Surprisingly little material specifically related to Cambodian Buddhism has been written in English. A brief glance at the bibliography accompanying this book demonstrates the truth of this assertion. Rather more is available in French, as one would expect from the ex-colonial power, but much is out of print and can be consulted only in specialist libraries. In addition the bulk of French-language materials tends toward the recondite, and no introductory overview exists. The present book represents a modest attempt to fill the gap.

In 1853 the Catholic priest Jean Claude Miche had been responsible for drafting King Ang Duang’s letter to Napoleon III, asking for French protection and aid in retrieving the provinces of Cambodia that had been lost to the neighboring powers of Thailand and Vietnam. Thus he was instrumental in establishing a European presence in the region. But he was also an early observer of the religious scene. Yet to his prejudiced eyes Cambodian Buddhism appeared a “vast and absurd Pantheism, which covers with its veil a hopeless atheism.” He wrote that it “defies the whole of nature,” for its sacred writings ranked “man in the same class with the brutes.” Its conception of heaven was likewise problematic, in that the blessed were supposed to experience various joys that “for the most part consist in carnal pleasures of which decency forbids the mention” (Miche 1852, 605, 607–610). Such attitudes must be seen in their historical context, but they were quite long-lived and influential. Indeed, some of them have persisted down to the present. But they were soon to be challenged by a more careful and less ideologically charged approach to the study of Buddhism in the region.

Adhémard Leclère had begun service as a fonctionnaire in Cambodia in 1866, but he is principally known today for his seminal work of 1899, *Le buddhisme au Cambodge*. This remarkable book is one of the very few works of Western
scholarship to treat the subject in the round. It covers matters as diverse as cosmology and metaphysics, the annual cycle of the Buddhist year with its various festivals, and monastic ordination and contains materials that illuminate both ecclesiastical organization and discipline. It is therefore a fundamental starting point for anyone seriously wishing to understand the nature and practice of Buddhism in Cambodia. Yet it does, to my mind, suffer from a number of problems. From a practical perspective it is available only in French and, despite a relatively recent reprint, continues to be rather difficult to obtain. It is also quite weak from the historical standpoint, and it reveals a tendency, particularly in the more doctrinally oriented sections, to indulge in somewhat tangential discussion of issues of more interest to the Christian theologian than to the student wishing to know more about the nature of traditional beliefs and practices. Admittedly, Leclère has abandoned the coarser forms of Christian missionary rhetoric found in Miche, yet an unexamined European triumphalism remains. Leclère admits the “elevated” character of Buddhist philosophy and ethics yet regards the mass of ordinary Cambodian Buddhists as lacking intellectual strength: “[they] are excessively contemplative, slack, without initiative, very imaginative; they seem always to have had for their sacred domain absolute respect for their ancestors, even the most barbaric” (1899, xiii). Thus, his work acted as a lens through which Cambodian culture and history were refracted in support of those anxious to extend French influence in the region.

Much of Leclère’s oeuvre is concerned with the traditions of the Cambodian court, but he also shows a strong concern for ethnology. Although many of the rustic practices he describes are no longer attested, his ethnological instincts appear to have been sound. In this respect he may also be identified as the progenitor of a line of fine scholars interested in Khmer folk traditions. The work of Éveline Porée-Maspero, culminating in her three-volume study entitled *Étude sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens* (1962–1969), is the most obvious example, although more recently the baton has been taken up by Ang Chouléan, particularly in his *Les êtres surnaturels dans la religion populaire khmère* (1986). Both scholars shed new light on the nature of Cambodian religiosity, and, when relevant to Buddhist history and praxis, their insights have been incorporated into the fabric of my own work.

Having acknowledged these debts, by far and away the most significant scholar in the field of Cambodian Buddhist studies is François Bizot. In a continuous stream of work beginning in the mid-1970s, precisely the time when the country had entered its descent into collective madness, Bizot produced studies of outstanding competence, range, and originality. Bizot’s output must be considered a major landmark in Buddhist and Cambodian studies, since it clearly demonstrates that, at core, the religious traditions of the country are at
some variance with Theravada orthodoxy of the sort now found in neighboring countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand. However, and notwithstanding its importance to Buddhist scholarship, his writing is rather technical, especially for those not already accustomed to this very specific scholarly terrain. I have tried to make some of these findings more accessible, particularly in the fourth chapter of this book, where I attempt a synopsis of relevant aspects of nonorthodox praxis, a tradition that appears to have been almost entirely neglected by earlier investigators such as Leclère. The present book would have been severely impoverished had I not been able to depend on Bizot’s work. It will be up to others to decide how well I have represented his views.

