Directly or indirectly, the chapters in this book all relate to the question, “What is particularly Cambodian about Cambodian religion?” In other words, they are concerned with the ways that Cambodian ideas and practices of religion relate to the ideas and institutions that have given shape to Cambodia as a social and political body—to a Cambodian “nation,” if you will. We are using the term “nation” very broadly, and, as we will discuss below, the authors in this book have very different ways of approaching the idea of “nation,” but all are concerned with the processes of religion giving meaning to social interaction, and that meaning in each case in some way includes “Cambodian” identity.

The origins of this book were e-mail conversations between the two editors in which we speculated about how interesting it would be to have a book about the many small, unusual religious movements that can be found in Cambodia today. We organized a “Cambodian Religion” panel for the 1998 Annual Conference of the Association for Asian Studies in Washington, D.C. As we discussed our ideas with the other panel members, we came to see the need for a volume in English that would showcase some of the current and exciting research being done by a new generation of scholars. Cambodian religion—like, in fact, all religions—is often characterized as a conservative force in society: traditional, static, and unchanging, or worse, removed from society and outside historical processes. We believe that in Khmer society, religion is deeply involved in processes of change, if not, in fact, often the matrix of social change itself. The chapters in this book clearly illustrate Cambodian religion in a perpetual process of reforming and recreating itself. The historical chapters in this book illuminate the chapters on contemporary ethnog-
raphy, and vice versa, not because Cambodian religion has not changed or is conservative, but because processes of change relate to social memory, sometimes in complex ways.

Cambodian religion first became the object of Western academic study in 1879, when Orientalists Hendrik Kern and Auguste Barth began publishing their translations of Cambodian Sanskrit inscriptions. At that time, the civilizations of Indochina were widely perceived to be once-great societies in decline that needed to be rescued by European colonization. As Penny Edwards describes in chapter 3, the French set up organizations that helped to systematize the study of Cambodian religion, such as the École Française d’Extrême-Orient in 1898, a Pāli religious school in 1914, and the Institut Bouddhique in 1930. During the colonial period, members of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient dominated Khmer studies. An immense body of French scholarship, such as Coedès’ seven-volume work on the *Inscriptions du Cambodge* and Giteau’s research on Khmer religious art and architecture, was created that emphasized Cambodia’s status as an “état hindouisé d’Indochine.” The temples and inscriptions from the Angkorean period, considered by many to be the most valuable and authoritative remnants of Cambodian culture, always received the most funding and scholarly attention. Research informed by these traditions of French scholarship has continued into the present day, focusing on the information that can be gleaned from ancient temples, the numerous Khmer inscriptions, and the Khmer chronicles (Pou 1989; Mak Phoeun 1984; Mannikka 1996; and Vickery 1998, among others).

One of the first ethnographers of Cambodia was Adhémard Leclère (1853–1917), an administrator of the French protectorate who rose to the position of Résident in Kratie Province. He translated many Khmer religious texts as well as royal chronicles and recorded his observations of religious ceremonies in several books that were for many years the only source for Cambodian religious practice. The work of Leclère, an amateur who did his research in the vernacular and in the field, was at first considered less important than the work of scholars trained in the classical languages of Buddhist studies who endeavored to uncover the secrets of Angkor. Today, however, Leclère’s work seems to be an important precursor to the ethnographical research of Porée-Maspero (1962), Martel (1975), Bizot (1976, 1988), Forest (1992), and the Khmer scholar Ang (1986).

There was little writing in English about Cambodian religion prior to the Civil War period, with the exception of short articles by Ebihara (1966), Kalab (1968), and a chapter in Ebihara’s dissertation (1968), all more concerned with peasant social systems than religion per se. Chandler wrote several articles on the intersection between religion and politics (1974, 1976, 1983). In the 1980s, a Khmer scholar residing in the United States wrote an insightful description of the relationship between Cambodian Buddhism and politics between 1954 and 1984 (Sam 1987).
A volume in English published out of a refugee camp also explored the relationship between Buddhism and politics from the perspective of the Cambodian resistance movement of the time (Khmer Buddhist Research Center 1986). In the 1990s, work began to appear describing Cambodian religious practices in countries of resettlement, for example, Kalab (1994), Mortland (1994), Higbee (1992), Ledgerwood (1990), and, especially, Smith-Hefner (1999).

The contributors to this volume are scholars whose primary research on Cambodia began in the 1990s, when Cambodian political developments created new openings for Western researchers in the country and a new momentum for the study of Cambodian culture. The chapters compiled here show religious practice relating to Cambodian “nation” in very different ways. Contemporary theory holds “nation” to be a modern social formation, whereby an imagined community develops in relation to a clearly defined geographical entity and a bureaucratic state apparatus. This is the kind of nation Edwards is referring to as she describes under French colonialism the development of state bureaucratic apparatus, an education system, and book publication in support of the state vision of Cambodian Buddhism—a Buddhism seen as separate from the secular institutions of the state. This vision of nation also meant the institutionalization of the vernacular language as a national language.

