



**HAL**  
open science

# When the spirits are angry, God gains in popularity: Exploring the emergence of Bunong Protestantism in the Highlands of Cambodia

Catherine Scheer

► **To cite this version:**

Catherine Scheer. When the spirits are angry, God gains in popularity: Exploring the emergence of Bunong Protestantism in the Highlands of Cambodia. *Aséanie, Sciences humaines en Asie du Sud-Est*, 2011, 28. halshs-02165624

**HAL Id: halshs-02165624**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02165624>**

Submitted on 11 Feb 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# When the Spirits are Angry, God Gains in Popularity: Exploring the Emergence of Bunong Protestantism in the Highlands of Cambodia

Catherine Scheer

---

**Citer ce document / Cite this document :**

Scheer Catherine. When the Spirits are Angry, God Gains in Popularity: Exploring the Emergence of Bunong Protestantism in the Highlands of Cambodia. In: Aséanie 28, 2011. pp. 45-72;

doi : <https://doi.org/10.3406/asean.2011.2213>

[https://www.persee.fr/doc/asean\\_0859-9009\\_2011\\_num\\_28\\_1\\_2213](https://www.persee.fr/doc/asean_0859-9009_2011_num_28_1_2213)

---

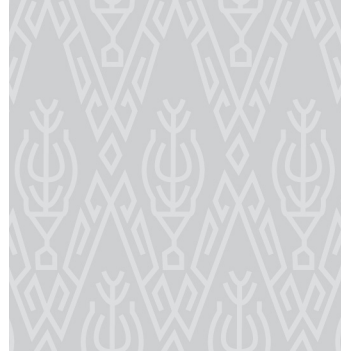
Fichier pdf généré le 09/07/2021

## Abstract

The two-fold aim of this paper is to outline a hitherto largely unknown history of evangelical Christianity among the Cambodian Bunong and to reflect upon aspects that may have been relevant in the encounters between Protestant missionaries and this minority population living in the highlands bordering with Vietnam. Relying on historical missionary accounts and on Bunong narratives gathered during fieldwork in Monduliri province, I will explore three moments of this meeting of different “thought-worlds”— from the lack of success of early evangelisation efforts during the colonial and post-independence era, over the first conversions during the Vietnam War, to the installation and limited spread of Christianity in liberated Cambodia from the 1980s to the 1990s. In these various political and socio-environmental contexts, particular attention is given to the part of ritual practice in the dynamic of conversion, as it appeared to be a topic shared by the animist highlanders and the evangelical emissaries.

## Résumé

Cet article cherche à esquisser l'histoire peu connue de l'arrivée du christianisme évangélique parmi les Bunong du Cambodge. Il vise aussi à réfléchir sur des facteurs susceptibles d'avoir été déterminants pour le déroulement de ces premières rencontres entre des missionnaires protestants et cette population minoritaire vivant sur les hautes terres, à la frontière du Viêt-nam. À partir d'écrits missionnaires et de récits de vie bunong, recueillis dans la province de Monduliri, nous explorerons trois «moments» de cette rencontre entre différentes visions socio-cosmiques, ouvrant sur l'échec de l'évangélisation à l'époque coloniale et sous le régime post-indépendant, pour passer par les premières conversions lors de la guerre du Viêt-nam et finir par l'installation et la dispersion limitée du christianisme après la libération du Cambodge, dans les années 1980-1990. Dans ces différents contextes politiques et socio-environnementaux, une attention particulière sera portée au rôle joué dans le processus de conversion par les pratiques rituelles. Celles-ci semblent avoir constitué un point d'intérêt partagé tant par les animistes des hautes terres que par les émissaires protestants.



