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# The influences of Thai divination on Cambodian fortune-telling practice

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## Abstract

The Khmer Rouge period had a hugely negative impact on the knowledge and practices of Khmer divination. At present, Khmer divination and astrology has been revitalized with many forms of it being embedded in people's everyday lives in both rural and urban settings, such as in the capital Phnom Penh. With the re-emergence of numerological fortune-telling, Khmer practitioners are now turning to Thai numerological books, such as '*Patithin Neung Roi Pee* (100-year calendar)', '*Tamra Phromachati*', and '*Tamra Plu Luang*' to supplement the diminished body of traditional Khmer knowledge that survived the war. This paper aims to explore how Cambodia divinatory and astrological authority have been revitalized and reinvented through that of their Thai counterparts within the flows of globalization and modernity.

**Keywords:** Thai divination; Cambodian divination; fortune-telling; Astrology

The Khmer Rouge destroyed many forms of religious practices and folk beliefs involving animism, magic, spirits, and divination. Many religious scholars have studied the revival movements of Cambodian religious traditions involving Buddhism and non-orthodox practices that have been reinvented after the social upheaval under the Khmer Rouge (Ang 1988; Marston and Guthrie 2004; Kent and Chandler 2008). However, they have yet to provide an in-depth ethnographical account focusing on the resurgence of divination practice in Cambodian society.

This paper is part of an ongoing research project which explores the methods, practices, and meanings of divination in Cambodian society. It presents an ethnographic account of the resurgence of divination practice after the Khmer Rouge revolution. The reinvention of the Khmer divinatory traditions is here portrayed from the experience of the two elite astrologers and fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh. They are considered to be among the 'elite fortune-tellers' as per the local classification system. Although they come from different backgrounds, they have shared similar experiences while struggling to establish their divinatory authority by utilizing sources of knowledge

drawn from outside of the country. Both of these men reflected that they had limited access to traditional Khmer astrology manuals. Furthermore, the transmission of astrological knowledge in Cambodia has been very limited because previous generations of fortune-tellers and astrologers did not share their knowledge with a public audience. In order to reinvent divinatory knowledge in Cambodia, therefore, they needed to employ astrological knowledge generated outside of the country; in this case especially Thai astrology books. The elite astrologer and fortune-teller primarily learnt astrology and divination from Thai textbooks, such as *Patithin Neung Roi Pee* (ปฏิทิน ๑๐๐ ปี) [100-year calendar], *Tamra Phromachati* (ตำราพรหมชาติ), and *Tamra Plu Luang* (ตำราพลูหลวง).

In what follows, this paper highlights the influence of astrology and divination practices that originated in Thailand on the divinatory discipline and authority in present-day Cambodia. While historical documents on the development of divination and astrology in the ancient Khmer society are scant, it is clear that the shared histories of ancient Cambodia and Thailand led to their traditions having some similarities. Due to the lack of concrete historical evidence, this paper focuses on historical information derived from ethnographic accounts. At current, the reinvention of divinatory traditions in Cambodia, and the influence of Thai practices on this process, has not been anthropologically investigated. This paper unveils some novel forms of cultural transmission, and an interesting approach to establishing authority in the context of a near-vacuum of traditionally appropriate historical anchors. It aims to draw an anthropological framework in order to understand the resurgence of astrology and divination in the capital city of Cambodia, and how practitioners have established authority.

I will first provide a brief historical background of the astrology and divination practices in Cambodia in the period of social disruption during the Khmer Rouge. Then, I will present my two interlocutors: an elite astrologer and a fortune-teller, to explain how they try to find their ways and establish their divinatory authority in the city. In a final section, I will discuss the resurgence of divination and astrology in Cambodia and the role played by Thai astrology books. I will claim that the Khmer astrologer and fortune-teller reinvent their divinatory authority through Thai astrology manuals, due to the loss of authentic Khmer manuscripts and experienced practitioners during the civil war.

