

DIDIER BERTRAND

CERPP, Université de Toulouse le Mirail

IRSEA-CNRS, Marseille, France

The Names and Identities of the *Boramey* Spirits Possessing Cambodian Mediums

Abstract

Powerful spirits called *boramey* possess mediums in Cambodia. In this article the procedures used in the attribution and recognition of *boramey* names is described, and a typology of these spirits is offered based on their identity and history. Specific and well-known roles that influence the attitudes of believers are delineated in order to show how the identities of the medium and the *boramey* interlink. The resurgence of these mediumistic practices is explained in the context of the recent history of Cambodia and in relation to the turmoil faced by individuals in a society confronted with rapid changes.

Keywords: spirit possession—Cambodia—mediums—spirits (*boramey*)—social change

FOR ABOUT THREE YEARS, I lived with and participated in the lives of Cambodian mediums and took part in the activities and ceremonies that constitute their social life.¹ During this time I interviewed about one hundred mediums who are the so-called representatives (*snang*) or physical bodies (*rup*) that become possessed by spirits. While spirits possessed mediums, I interviewed the spirits as well. In the process of these interviews, over three hundred *boramey*² names were collected.

The term *boramey* is a Khmer derivation from the Pali word *parami* that originally meant the ten virtues of the Buddha (*tousak boramey*), which permit one to attain nirvana. In popular conceptualization of the term in Cambodia, mediums are said to be attacked as well as chosen by spirits called *boramey*, who are supposed to have the Buddha's ten virtues by which they become a benevolent power. *Boramey* are assumed to represent a variety of mythical and historical characters, and are usually clearly differentiated from the souls of those who died a sudden or violent death and from the other errant spirits who populate the Khmer universe. Certain mediums think, however, that cases of malevolent possession do exist, where a demonic spirit (*preay*) is summoned, trained, and pacified by a master medium (*kru chaul rup* "master enter body"). The word *boramey* is popularly used in connection with mediums to mean a spirit that is supposed to be virtuous and *kru boramey* has become the name of the master who deals with them.

It is said that there are about 10,000 *boramey* in Cambodia. They are often identified with distinct mythical and historical people well known to Cambodians. These people are known for their distinctive clothes, and they use instruments characteristic for their identity. When a medium is possessed by a *boramey*, the medium's behavior while in a state of trance, particularly his physical and verbal expressions, provides further insight into the character of the *boramey*. Each *boramey* identity translates into a social and therapeutic function, which it may choose to exercise through its human representative (*snang* or *rup*). In other words, the *boramey* possesses the physical form of the human representative (i.e., the medium), which it

becomes identified with, and momentarily modifies him or her. Such modification occurs, for example, when a *boramey* princess possesses and transforms the body of a male master (*kru*). Consequently, masters claim to have multiple identities, and it is on the basis of these identities that the masters' reputations and practices depend.

In this article the different *boramey* I have encountered are presented. I have classified them using criteria that take into account the form and/or historical aspects of the *boramey*. This has forced me to make choices about the classification of those *boramey* who could conceivably belong to several categories. I also describe the procedures I used for the attribution and recognition of names. Finally, I address questions such as how the *boramey* choose their *snang*, or the *snang* their *boramey*; and how familial ties develop between human beings and the *boramey*.

I intend to show the intertwining of the identities of the *snang* and the *boramey*, making reference to their specific and well-known roles, which seem to influence the attitudes of believers. I propose to understand the resurgence of the practices of the mediums with regard to the recent history of Cambodia and the turmoil faced by individuals in a society undergoing violent and rapid change.

THE DETERMINATION OF BORAMEY NAMES

Almost all the *snang* go through a very difficult period before it is revealed that the cause of their suffering, disease, accident, or some other misfortune has to be traced to a *boramey*. Before consulting a medium, they will have suffered for long periods from diseases that doctors and traditional healers have been unable to cure. Eventually diagnoses will attribute the misfortune to a *boramey*. In some rare cases, however, a spirit spontaneously possesses the *snang* during a ceremony without the *snang* having previously suffered from any disease. Such a *snang* goes into trance simply by hearing a certain kind of music.

Quite often the path of the *boramey* (*pleuv boramey*) is opened by a *kru boramey*, who is also a healer called *upachhea*. The healer progressively reveals to the *snang* his or her *boramey*, in accordance with the amount of information available about the *boramey*'s power. The name given to the *boramey* is closely related to the behavior of the patient during the treatment sessions. For example, a subject who trembles frequently is called Hong Mea (Golden Stork). In a traditional story, this bird is captured and put into a cage because of its golden feathers, and it trembled when its protective feathers were plucked away. The *snang* of the *boramey* Tep Macha (Divine Fish) makes movements as if he were swimming.