# When the Spirits are Angry, God Gains in Popularity:

## Exploring the Emergence of Bunong Protestantism in the Highlands of Cambodia

Catherine Scheer

*At the time of the B-52 war, bombs were dropping, we were running to Vietnam. Fire had eaten our house, had eaten our jars, had eaten our gongs, had eaten our rice. We had no more buffaloes, no more cows, no more pigs, no more chicken. We had nothing to offer to the spirits, we had nothing to “clean” the destruction caused by the fire when my father got sick. We entered Christianity. We put ourselves in God’s hands. (Interview with Chhé Laa, Bu Sra, 2009)*

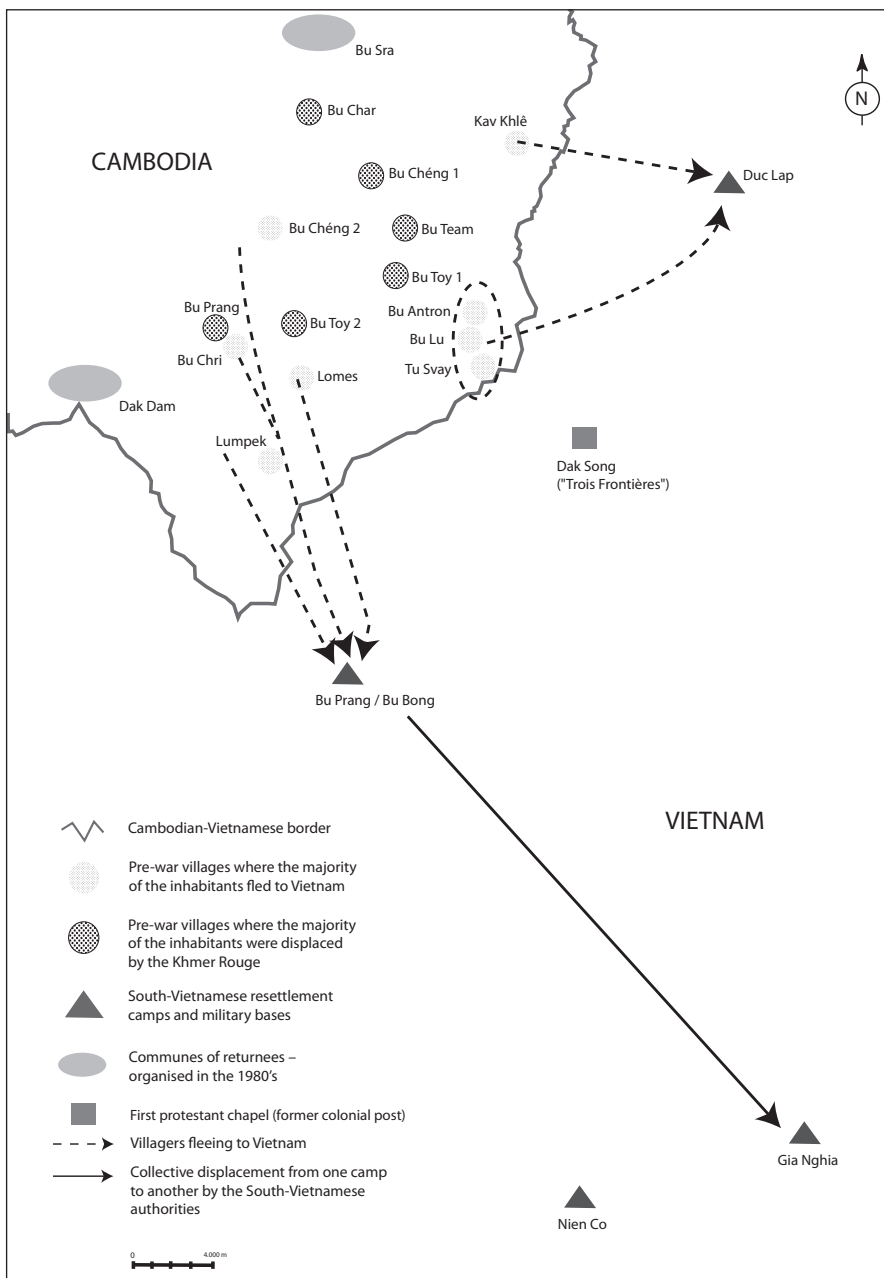
It was after the turbulent years of the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge incursions that the first churches appeared among the Bunong, in the north-eastern province of Mondulkiiri. While in many of the neighbouring Southeast Asian mountain areas highland populations had adopted the Christian religion since the nineteenth century, especially in colonial contexts, there had not been any successful evangelisation at that time among the Cambodian “forest peasants” (Boulbet 1975).