## Background and re-emergence of divination practices in contemporary Cambodia

### Local terms, definitions, and classifications

The literal English meaning of the term ‘fortune-teller’, according to the Oxford Online Dictionary, is ‘a person who is supposedly able to predict a person’s future, for example, by palmistry, a crystal ball or similar methods’; while the term ‘divination’ refers to ‘the practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means’. While Thai people call fortune-tellers *modoo* (หมอดู), Khmer people refer to such practitioners as ‘*grū dāy*’ (គ្រូទាយ). In Khmer, the term ‘*grū dāy*’ (គ្រូទាយ) denotes a teacher or a person who applies his/her divination skill ‘to guess’ (*dāy*, ទាយ) or to read peoples’ fortune. In Bangkok, fortune-tellers will use multiple divination

techniques, including tarot cards, Thai numerology, and Chinese facial physiognomy to predict the customers' destinies. The fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh also apply various forms of divination techniques, such as old scripture (*cākgambīra*, ចាកកម្ពីរ),<sup>1</sup> card-reading (*moelpia*, ម៉ើលបៀរ), numerology (*lekhaprāmbirtua*, លេខប្រាំពីរតួ), and mediumistic divination (*nakcūlrūp*, អ្នកចូលរូប).<sup>2</sup>

In accordance with local definitions, this paper uses the term 'divination' to define a broader range of fortune-telling practices in Cambodia than the dictionary definition. Divination entails seeing not only the unknown future, but potentially also the past and present, as well as occult realms, forces, and principles that normally are invisible to ordinary people.

Early into my fieldwork in 2015, it became apparent that Khmer people in Phnom Penh tended to hold the view that the most authentic divination practices are to be found in rural settings, rather than in the city. Drawing on this assumption, Khmer people consider the town of Siem Reap, for example, as a place where cultural traditions like divination have been preserved. In Phnom Penh, however, Khmer people would hardly look for authentic forms of divination. Although many urban Khmer regard divination as a rural practice, it is surprisingly well developed and complex. Urban-based fortune-tellers are often classified into two groups. First are market-based fortune-tellers, who are specialized in card-reading and offer their services in local markets; then there are fortune-tellers who are skillful in numerology, and favor using formulae from astrology books to garner insight about a person through calculations based on their birth date, month, and year. Most of my research interlocutors in Phnom Penh considered practitioners specializing in numerology more respectful and trustworthy than the mediumistic and card-reading fortune-tellers in the markets. This is particularly valid for royal astrologers or *Hora*, whose 'high status' is granted by their history of meeting the requests of the royal family and government officials.

Elite astrologers and fortune-tellers also try to distinguish themselves from market-based fortune-tellers. There are many reasons for this. First, they emphasize their sophisticated knowledge of divination and astrology. Second, they claim that fortune-tellers in the market just 'guess' (*dāy* in Khmer) the clients' future without any knowledge proceeding from the appropriate astrology textbooks. Third, they consider their divinatory service more trustworthy and reliable than the mediumistic fortune-tellers (*nakcūlrūp*), who rely upon *chum nua arūp pei* [ឆ្នើមរូបប៊ែរ], 'invisible forms of power' – a phrase whose equivalent in English would probably call upon 'supernatural powers'. Elite astrologers and fortune-tellers think of numerological technique

<sup>1</sup>The fortune-teller will ask the clients to open a book and use an object like a toothpick to select a page number. The *grū* or religious master is a person who takes lead in this technique. They are usually around 60 years-old and are mostly dressed in a white T-shirt and black pants. They usually assist the Buddhist followers at the pagoda, and will read individual fortunes from the page they have chosen in the old textbook. This kind of divinatory technique is largely found in the pagodas in Phnom Penh, such as Wat Phnom and the Royal Palace. Khmer people do not call the person who practices this technique as *grū dāy* but refer to them as *grū cākgambīra*.

<sup>2</sup>In Phnom Penh, the term '*nakcūlrūp*' is used to refer to spirit mediumship or mediumistic fortune-tellers. In the provinces, such as in Kampong Thom or Battambang, local people usually frequent the two types of the mediumistic fortune-tellers, including '*nak cūlrūp* and *grū moel*. Both are thought of as very skillful in divining through spiritual assistance and in healing their clients.

as a ‘visible form of divination’ because it is based on calculations and formulae that are observable and transparent. In order to understand the fundamental concepts of numerology, a lot of research and knowledge of astrology books published is required. Khmer fortune-tellers and astrologers usually conceptualize such sophisticated divinatory techniques as *Kpuan* [ក្បួន]. In the context of Khmer divination, *Kpuan* is referred to as a formal knowledge and methodology of divination. In this sense, elite astrologers and fortune-tellers can claim authority in the field of astrology and divination in Cambodia through a set of knowledge that has been formalized in a corpus of texts.

