



Reinvention of Divinatory Authority in the Post-Khmer Rouge Era

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ABSTRACT

The Khmer Rouge period had a hugely negative impact on the knowledge and practices of various forms of religious traditions. After the social upheaval, local practices of divination, magic and spirit veneration have increased in diversity and popularity in Cambodia. Anthropological scholars, however, have yet to provide sufficient in-depth analysis of the revival and reinvention of such religious traditions in Cambodia's modern era. At present, Khmer divination and astrology has been revitalized with many forms of it being embedded in people's everyday lives in both rural settings and urban ones, like in the capital Phnom Penh. With the resurgence of divinatory authority, especially numerological fortune-telling, Khmer practitioners are now turning to Thai numerological books to supplement the diminished body of traditional Khmer knowledge that survived the war. This paper aims to answer the following: *To what extent does Thai divination and astrology influence Cambodian divinatory techniques?* and *How do Cambodian fortune-tellers in present-day Cambodia establish their divinatory authority through that of their Thai counterparts?* Based on the ethnographic data, this paper argues that the elite astrologer has improvised his divinatory authority through hybrid resources and knowledge assembled in the context of cultural discontinuity and rupture with tradition occurring since the Khmer Rouge. It highlights the process and context of transmission and reinvention of divinatory authority in relation to cultural hybridity and modernity after the Khmer Rouge. The experiences of the two elite astrologer and fortune-teller suggest that Thai astrology has 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. This paper thus argues that the process of divinatory reinvention after the communist evolution should be understood in relation to the cultural hybridity that allow the transmission and improvisation of astrological and divinatory knowledge between Thai and Khmer specialists are possible within the historical culture and cultural discontinuity.

1. INTRODUCTION

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 [1, 14, 11]. However, they have yet to provide an in-depth ethnographical account focusing on the resurgence of divination practice in Cambodian society.

This paper has been developed from my PhD dissertation which explores the methods, practices and meanings of divination in Cambodian society. This paper presents an ethnographic account of the resurgence of divination

practice after the Khmer Rouge revolution. The reinvention of the Khmer divinatory traditions are here portrayed from the experience of the two participants, who are considered as 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 astrological 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

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to reinvent divinatory knowledge in Cambodia, therefore, they needed to employ astrological knowledge generated outside of the country; in these case especially Thai astrological books. The elite astrologer and fortune-teller primarily learnt astrology and divination from Thai textbooks, such as *Patithin Neung Roi Pee* (100 year calendar), “*Tamra Phromachati*” and “*Tamra Plu Luang*.” Drawing from the experience of the two elite astrologers and fortune-tellers that I have interviewed, this paper asks the following questions: *To what extent does Thai divination and astrology influence Cambodian divinatory techniques?* And, *How do Cambodian fortune-tellers in present-day Cambodia establish their divinatory authority through that of their Thai counterparts?*

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 have led to their traditions having some similarities. 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. The researcher aims to explore the observed phenomena relating to the resurgence of astrology and divination in the capital city of Cambodia, and how practitioners have established authority.

This paper has been structured into three sections. The first section of this paper will provide a brief historical background of the astrology and divination practices in Cambodia in the period of social disruption during the Khmer Rouge. The second section will present the two selected research interlocutors: the elite astrologer, and the fortune-teller, and how they try to find their ways to establish their divinatory authority in the city. The final section will discuss the resurgence of divination and astrology in Cambodia and the role of Thai astrological books in this reinvention. Based on what is explored here, I argue that the Khmer astrologer and fortune-teller reinvent their divinatory authority through Thai astrological manuals, due to the loss of authentic Khmer manuscripts and experienced practitioners during the civil war.

2. A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, LOCAL REFLECTIONS, AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF DIVINATION PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY CAMBODIA

Local Terms, Definitions, and Classifications

The literal English meaning of the term “fortune-teller” is “a person who is supposedly able to predict a person’s future, for example, by palmistry, a crystal ball or similar methods” [17]. And the term “divination” refers to “the practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means” (Ibid). While Thai people call fortune-tellers “*mō dū*” (หมอดู), Khmer people call such practitioners as “*Kru Teay*” (គ្រូទាយ). In Khmer, the term “*grū dāy*” (គ្រូទាយ) refers to a teacher or a person who applies his/her divination skill “to guess” (*dāy* [ទាយ]) or to read peoples’ fortune. In Bangkok, I observed that fortune-tellers (*mō dū*) will use multiple divination techniques, including Gypsy 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)^{*}, card-reading (- ទឹកស្រាវ), numerology (*Lekha Prāmbirtua* លេខត្រីសិរីភូមិ), and mediumistic divination (*Nakcūlrūp* - អ្នកចូលរូប)[†].

