from impulses within the colonial subjects’ own history and culture. In the case of Sri Lankan Buddhism, these questions have been debated around the label “Protestant Buddhism.” Anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere originally coined the term to refer to a modernist expression of Buddhism that simultaneously adopted some forms and fashions of Protestant Christianity from Euro-American missionaries and at the same time rebelled against European political domination. More-recent scholarship on Sri Lankan Buddhism moves away from the “one-way” examination of European modern influence. Anne Blackburn’s work, for instance, explores the indigenous scholastic shifts that helped to prefigure modern Buddhism. Peter van der Veer’s work considers ways in which encounters between South Asians and Europeans influenced changes in each other’s religious understandings.

The development of Khmer Buddhist modernity, which past scholarship has hardly examined at all, requires a careful historical reading. Because of the insertion of colonial politics in the construction of Khmer modernism, it can appear, from reading French colonial sources, that Khmer Buddhist modernism was a French invention. Indeed, as will become evident in chapter 4, French accounts of the stasis and even backwardness of the Khmer religious mentality credit the mission civilisatrice with emerging expressions of religious revitalization in Cambodia. Historian John Tully has commented that the 1920s and 1930s have “often been cast as a politically ‘dead’ period for Cambodia,” but in fact this characterization of the period (of which Tully is justifiably suspicious) overlooks the productivity and fertile outpouring of Buddhist ethical writings and translations. Obviously, the idioms used for understanding social and political change and the construction of meaning can vary widely, depending on the historical contexts. Novels, reportage, memoirs, and newspapers—literary forms associated with the articulation of modernity and the imagining of the communities of the city and the nation elsewhere in Southeast Asia—were scarcely in evidence in Cambodia. But perhaps this was in part because Khmer Buddhists were busily engaged in articulating modern experience in their own, heterogeneous terms. In Cambodia, where the majority of educated Khmer had been trained in Buddhist monasteries, Buddhism remained the primary medium for understanding and articulating a new self-consciousness of what it meant to be Khmer and a modern person. I think that the oversight of Buddhist literary expressions during this period as a historical source for understanding social change has arisen because the production of Buddhist translations is perceived, even by contemporary scholars of comparative colonialisms, as imitation rather than imagining. This misunderstanding could make it difficult to see how translating the Buddhist canon could serve as a site for articulating new ways of being.
OUTLINES OF BUDDHIST MODERNISM IN CAMBODIA

Like the broad body of thought referred to as Islamic modernism, Buddhist modernism, as scholars have begun to describe the accommodation between modern and Buddhist values, was not a monolithic intellectual development. Cambodia was no exception; different interpreters emphasized different ideas and were at times engaged in translating varying sorts of authoritative scriptural texts according to their own interests. In the discussion that follows, I treat the emerging body of Khmer modernist thought in terms of its general preoccupations and articulation of ethical values. I draw a distinction between the general currents of modernist interpretation and the more specific tenets outlined by the modern Dhamma group within the Mahānikāy. Modern Dhamma or Dharm-thmî was the moniker used to designate the monastic group of students and Pali scholars clustered around Brahma Vimaladhamm Tho’n at Watt Unnalom in the early 1900s. The term was used by the group’s early adherents and detractors and was widely employed in French Sûreté and other administrative records after the mid-teens.

Designating their interpretation of the Dhamma as thmî, “new” or “modern,” the modernists’ ideology opposed the traditionalism of the Dharm-câs, the “old” or “traditional” Dhamma advocated by the Sangha chief, which from their standpoint represented an impure and degenerate practice of Buddhism. While the new Buddhist movement in Cambodia shared many of the characteristics of traditional Buddhist reform and purification movements, modernism was not simply a reform of Buddhist ideas or a renovation of Buddhist institutions engineered by French scholars and colonial officials. Rather, what began in the nineteenth century under King Ang Duong as an example of yet another Theravâda Buddhist purification movement was transformed by these later Buddhist intellectuals into an expression of Southeast Asian religious engagement with modernity.