### *Development of divination practice in Cambodia*

The practice of superstitions involving magical protection and folk religious practice can be traced back to the Khmer kingdom of Angkor, between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries (Harris 2005). However, historical literature hardly describes the important role that divination and astrology played in the Khmer’s way of life. Archival evidence suggests that the Hora, the royal astrologer, had assisted the King during the colonial era (1863–1953) and had predicted the lunar eclipse in 1934.<sup>3</sup> According to Khmer tradition, royal astrologers assisted the King and the royal families in interpreting the symbolic meanings during the royal rituals or ceremonies, especially the Royal Ploughing Ceremony or *Phi Thi Chrot Pheah Nung Korl* [ដំនើរអង្គប៊ិច]. This ceremony is conducted annually in May, the rice growing season. Brahmins and astrologers observed what the royal oxen consume in the ceremony and applied their knowledge of astrology and divination to make predictions about the outcome of a harvest (Vida 2015). Drawing on a traditional form of Cambodian divination in the ploughing ceremony, the royal astrologer served as the mediator between humans and the natural world. It was a type of service that would help establish the King’s legitimacy.

During the Pol Pot era, religious practices and scriptures related to Buddhism and superstition were seriously damaged and, in some cases, completely destroyed (Edwards 2007; Chandler 2008). Lately, Theravada Buddhist ideology and practices have been revitalized by various projects supported by the Ministry of Cults and Religion as well as by various NGOs (e.g. BFD-Buddhism for Development). However, scriptures and books focusing on astrology and divination have gained less attention from government agencies. Some fortune-tellers I met in Phnom Penh, who were aged between 50 and 60, were unable to show original astrology books from before the Khmer Rouge era. However, numerous fortune-tellers and astrologers claimed that they had preserved astrology books from the Khmer Rouge’s devastation policy. For example, a Buddhist monk named Som Korn at Wat Neakvoan (a temple in the suburban area of Phnom Penh) claimed that he had survived the genocide and still kept in his possession a personal astrology handbook that contained what he had learnt from his deceased fellow monks (NyoNyum 2015). It remains nonetheless unclear to what extent Khmer astrology books have been preserved.

<sup>3</sup>Such evidence was found in the ‘Bulletin Individual de Note’ (1902–1903) and ‘Bulletin de Soit Communiqué’ (1934), kept untitled in the Khmer archives at the National Library of Cambodia, Phnom Penh.

Although there are also printed versions of astrology books in circulation in bookstores in Phnom Penh, yet due to the limited range of astrology books published in the national language, Khmer astrologers and fortune-tellers tend to rely on foreign divinatory techniques and books. Thai astrology texts, with a wide range of divinatory techniques, are a foremost popular reference for Khmer fortune-tellers.

### *Challenging divinatory authority in Cambodia*

In Cambodia today, one can find fortune-tellers in any corner of the country, in urban settings as in the countryside, in markets and temples, among the rich and the poor. In Phnom Penh, practices of divination and magic are largely accessible in local markets (e.g. the Central Market), in the areas around Wat Phnom, and in front of the Royal Palace.

Although the practices of astrology and divination are widespread across Cambodia, authentic traditions have been crucially preserved by the royal family and government officials. Ethnographic data suggest that the transmission of such knowledge is still limited to the royal families and to a small group of elite fortune-tellers. This restriction seems to be widely recognized by local fortune-tellers. Grū Bun (pseudonym), a numerological fortune-teller, claimed that previous generations of the learned Khmer fortune-tellers refused to transmit their divinatory knowledge to the next generation, unlike Thai astrologers/fortune-tellers. He experienced this when he was refused knowledge of divinatory techniques by a famous monk fortune-teller. Grū Bun regards the belief that knowledge should belong to individuals rather than the public as a weakness of Khmer mentality. As a result, we find a relatively small number of astrology books written in the Khmer language; their loss during the Khmer Rouge period was therefore yet more serious.