In accordance with the local definitions, this paper uses the term “divination” to define a range of fortune-telling practices in Cambodia, since it encompasses a broader range of meanings and functions 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 will have been preserved. In a city like Phnom Penh, however, Khmer people reflect that it is difficult to

^{*} The fortune-teller will let the clients open the book and use an object like a toothpick to select a page number. The *grū* or the religious master is a person who takes lead in this technique. They are around 60 years-old and like to wear 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 the 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 call him as *grū cākgambīra*.

[†] In Phnom Penh, Khmer people use the term ‘*nakcūlrūp*’ when they want to refer to spirit mediumship or mediumistic fortune-tellers. In the provinces, such as Kampong Thom and Battambang, the local people usually experience the two types of the mediumistic fortune-tellers including ‘*nakcūlrūp*’ and *grū meol*. Both of them are thought of as very skillful in divining through spiritual assistance and healing their clients.

find an authentic form of divination. While many urban Khmer think of divination as a rural practice, urban divination is surprisingly well developed and complex. Khmer people tend to classify urban-based fortune-tellers into two groups. The first group is the market-based fortune-tellers, who are specialized in card-reading and offer their services in local markets. The second group is skillful in numerology, and favor using formulae from astrological 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 reflected that the practitioners specializing in numerology are more respectful and trustworthy than the mediumistic and card-reading fortune-tellers in the markets. This is especially true of the royal astrologers or *Hora*, whose ‘high-rank’ is derived from their history of servicing the requests of the royal family and government officials.

The elite astrologers and fortune-tellers also try to separate themselves from the market-based fortune-tellers for many reasons. First, they separate themselves by emphasizing the sophistication of their knowledge of divination and astrology. Second, they also claim that the fortune-tellers in the market just “guess” (*dāy* in Khmer) the clients’ future without any knowledge derived from the appropriate astrological textbooks. Third, they claim that their divinatory service is more trustworthy and reliable than the mediumistic fortune-tellers or *‘nakcūlrūp*, who are rely upon *Chum-neur-ah-rub-phai* or “invisible forms of power.” What Khmer people refer to as invisible forms of power can be thought of as “supernatural powers” in English. However, the elite astrologers and fortune-tellers seem to establish their divinatory authority and legitimacy in the context of modernity and globalization in contemporary Cambodia’s urban culture. As Giddens argues [15, 7] knowledge is the primary character of modern society, which creates the so called expert systems. Modern cultural value of mentoring expertise and specialized skills generate the idea that inspires some educated Khmer astrologers and fortune-tellers to reinvent divinatory authority through certain form of knowledge deriving from various sources. Following the modernity’s discourse, the elite astrologer and fortune-teller attempt to rationalize and make sense of their divinatory techniques. With this said, they consider astrology and divination as a form of knowledge even it has been fragmented and unstructured due to the Khmer Rouge’s cultural devastation policy. As such, however, such specialized knowledge can be reinvented. As a result, the elite astrologer and fortune-teller conceptualize numerological technique as a “visible form of divination” because it is based on calculations and formulae that are observable and more transparent. In order to understand the fundamental concept of numerology, they have to do a lot of research from different kinds of astrological books, which were published in various countries. Khmer fortune-tellers and

astrologers usually conceptualize such sophisticated divinatory techniques as “*kpuan*.” In the context of Khmer divination, *kpuan* is referred to as a formal knowledge and methodology of divination. In this sense, the 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 through text.

A Brief Historical Development of Divination Practice in Cambodia

The practice of superstitions involving magical protection and folk religious practice can be traced back since the Angkorean Empire (the 9th-12th Centuries) [8]. However, the historical literature does not explore how and whether divination and astrology played a significant role in peoples’ everyday lives. During the colonial era (1863-1953), the practice of divination and astrology was operated by the royal astrologers, or *Hora*. The archival evidence suggests that the *Hora* had assisted the King during the colonial era (Bulletin Individual De Note [4] and predicted the lunar eclipse in 1934 [3]). According to Khmer tradition, royal astrologers helped the King and the royal families interpret the symbolic meanings during the royal rituals or ceremonies, especially the Royal Ploughing Ceremony or “*Phi Thi Chrot Pheah Nung Korl*.” This ceremony is annually held in May, the rainy season in which Khmer people start planting their agricultural products [18].

Brahmans and astrologers applied their knowledge of astrology and divination in this ceremony to make predictions about the outcome of a harvest from what the royal oxen consume (Vida 2015). Drawing on a traditional form of Cambodian divination existing in the ploughing ceremony, the royal astrologer served as the mediator between humans and natural world and this service particularly helped to establish the King’s spiritual, as well as temporal, legitimacy.