The Bunong belong to the two per cent of the national population whose mother tongue is Mnong, a language belonging to the Mon-Khmer language family which is spoken by 37,000 speakers in Cambodia (Mondulkiiri province) according to the National Census 2008.<sup>1</sup> They traditionally make a living from swidden agriculture

---

1. “Bunong” is the endonym used by Mnong speaking groups in Cambodia. Although the term “Mnong” appears in the literature based in the Vietnamese field, following thereby the ethno-linguistic terminology, I use the endonym “Bunong” throughout this article since I focus on the Cambodian Mnong. All Bunong (i.e. Central Mnong) terms are transcribed according to Sylvain Vogel’s romanized transcription system (Vogel 2011, 184-186).

For an ethnography on the Mnong Gar from Vietnam, see Condominas 2003 and 2006.



Cambodian Bunong population shifts between north-eastern Cambodia and central Vietnam (1970-1986)

(Drawing: Julie Blot, Conception: Catherine Scheer)

and follow animist practices.<sup>2</sup> Inquiring into the emergence of Christianity among those Bunong who define themselves as Protestants today has revealed many stories about how the first generation of converts got to know this new god.<sup>3</sup> Most accounts were integrated into wartime narratives and the narrators insisted on the impossibility of performing ritual sacrifices at that time. Conversion is a complex process which social scientists have approached in many different ways. For example, the colonial encounter has been a popular setting for anthropological analyses, regularly emphasising the role played by intense missionary efforts supported by the obligations and attractions of the underlying western order.<sup>4</sup> Several of the studies specifically examining evangelisation among Southeast Asian highland populations have described Christianity as an appealing religious option enabling marginal minorities to redefine the ethnic boundaries between them and the surrounding majority.<sup>5</sup> Far from ignoring the interest of these and other approaches, this paper limits its analysis to the role ritual practice may have played in the Bunong's decision to convert, exploring it over a period of time.

While formal ritual is central to the Bunong mountain dwellers' spiritual practices, it is commonly rejected in Protestant Christianity. The first Protestant account mentioning the Bunong from Cambodia, entitled *The Blood Hunters*, is thus introduced by its author G.H. Smith as dealing "only with the savages, those primitive dwellers of Indo-China's jungles and mountains who offer the blood of their animals to appease the evil spirit" (Smith 1942, x). Smith underlines here one of the major practices evangelists of the Christian and Missionary Alliance working among South East Asia's highland populations were fighting against, that is animal sacrifices. Later on, his wife Laura also insisted on her attempt to make one of the highland men to whom she was talking refrain from his participation in this ritual activity, emphasizing that it was even sinful to eat the meat of a sacrificed animal:

- 
2. Throughout this paper, the term "animism" must be understood as "the belief that natural beings possess their own spiritual principles and that it is therefore possible for humans to establish with these entities relations of a certain kind—protection, seduction, hostility, alliance or exchange of services" (Descola 1992, 114).
  3. In this article I chose to focus on the Protestant Bunong since they represent the large majority of the indigenous Christians in Mondulkiri. Comparisons with the Catholic Bunong have proved to be very instructive during my PhD research but they largely exceed the scope of this article.
  4. See Jean and John Comaroff's famous study of mission work in South Africa in which Christianisation and modernisation are shown to be closely related (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991).
  5. Among others, Oscar Salemink has described this approach concerning the inhabitants of Vietnam's Central Highlands in several papers (Salemink 1997, 2003a, 2003b) and has also offered (Salemink 2009) a review of the major studies written on conversion among Southeast Asian highland minorities, including Hayami (1996), Kammerer (1990) and Tapp (1989). In the latter paper he suggests differentiating between conversions that took place in the colonial and post-colonial context in which it would be useful to emphasise the potential of conversion to integrate people, for instance into markets, states or transnational networks (Salemink 2009, 37).