In Thailand, the Astrological Association of Thailand (under the Royal Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen) plays a key role in standardizing and popularizing astrology as well as divination practices across the country. With the support of royal family members and elite state officials, the association has been successfully established in Bangkok since 1947. One would expect to find a formal astrological association in Cambodia too, but this is not the case. Further, the Cambodian Ministry of Cults and Religion, the government agency who has the authority to reinvent and re-establish religious and ritual traditions, has neither proposed a standard or official astrological practice nor published any astrology handbooks for interested people. The official representative of the Ministry of Cults and Religion claimed that the main duty of the Ministry primarily focuses on organizing and supporting Buddhist ceremonies and rituals instead of popularizing superstitious practices.

Ven. Khy Sovanratana, the Vice Rector of Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University, voiced his support of the Ministry of Cults and Religion by confirming that the government does not offer a curriculum or training course in astrology for general people. However, the government frequently offers a short course on divinatory/astrological practices for Buddhist religious specialists (*Ajar*) who play an important role in conducting ceremonies inside pagodas and individuals' residences.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Personal conversation, Aug 15, 2015.

Another obstacle to reinventing or re-establishing a divinatory authority in Cambodia is that fortune-tellers in Cambodia are impinged in their communications by strict government censorship. Some astrologers and fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh lamented a considerable lack of freedom in comparison with their counterparts in Thailand. Khmer practitioners are not allowed to predict or analyze situations that may happen in their country. Even the head of the royal astrologers, who has some authority in the field of astrology, simply wrote a few sentences on the national situation but refrained from going into further details due to government censorship. While in Thailand fortune-tellers may perform on television, and thus establish their legitimacy, this is not possible in Cambodia. Thai diviners who work on television are relatively free to make claims about communicating with spirits or ancestors, and often make public predictions about future events. In Cambodia, practitioners are afraid that they would be in trouble if they were to negatively influence or predict events with political consequences.

In what follows, I will scrutinize the resurgence of Khmer astrology and divination in relation to the limitations and obstacles imposed by contemporary Cambodian society. For lack of an institutionalized divinatory authority, there is no standard astrological technique in today's Cambodia. As a result, there is no agreement among elite fortune-tellers and astrologers as to how authentic divinatory knowledge is to be transmitted. In this environment, practitioners are confronted with the difficult task of tentatively re-establishing their authority through a limited number of channels.

In addition to local contexts, the reinvention of Cambodian religious tradition after the revolution could not be fully understood without the context of globalization and modernization. This article partly joins in the existing debates of leading scholars in the field, such as Peter Jackson (1999), Philip Taylor (2007), and Pattana Kitiarsa (2012), who argued that local religious practices in Southeast Asian countries are not declining or fading into oblivion; they considered instead that such practices are expanding in response to modernization, industrialization, and capitalist market economy. Following such argument, these scholars relate this upsurge of local religious traditions with the driving forces of globalization. Revived religious practices, including Buddhist rituals and non-orthodox repertoires such as spiritual veneration, divination, and magic, are seen as a by-outcome of growing market-based relations, neoliberal orders, capitalist investments, modern technologies, and the rising of migration and refugees (Mills 1999; Taylor 2004, 2007; Hefner 2010).

Revived practices of divination and magic in the post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia are intertwined with the dynamics of globalization and modernity in two ways. Firstly, the resurgence of religious tradition is largely concentrated in Phnom Penh, the capital city where the flows of urbanization and market economy fostered new forms of knowledge in response to the social and economic transformations. Although urban Khmers have embraced a cosmopolitan lifestyle, they continue to utilize divination and magic as a resource to cope with the uncertainty and uncontrollability of their daily circumstances. In this sense, religious repertoires may be viewed as tools and methods of dealing with growing social and existential stress. Secondly, as this practice relies on the religion-based skills of rural-urban migrants, one can observe how capitalist aspirations create and reproduce the value of self-improvement and the importance of agency formation for individuals. The case of elite fortune-tellers is a

good reflection of how a Khmer migrant from the countryside could improvise his own divinatory authority to attract wealthy clients. A sense of self-achievement, together with market competition, would motivate him to improve his divination service by exploring hybrid forms of divinatory techniques. Globalization and modernization, along with the dearth of formal institutions regulating divination in Cambodia, led elite fortune-tellers to find their own paths into legitimacy.