During the Pol Pot era, religious practices and scriptures related to Buddhism and superstition were seriously damaged and in some cases completely destroyed [6, 5]. After the social upheaval, Theravada Buddhist ideology and practices have been revitalized by various projects supported by the Ministry of Cults and Religion, and 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 to 60 years-old (assuming they were born during the Khmer Rouge era) were not able to show any original astrological books from before the Khmer Rouge era. However, there are numerous fortune-tellers and astrologers who claimed that they had preserved astrological books from the Khmer Rouge’s devastation policy. For example, there is a Buddhist monk named “Som Korn” at Nak kawann Temple who claimed that he

survived the genocide and still kept an astrological notebook that contained what he had learnt from the deceased monks with him [16]. With this said, it is still unclear to what extent the Khmer astrological books have been preserved in a general sense.

There are a few Khmer astrological books that have been circulated in the local bookstores in Phnom Penh. The head of royal astrologer claimed to be the sole author of this book, and it is the only one that was intended for a general audience. With the limited range of astrological books published in the national language, most Khmer astrologers and fortune-tellers tend to rely on various divinatory techniques from books that have been published in different countries. Thai astrological books which provide a range of divinatory techniques tend to be the most popular reference for the Khmer fortune-tellers.

Challenges of Divinatory Authority in the Contemporary Cambodia

In Cambodia today, one can find fortune-tellers in any corner of the country, from urban settings to the countryside, from markets to temples, and among the rich and the poor. They serve by giving advice to clients to predict their futures, as well as speculating on appropriate solutions to deal with difficult problems. Especially, in main urban cities like Phnom Penh, practices of divination and magic are largely accessible in such public areas as the local markets (e.g. the Central Market), the areas nearby Wat Phnom, and in front of the Royal Palace.

Although the practices of astrology and divination are widespread across Cambodia, such traditions have been centrally preserved by the royal family and government officials. At this point, the ethnographic data suggest that the transmission of such knowledge, considered the authentic kind, is still limited to the royal families and a small group of elite fortune-tellers. The limitation of knowledge transmission in the field of divination and astrology seems to be widely recognized by the local fortune-tellers. Lok Grū Bun, a numerological fortune-teller, also claimed that previous generations of the learned Khmer fortune-tellers refused to transmit their divinatory knowledge to the next generation like Thai astrologers/fortune-tellers did. He had such an experience when he was refused being taught divinatory techniques by a famous monk fortune-teller. Lok Grū Bun further reflects that this seems to be a weakness of the Khmer mentality in believing that knowledge should belong to individuals rather than the public. As a result, there were a relatively small number of astrological books written in the Khmer language to begin with, further increasing the seriousness of the loss of such materials during the Khmer Rouge period.

To understand the current situation and state of divinatory knowledge in the context of Cambodia's modern era, it can be compared to the formation of

divinatory authority in Thailand. The Thailand's Astrology Association plays a key role in standardizing and popularizing astrology and divination practices across the country. With the co-operation of the royal family members and elite state officials, the association has been established in Bangkok since 1947. In a similar manner, as a Thai researcher who tried to observe the reinvention of Khmer divinatory authority, I expected that there could be a formal astrological association in Cambodia. However, a national astrology association has never been established in Cambodia. Further, the Ministry of Cults and Religion, the government agency who take the key role to reinvent and re-establish religious and ritual traditions, has never proposed a standard or official astrological practice or published any astrological handbooks for people interested in such a thing. The official representative of the Ministry of Cults and Religion claimed that the main duty of the Ministry of Cults and Religion primarily focuses on organizing and supporting Buddhist ceremonies and rituals instead of popularizing superstitious practices.

Ven. Khy Sovanratana, Vice Rector of Preah Sihanouk Raja Buddhist University spoke on behalf of the Ministry of Cults and Religion and stated that the government does not provide an astrological curriculum or training course for general people. However, the government usually offers a short course on divinatory/astrological practices for Buddhist religious specialists (*Ajar*), who play an important role in conducting ceremonies inside the pagodas and in the individuals' residences

Another obstacle to reinventing or re-establishing divinatory authority in Cambodia is that fortune-tellers in Cambodia are impinged in their communications by strict government censorship. Some of the astrologers and fortune-tellers in Phnom Penh reflected that they do not have freedom like their counterparts in Thailand. As such, Khmer practitioners are not allowed to predict or analyze situations that may happen in their country. Even the head of the royal astrologers, who seem to have the official authority in the field of astrology just simply, wrote a few sentences on the national situation but did not go into details because of government censorship. While in Thailand fortune tellers may perform on television, and through this establish legitimacy, this is not possible in Cambodia. Thai diviners who work on television are relatively free to make claims about communicating with ghosts, or ancestors, and can also publicly make predictions about future events. In Cambodia, however, practitioners are very concerned that they may cause trouble for themselves by influencing or making negative predictions about events with political consequences.