In one case a young man became paralyzed in the arm while trying to

light incense sticks on an altar, and the symptoms gradually disappeared when the medium started treatment. In this case the *boramey* was called *sedayos*, a bird that according to a popular narrative in the *Ramayana* got injured on the wing by an arrow. Although the *snang* was cured, whenever he becomes possessed, the paralysis of his arm becomes noticeable.

There are other cases where the *snang* becomes seriously ill, falls unconscious, and dreams. After waking up, the *snang* claims to have crossed to another world that has an extraordinary landscape and says that the arrival of the *boramey* as well as its identity had been revealed. During this voyage, the *snang* meets members of his or her spiritual family, and in this way gets to know his or her spiritual relatives. These claims are confirmed later in the presence of a medium or later on in life when the person becomes a *snang*.

Biographical elements can also help in understanding the procedure followed in the determination of the names of *boramey*. For example, one *snang* claimed that during her childhood she used to accompany her grandfather who was a medium, and who had the habit of pulling her hair when possessed (*tuk chuk*). This *snang* has been possessed by a *boramey* called “the small possessed child with pulled hair” (*chau tuk koma*).

THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF *BORAMEY*

The religious boramey

This group, which constitutes about 25% of the total interviewed, is made up of a variety of figures that derive from different spiritual influences in Cambodia.

Brahmanist divinities like Parvati are found under such names as Oma Vathey,³ Preah Phakkani (Ganesh), Champoh Krud (Garuda, Vishnu’s vehicle) and Srey Khmeu (a black woman or goddess reminiscent of Kali). The religious narratives (*kampey*) mention important figures such as the ones from the Jataka (*tos cheadak* in Khmer). These names date as far back as before the birth of the Buddha and refer to the Buddha’s family. There are also names of the Buddha’s disciples such as Preah Vesando, Preah Mokklean, Preah Ayabot. However, the origin of these beings is highly disputed by some skeptical mediums who strive to show that Buddhist beings of such purity could not come to earth. Tevadas (kings of angels) only come to take quick possession of *snang*.

The statue of Neang Preah Hing Thorakni (mother of the earth), who is considered to be a *boramey*, is found on all altars. This *boramey* does not take possession of the mediums as the goddess is supposed to belong to the universe of the Buddha. But Neang Chek and Neang Chom, which are worshiped through the famous Buddha like statues at Siam Reap and which have become the objects of a recent nationwide cult whose origins still

remain mysterious, both have their own *snang*.

Finally, there are also highly dominating figures such as hermits (*look ta eysei*) engaged in spiritual activities, and hermit monks (*tabors*), or learned hermits (*neak sachan*). Usually they are men, but in some cases they are women who are said to lead mystic lives (for example, *look yiei* Phnom Kulen, Neang Pov of Phnom Kulen). They are differentiated by names (e.g., “Divine Mouth”), locality, and physical characteristics (long hair, etc.) or by the nature of their morals, which are Buddhist. They are usually dressed in a white garment called *krong sar*, where the word *krong* (to dress) is borrowed from the vocabulary of Buddhist priests to indicate that a Buddhist figure has entered the human *rup*. The mediums sometimes carry a stick and a small bag strapped across their shoulders.

The *boramey* named Oma Vathey wears, through the means of her *snang*, expensive clothes and is addressed in the royal language. Her presence is symbolized by a yoni, which evokes in the mind of the observer the linga of her husband Preah Eyso (Shiva) in the same way that a stone in the shape of a phallus evokes him.

The *snang* of these *boramey* are usually people of great virtue (or at least they claim to be), and lead a peaceful life. They observe the eight or ten rules of abstinence depending on the nature of their *boramey*. Possession by a hermit *boramey* is very calm. As a sign of wisdom and plenitude, the *boramey* listens, gives advice, and reminds people to live by good moral virtues.

Some *snang* claim that the *boramey* is permanently in them and that they only have to light incense and concentrate to have it become active—going into a trance is not necessary. Some of these *snang* are *neak sachan* (respectable old men of knowledge) who have profound knowledge. For example, they can give the names of many medicinal herbs in the remote mountains and forests where they live. The *boramey* of these *snang* are first and foremost supporters of the dharma, the virtues of which they want to teach and illustrate through meditation.