### Thai Astrology books and divination in Cambodia

I will now examine how Thai astrology books have served as a means to re-establish the authority of Khmer diviners and fortune-tellers. I will first discuss the case study of Burie (pseudonym), the head of the royal astrologers in Cambodia. Then, I will examine the practices of Grū Bun, a well-known numerologist. Finally, I will assess the role that Thai texts have played in establishing their authority.

#### *The head of royal astrologers and his astrological technique*

Burie, the head of royal astrologers in Cambodia, showed interest in various forms of divination techniques including astrology, numerology, palmistry, healing, and magical rites. He presented himself as an educated astrologer who applied a standardized and formal knowledge of divination. However, the divinatory and astrological systems that he reinvented and re-established are considerably ‘hybrid’ due to the multiple origins of the techniques. *Khabuan Mahasongkran* (ក្បួនមហាសៀង្ករ) and the Khmer calendar system were the first techniques Burie learnt from an old sheaf of sutras. The sutras featured legendary and astrological perspectives on Khmer New Year and the traditional calendar of Cambodia. Burie claimed that *Khabuan Mahasongkran* was ‘the traditional Khmer divinatory technique’ as the sutras probably had been written under the reign of King Ang Duong (1847–1860).

The legend of Khmer New Year actually originated from a local folktale, ‘Thewada Songkran’ or ‘New Year Angel’, a widespread legend in mainland Southeast Asia (Anuman-Rajathon 1957). In this region, New Year is celebrated between April 13 and 15. Khmers call this festival ‘Maha Songkran’; in Thai, it is known as ‘Songkran’. According to local folktales, seven New Year angels live in the lower level of heaven – Thungsa, Khoraka, Rakasas, Monthea/Montha, Kirinee, Kimitha, and Mahothara. They are all daughters of the Hindu Lord Brahma, the god of creation, here called ‘*Thao Kabilabrahma*’. They also work as personal servants for Indra. They have different names, different characteristics, carry different flowers, accessories, weapons, vehicles, and consume different kinds of food. Each angel performs different actions while riding their animal vehicles – normal riding, standing with open eyes, lying down with open eyes, and lying down with closed eyes. These actions represent different parts of the daytime (e.g. morning, afternoon, evening). The origins of this story began when their father, Lord Brahma, had to cut off his own head after losing a question-answer battle to a billionaire’s son, who was very clever and could understand birds. Since the billionaire’s son could answer all questions, Lord Brahma had to keep his word by beheading himself. As his head had a mighty flaming power that could burn the world and destroy it, the seven angels decided to keep their father’s head inside a cave in Krailad, a sacred mountain where Indra resides. Every year, at Songkran, one of the

seven angels would bring Lord Brahma's head out of the cave and carry it while circling clockwise around Mount Meru (or Sumeru).

In addition to traditional forms of Khmer divination, Burie learnt numerology techniques from astrology handbooks written by different well-known fortune-tellers. However, the primary resources Burie relies on are Thai astrology books that include *Tamra Brahma-chati*, the Thai 100-year calendar, and Chinese *Feng Shui* handbook as written by Thai fortune-tellers. Besides astrology handbooks, Burie was also interested in books instructing how to acquire magical invulnerability, do acupuncture, and practice palm-reading.