In what follows, we should understand the resurgence of Khmer astrology and divination in relation to the limitations and obstacles imposed by contemporary Cambodian society. At this point, the lack of an institutionalized divinatory authority leads to the absence

of a standard astrological technique in Cambodia. As a result, there is no agreement among the elite fortune-tellers and astrologers as to how authentic divinatory knowledge is to be transmitted. In this environment which lacks a systematic transmission method for divination, practitioners are faced with the difficult task of tentatively re-establishing their authority through a limited number of channels.

Based on historical and ethnographic evidence, this paper has argued that Cambodian divinatory is fragmented and in a process of reinvention. As I have described, Cambodia lacks any formal institutions for the propagation of divination, or any consistent means by which its practitioners can establish legitimacy and authority. In this fragmented and ad hoc context, elite fortune-tellers have found their own ways to re-invent their divinatory authority. The next section will demonstrate how my two informants of interest have deployed Thai astrological books as a means of reinventing their field and establishing their authority.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF THAI ASTROLOGICAL BOOKS TOWARD THE ASTROLOGY AND DIVINATION IN CAMBODIA

In this section, I will examine how Thai astrological texts have served as a means for the establishment of authority among Khmer diviners and fortune-tellers. This will be done by first discussing the case study of Pishet, the head of the royal astrologers in Cambodia, and after this examining the practices of Lok Grū Bun, a well-known numerologist. Following this, I will go on to analyse the role of Thai texts in the establishment of their authority.

Case Study 1: The Head of Royal Astrologers and his Astrological Technique

Lok Grū Pishet (pseudonym), the head of the royal astrologers in Cambodia, expressed 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 standardised 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. *Kpuan Mahasongkran* and the Khmer calendar system were the first techniques Lok Grū Pishet learnt from an old sheaf of sutras. The sutras featured legendary and astrological perspectives on Khmer New Year and the traditional calendar of Cambodia. Lok Grū Pishet claimed that *Kpuan Mahasongkran* was “the traditional Khmer divinatory technique” because the sutras probably had been written since King Ang Duong (1847-1860).

The legend of Khmer New Year actually originated from the local folktale of “Thewada Songkran” or “New Year Angel”, which is widespread in Mainland Southeast Asian

countries [2]. In this region, people will celebrate their New Year between 13-15 April every year. Khmer people generally call this festival Maha Songkran, and it is known as *Songkran* in Thai. According to the local folktales, there are seven New Year angels who live in the lower level of heaven—Thungsa, Khoraka, Rakasas, Monthea/Montha, Kirinee, Kimitha, and Mahothara. They are daughters of the Hindu god of creation “Lord Brahma” which has been called “Thao Kabilabrahma.” The seven angels also work as personal servants for Indra. They have different names, have different characteristics, carry different flowers, accessories, weapons, vehicles, and consume different kinds of food. The seven angels perform different actions while riding their animal vehicles—normal riding, standing and opening eyes, sleeping and opening eyes, and sleeping and closing eyes. These actions represent different timing (e.g. morning, afternoon, evening) when the Sun moves from Pisces to Aries. The origins of this story began when their father, the Lord Brahma, had to cut his head off after losing a question battle to a billionaire’s son, who was very clever and could understand birds. Since the billionaire’s son could answer all of the questions, the Lord Brahma had to keep his word by cutting his head off. The Lord Brahma’s head was very dangerous since it has a powerful flaming power which can burn and destroy the world. The seven angels decided to keep their father’s head inside a cave in Krailad, a sacred mountain which is the residence of Indira. Every year, when the Songkran festive begins, one of the seven angels has to bring the Lord Brahma’s head out of the cave and then carries it and walks clockwise around Sumeru Mountain (Ibid).

In addition to the traditional form of Khmer divination, Lok Grū Pishet also learnt numerology techniques from various astrological handbooks written by different well-known fortune-tellers. However, the primary resources Lok Grū Pishet relies on are Thai astrological books. These Thai astrological handbooks included *Tamra Brahma-chati*, Thai 100 year calendar, Chinese *Feng Shui* ‡ Handbook (written by Thai fortune-tellers). Besides the astrological handbooks, Lok Grū Pishet was also interested in books giving instructions for acquiring magical invulnerability, doing acupuncture, and palm-reading.

‡ *Feng Shui* is a Chinese prognostication, which is relied on the philosophical system of harmonisation between natural components including heaven, earth, and humans [13]. *Feng shui* combines three important aspects including astronomical phenomena, natural phenomena, and human behaviour (ibid). Astrologer or fortune-teller will apply *Feng Shui* technique to read people’s fortune from their faces and the decorated interior of their residences. The practice of Chinese geomancy is very important to an individual’s daily life because it offers various useful guidance to improve one’s life. For example, where a house has been decorated and designed appropriately, the residents may experience persistent happiness, and their lives will be successful.