Mythological boramey

This group constitutes about 40% of those interviewed. The names of the vast majority of mythological *boramey* are found in narratives. A quarter of them are women who are described as being of striking and exquisite beauty. Among them are characters from popular and mythical narratives such as Chup Leak (which is the name of the son of Rama), Neang Kang Rey and Rithisean, King Preah Chan Koma (i.e., the child of the moon), Preah Neang Soma Vathey, Preah Ko,⁴ Preah Keo, and Neang Peu Rachana. They are often mentioned in relation to ancient capitals of different Khmer empires and highly sacred places (e.g., Angkor, Phnom Udon, Phnom

Chisor, Phnom Bayonkor, Angkor Borey), which have become pilgrimage places for *snang*. The *snang* of Preah Ko and his wife, Neang Peu Rachana, for example, go to Long Vek where they worship relics such as a very old mango tree (*svay kal*) that has grown in the middle of a banyan tree.

The *snang* associate some of these places with the names of certain *boramey*, although the association may not always be historically accurate. The *snang* of Preah Kum Long, the king with leprosy, used to go to Ta Prom temple in Angkor Thom, which they claimed was the place of origin of this king. Preah Kum Long is a curious and playful *boramey*. He often tells sexual and vulgar jokes, and reveals lottery numbers in a comical way. He is so popular that he is considered to be a *preah* (divine being) but most people address him in a more familiar way as *ta* (“grandfather”).

Here we find the re-creation of a mythical national story, which is the fruit both of the medium’s imagination (or of the *boramey*’s) and of popular narratives that were widely spread through comic books before the war. The characters in these stories are particularly abundant because continuously new topics are invented in interaction with *boramey* families. The clothes, the instruments, and the language used by these characters are similar to those used by the characters of the Bassac theater.⁵ The *snang* who are not rich enough to buy expensive clothes rent them, especially for opening ceremonies and for the inauguration of their altars (*aphisek asaknak*). The more fortunate *snang* add decorations such as jewelry or high quality clothes with fake silver and gold encrustations. The altars of such *snang* are very well decorated with a variety of vehicles (e.g., horses, chariots, boats)⁶ and images that relate the story of the *boramey*. The gestures and general behavior of *snang* are reminiscent of professional actors. Observers of the *snang* thus get the impression that they have come face to face with a *boramey*. The *snang*’s vivid actions strengthens the credibility of the *boramey* among those who come to consult it. The gestures and behavior of the *snang* are such that it is easy to forget the person who has become the *snang*; thus the confidence in the *boramey* and the respect given it by followers is enhanced. Cases of sexual inversion, for example, when a male *snang* becomes a princess *boramey*, are most “attractive” when the transfiguration of a *snang* into a *boramey* is total.

These *boramey* are consulted for divination and the curing of various diseases. They are also called upon to sort out family conflicts or misunderstandings at the workplace.

Animal boramey

This modest group is composed of *boramey* that originate in narratives or which derive from some wild animal. The dragon (Khmer: *neak*; Pali: *naga*)

and its family represent almost half of this type of *boramey*. It includes Muskalin, the famous seven-headed *naga* who is mentioned in the Buddhist scriptures as having protected the Buddha once while he was meditating in the rain. There are also monkeys such as the famous Hanuman from the Ramayana. And there is a tiger, a crocodile (*krapoe sarawan* in Khmer narratives), a white elephant (*kuchasa sor*;⁷ found in many narratives like the one of the king of white elephants), a mythological golden spotted bird (*hang meas*), which carries Preah Prum (Brahma) (SOR 1973, 173), and the white horse on which Sakyamuni rode on his way from the palace to become the Buddha.

These *boramey* are more easily recognizable than the others because they are associated with specific gestures and actions. For example, sometimes a *snang* may wear the mask of a monkey or produce hissing sounds to signal small wild dragons crawling around. They mobilize the whole assembly to help control their uncoordinated movements. The *snang* who are not possessed run to fill their mouths with water, which they then spray around by spitting it out. The small dragons possess their *snang* in a very violent manner. *Snang* have great difficulty coming out of their trance when possessed by these small dragons. In fact, the medium has to wake the *snang* up by slapping him slightly or giving him perfume. In contrast to this, the actions of the big dragons, such as Neang Neak, Muscha Lin, and Champa Vathey, are more controlled. They are quite often dressed like princesses⁸ and they rarely roll on the ground. Neang Neak is the wife of Preah Tong according to the mythology that seeks to explain the origin of the Kingdom of Cambodia. She is jealous, authoritative, and prone to outbursts of anger. The others tend to have an animal-like character; they rarely talk, but, if they do, they use royal language.