Far be it from me to undermine the brilliance of Bizot’s investigations of the religious folkways of traditional Cambodia, but it must be admitted that he adopts a rather dismissive attitude toward those strands of Buddhist doctrine and practice that have emerged over the last century or so. I am thinking here of Buddhist modernism, a phenomenon that has, in one way or another, exercised a significant presence in all the countries of Buddhist Asia since the end of the nineteenth century. Put simply, Buddhist modernism has a preference for those modes of thought and behavior specifically authorized by the “scriptural tradition” of Theravada Buddhism as expressed in the Pali canon (Tripitaka) and its commentaries. It also shows a marked tendency toward laicization and the employment of modern proselytizing techniques, such as pamphlet production, distribution, and the like. Buddhist modernism, then, presents itself as a movement of purification, reform, and return to the “original truth” of the Buddha’s vision. It has tended to flourish in Buddhist cultures under colonial rule and has been influential in the development of various national liberation struggles, which may be read as alternative forms of the liberation recommended by the Buddha. Bizot and his coworkers have tended to accept the traditionalist position somewhat uncritically. Thus they are inclined to dismiss the modernist position as nothing more than politics and not really much to do with Buddhism. I disagree with that assessment on the grounds that it is difficult to identify any historical manifestation of the Buddhist tradition that does not, on detailed examination, possess some element of the political. The story of the tension between modernism and traditionalism is, consequently, assigned a prominent place in my discussions.

No one can write about the early phases of Cambodian history without an enormous debt to the labors of George Coedès. This remains as true today as it was in the past, despite Vickery’s recent and persuasive criticism of Coedès’ Sanskrit-oriented approach to the study of the inscriptive record. My debt is particularly manifest in the early portions of this book, even where the great savant’s conclusions have been reconsidered in the light of Vickery’s more re-
cent investigations; for it will be obvious to the careful reader that I have tried to take onboard some of the findings of the latter’s Society, Economics, and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia: The Seventh–Eighth Centuries (1998).

The post-Angkorian period is undoubtedly the least well-understood phase of the region’s historical record. Mak Pheun’s and Khin Sok’s works on the royal chronicles are the most obvious guides to the period and have been very useful. Regrettably, the chronicles shed a rather anemic and unreliable light on the development of Theravada Buddhism before the arrival of the French, and it was with some trepidation that, in due course, I turned to this most intractable part of the whole book. During my floundering in the middle period of Cambodian history, I had the good fortune to stumble upon the work of Ashley Thompson, particularly her 1999 doctoral thesis, “Mémoires du Cambodge.” In it she examines the manner in which ancient temples, originally constructed during the Angkor period, were reappropriated by an expanding Theravada tradition with strong probable links to a reinvigorated cult of kingship. By connecting her work with previous studies on post-Angkorian epigraphy (“Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor” [IMA]), especially those conducted by Saveros Pou [Lewitz], I have been able to give an admittedly sketchy account of this shadowy period of Buddhist history.

The second half of the book explores the issue of politicized Buddhism in Cambodia since the middle of the nineteenth century in some detail and from a chronological perspective. If the work has any claim to originality, it is to be found here. As one moves closer to the present, so the resources grow in number and quality. In terms of primary sources, Ven. Huot Tath’s Kalyanamitt roboh kñom (My intimate friend, 1970)—a partial account of the career of the influential monk Ven. Chuon Nath, the leader of the emerging Buddhist modernist cause—is crucial to the understanding of the tensions that developed in the Buddhist order, and to a lesser extent in wider Phnom Penh society, in the first half of the twentieth century. But I must also acknowledge my dependence on materials contained in a recent doctoral thesis by Penny Edwards, “Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945” (1999); though not concerned specifically with Buddhism, it nevertheless fills in many of the gaps that were previously missing from the overall historical picture of the time. For reasons of completeness, Jean-Samuel Try’s 1991 École Pratique des Hautes Études doctoral thesis, “Le bouddhisme dans la société khmère moderne,” is also worthy of mention in this context. It covers a fair amount of relatively contemporary material, not all of which may be easily found elsewhere, but it is not really available for public scrutiny. It is also slightly compromised by the fact that, as a Khmer Christian, Try seeks to engage in the kind of interreligious dialogue that characterizes some of Leclère’s writing.
Most secondary sources related to the modern period are tangential to the main thrust of my account. But no one can embark on a serious examination of recent Cambodian history without significant reliance on the writings of David Chandler, Steve Heder, Ben Kiernan, and Michael Vickery. Although none of these four shows any great interest in Buddhism, voluminous references to their scholarly output at crucial points in my discussion demonstrate that this book is no exception.

