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PROCESSES OF SPIRITUAL ‘BLACKBOXING’ IN CAMBODIA: THE EMERGENCE OF SPIRITS IN SPACE AND EMBODIMENT

As part of my dissertation project (‘Spirits in Cambodia - Practice, Power and Politics’), this presentation sheds light on key aspects in the emergence of popular spirits in Cambodia. The worship of spirits is widespread in Cambodia. Under the shared category of Brahmanism, many sub-classes of spirits are regarded to have separate identities. One of the most popular categories of spirits is *neak ta*. They are either embodied in a spirit medium (*kru*) and/or considered to dwell at certain places. Where do these spirits come from? And under which conditions do they stay or disappear again? To analyze and understand these processes I am inspired by Bruno Latour’s concepts of blackboxing and actorship. This approach makes the emergence of spirits more comprehensible and includes more factors (or ‘actors’) than purely functional or ontological explanations would do. I analyze the elements of success of the new actors to manifest in the religious field through the case studies of two prominent, recently emerged spirits; that of Pol Pot, and a medium possessed by “Grandfather Christmas”. The presentation aims to contribute to the study of dynamics of religious life in Southeast Asia. More specifically, it stresses the flexibility of Brahmanism and spirit worship in Cambodia today, where the influence that spirit practice exerts on society and politics of present-day Cambodia cannot be overstated.

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