The tiger (*khla*) *boramey* is very nervous and aggressive, always roaring and ready to fight. Just as in the case of the dragon, its *snang* falls into a deep trance from which the *boramey* emerges only after the *snang* faints.

These *boramey* who have no social or therapeutic functions, are the first spirits to visit a *snang* before more human ones manifest themselves. In most cases, possessions by animal *boramey* are sudden, and the *snang* undergo the usual training,⁹ which progressively provides them with a revelation.

The group of Neak Ta (local spirits)

Some *boramey* are called by names that are recognized as those of local spirits, or *neak ta*, found in Khmer narratives such as those about war heroes (historical or imaginary) like Kleang Moeung, and the *neak ta* of Pursat and Kra Ham Kor who are well known in several regions. About 10% of the *boramey* I interviewed belong to this category.

Some *neak ta* that are widely known throughout the nation are not identified with any particular region of the country. Among these *neak ta* are Kra Ham Kor, Preah Chao, and Cambong Daek, statues of which are situated in front of the palace and are supposed to protect the great national *neak ta* of the flag, Dong Kaoeuk. There is even a cult devoted to these nationally known *neak ta* for which rites are performed in homes on the *snang*'s altar. These national *neak ta* not associated with geographical regions are referred to as *boramey*. They are not located in places of pilgrimage and there are no objects such as a pagoda dedicated to them at pilgrimage sites. The *snang* only refer to them in terms of royal language (*preah ang* or *preah bat*), but the people in the villages add the prefix *ta* to the names of these *neak ta*.

As one medium explains:

The way of the *neak ta* and the way of the *boramey* is the same—the best *neak ta* can pass an exam to become *boramey*. Now very often they want to become *boramey* because they cannot find a *rup* in their village and there is a need to help the whole country. If the *rup* dies, the *neak ta* can, of course, enter another person, but it is difficult to find a substitute. The *boramey* have a lot of knowledge, the *neak ta* less, but they can change (*pdo*) once they study and pass their exam to become *boramey*.

Historical boramey: Kings, members of the royal family, heroes, army chiefs, ancient Buddhist priests and famous masters (kru)

Some *boramey* (about 10% of those interviewed) have acquired the common name of priests or *kru*, who became famous in recent history. These priests died under the Sihanouk, Lon Nol, or Pol Pot regimes. There are also others like the monk Chan Cheung who used to meditate in Wat Phnom in Phnom Penh during the American war on Cambodia from 1970 to 1975.

Crafting a new historical narrative, one *snang* in Takhmau claims to be possessed by Krapun Chuk, and to be a daughter of Sihanouk,¹⁰ who died suddenly while still young. Just as in the case of *neak ta*, some people whose spirits became *boramey* died violently in an accident. Under such circumstances, it becomes practically impossible to distinguish these *boramey* from wandering souls or ghosts unless they reveal their power or identity while they are possessing their *snang*. Most *kru boramey* mention cases of rather wild spirits who still need to be educated to be turned into good and helpful spirits.

The sudden increase in the number of *boramey* is often explained by the fact that during the last three decades numerous persons of great virtue died without the appropriate funeral rituals. It is supposed that these people's

spirits are coming back through *snang* to request rituals and enlist the *snang*'s services to propagate their teaching. But the names of people who died violently under the Pol Pot regime are rarely mentioned.¹¹

One master of magic (*kru monakhom*) who is quite famous in Svay Rieng Province is Pet Nien. He has a *snang* who happens to be the son of his adopted son, who he claims to be a *kru boramey*. Surprisingly, the powers of Pet Nien continue to be effective through a well-chosen successor.

Twenty-five percent of the historical *boramey* are princesses or queens. Their names are among those of famous people in popular stories or of heroes who had to fight before victoriously ascending to the position of king or queen. The *snang* usually knows the geographical origin of these *boramey*, which in every case becomes a place of pilgrimage. Soma Vathey, for instance, goes on a pilgrimage to his place of origin, Phnom Da (Kirivong, Takeo), the capital of Funan. The *boramey* of Basey Chamkrong, a king of the Angkor era, has a *snang* living in the village of Muk Bun, which is next to Phnom Prasit where he spent his youth and practiced meditation. The *snang* of this *boramey* makes a pilgrimage to Vihear Sour, where the king is supposed to have taken refuge from his enemies.

Through the *snang*, the *boramey* of Basey Chamkrong also maintains relations with his relatives, among whom are characters found in many historical narratives. These characters, such as Ta Kahe, the king's adoptive father, and Yai Leak, his wife, are impersonated by the *snang*.