Modernists did not reject all aspects of older Khmer thought, and in fact several of the modernists I study here were among the most erudite products of the older Khmer Buddhist manuscript culture. In particular, the modernist emphasis on purification through conduct was already a part of the Khmer religious imagination of the nineteenth century, albeit in different forms. Commonly held perceptions of the relationship between merit and power, generated by individuals considered more pure than ordinary people, underlay political organization and social structures as well as idealized representations of order in literature. The idea of purification through moral conduct had been central to the doctrine and practice of the Vietnamese Buu Son Ky Huong tradition as it developed in the mid-nineteenth century. A similar belief was apparent in the millenarian movements that sprang up in the border regions between Cambodia and Cochinchina; the charismatic figures who led them were known as qanak mân puny, “people possessing merit,” who had become purified through means such as adherence to religious precepts, forms of abstinence, meditational prowess, or the
transmission of special teachings. In contrast to these older interpretations of purification, modernists were advocating a new brand of Buddhist purification that in some ways made Buddhism appear more egalitarian. Purification was available to everyone, including ordinary laypeople, though it also encumbered them with the responsibility of being more mindful about their everyday actions and relationships. Rather than kings and extraordinary figures such as Buddhast-to-be, all Buddhists had collective responsibility for purifying themselves, and by extension, for purifying the sāsana, the “religious doctrine.”

The ability to purify one’s own behavior depended on knowledge, which in turn was dependent on understanding the authentic teachings of the scriptures, not texts that had been corrupted over time through scribal errors and lack of understanding. Thus, the new Buddhist understanding necessitated innovations in pedagogical and textual practices as well that ended up hastening the transition from manuscript to print Buddhist culture in Cambodia. Khmer texts were traditionally preserved either as inscribed palm-leaf manuscripts or accordion-style folded paper manuscripts inscribed with ink or chalk. Since few opportunities for education existed outside the monastery, literacy and writing were closely linked to religious practice. Writing in itself was highly valued and spiritually potent. Manuscripts were produced with great care, surrounded by rituals for preparing the palm leaves and ceremonies and regulations that had to be observed by the monks who inscribed them. Finished manuscripts were consecrated, and the presentation of the manuscript to a monastery required a ritual ceremony, such as the presentation of special cloth for wrapping the texts or the donation of robes to the monk-scribe in order to effect the passing of merit to the donor of the manuscript. The quality and efficacy of the manuscript depended in part on the beauty of its written words, which in turn reflected the mindfulness of the monk who inscribed it, since in many cases, written syllables of the teachings were considered as microcosmic representations of the Buddha. The production of a manuscript was thus an act of devotion whose quality could be judged according to its clarity, lack of writing errors, and aesthetic character. Imbued with these elements of the Buddha and the Dhamma, of merit and devotion, manuscripts were venerated as aural texts, meant to be heard, conferring merit on their listeners and on the monks who read or chanted them, and as written texts, venerated in and of themselves for their written nature. Ideologically committed to new technologies of textual translation and print dissemination, modernists rejected these traditional methods associated with manuscript production as well as other older practices, ritual conventions, and ways of transmitting knowledge connected with the manuscript culture of learning.

In spite of the modernists’ opposition to traditionalism, however, Buddhist modernism was in many respects a conservative movement. It sought to identify authentic aspects of Khmer culture, most notably the history and development of Theravāda Buddhism within Cambodia and its moral values and teachings. It also sought to purify expressions of Khmer culture that had become corrupted: lan-
guage, rituals, institutions, practices, and most important, everyday moral conduct and the Dhamma itself, which had been damaged by a decline in Pali knowledge and texts. At the center of this concern with purification was the Dhamma-vinay (Pali: Dhamma-vinaya), a “canonical” body of Buddhist texts and teachings, and particularly the Vinaya, the compendium of prescriptions for monastic behavior. Following from the insights developed by Mongkut’s reforms in Siam, beginning in the 1830s, the early generations of Khmer monks who had been trained in Bangkok, and later, their students in Khmer monasteries, turned their attention to careful study and articulation of moral conduct based on codes of conduct outlined in the Vinaya. Consequently, the introduction of new educational methods including grammar, translation, and other pedagogical concerns were crucial for the modernists because they illuminated Vinaya and other scriptural knowledge. It was in this sense that the modernist movement most ardently began to challenge and change traditional textual understandings and practices in Cambodia. In the older Khmer manuscript culture, the clear delineation of aspects of Buddhist doctrine and Buddhavacana, “the words of the Buddha,” was less important than the larger vision of the possibility of human perfection, represented by the figure of the Bodhisatta, over vast spans of time.