“No Ee-Blo” firmly answered the missionary, “I could not touch a chicken that has been offered to the evil spirits.” (Smith 2003, 22)

The question of rituals continued to be strongly emphasised by Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries working among the Vietnamese highlanders in accounts written in the 1950s-1960s. In their reports the activity of sacrifice was not described as irrational, but as wrong, addressing evil spirits instead of the only true God.

Evangelisation can thus be seen as “an assault, in part, on the explicit contents of what is constituted as false knowledge” (Keane 1996, 138). Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries contested the power that the “pagan” highlanders would erroneously attribute to ritual sacrifice. In their Christian “ideology of communication”, a concept defined by Joel Robbins as a “set of ideas about how information flows between people and the natural and supernatural worlds” (Robbins 2001, 599), sincere prayer was the only true way to address God. It is therefore interesting to see how the role the missionaries attributed to language as opposed to ritual, may contribute to an understanding of the emergence and expansion of Christianity among the Bunong from Cambodia.

In order to explore the encounters between the ideologies of ritual-performing highlanders and evangelical missionaries, I have gathered information about the particular historico-political and socio-environmental features of the contexts in which those encounters initially took place. We will look into three periods, colonial and post-independence Cambodia, the final years of the American Vietnam war (1970-1975) and liberated Cambodia (1979) before the arrival of international NGOs and the return of foreign church associations and missionaries at the end of the 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

To complete the scant amount of written sources on early evangelisation attempts among the Bunong, I have gathered a large part of the information on the more recent and also determining phase of Vietnam War years through field work in Mondulkiri (January 2009-January 2010, August-October 2010), especially among the Protestant Bunong from Bu Sra. Interviews and informal discussions were all in Bunong, partly done with Neth Prak, my Bunong research assistant, partly by myself. Most of them were recorded and later transcribed together with Neth. The names of the villagers have been changed in order to respect their anonymity. Besides the collected conversion narratives, I have assembled complementary information on the general context in which conversions took place that is on people’s everyday life, on their very practical issues.

---

6. In Mondulkiri, the reconstruction period following the 1991 Paris agreements and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (1992-1993) only began at the end of the 1990s, when access to this remote province was made easier. The building of a bridge across the Mekong from Kompong Cham to the east in 2001 gave rise to a marked increase in the influx of international aid to this highland area.

I should point out that this historical outline is particular to the Bunong from Mondulkiri and for that reason, one should refrain from generalising it to the experiences of other Cambodian highland inhabitants of neighbouring Ratanakiri, recently studied by Baird 2009, Uk 2011, and Jammes 2011.

Besides bringing to light some elements of a hitherto mainly unknown history of Christianity among the Cambodian Bunong, this approach aims to allow for the influence of different contexts on the ritual issue expressed in the missionary encounter.

## Contact without conversion in the colonial and post-independence Cambodian highlands

The first Protestant missionaries that ventured into the north-eastern highlands were Reverend Gordon H. Smith and his wife Laura in the early 1930s, and after independence (1957-mid 1960s) Reverend Carl E. Thompson and his spouse. Both couples were part of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, which was the first Protestant organisation to enter Cambodia in 1922, a few years after starting to evangelise in Southeast Asia, in Vietnam in 1911.<sup>7</sup>

The Christian and Missionary Alliance was created in 1897 in the United States, parallel to the establishment of evangelical Protestantism, which had spread across the Atlantic since the First Great Awakening (1720-1750).<sup>8</sup> The creation of missionary organisations addressing populations overseas was an emergent trend at that time, reflecting religious activism—in concrete terms a strong investment in motivating people to convert—which is one of the major characteristics of Evangelical Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

