Cambodia’s religions, in ashes and in ink

The image on the cover of Ian Harris’s new history of religion is both familiar and unexpected: in place of the towering stone shrines that adorn so many Cambodian guidebooks, we see instead the fragility of a modern Buddha statue, cast in concrete. It was smashed to pieces and later re-assembled, with its steel structure now exposed, as bones laid bare.

Eisel Mazard

Sweeping away errors of old

The monumentality of Cambodia’s ancient history and the bewildering brutality of its more recent past have inspired many Western scholars to be highly inductive and imaginative in spinning narratives out of the evidence available to us. Almost any new work in the field can thus earn a degree of praise for sweeping away the errors of the old.

In this new work from Ian Harris, gone are the wild socio-logical speculations based on the types of hats worn in various Angkorian steles, gone are the imaginary revolutions of an ancient, ‘Buddhist Bolshevikism’. There is, in short, much to be praised in what this new volume omits from earlier attempts at writing history.

The volume opens by explaining, with explicit humility, that a large part of the material constitutes a re-statement (in English) of findings that are already available in French. I would add that it also presents some major new English-language research that (as yet) languishes in the semi-published state of the PhD thesis; the works of Penny Edwards and Anne Hansen deserve special mention in this respect.

Unfortunately, the subject matter does not lend itself easily to a survey of secondary sources without access to the primary texts. The errors of fact and judgement found throughout the volume left me with deep misgivings as to the viability of ‘Buddhist Studies’ in the absence of the strictures that define the disciplines of philology, history, and religious studies.

Gender-bending errors

As an example, there is a gender-bending cluster of errors on p. 68, made more troubling by a misleading citation. We are told a story of a layman who regards a monk (namely, Kacciyavan) with ‘a desire to make the monk his wife, upon which the monk turned into a woman.’ Anyone acquainted with medieval Sinhalese karma-theory would know immediately that this can’t be right at all: in fact, the layman’s desire results in his own transformation into a woman (as a ‘karmic punishment’ of sorts). Even without recourse to better sources, it could not make sense within the logic of the story for the monk to change gender instead of the prurient layman. The author could have found this folk tale readily available in English translation, even on the internet; conversely, if he was misled by a particular source (without checking against others) he does not cite it.

While it seems impossible to believe that this error could have come from the study of primary sources, Harris directly cites the original Pali with the abbreviation ‘DB’ (no translation is mentioned on p. 68, nor on p. 239); moreover, we are told that the story is from ‘Pali canonical sources.’ Even for an amateur, it should be self-evident that this is quite wrong: the final ‘A’ of the citation indicates that the source is not canonical, but commentarial. This distinction entails a difference of a thousand years and the opposite side of a small ocean. While sloppiness of this kind is common in Buddhist Studies, this is not a trivial error; would anyone reviewing the book cannot rise to the standards of political science, nor perhaps, those of social anthropology. The question must be asked: what standards apply? What is ‘Buddhist Studies’ if not based on the study of primary source texts (viz., Pali or vernacular Cambodian) nor adheres to the standards of the other disciplines mentioned? These disciplines exist to prevent precisely such errors as arise from an uncritical survey of secondary sources.

The failure to consider some of Vickers’s most important contributions to Cambodian history seems equally inexplicable (e.g. Vickers, 1979 & 2004 – many more could be listed); his work has changed many fundamental assumptions of earlier histories (such as the timeline of Thai invasions in the 14th-15th centuries).

While I am tempted to offer criticisms of Harris’s approach to more recent history, too, it could be said (reasonably enough) that the book cannot rise to the standards of political science, nor, perhaps, those of social anthropology. The question must be asked: what standards apply? What is ‘Buddhist Studies’ if not based on the study of primary source texts (viz., Pali or vernacular Cambodian) nor adheres to the standards of the other disciplines mentioned? These disciplines exist to prevent precisely such errors as arise from an uncritical survey of secondary sources.

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References


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