In the early 1990s, Lok Grū Pishet, decided to learn numerological subjects from Thai textbooks. Although he could not speak Thai or understand the grammar, he read those Thai astrological textbooks by using a dictionary. The first Thai astrological textbook was written by a famous numerological fortune-teller “Sor Dusit,” who produced a series of influential numerological textbooks.[§] From the book titled *Lek Chet Tua Mahatsachan* (The Amazing Seven Numbers) [19], the writer highlights 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 that affect the characters and actions of human individuals.

Case Study 2: The Numerological Fortune-teller in Bung Kak, Phnom Penh

Lok Grū Bun ** (pseudonym) is a well-known numerological fortune-teller who has offered fortune-telling services for more than 10 years. He offers fortune-telling consultations and healing services for clients who are seen 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,” meaning “people who live in this house is rich”. It was very clear from the decorations of Lok Grū Bun’s home that he was highly familiar with Thai cultural values; the 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. Lok Grū Bun trained in numerology and various forms of divination by “self-study” and research from different divinatory and astrological textbooks, which were primarily published in the Khmer and Thai languages. Lok Grū Bun used the

Khmer divinatory book which was originally written by a monk fortune-teller in Siem Reap (see figure 1). The fortune-teller also claimed that the divinatory knowledge of this book had been taught since the Angkorean Empire. Even though most of the Khmer divinatory textbooks were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge period, the book and certain forms of divinatory tradition had been preserved through oral transmission within some families and by some religious practitioners. The content of the Khmer divinatory book highlights certain forms of magical objects (e.g. Yantra), and the manual teaches how to calculate auspicious times and dates for ancient warriors, who sought for protection and victory in warfare.

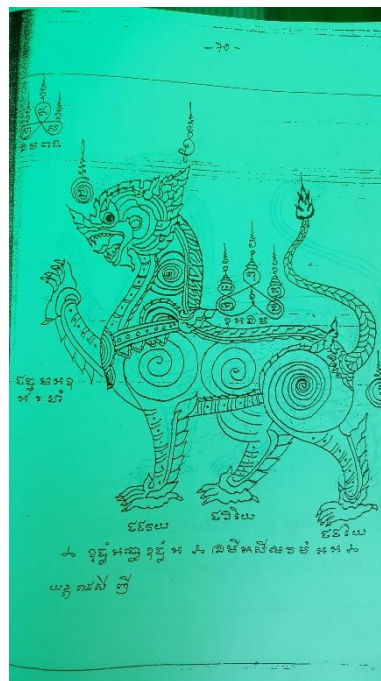


Fig. 1. A page of Yantra taken from the Khmer divinatory book’s cover, which was claimed by Lok Grū Bun to be traced back to the Angkorean Empire. The pictures show two different patterns of Yantra which symbolize the meanings related to the concept of auspiciousness, power of protection, and victory. The original version of the book belonged to a monk fortune-teller in Siem Reap.

[§] The Thai numerological book written by Sor Dusit basically explains the meanings of each number in detail. The seven digits of the number: 1-7, in this context, represent different celestial objects. Number 1 stands for the Sun, number 2 stands for the Moon, number 3 stands for Mars, number 4 stands for Mercury, number 5 stands for Jupiter, number 6 stands for Venus, and number 7 stands for Saturn. The seven digits of number contain different meanings that can explain the personalities of individuals. Number 1-Sunday refers to rank/title/status, greatness/mightiness and hot temperature. Number 2-the Moon refers to gentleness, delicate, and service. Number 3- Mars refers to bravery/courage, diligent, act hastily/be aggressive, strong. Number 4-Mercury refers to adaptation, changeable, words/speech, information, and wit. Number 5-Jupiter refers to morality, academic, adulthood, supporter, and intelligence. Number 6-Venus refers to lively, art, beauty, love and money. Number 7-Saturn refers to suffering and anxiety, stingy, prudently (see also [19]).

** Lok Grū is the title calling a senior male teacher, instructor, trainer, or mentor or a person, who possesses a charismatic character that he could perform through knowledge or specialisation he uses to educate people.

Lok Grū Bun started learning numerology techniques from Thai astrological books when he was a monk and travelling across the border to Thailand and Laos. His travelling experience allowed him to access various sources of divinatory techniques. However, he thought that the most reliable resources are the Khmer and Thai divinatory textbooks. Lok Grū Bun reflects that his numerology technique is primarily developed through and inspired by Thai numerology techniques. He felt that at this time, Khmer resources were insufficient for the whole process of numerology, and as such he needed to supplement his knowledge with Thai texts. The Thai

textbooks included *Phathithin Nung Roi Pee* (100 year calendar), *Tamra Brahma-chati*, and *Tamra Phlu Luang* (see figure 2).