This book combines historical and textual analysis to examine the development of these ideas from the mid-nineteenth century through 1930. Chapter 1 provides a literary starting point for the study, not as the repository of traditional Buddhism, but more as a perspective on the ethical perspectives and anxieties of late-nineteenth-century Buddhist scholars, who were writing about moral development in an ordered universe and about the merit and virtue with which politically powerful persons were imbued. What these late-nineteenth-century Buddhist writings omit, however, are explicit references to the destabilized political situation in colonial Cambodia at the time. In chapter 2, I suggest reading these sorts of texts as evidence of a disjuncture between ideas about how the world was supposed to be ordered and how living in it actually felt. Chapter 2 offers further evidence of this disjuncture by considering the sociopolitical changes that occurred during this period, ushered in by French “reforms,” and by examining the development of other kinds of Buddhistic responses to social change, including nineteenth-century instances of millenarianism, Prince Yukanthor’s short-lived venture into anticolonial agitation in 1900, and Ind’s modernist work Gatilok (Ways of the world), composed between 1914 and 1921.

Chapter 3 further charts the changing understandings of Khmer ideas of purification. It examines how the Buddhist renovation movement put in place by King Ang Duong to purify the religion was reflected in the state of Khmer manuscript collections and Buddhist learning at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although Buddhist learning had developed in significant ways since 1848, Bangkok was still the more desirable destination for Khmer monks who wanted to pursue higher learning. Drawing on funeral biographies and other sources, I examine accounts of their experiences in Siam, the influence of the ideas they carried
back to Cambodia, and the initially clandestine growth of modern Dhamma among a group of young monks in Phnom Penh. Chapter 4 looks at the ways in which this modernist interpretation developed in monastic circles between 1914 and 1930, bolstered by French colonial religious policies, and the accommodations between European and Buddhist discourses of modernization.

Finally, chapter 5 returns to reading Khmer ethical writings to examine how Khmer ideas about how to behave as a moral person had shifted over the course of several decades. These new writings, as I have suggested, emphasized the themes of authenticity, rationalism, and purification of moral behavior. These themes were expressed in new literary forms and styles that reflected the new ways in which the modernists were interpreting and expressing Theravādin ideas in ways that were simultaneously expressive of the translocal and transhistorical ethical dimensions of Buddhism and geographically and temporally situated in the ordinary lives of Khmer Buddhists. I conclude by briefly considering the transformation of these ideas from modernist critique to mainstream Buddhist orthodoxy.

**Sources**

The most important sources for this study are modernist writings produced between 1914 and the early 1930s and funeral biographies of Khmer monks born before 1900, a type of text that seems to have come into being only in the late 1920s. The modernist writings include compendiums, ritual manuals, translations, sermons, and folklore compilations; these forms will be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow, particularly chapter 5, in which some of these writings are excerpted. The latter sources contain both biographical and monastic lineage information about the deceased bhikkhu (or in a few cases, laypeople), often accompanied by a translation of a scriptural passage. These sources, little scrutinized by scholars of Cambodia and Theravāda Buddhism, merit even further attention than my study provides.

I also draw on a range of other types of Buddhist writings from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of which have been extensively studied or translated by others, and to whom I am indebted. These include cpāp’ (didactic poetry), a varied body of translations (often in verse) of Pali textual sources, and jā-taka. Whenever possible, I tried to use editions of the work from the period in question, although often they were compiled later, in print form, based on palm-leaf manuscripts, or reprinted without alteration. The poetry and prose of Ukñā Suttantapriñā Índ, trained as a monk in nineteenth-century Bangkok, runs through almost every chapter of the book. I have suggested that his writing represents modern Buddhist concerns at different moments in the time period I examine; his work also introduces us to one of the most eloquent and original voices of Khmer Buddhist modernism.

Some of these Buddhist sources are early printed texts; others are drawn from
the first print periodicals introduced in Cambodia in 1926 and 1927, _Kambujasuriyā_ and _Ganthamālā_. The former was introduced for the purpose of publishing, in Khmer, materials on Khmer culture, and at least initially was devoted almost entirely to religious topics. The latter periodical was intended as a vehicle for publishing new critically edited vernacular translations of Pali texts being produced by young monks at the Sālā Pali in Phnom Penh.

In addition to two rare individual memoirs treating the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively,75 I make use of French colonial ethnographies, travel accounts, scholarly articles, dictionaries, and documents and correspondence gained from archival research in Paris and Phnom Penh.

My focus on the scholarly and textual practices of Buddhists in Cambodia is not meant to preclude the importance of other sites for imagining modern Buddhism. Visual culture, ritual, healing practices, and ecclesiastical law are other aspects of religious life that could be examined. But the Khmer scholarly tradition or _gantha-dhura_, as it is known among Theravāda Buddhists, is one that has received little recent attention, particularly in respect to the translocal character of its development.