In terms of its coverage, the book is organized as follows. The first chapter considers evidence for the existence of Buddhism in the earliest phase of Cambodia's history, a period stretching from the first significant polity in the region, Funan, to the fall of Angkor. It surveys available epigraphic, art historical, and other documentary evidence, particularly that located in Chinese literary sources, in an attempt to evaluate the oscillating fortunes of Buddhism when set beside the various forms of Hinduism that also flourished around the time. The chapter examines what we can know about the sectarian affiliations of early Cambodian Buddhism and considers the forms of Hindu-Buddhist syncretism that appear to have developed at crucial points in the history of Angkor. It concludes by looking at the manner in which Buddhism participated in the life of the state, with special emphasis on the dominant role of tantric Mahayana concepts and rituals under Jayavarman VII (r. 1181–c. 1220). The second chapter continues the historical thrust with consideration of the factors that led to the emergence of a distinctively Theravada form of Buddhism in Cambodia following the collapse of Angkorian power. Resolution of the question as to whether the Theravada should be regarded as a popular tradition operating at the grass roots or as yet another elite system with its locus in courtly circles is given some prominence. Drawing on a more limited inscriptional base, though complemented by relevant materials from later Cambodian royal chronicles, the chapter looks at the ways in which significant Angkorian-period temples dedicated to other cults, Angkor Wat most notably, were remodeled and reapropriated so that they could serve as significant beacons of the new Buddhist faith. It also considers the symbolism of Angkor’s various successor capitals and the link between the Theravada and the cult of kingship up to the reign of King Ang Duang in the mid-nineteenth century.

In the following two chapters the discussion is loosened from a purely historical framework in an attempt to isolate and describe the distinctive features of Cambodian Theravada Buddhism. Chapter 3 examines the way that the premodern Khmer interpreted their environment from both the physical and the
mythological perspectives. It becomes clear that, despite the shift in religious priorities at the end of the Angkorian period, certain key preoccupations and dichotomies were preserved. The chapter demonstrates that, in its popular manifestations, Theravada cult activity owes a significant debt to probably quite archaic ways of understanding reality. The discussion also covers the nature of the monastic economy in the premodern period and concludes with a short examination of the basic structural and sociological features of the tradition that have persisted down to the present. Chapter 4 surveys some of the literary resources and practices characteristic of the Cambodian Buddhist tradition. The discussion steers away from detailed examination of the kinds of mainstream Theravada beliefs and practices rooted in canonical sources and performed in all the regions of South and Southeast Asia, for such accounts may be readily found elsewhere; instead it focuses on several distinctive Cambodian literary genres before detailed attention is turned to the baroquely esoteric traditions mentioned previously in connection with the work of François Bizot.

In chapter 5, with its focus on the ways in which Cambodian Buddhists reacted to the challenge of colonial rule, we return to historical narrative. The chapter explores the impact of various foreign influences on the nineteenth-century monastic order (sangha), including the establishment of a new Thai-based and reformed monastic fraternity, the Thommayut. The mechanisms through which the sangha became polarized and fractured into two camps—the modernizers (thor thmei) and the traditionalists (thor cah)—are traced, and the issues dividing the two parties considered. At the heart of the chapter is a characterization of the career of Ven. Chuon Nath, probably the most influential monk of the twentieth century and a major champion of modernization and reform. It shows how the modernizers, in some but by no means all cases, cooperated with the colonial power to bring about significant reforms in monastic education and administration. But not all members of the order were enthusiasts for change, and some appear to have bitterly opposed it.