---

7. Christianity appeared in Cambodia through Portuguese traders. The Dominican Gaspar da Cruz, presenting himself at the court of Longvek in 1555 and Sylvester d’Azevedo, arriving around 1574, were the first missionaries among the Khmer. While Catholic priests from the Missions Étrangères de Paris have been present since 1665, it was only with Christian and Missionary Alliance that the first Protestants entered the country. Until the 1970s, the Christian and Missionary Alliance remained one of the few and certainly the main Protestant organisation in the country (one may also mention the Seventh Day Adventists and the Overseas Missionary Fellowship) (Sunquist 2001, 112). However, the Christian presence remained very weak, not only in the highlands but also at the national level. For a history of Protestantism in Cambodia, see Cormack 2001. On Catholicism, see Ponchaud 2006.

8. During the nineteenth century, the evangelical movement emerged in parallel with the young American nation. Evangelicals established voluntary social help, handing out Bibles, creating schools and colleges, or “evangelising people in need”. Before the creation of Christian and Missionary Alliance, its founder Rev. A.B. Simpson is said to have stopped his minister in a Presbyterian church in New York in order to “reach out to the unreached and neglected masses” (in 1881, according to the Time line available on the Christian and Missionary Alliance website).

9. J.-P. Willaime defines Evangelicalism as a militant form of Christianity concerned with the doctrinal and moral correctness of the Christian individual (Willaime 2001, 171).



A few years after the Christian and Missionary Alliance's arrival in Southeast Asia, Rev. Smith thus describes the needs to evangelise the local populations who were then referred to as "Phnong" in Cambodia:<sup>10</sup>

In the heart of French Indo-China are the wild, savage tribes people driven into the jungles and mountains of the interior by the millions of yellow-skinned Cambodians and Laotians of the west. These tribes people had never yet had a missionary. They'd never heard the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of all mankind. (Smith 2003, 7)

However, both Smith and Thompson seem to have found it difficult to share their convictions once they met with the Cambodian "tribesmen". Far from living among the Bunong, both missionaries were limited to occasional excursions to villages where they had a local person to facilitate their visit.

The little information accessible concerning these early missionary activities does not facilitate the development of far-reaching arguments.<sup>11</sup> However, the initial descriptions of encounters with missionaries can be kept in mind to compare or even to contrast with later ones.

### *Missionaries in the village, received with feasting*

After spending four years among the Khmer Buddhists, the Smiths came close to the Bunong hinterland when they moved to Kratié in 1930. Around the same time and starting from this colonial town, the French resumed their military penetration of the unsubdued north-eastern highlands.<sup>12</sup> Smith explains that he came into contact

---

10. The term "Phnong" or "Pnong" is used in French documents of the colonial era but was also common among the Khmer majority population. It then had a generic use, referring to all highland inhabitants considered savage and backward, besides referring to the specific ethnolinguistic group of the Mnong.

11. While the study of the impact of Christianity has often been facilitated by the abundant literature produced by missionaries—either their doctrinal reflections or their ethnographical descriptions—the specific area and period that I am dealing with do not seem to have given rise to many such accounts, probably in part because the missionaries did not stay long enough. The books by the American missionary couple Gordon H. and Laura Smith (1942, 1947, 2003) have been mainly useful to get a grasp of their doctrinal views but they remain quite brief on their time spent among the Cambodian Bunong. Besides those, I have relied on articles that appeared in publications of the Christian and Missionary Alliance focusing on their missionaries' work in the Annamite Mountains. *Alliance Witness* is of interest for the relatively quiet period of the 1950s-early 1960s in Cambodia and *Jungle Frontiers* constitutes an important resource for the period of the Vietnam War.