Fig. 2. *Phathithin Nung Roi Pee* (100 year calendar) which was published in Thai language.

Lok Grū Bun usually 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 and then calculates the age of the clients. *Tamra Brahma-chati* is another source that Lok Grū Bun usually relies on when he reads fortune for the clients. He sees *Tamra Brahma-chati* as his “teacher” because it introduces him to the field of astrology. He has learnt various divinatory techniques from the book but the most important is the calculation of auspicious time to do certain actions. Lok Grū Bun applied the concept of auspicious time to read his clients fortune by considering the time they come to consult. He reflected that the concept of auspicious time he took from *Tamra Brahma-chati* is very reliable as it has been empirically proved through the high accuracy of a fortune-telling prediction he offers the clients’ fortune for many years.

4. THAMRA BRAHMA-CHATI: THE INFLUENCE OF THAI ASTROLOGICAL BOOKS ON THE REINVENTION OF DIVINATORY AUTHORITY IN CAMBODIA

This paper will discuss *Tamra Brahma-chati* as the primary Thai astrological book that the elite Khmer astrologer and fortune-teller in Phnom Penh have relied on. The discussion in this section will contribute to answering the question: How do Cambodian fortune-tellers in present-day Cambodia establish their divinatory authority through that

of their Thai counterparts?

Tamra Brahma-chati: The book title can be interpreted in Khmer as “the scripture of the Lord Brahma.” We can imply that the astrological techniques covering in this book might be associated with the Lord Brahma in Hindu religious belief. With this said, we can guess that the writer(s) have been Brahman priests that lived in Thailand. However, it is unclear who the first writer or editor of this book is. According to the website “Intangible Cultural Heritage,” based in Thailand [9], all divinatory traditions inside *Tamra Brahma-chati* were originally written by an unknown astrologer in the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767). It was not until the time of King Rama IV (1851-1868) that such techniques were compiled and reintegrated with new techniques and then officially published in the form of the book titled *Tamra Brahma-chati*. The oldest version of the book that could be seen to be used had been published by the Thai publisher named “Rong Phim Phanit Saphaphon” before 1912. It is still unclear who compiled the information for this book.

In Cambodia, it was also unclear who the first agency to introduce *Tamra Brahma-chati* to the Khmer divinatory community was. I had a chance to communicate with Miss Thida, a government officer who works for the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunication in Cambodia, and they suggested that *Tamra Brahma-chati* was originally translated from the Thai version to Khmer in 1971 before the Khmer Rouge. The book has been reissued several times after the Khmer Rouge period. Currently, the book is still very popular among the Khmer people who are interested in learning astrology.

This book is one of the essential astrological handbooks for those who begin learning Thai astrology. The book highlights multiple forms of astrological manuals, which are demonstrated with a number of different symbolic pictures. The content of the book covers a range of astrological techniques including the predictions of individual lives from various approaches, such as animal zodiacs, and birthdates. The book also includes content on the belief in guardian spirits who protect newborn babies (*Mae Sue* in Thai), the calculation formula to predict the gender of babies, a manual for considering the compatibility of horoscopes (individuals can apply for choosing their soulmate), and rituals to eliminate or minimize bad luck, unusual situations, and natural disasters. The book also integrates Thai traditional beliefs in auspicious times to do certain things like building the house, having a haircut, washing hair and cutting nails as well as the rituals individuals need to do before travelling. In addition to traditional forms of divination, the book also integrates the belief in *Feng Shui*- reading individuals’

characters from their physical body; e.g. face, lip, eyes, ears, nose, teeth, etc.^{††}

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 also covers the astrological perspective of *Kpuan Mahasongkran* or Khmer New Year that the head of royal astrologer has considered the official “Khmer astrological tradition.”

Grū Pishet’s astrological 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 entitled “*Kpuan Horasatre Khmer-Chen-Sakol*” or “*Khmer-Chinese-Universal Astrological System*.” In the subsections of this book, the author applied the astrological approach from *Tamra Brahma-chati* to predict the amount of rain and natural water for the current year, weather, agricultural products, rice-field planting, political situation, and social relations in general. However, the way he wrote the prediction concerning politics or social phenomena cannot be specifically criticized the third party or the government agency. The prediction tends to provide a useful solution to resolve such problems. In addition to such predictions, the author also provided a table indicating the auspicious and inauspicious times for doing any activity of the year. It is clear that the astrological concept of an auspicious time for doing something is exactly what the *Tamra Brahma-chati* had previously articulated.