The new boramey

The names of "new *boramey*" are composed of several semantic units from lexemes that denote such things as precious materials (gold, diamond, bronze), sacred materials (lotus flower), respectful titles (*preah ang* "Monseigneur"; *look ta*, *look yiey* "grandfather" "grandmother") or other titles used to address aged people such as "Your Excellency." The names of these *boramey* also consist of recent words that are symbolically chosen as they refer to virtues. These names also include some common names and nicknames.

Some of the names of new *boramey* are inspired by other names from narratives, or parts of names such as Sampeh Tevi Vathey (other combinations of Tevi and Vathey are mentioned above). These new names are taken from numerous sources, and the persons designated with them have no deep historical roots. According to my understanding, their power is mostly derived from their names. When questioned about their story, the *boramey* are usually surprised and not always ready to reveal much biographical information.

Certain *boramey* have new names preceded by the title *koma*, which

means “child.” They are child *boramey*, adopt puerile language, and play with children’s toys that are kept on the altar. Simple names are given to these young *boramey*, whose social role is very limited (mostly they conduct themselves to the amusement of the audience and in the service of the greater *boramey*). Their names might refer to some of their personality traits, such as *akil* (turbulent child) or *akoy* (dishonest child). Some of these child *boramey* are referred to as *mreang kong veal*, a famous kind of wandering child spirit who used to receive offerings from farmers for their supposed protection of cows or buffaloes .

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *BORAMEY* AND *SNANG*: DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES IN WHICH *BORAMEY* AND *SNANG* INDULGE

The social groups of boramey

The first and most remarkable group of this type is that of the *boramey* of the highest rank. These *boramey* are said to be the most efficient by those who consult them. Certain mediums, however, express doubt that this kind of *boramey* can be reincarnated in human form. They are critical of *boramey* who claim to belong to this rank because it is well known that such persons do not visit ordinary mortals as they have already left the mortal world.¹² In the opinion of skeptical mediums, such beings should be in nirvana, and thus not able to visit the world of the living. As examples, they cite Sakathevareach (the king of the Tevada), the mother of Buddha, Preah Seametry (the Buddha of the future), and Meida Pipop Look (the mother of the world).

Other, less skeptical mediums say that spiritual possession by these *boramey* is very rapid. In fact, the word used for this type of *boramey* is *krop*, which means “recover,” rather than “enter” (*chaul*). They add that in reality, the *preah* (*boramey*) does not stay and “work” but only provides advice or answers. This could be interpreted as a form of Buddhist meditation (Pali: *jhanas*) during which the meditator enters a state of ecstasy and has visions of supernatural Buddhist beings (SPIRO 1978, 161).

In this case, the medium who conducts the therapy or divination may or may not be possessed by another *boramey*. This possession by a high-ranking *boramey*, although fleeting, serves as a kind of advertisement and attracts many people. Even after the *boramey* has left and the *snang* is no longer possessed, the medium who was the *snang* might be addressed, revered, and greeted with respect due to the earlier possession by the high ranking *boramey*.

The second group is made up of personalities similar to human beings. These characters are old and powerful who are always present in the minds of Khmer people (e.g., *neak ta*, princesses, disciples of the Buddha, and

heroes). As with popular TV or Bassac theater shows, the dramatized ceremonies in which they appear attract many believers because *boramey* actors of this type appeal to the people. The *snang* of these *boramey* may become quite wealthy because the popularity of their *boramey* works to their financial advantage. But they might also spend most of the money they receive on offerings to temples. Some *snang* do not gain any economic benefit from their spiritual activities. They continue to lead normal lives as drivers, factory managers, civil servants, or businessmen to ensure their subsistence. At the same time, they seek protection for themselves and their families from bad health and misfortune by conducting rites for their *boramey* at the altars in their homes. Their lives are centered around the respect for the “three jewels” of Buddhism: the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Whether or not mediums earn their livelihood from their activities while possessed by the *boramey* depends on the degree of the medium’s ordinary economic activities (i.e., how sufficiently the medium can support his family) and recommendations from the *boramey* who usually forbid their mediums from making money from spiritual activities.

The poor *snang* who have “small *boramey*” are not professional mediums, but they regularly visit their master (*kru*), and seek advice or protection from more famous *boramey*. They participate in ceremonies and pilgrimages, and usually help in the preparation of offerings. The small *boramey* work with the greatest ones; many *snang* help their master as apprentices and later usually remain close to them. Others apprentice themselves to a *boramey* in order to acquire spiritual powers and then detach themselves to operate on their own. This sometimes creates competition and animosity between the persons concerned.