In the early 1990s, he turned to Thai numerology. In fact the first Thai astrology textbook was written by Sor Dusit, a famous numerological fortune-teller who produced a series of influential numerological textbooks. In *Lek Chet Tua Mahatsachan* ([เลขเจ็ดตัวมหัศจรรย์] The Amazing Seven Numbers), Sor Dusit expounds the basic instructions and patterns to read the symbolic meanings embedded in each number, as well as the relationship of such numbers to celestial objects. His work explains the meanings of each number in detail. The numbers 1-7 represent different celestial objects and different meanings that help explain individual personalities. Number 1 stands for the Sun, number 2 for the Moon, number 3 for Mars, number 4 for Mercury, number 5 for Jupiter, number 6 for Venus, and number 7 for Saturn. Indeed, the relative positions of celestial objects such as the sun, the moon, the stars, and other planets play a key role in human actions and characteristics. Number 1 – Sunday – refers to rank/title/status, greatness/mightiness, and hot temperature; Number 2 – the Moon – refers to gentleness, delicacy, and service. Number 3 – Mars – refers to bravery/courage, diligence, hasty acts/aggressiveness, strength. Number 4 – Mercury – refers to adaptation, changeability, words/speech, information, and wit. Number 5 – Jupiter – refers to morality, academics, adulthood, supporters, and intelligence. Number 6 – Venus – refers to liveliness, art, beauty, love, and money. Number 7 – Saturn – refers to suffering and anxiety, stinginess, prudence (Sor Dusit 2007). Thai astrology books provide Cambodian practitioners with formulas and frameworks that are necessary for them to perform their craft. Ultimately, they provide a ground for their authority.

### *The numerological fortune-teller in Bung Kak, Phnom Penh*

Grū Bun<sup>5</sup> is a well-known numerological fortune-teller who has offered fortune-telling and healing services for more than 10 years to people who seem to be affected by spiritual and magical forces. When I visited his home in suburban Phnom Penh, I was surprised to see a picture of King Rama IX of Thailand located next to a hand-made wooden tag displaying the Thai phrase 'Ban Nee Yu Laew Ruay' [บ้านนี้อยู่แล้วรวย], meaning 'people who live in this house are rich'. It was very clear from the decorations in Grū Bun's home that he was highly familiar with Thai cultural patterns; veneration of the king, for example, is commonplace in Thai homes. This could be interpreted as a very strong symbolic appeal to a Thai-derived authority.

<sup>5</sup>Grū, *Kru* (ครู), or *Lokkru* (โลกครู) is the title for a senior male teacher, instructor, trainer, or mentor, and in general for a charismatic person devoted to educating others.



Grū Bun trained in numerology and various forms of divination through ‘self-study’ and research from different divinatory and astrology textbooks, which were primarily published in the Khmer and Thai languages. He claimed to have used a Khmer divinatory book written by a monk fortune-teller in Siem Reap; allegedly, the divinatory knowledge contained in this book can be traced back to the kingdom of Angkor era. Even though most of Khmer divinatory textbooks were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge period, this book and certain forms of divinatory tradition have been preserved through oral transmission within some families and by some religious practitioners. The Khmer divinatory book revolves around certain forms of magical objects (e.g., Yantra), and the manual teaches how to calculate auspicious times and dates for ancient warriors who sought protection and victory in warfare.

Grū Bun began to learn numerology techniques from Thai astrology books when he was a monk travelling across the borders to Thailand and Laos. His travel experience allowed him to access various sources of divinatory techniques. However, he considered Khmer and Thai divinatory textbooks as the most reliable resources. Grū Bun reckons that his numerology technique is primarily inspired by Thai numerology techniques. In his view, resources in Khmer numerology were scarce and needed to be supplemented by a deeper knowledge of Thai texts. His Thai sources included *Phathithin Nung Roi Pee* ([ปฏิทิน ๑๐๐ ปี] 100-year calendar), *Tamra Brahma-chati* [ตำราพรหมชาติ], and *Tamra Phlu Luang* [ตำราพลุลวง].

Grū Bun uses *Phathithin Nung Roi Pee* and *Tamra Brahma-chati* more often than *Tamra Phlu Luang*. *Phathithin Nung Roi Pee* is used in the early stage of his fortune-telling consultation as he needs to check the date, month, and year of birth to calculate the age of the clients. *Tamra Brahma-chati* is another source that Grū Bun usually relies on when he reads fortune. He sees *Tamra Brahma-chati* as his ‘teacher’ because it introduced him to the field of astrology. He has learnt various divinatory techniques from this book, the most important of which is the calculation of the auspicious time for doing certain actions. Grū Bun applied the concept of auspicious time to read his clients’ fortune by also taking into account the time they come to him for consultation. He deems the concept of auspicious time he took from *Tamra Brahma-chati* very reliable as it has been empirically tested through the high accuracy of a fortune-telling prediction he offered for many years.