12. According to A.-M. Maurice, himself involved in the pacification, a road was constructed in the direction of Srektum, where a post was recreated in 1930. But even in this relatively close area, the author mentions that the Phnong remained reluctant, only taking advantage of easier trade and from medical action. The region was considered to be pacified by 1934 (Maurice 1993, 73-74). For further details on the colonial period in the Cambodian highlands, see Guérin 2008.

with a Phnong person who was working in Kratié as an intermediary between the “Résident de France”, the official representative of the French Government in Phnom Penh, and his people. It was through this man, with whom he tried to learn some of the Bunong language, that G.H. Smith first visited an already “pacified” village situated at the border of the still largely refractory tribal territory.

Later on Rev. Thompson also set out from Kratié, where he and his wife had a small church, to explore the “Cambodian tribes country” (Thompson August 1957, 9). He relates the first excursion made through the highlands by truck and trailer in 1957. Only a few years after the country’s independence in 1953 the new north-eastern provinces of Mondulakiri or Ratanakiri had not yet been created but the area was already under military administration. Prince Sihanouk’s goal was to integrate these marginal populations into the Cambodian nation, thus referring to them as “upland Khmer” or “Khmer Loeu”. The national politics of Khmerisation attempted to make them fall into line with the majority population through education, Buddhist teaching and regrouping of villages.<sup>13</sup> At the time when Rev. Thompson first explored the region, these measures were still in their initial phase. As Smith, Thompson too had been invited by a Bunong tribal leader whom he had probably been introduced to by a Khmer schoolteacher recently delegated from Kratié to the highlands (Thompson April 1957, 9).

Both Thompson and Smith appear to have been impressed by the warm welcome they got during their village visits. Smith details how he enjoyed the stories told and the songs sung by the villagers, regretting that his knowledge of the local language was not yet sufficient to preach. He adds, however, that he refused to drink from the rice wine jar that he had been offered, emphasising thereby his opposition to what he considers to be a major animist practice. Thompson also mentions having enjoyed the villagers’ chanting and, helped by a translator, he was apparently able to participate in the story-telling, sharing the book of Genesis after having listened to a Bunong creation story.

The two missionaries, equipped with firearms, then describe how they gained respect through their hunting abilities. In fact Smith was asked by villagers to go on a hunt with them and brought back a deer. Thompson had killed a leopard on the way and entered the village of Krong Teh with the animal hanging from a wooden pole. Meat-sharing and feasting thus surrounded the visits of the successful hunters.

### *Political obstacles and impressions of ritual integrity*

Neither Smith nor Thompson managed, however, to convert the Cambodian Bunong to Christianity. Political restrictions imposed on Protestant missionaries, both under the French protectorate and during Norodom Sihanouk’s post-independence

---

13. Officially the number of schools tripled between 1955-6 and 1961-2. (Evolution du Srok de Chhlhlong Loeu, 1961, ANC). See also Guérin *et al.* 2003, 56.

“Sangkum Reastr Niyum” seem to have been major obstacles.<sup>14</sup> Smith relates having to ask permission from the “Résident de France” several times before finally being allowed to go into highland territory. The missionary does not give details about the circumstances that precipitated his and his wife’s rapid departure, which happened only a few years after they arrived in Kratié. He briefly states that “the doors of Cambodia had been closed” to them. It is quite probable that they left the country as a consequence of a royal circular issued in 1933, threatening to ban the presence of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Cambodia.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Rev. Thompson had to wait seven years before returning in 1964 to the village he first visited in 1957, partly because of the difficulties he faced to obtain government permissions. His plans to establish a tribal centre—including a Bible school and a health centre—close to the military quarters in the area, remained, however, unrealised.<sup>16</sup> The severance of diplomatic relations between Cambodia and the United States in 1965 and the consequent expulsion of all American citizens put an end to the Thompsons’ activities among the Bunong.