Whenever possession by evil spirits (such as a *preay*; Pali: *preta*) occurs, the *kru* maintain that it is because the *snang* in question has done his or her meditation badly and violated regulations. However, according to certain *kru*, these evil spirits can be appeased. They can then transform the bad spirits into small *boramey* and give them a name. Thus, the distinction made in other Theravada societies such as Sri Lanka (AMES 1966) between good and bad spirits does not appear to be permanent in Cambodia. (This lack of a permanent distinction between good and bad is also reflected in political contexts in Cambodia, as is evident by the reintegration into society of former Khmer Rouge members who were responsible for mass killings.)

THE SOCIETY OF *BORAMEY*

The *boramey* belong to a massive, structure-less population. Thus it is difficult to discuss a pantheon as we could do in the case of Vietnamese spirits (*génie*). This population reflects Cambodian society and its evolution

through the centuries. There is no strict hierarchy or central authority in charge of the whole. The *neak ta* follow the same patterns. They, too, are not organized in such a way as to cover the whole territory in a set manner.

On the other hand, because there are no mere peasant *boramey*, the society of *boramey* can be seen as a reflection of the elementary social aspirations of the people. As one *kru* explained “there are rich and poor, there is a king and a mandarin here and there, there are civil servants and military people, and there are those who are just ordinary citizens.”

When army generals appear as *boramey*, a military model is adopted for his ceremonies, and *snang*-soldiers organize rites at the beginning and end of these ceremonies. The *boramey* general is supposed to fight with his soldiers to defend the Dharma and fend off evil influences. They appear after Krong Pali (mother of the earth) ceremonies and enjoy a feast seated around a long table where non-Buddhist sacrifices are offered (pig head and boiled chicken) as well as fruits, sticky rice, and cans of beer. During this brief feast of the generals, traditional music is played (*plin piet* or *plin khmer*). The *boramey* dance following the strong rhythm and shake beer cans vigorously before opening them to spray the beer over the whole assembly.¹³

The *boramey* emphasize submission only in regard to certain roles. For instance, there are some *boramey* acting as servants (*mahatlek*) to royal figures, as well as a group of small *boramey* that some *kru* call *boriva boramey* (i.e., “the ones who are around”). These small *boramey* are seen during festivals dancing and throwing flowers on statues of the Buddha. The dance is a significant aspect of spiritual possession, especially during festivals, and it is a manifestation of the different roles of *boramey*. One never sees, for instance, a *neak sachan* (wise old hermit) dancing. To quote a *kru boramey* who is also a Buddhist monk, “There is singing, and there is dancing during the festivals in accordance with the rank of the *boramey*. It is the small ones who adopt this behavior, not the king and the monks.”

Another *kru* said, “There are classes of *boramey*. The ones who go into meditation do not dance; they are clean shaven and wear white clothes. But all the *boriva boramey* like to dance.”

Boramey are not only of Cambodian nationality. They are also Indian, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese,¹⁴ Thai, Laotian, Javanese, and Chinese. I was even told of a French *boramey*, but I never met him. The way they dress distinguishes them from one another; but it is the characteristic vocabulary of their country of origin that constitutes the major difference between them. Those from India and Sri Lanka, who claim to speak Sanskrit and Pali, are particularly venerated since they are from the country of the Buddha. The *snang* of these *boramey* complain that they have no authentic clothes to please their *boramey*. During my interviews some *snang* asked me to bring

saris from India and Sri Lanka.

Soma Vathey, who wears Cambodian clothing, covers her head with a scarf like Chams (i.e., Muslims) to show respect for the adoptive father of her husband, Kao Din, who is supposed to come from Java (or Malaysia) and be a Muslim.¹⁵ Chinese *boramey* are mostly warriors (e.g., Koma Lao Cha, Kong Kong, Taiy Loek Tsi), but some of them became *neak ta*. Most of their *snang* are Khmer-Chinese.

Once, I saw *snang* who were non-Khmer mountain people. It was explained to me that they come only once a year to help prepare for a festival and bring gifts from the mountains. However, as they are non-Buddhists, they cannot be involved in *pro sat*, the delivering of human beings through Dharma teaching.

It is very interesting to see how much inter-ethnic relations between the Khmer and non-Khmer groups are reproduced at the level of *boramey* society.