The Buddhist contribution to an emerging sense of nationhood is covered in chapter 6, which begins with discussion of a number of insurrections in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that appear to have had a Buddhist element. Some, but not all, of these insurrections may also have been motivated by anticolonialist sentiment. The establishment and impact of Cao Dai, a new Vietnamese religion founded just across the Cambodian border at Tay Ninh and conceived as a “renovated” Buddhism, are also considered. Cao Dai was viewed with concern by the colonial authorities, but it also appears to have focused the minds of some senior Cambodian Buddhists, who both condemned it and saw in it a model for a new and more challenging relation with the French.
The first real manifestation of organized anticolonialism in Cambodia materialized in 1942, when a monk-led demonstration challenged various reforms being imposed on the Khmer people. In a sense this event opened the floodgates, and it may not be too bold to assert that the country moved toward independence on a breaking wave of Buddhist activism that had its seeds in the late nineteenth century. The chapter concludes with an examination of the Buddhist socialist movement instigated by Prince Sihanouk in the early decades of the newly independent state.

Following the overthrow of Sihanouk in 1970, Cambodia slid quite rapidly into disorder and violence, a process that culminated in the fall of Phnom Penh to extreme nationalistic communists in April 1975. The resulting state of Democratic Kampuchea lasted only until the end of 1978, when it was toppled by a fraternal invasion of Vietnamese communists. The devastation and horror of the Democratic Kampuchea period have achieved notoriety and are widely known, at least in general outline. Chapter 7 may be the most surprising part of the book to the reader with little prior knowledge of modern Cambodian history, for it suggests that the Buddhist-inspired nationalist movement discussed in the previous chapter provided fertile ground for the germination of Khmer communism. As the communist movement grew and developed, some of its leading members sought to break their links with the past by shedding all prior connections. As is quite well known, the regime developed a vehemently antireligious policy, yet even at the height of the Democratic Kampuchea period subliminal Buddhist influences remained. These are treated in some depth, as are the phases in the elimination of institutional Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge. The chapter also explores the manner in which Buddhism was manipulated by various political groupings in the civil war period, which consumed the first half of the 1970s.

In the concluding chapter, attention is focused on the gradual reemergence of Buddhism after the darkness of the Pol Pot years. The slow recovery of organized Buddhism, its ideological manipulation, and its attempts to gain a foothold within the political system prevailing in the early years of the 1980s are all described and analyzed. The great easing of restrictions following the withdrawal of Vietnam from the country at the end of that decade, and the impact that preparations for the 1993 elections had on the restoration of the sangha’s pre-revolutionary institutional forms, are given similarly detailed treatment. The chapter ends by cataloguing and evaluating the forms of Buddhism that have emerged in recent years, with particular reference to their political contexts. An earlier version of this final section first appeared in 2001 as an essay entitled “Buddhist Sangha Groupings in Cambodia” in the Buddhist Studies Review.
Over the course of the last few years I have engaged in discussion and correspondence with many individuals well placed to offer good advice. Many are mentioned in the endnotes. It is wise to maintain the anonymity of others. However, I would like to thank the following for their criticism and wise counsel at various points in the composition of this work: Olivier de Bernon, David Chandler, Youk Chhang, Chin Channa, William Collins, Penny Edwards, Alain Forest, Peter Gyallay-Pap, Hean Sokhom, Steve Heder, Judy Ledgerwood, John Marston, Caroline Nixon, Thonevath Pou, and Peter Skilling. I am also grateful to Alex Watson for her help in tracking down obscure research materials. The views and errors contained herein are purely my own responsibility.

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Note on Transliteration

My approach to the representation of Asian terms was determined by three separate considerations: scholarly norms, the most widespread form of proper names, and reader recognition. With a few very common exceptions, the transliteration of Pali and Sanskrit terms accords with accepted academic conventions. The rendering of Khmer terms is more problematic, because no universally recognized system of transliteration exists. Some systems aim to give an accurate representation of Khmer orthography, while others provide a clearer
account of pronunciation. Publications of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient have tended in the former direction, and in order to avoid confusing readers who may wish to consult these important sources, I have retained this rendering in relevant sections of the book. Elsewhere I have employed a simplified rendering with stronger emphasis on oral articulation. It is impossible to square the circle, but khmerologues may refer to the word list at the end of this work, in which the majority of terms occurring in the text are also given in Khmer script.