Scholars have attempted to describe how a premodern Southeast Asian polity differed from this, using terms such as “man. d. ala” to describe polities with no clear geographical boundaries that took form as a configuration of relationships connected to a symbolic center. Wolters (1979), in an article on Cambodia’s “protohistory,” suggested that a Khmer kingdom, with its own identity as such, was never established; there was only the cult of kingship—the form of the personal cult of the man who had seized the kingship—the form of the personal cult of Kingship. These man. d. ala are the kinds of formations Ashley Thompson is describing in her chapters on Cambodian kingship (chap. 4) and the cult of the Maitreya, or “Buddha-to-come” (chap. 1). She convincingly describes the metanymic role of kingship and the cult of Maitreya as unifying processes in the formation of the Khmer geobody. Whether or not we can call these processes of social unification configurations of “nation,” such “premodern” social formations (which have in fact existed in quite a variety of historical periods and in states of very different scale) have continued to be a dynamic of the modern Cambodian state and as such continue to stand, in modern society, as powerful symbols. The tension between a “premodern” man. d. ala social formation and emerging modern institutions is explicit in Anne Hansen’s chapter about religious identity in the face of French colonial reforms (chap. 2). Less explicitly, this tension underlies many of the chapters in this book.

The chapters by Hang Chan Sophea (chap. 5), Didier Bertrand (chap. 7), and John Marston (chap. 8) also concern the power of religious iconography in ways that perhaps suggest the continuing power of social formations organized around
symbolic centers—especially the icons of kingship in Hang’s chapter. Marston’s chapter shows the iconography of Angkor assuming great weight in a millennial cult focused on the idea of the Khmer nation. Angkor Wat doubtless functioned historically as a symbol of spiritual power informing configurations of mandala; a contemporary cult of the kind Marston describes searches for a similar symbolic center, while at the same time taking on modern sociopolitical meanings in relation to Cambodian society. As Bertrand’s chapter describes them, the pantheon of pāramī that manifest themselves through contemporary Cambodian mediums are less clearly symbols of nation; however, they also show the power of central icons to give meaning to Cambodian society—and perhaps in their totality do suggest a set of reference points for Cambodian nation.

Almost all the chapters in this book show Cambodian religion looking backward to a mythico-historical past at the same time that practice is shaped by the memories of a more immediate, cataclysmic history and adjusts to a continuing process of social change. In this way they relate to a process of constructing narratives of the nation moving through time. Chapter 10, by Teri Shaffer Yamada, especially shows how a particular narrative of the defense of the Khmer nation is used ritually to promote unity among Cambodians—in her specific ethnographic work, among Cambodians living overseas.

While we are uncomfortable using the term “postmodern” to refer to the recent intensification of transnational processes, we recognize these processes coming into play in the religious practices of diasporic Cambodians and in the ways transnational support and organizations have intensified recent Cambodian religious movements, as we see in the chapters by Yamada, Marston, and Kathryn Poethig (chap. 9). In cases like these Cambodian identity comes to be defined and emphasized as contrasting with other national identities through the very transnational processes that bring these national identities into contact.

From a broad perspective, all religious practices are transnational, and in emphasizing Cambodian religion, we do not wish to ignore the continuities among the earlier religious practices of monsoon Asia, the continuities of tradition among Theravāda Buddhist countries, or the underlying unities among all religions. What we choose to emphasize, however, amid the flux of religious practice are some institutions and belief systems shaped by their connection with the history of a given place, Cambodia.

Cambodia is conventionally described as a Theravāda Buddhist country, and few Cambodians would question this characterization. As in other Theravāda countries, however, there is a complex relation of Buddhist religious practices to “non-Buddhist” practices that are nevertheless deeply ingrained in Khmer culture in what is sometimes called syncretism, or synchronism. Cambodian scholars themselves describe their religion as a mixture of animism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism (Phang 1963; Yang 1987; Ang 1986, 1988). Scholars of Buddhism have
struggled to define the exact relation of complementarity and unity among these different traditions (Kirsch 1977; Tambiah 1970; Gombrich 1988, 23–31), while until recently Cambodian Buddhists have shown little need for self-consciousness about the precise boundaries between these practices. We will not try to define a precise sociological model of this “syncretism.” It is worth pointing out, however, that the chapters in this book tend to be less concerned with examining the “pure” animist, Brahmanist, or Buddhist tradition than with exploring the social complexity, with its concomitant ironies, that arises in the unclear boundaries of these traditions—just as this volume is also concerned with the social complexity in the unclear boundaries between religious practice and political formation.

What is missing from this volume? The chapters in this book are concerned with the religious practices of the dominant population of Cambodia, the Khmer, and do not attempt to touch on the religious practices of ethnic Vietnamese, the largely Muslim Cham and Chvea, or the numerous small ethnic minorities of the Cambodian northeast. There is also no discussion of Chinese religious practices, even though there is evidence of a fascinating mixture between religious practices identified as “Chinese” and “Khmer” among Cambodians, regardless of their personal identification as “Chinese” or “Khmer.”¹ Among the religious practices of ethnic Khmer, perhaps the chief gap in this volume is the absence of discussion of Christianity, which has been discussed historically by Ponchaud (1990). While still little studied (an article by Poethig [2001] on the dual citizenship of Cambodian-American Christians is an exception), recent conversions related to the return of refugees from border camps and evangelization by overseas Cambodians may yet prove to be an important social development.

Notes

This general introduction was written jointly by John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie. The introductions to each of the four parts should be regarded as the work of Marston.

1. A conversation with Kobayashi Satoru helped illuminate some of these tendencies for us.