THE RELATIONSHIP AND INTERACTION BETWEEN *BORAMEY* AND *SNANG*

The *snang* enjoys fame and draws much respect because of his or her *boramey*. Some *snang* are addressed by the names of their most famous *boramey* and enjoy the same expression of reverence that is given to the *boramey* even at times when they are not possessed. Some mediums claim to have the *boramey* in them all the time. They are the ones who are deeply involved in spiritual life and never dance or put on a spectacular show while in trance. In relation to gifts, there is some confusion as to who is to receive them. In the end, the *snang* is the one who has to deal with these material issues in accordance with his or her *boramey*, who often expects the *snang* to practice *dāna* (selfless giving). The *boramey* usually expect their *snang* to donate as much as possible for the rebuilding of stairs, fences, roofs or halls of worship (*sala*) at temples, for which the *kru* are usually collecting funds. *Snang* often become famous because of the name of their *boramey* and, as a result, may attract large donations from rich people for the operations of construction and repair with which they, the *snang*, are involved.

The family links of the *boramey* also attract people to the *snang*'s house, and the more relatives a *boramey* has, the greater the attendance. For instance, a young couple may take their sick child to a *boramey* who recognizes the child as his son. He will then ask the parents to come regularly to bring gifts as well as to attend major celebrations. Failure to do so on the part of the couple, it is feared, will lead to the reoccurrence of a sickness in the child. Such relations force followers to be more faithful and to respect their obligations to visit.

When a person is possessed by a *boramey*, and has to become its *snang*,

it is an incident of great importance for the members of that person's family. Becoming the *snang* of a high-ranking *boramey* can, for instance, improve the social status of some women. Husbands of female *snang* take charge of welcoming the *snang*'s patients and disciples. The women become the ones who support their families, and life is organized around their spiritual activities. The husband is respected as well. He helps his wife, who is very busy spending many nights away from home to attend ceremonies in the provinces and go on pilgrimages. But, as not all husbands will accept this new way of life, some couples separate. Living with a *snang* or a *boramey* brings various kinds of constraints, including sexual ones, that not all spouses accept. Some women explained to me how when their husband threatened them the *boramey* made the husband sick, and he had to retract his threats in order to be cured. In June 1996 a female medium organized a feast to celebrate her return to conjugal life after she and her husband had overcome an intense conflict due to the husband's refusal to allow his wife to participate in the activities of a medium.

Nearly half of the *snang* I met were not married. Of these, many were separated, divorced, or widowed. Some women live with other women. Two mediums I met organized a second wedding¹⁶ for their partners after they had become mediums. It happens that weddings are also organized between *boramey* without any consideration of a *snang*'s gender. These weddings are not supposed to result in sexual activities, but such *snang* are at least very good friends. Mediums do not appear to be especially licentious since many of them take vows of chastity just as the monks do.

Even during the periods of deepest depression in Cambodian history, when possession was banned, *snang* say that they maintained close relations with their *boramey* who, they claim, helped them to survive the Pol Pot regime. *Boramey* are believed to have brought food to their *snang* who were dying of hunger during the Khmer Rouge regime. They also helped them to escape arrest under the Vietnamese occupation by possessing the very policemen who attempted to apprehend their *snang*. These beliefs about the *boramey* seem to reflect a denial of the oppressive political power the people experienced and resulted in attributing even more power to the *boramey*. Examples of similar beliefs and their implications have been previously described for Laos by SELIM (1996).

The identity and behavior of the *boramey* appear in the everyday lives of most of their *snang*. A *snang* woman I interviewed has a *boramey* child and she complains that her knees hurt because the child plays too much. This *snang* still speaks and behaves as a child when she is with other *snang* and the *snang* of her *boramey* parents. Another *snang* of a child *boramey* says that she cannot go to work or be outside because she is too young. She therefore

spends most of her days next to the altar in her home, receiving guests attracted by her famous fortune telling abilities.

CONCLUSION

The borderline between the identities of a *boramey* and its *snang* is not always very clear, and there are many interactions between different levels of reality. The confusion is most noticeable at the level of sexual identity. It is quite obvious that some *boramey* allow their *snang* to openly express their tendencies for transvestism or sexual inversion. *Snang* may keep these habits while not possessed. Often men will have long painted nails, long hair, and face make-up, while women wear men's clothes, smoke cigarettes, have short hair, and exhibit male behavior. Although most of the *kru boramey* are men, about 75% of *snang* are women. About half of the *snang* experience, with more or less lasting results, a sexual inversion during possession.

The name and identity of a *boramey* fundamentally influence the power attributed to it. The most famous names attract the most believers or patients. In regards to identity and power, the highest *boramey* are believed to be in touch with men who hold the highest political positions, as if the spiritual world and this world were closely connected.