The astrological concept of the 12 animal horoscopes was also introduced and elaborated in Lok Grū Pishet’s astrological book. In the 2015 volume, there was a section in which the author explained about the characters, behaviors, problems, obstacles, luck and achievements of male and female monkey year-persons, with the detailed predictions of other animal zodiacs. The content of these sections is interesting, as it is largely derived from Chinese divination, but is absorbed successfully into Khmer thought in this context as a part of a greater Thai divinatory repertoire.

Following *Tamra Brahma-chati*’s manual for considering the compatibility of horoscopes; Lok Grū Pishet wrote a section in his astrological book on how to choose a soul-mate based on the belief in Chinese animal zodiacs. His guidance was based on the Chinese divinatory belief that some animal zodiacs were perfectly matched with others. In this sense, they could have “good friendship/companionship.” However, some animal zodiacs were not able to get along due to the hostile/opponent relationship between the animals. Khmer people called the year that is considered opposed to the monkey year as *Chnam Chong*. The word *Chong* is a Chinese word referring to “clash.” For example, people who were born in the year of the tiger will clash with people born in the year of the monkey. In this regard, the couples who were born in clashing years are not real soul-mates. After that, the author articulated the characters and personalities of individuals who were encountering inauspiciousness or bad fortune with some solutions to resolve such adverse situations. Then, the final section of the book followed the structure of a Thai astrological book where the author discusses individual characters and behaviors in relation to the concept of Chinese geomancy (*Feng Shui*).

From the ethnographic account as discussed above, the elite astrologer and fortune-teller claim that they inherited certain forms of Khmer divinatory tradition including *Kpuan Mahasongkran* sutras and the Angkorean divinatory book. The Khmer divinatory tradition tends to focus on the astrological perspectives on Khmer New Year, calendrical system, and various magical Yantra and its spiritual power. Such traditional knowledge, however, is insufficient to establish their reputation and authority as a professional practitioner in the field of astrology and divination. At this point, it is clear that they must draw on other sources, but the question arises of why they chose Thai texts to do this. On this subject, Lok Grū Pishet and Lok Grū Bun both reflected 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.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Drawing from the ethnographic and historical data as discussed above, this paper argues that Thai astrology has 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 numerical books written by Thai astrologers were observed to be used as tools to reimagine and lend authority to Cambodian divination; in other words, the history and thus legitimacy of Thai divinatory practice is coopted into the process of establishing authority for Cambodian diviners. Accordingly, Lok Grū Pishet and Lok Grū Bun, have re-established and reinvented their

^{††} This concept relies on the philosophical system of harmonisation of natural components including heaven, earth, and human beings. *Feng Shui* combines three important components including astronomical phenomena, natural phenomena, and human behaviour (Ibid). Lok Grū Pishet applied this concept to read people’s fortune from their face, and to give advice on decorating their environment and residences. The practice of Chinese geomancy is thought to be very important to an individual’s daily life because it offers much useful guidance to improve their lives. In some cases, if a particular house has been decorated and designed appropriately, the residents are thought to stay happy, and their lives thought to be successful. See also [13]. The art and science of *Feng Shui*—a study on architects’ perception.

divinatory reputation and authority by utilizing divinatory books from different countries, especially from Thailand. They have done this 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 to see professional Khmer fortune-tellers and astrologers explain their divinatory discipline and reputation comes from autodidactic learning from legitimate sources. Since they can read Thai (or relatively easily learn to do so), they can access to the astrological knowledge based in Thailand then reintegrate (or merge) it into the Khmer astrological tradition. It is difficult to demonstrate what the authentic form of Cambodian astrological tradition is, 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 from the experiences of the 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. The analytical questions of this paper have been formulated in the context where the elite astrologer and fortune-teller try to overcome challenges and obstacles in establishing their knowledge and professional reputation by utilizing a range of Thai astrological books.

To what extent does Thai divination and astrology influence Cambodian divinatory techniques?

I would say that the Thai divination and astrology influence Cambodian divinatory techniques in the form of textbooks that the Khmer elite fortune-tellers have utilized.

The ethnographic data suggest that the professional fortune-tellers and amateur learners see the Thai book *Tamra Brahma-chati* as a fundamental handbook to understand a range of basic astrological techniques. At this point, we can say that Thai astrology has influenced astrology in Cambodia both before and after Khmer Rouge, though its importance after has grown. At this point, the question arises of why the elite astrologer and fortune-teller make use of primarily Thai astrological books (i.e. *Tamra Brahma-chati*) are as sources to establish their divinatory authority. Why not other sources from other countries they can access? Is it primarily because of the linguistic similarity of Khmer and Thai? I believe that the reasons can be revealed when we look at the contents of Thai astrological books. And this leads to the next question of this paper.

How do Cambodian fortune-tellers in present-day

Cambodia establish their divinatory authority through that of their Thai counterparts?