### **The *Tamra Brahma-chati*: The influence of Thai Astrology books on the reinvention of divinatory authority in Cambodia**

Let us focus on *Tamra Brahma-chati* as the Thai astrology book that the elite Khmer astrologer and fortune-teller in Phnom Penh have primarily relied on. In Khmer, the book title can be translated as ‘the scripture of Lord Brahma’s lineage’. The astrological techniques described in this treatise could therefore be associated with Lord Brahma in Hindu religious belief. In addition, we can imagine that the writer(s) were Brahman priests who lived in Thailand. However, it is still unclear who first wrote or edited the book. While some experts claim that all divinatory traditions in the *Tamra Brahma-chati* were originally written by an unknown astrologer in the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767),<sup>6</sup> it was only under King Rama IV (1851-1868) that these techniques

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage,’ in Thai, [www.ich.culture.go.th](http://www.ich.culture.go.th).

were compiled, integrated with new techniques, and published as a book by the name of *Tamra Brahma-chati*. The oldest version we know of it was published by a Thai publisher, Rong Phim Phanit Suphaphon, in 1912. It is still unclear, though, who did actually compile the information included in the book.

As unclear is who first introduced *Tamra Brahma-chati* in Cambodia. According to Sodany (pseudonym), a government official who works for the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication in Cambodia, the *Tamra Brahma-chati* was originally translated into Khmer in 1971, before the Khmer Rouge. It has been reprinted several times after the Khmer Rouge period, and it remains a very popular work among Khmers seriously interested in astrology.

The *Tamra Brahma-chati* is a key handbook for beginners in Thai astrology. It covers a wide range of astrological techniques – including diverse approaches to individual predictions, such as animal zodiacs and birthdates – along with considerable symbolic imagery. It includes information on belief in guardian spirits who protect new-borns (*Mae Sue* in Thai), on the calculation for predicting babies' gender, a manual for assessing the compatibility of horoscopes (usually applied in choosing soulmates), and rituals to eliminate or minimize bad luck, unusual situations, and natural disasters. Moreover, it integrates Thai traditional beliefs in auspicious times for conducting certain things like building a house, having a haircut, washing hair and cutting nails, as well as the rituals individuals should perform before travelling. In addition to traditional forms of divination, the book describes the belief in *Feng Shui* or reading individuals' characters from their physical body, including face, lip, eyes, ears, nose, teeth, etc.<sup>7</sup>

From the stance of the head royal astrologer, *Tamra Brahma-chati* is 'an essential astrological approach' which directs the fortune-tellers and astrologers on legitimate way(s) to read fortune, fate, and horoscopes of individuals. Particularly, the book covers the astrological perspective of *Khabuan Mahasongkran*, the astrological tradition based on the numerological calculations beginning with the Khmer New Year, that the head royal astrologer declared the official 'Khmer astrological tradition'.

Burie's astrology handbook, which is usually sold in local bookstores and markets before Khmer New Year, has been influenced by *Tamra Brahma-chati* in many ways. His book is titled *Khabuan Horasatre Khmer-Chen-Sakol* (Khmer-Chinese-Universal Astrological System). In its different sections, the author applies the astrological approach from *Tamra Brahma-chati* to predict the amount of rain and natural water, the weather, agricultural products, rice-field planting, political situation, and social relations in general for the current year. However, his prediction concerning politics or social phenomena cannot contain specific criticisms of a third party or any government agency. The predictions tend instead to provide a useful solution to solve any such problems. The book also provides a table indicating the auspicious and

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<sup>7</sup>*Feng Shui* relies on a philosophical harmonization of three natural components: heaven, earth, and human beings. Accordingly, it combines astronomical phenomena, natural phenomena, and human behaviour. Burie applied it to reading people's fortune from their face, and to give advice on decorating their environment and residences. The practice of Chinese geomancy is widely thought to be very important to an individual's daily life as it offers useful guidance to improve one's life. See, among others, Mak and Ng (2005), Obringer (2005).

inauspicious times for conducting various activities throughout the year. Clearly, the astrological concept of an auspicious time for doing something is exactly what the *Tamra Brahma-chati* was concerned with.