Dramatizations of *boramey* possession are mostly visible in urban or suburban settings, which attract crowds and support the popularity of the *kru*. This mise-en-scène, which is linked with some popular theater traditions (e.g., *lkhaon bassac* and *yike*), is testimony to an imaginary reconstitution of Cambodian history through rituals and religious beliefs. Heroes or mythical characters are re-appropriated and employed in a new socio-cultural context. Through the *boramey*, a representation of the Cambodian world and the worlds surrounding it is shaped. The places of worship are spots on a new spiritual map of Cambodia.

With respect to *boramey*, the increasing appearance of mediums around the major towns is testimony to the creative spiritual vitality of Cambodian society and the development of mysticism in confrontation with materialism run wild.¹⁷ These spiritual and religious entities that are superior to humans are called upon to solve everyday problems. This situation seems to suggest that people relinquish their own destiny as a consequence of the deep turmoil and rapid change that Cambodian society has been exposed to for over twenty years. Humans do not trust humans any more and look instead for support from other beings. The *boramey* are considered to be visible manifestations of the Buddha's power through their *snang*, who act as intermediates. The Buddha is in another world. He cannot return to this world, but he is sending the *boramey* to help humans and give them power and legitimacy. *Boramey* are answering the new needs of the individual, in both social

and political life. Careful observations reveal that these *boramey* represent the kind of figures needed in Cambodia today. They deliver a strong moral message that is crucial in rebuilding this war torn society.

NOTES

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1. Activities included a rite for the reinforcement of power for a statue of the Buddha, the dedication of a new altar (*apisek*), anniversary (*bon khoup*), holy days (*thnay sael*), healing sessions, soothsaying, and pilgrimages.

2. For the Khmer words used in the text, I have adopted the Franco-Khmer transliteration developed by Franklin E. HUFFMAN (1983).

3. Another *snang* dresses as a historical person, called Oma Vathej, who is supposedly a sister of Soma Vathej, one of the mythical founders of the Cambodian kingdom.

4. This is a cow that was born from a woman who was impregnated by her brother Preah Keo, a human. The *snang* possessed by this cow goes on all fours and eats lotus flowers.

5. Bassac theater is a very noisy form of popular drama influenced by Chinese theater. It features songs as well as spoken texts. The characters shout often, and drums are an important part of the orchestra.

6. All boats, especially those used for the boat races during the water festival, are protected by a *boramey*.

7. *Kuchasa* is a royal term for elephant.

8. This reminds us of a remark by Alfred MÉTRAUX about Ethiopia, where he says that “while usually the god forces his vehicle to crawl on the floor, a woman possessed by a snake-god would refrain from rolling on the ground if she were wearing a new dress for fear of soiling it” (1955, 43).

9. Nonetheless, a Ramayana actor who plays the part of Hanuman is considered to be a *snang* of Hanuman. Hanuman actors perform remarkable dances because they have already had many years of experience as students (not as *snang*) in the school of arts. During their performance of epics, most of the actors are supposed to be possessed.

10. Sihanouk’s daughter, Khanta Bopha, died as a result of leukemia. Krapun Chuk, who is still famous in Kratie Province where she has several *snang*, is known as the daughter of Chan Reachea who built a stupa for her in 1529. According to MEYER (1971, 88), in 1970 the royal family was still venerating this place and continuing to consult the *snang* of Krapun Chuk as an adviser.

11. However, several *kru* mentioned that those spirits might become benevolent *boramey* after being educated.

12. A *snang* who claims to be a representative of a *boramey* of the highest rank is often accused of being disingenuous in order to attract public attention.

13. Some *kru* contest the status of *boramey* as soldiers and generals because dancing, drinking, and killing violates the most basic rules of Buddhism.

14. Some *snang* refute the existence of Vietnamese *boramey*, arguing that they are not Buddhist as the Khmers. Or they may say that Vietnamese *boramey* enter only Vietnamese *snang* or that *boramey* do not want to study Vietnamese because they are not Vietnamese. Vietnamese see some Cambodians as historical enemies. I came across a Khmer *snang* from

Vietnam possessed by a *boramey* with a Vietnamese accent. This *smang* spent part of her childhood in Vietnam.

15. That is not possible as at that time (first century BC) neither the Javanese nor the Malay were converted to Islam.

16. This gift of partners brings to mind the story of Vessanda in the Jataka who, in order to practice the virtue of gift giving (Pali: *danaparami*), gave away his wife and children.

17. Some mediums live surrounded by their disciples, suggestive of a kind of sect.

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