Tamra Brahma-chati contains the astrological perspective of Khmer New Year, which has been reclaimed by the elite fortune-tellers as a “Khmer divinatory tradition.” With this said, Thai astrological books have become important sources for reinvention of the traditional form of Khmer astrology. Additionally, Thai astrological books provide the fundamental aspects of astrological techniques that the fortune-tellers can use when they have to deliver a consultation service to their clients. The Khmer astrologers and fortune-tellers tend to interpret or read individual fortunes by looking at the fundamental aspects of number series which contain multiple symbolic meanings, also paying attention to the relative positions of celestial objects like the Sun, Moon, stars, and planets and how such objects influence on human actions and characteristics. The Thai astrological books provide them with formulae and frameworks that are necessary for them to carry out these divinatory tasks. By giving the Cambodian practitioners the tools they need to perform their craft, the Thai books play a key role in generating authority for these practitioners.

This paper emphasizes that looking at the influences of Thai astrological books is only one approach to understand the whole process of the reinvention of divinatory authority in Cambodia. The Khmer astrologers and fortune-tellers might travel to Thailand and other countries and attend short courses in astrology from professional instructors or institutions as well. With this said, this paper reflects the reinvention of the Khmer divinatory tradition from a single source of authority. The Khmer astrologers and fortune-tellers may utilize something beyond the Thai astrological books to establish their reputation and authority. This paper opens the floor for anthropologists to discuss and suggest any relevant analytical framework to help theorize the resurgence of astrology and divination in Cambodia in relation to the Thai counterparts. In particular, a question of interest not addressed above is how the transmission of such knowledge between Khmer and Thai cultures is achieved given their somewhat antagonistic histories. Further, I believe that this case has the potential for new perspectives on cultural acquisition and establishment of legitimacy and authority that might be generalized in order to understand such transmissions in other contexts.

6. CONCLUSION

The ethnographic and historical evidence presented in this paper suggests that there is no hegemonic divinatory authority in Cambodia. In fact, divinatory authority is fragmented; no formal institution or association has ever been established, and specific claims to divinatory authority are highly contested. It is also difficult to trace or define the formal or traditional form of astrology in Cambodia due to the field's own complex and fragmented

lineages of transmission. This situation undoubtedly can be traced in part to the devastation caused by Cambodia's communist revolution and other major ruptures to the Cambodian cultural milieu before and since that period. It also speaks to the inherent limitations to knowledge transmission within a cultural and religious field that, for a century at the very least, appears not to have had a high level of institutional support and guidance comparable to that devoted to the cultivation of national cultural fields such as Buddhism, the performing arts and the Cambodian language, to name some prominent examples.

But instead of idealising, or lamenting the loss of, Khmer cultural practices involving astrology, divination and magical beliefs as pure, homogeneous, and authentic traditions, Khmer people in Phnom Penh experience and reproduce these realms of practice as hybrid traditions due to the diverseresources the astrologers and fortune-tellers can access to and deploy. As Milton [15] argues that globalisation with capitalist economy bring about 'the interface between the global economy and traditional cultures generates new cultural forms which differ both from the cultures of the core and from those periphery.' With this said, the Post-Khmer Rouge's modernity influences to the way Khmer people view and understand about their traditions that is possibly relied upon the two assumptions on culture: homogeneity and diversity. This paper instead considers the cultural diversity approach as an applicable framework to understand the reinvention of divinatory authority after the social upheaval.

With the long historical development and Globalisation increase the interactions and relations between Thailand and Cambodia. Such interactions and relations are falling into religious domains including astrology and divination. The elite astrologer and fortune-teller were struggled to research and recollect sources of astrology and divinatory due to the historical rupture and the limited oral transmission. "Lok Grū Pishet" and "Lok Grū Bun" encounter with difficulties, challenges, and problems in assembling resources like documents, textbooks, consultations with specialists or experts, astrological organisations or any support from the government. This paper, therefore, argues that the process of divinatory reinvention in Phnom Penh should be understood in relation to the cultural hybridity revealing after the social upheaval. Khmer knowledge and techniques of astrology and divination are improvised by individuals, who attempt to legitimize their authority through internal and external sources of knowledge. The elite astrologer and fortune-teller are specialized by using their Thai language skill to learn Thai astrological handbooks, as well as employing their connections with some specialists outside the country. This paper further argues that Khmer urban people improvise their cultural practices, especially divination, as experimental knowledge rather than reproducing them in unaltered form as faithful transmitters of a "cultural

tradition." In this way, they experience "divinatory tradition" as a living dynamic process which has been reinvented within the context of momentous social change, intellectual flows, cultural exchanges and uncertainty about the future, and the transformations in personal lives and fortunes that have occurred since the communist revolution.

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