The astrological concept of the 12 animal horoscopes was also introduced and elaborated in Burie's *Khabuan Horasatre*. In the 2015 volume, there was a section in which the author explained the characters, behaviours, problems, obstacles, luck, and achievements of male and female monkey year-persons, with detailed predictions for other animal zodiacs. The content of these sections is interesting – it is largely derived from Chinese divination, and represents a successful borrowing of Khmer thought from Thai divinatory repertoire.

Following *Tamra Brahma-chati*'s manual on compatible horoscopes, Burie's astrology handbook provides a formula for choosing one's soulmate based on Chinese animal zodiacs. His suggestions rely on the Chinese divinatory belief that some animal zodiacs are perfectly matched with others. In this sense, they could enact 'good friendship' or 'good companionship'. Inversely, some animal zodiacs are not able to get along well because of their hostile or mutually opponent relationship. For instance, people who were born in the year of the monkey will clash with people born in the year of the tiger. In this regard, couples who were born in clashing years are not real soulmates. Burie also provides the characters and personalities of individuals who were encountering inauspiciousness or bad fortune with possible solutions to resolve adversity. The final section of the book follows the structure of a Thai astrology book, in which the author discusses individual characters and behaviors in relation to Chinese geomancy, or Feng Shui.

According to this brief ethnographic account, elite Khmer astrologers and fortune-tellers claim that they inherited parts of Khmer divinatory tradition, including *Khabuan Mahasongkran* sutras and Angkor divinatory book. The Khmer divinatory tradition tends to focus on the astrological perspectives of Khmer New Year, on calendrical system, on various magical *Yantra* and its spiritual power. This traditional knowledge, however, is insufficient to establish their reputation and authority as professional practitioners in the field of astrology and divination. They must draw on other resources, but the question arises as to why they chose Thai texts to do this. On this subject, Burie and Grū Bun both considered that Thailand and Cambodia have exchanged and shared multiple forms of cultural practices over their histories, and this affinity lends a perception of legitimacy to Thai texts.

### Concluding remarks

Drawing on the ethnographic and historical data, I argued that Thai astrology had a considerable influence on the resurgence of astrology and divination in Cambodia, following the loss of traditional Khmer divination knowledge in the Khmer Rouge period. *Tamra Brahma-chati* and some other numerological books written by Thai astrologers were used as tools to reimagine and lend authority to Cambodian divination; thus the long-established history and legitimacy of Thai divinatory practice was brought into the process of establishing authority for Cambodian diviners. Burie and Grū Bun have re-established and reinvented their divinatory reputation and authority by relying on divinatory books from various countries, with a special focus on Thailand. They needed to fill the space left by the loss of legitimate, authentic Khmer texts. In other

words, these elite diviners have made Thai texts an essential part of their successful negotiation of authority in the context of Cambodian divinatory practice.

It is very common in Cambodia for professional Khmer fortune-tellers and astrologers to claim that their divinatory discipline and reputation are self-taught from legitimate sources. Since they can usually read Thai (or can relatively easily learn to do so), they can gain access to the astrological knowledge of Thailand and reintegrate (or merge) it into the Khmer astrological tradition. It is difficult to tell what the authentic form of Cambodian astrological tradition would be, but the experience of the two elite practitioners studied here suggests that a contemporary form of authentic Cambodian divination has emerged from a merging of the remnants of Khmer practices with the legitimizing power of an ongoing Thai divinatory history and discourse.

Drawing on the experiences of our two informants, the reinvention of divinatory authority in Cambodia appears to have been operated by their individual agency rather than by institutions. This contrasts with the situation in Thailand, where authorities and the media perpetuate divinatory practices. This leads me to conclude that the best approach to understand the process of reinventing divinatory authority in today's Cambodia is by examining the influence of Thai astrology books. Khmer astrologers and fortune-tellers often travel to Thailand and other countries to attend short courses in astrology from professional instructors or institutions. It may be useful to try to understand how such exchange of knowledge between Khmer and Thai cultures is achieved, given their somewhat antagonistic histories – an issue that I hope will be taken up by anthropologists in the future.

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