Besides these very concrete political limits imposed on attempts at evangelisation, it is interesting to note that the villages Smith and Thompson had visited appeared to be rather well-anchored in their ritual practices, receiving their guests with the usual feasting. When I briefly talked to an elderly man from Krong The (the same village Thompson had been forty-five years before), he could still remember a missionary couple who had come to visit. He also explained that the villagers finally found that the rules they had to follow in order to become a Christian were too strict. His statement reflects a common rejection of Protestantism among the Bunong, based on their adhering to animist ritual practice, which includes eating sacrificed meat

---

14. “Sangkum Reastr Niyum” (Popular Socialist Community), often abbreviated to “Sangkum”, is the name of the political organisation set up by Prince Norodom Sihanouk on 2 March 1955. By analogy this term is also used to refer to the first Sihanouk administration (1955-1970) during which this political organisation was in control of the government.

15. See Archives Nationales du Cambodge: RSC 30206, RSC-35269 and RSC 36434:

Sa Majesté et le Conseil des Ministres sont fermement résolus à prononcer l’interdiction pure et simple de la “Christian and Missionary Alliance” au Cambodge si les prescriptions auxquelles elle est soumise ne sont pas respectées par elle à l’avenir.

16. See Taylor 1964, 10-11:

Most important of all, the Mission has just received permission to work in this area—a miracle in these days of opposition! [...] They [the Thompsons] have requested permission to build proper quarters in the area from the military governor of the new province, and he said he is not opposed. The final decision will have to come from General Noul of Phnom Penh.

In the same article the author states that in 1964 there was one young Bunong who converted in Krong Teh, planning to go to Bible school the year after.

and drinking from the rice wine jar offered to the spirits, actions that were strictly forbidden by the Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries.

We may keep in mind this still fragmentary picture of a context of political obstacles together with the dynamism of ritual background found in Cambodia when turning to the missionary efforts on the Vietnamese side of the Annamite mountains. It was in fact over there that, escaping the consequences of war in their homelands at the beginning of the 1970s, the Cambodian Bunong started to turn to Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

## Spirits under gunfire: collateral effects of the Vietnam War

Talking to elderly Protestant Bunong about their conversion means listening to long accounts of how they fled their villages, escaping to Vietnam, and how they turned to the Christian god in those difficult days. The specific setting of these conversion stories is relevant not only to understand how Christianity first arrived among the Cambodian Bunong, but also to explore Bunong people's own explanations of how they came to convert.

Indeed, many of Mondulkiri's inhabitants, especially those living in villages situated close to the Ho Chi Minh trail and the Vietnamese border, had been strongly affected by war. The Vietnam War hit the Cambodian highlanders at the end of the 1960s and especially in 1970 when US President Nixon ordered bombings to destroy base areas identified as Viet Cong in Cambodia, targeting among others the so-called "fish hook" area in the south-eastern part of Mondulkiri province.<sup>18</sup>

According to a villager, Chhé Bjoan, a native from Bu Sra village, planes were in the sky every day during the period the Bunong commonly refer to as "B-52 Time". He remembers the moment he fled to Vietnam:

Bombings started around midnight and lasted until sunrise. The villagers from Bu Lu and from Bu Antron joined us. We left together. We were a lot of people. (Interview with Chhé Bjoan, Bu Sra, 2010)

A large part of the inhabitants of about ten Bunong villages that had been settled in this north-eastern area of Mondulkiri fled over to Duc Lap, also called Bu Teak, by

---

17. Compared to Cambodia, Protestant missionaries appear to have been rather well established in the Central highlands of Vietnam. Not only did the Smiths continue their work there, establishing in 1934 the second Christian and Missionary Alliance highland missionary station in Ban Mé Thuot among the Êdé, but the Thompsons also were welcomed on the other side of the border in 1966:

Unable to return to Cambodia [...] they have joined our ranks here in Vietnam. Their ministries will be very effective for [...] the Mnong, the tribe which the Thompsons have for years been working, spill into Vietnam. (*Alliance Witness*, Spring 1966, 16)

18. Operation Menu meant fourteen months of secret bombings (March 1969-May 1970) and 3630 B-52 plane attacks on targets in Cambodia (Shawcross 1987, 28). The operation on the "fish hook" area lasted from early May to end of June 1970.

that time.<sup>19</sup> Around ten kilometres away from their former villages, Duc Lap was a South Vietnamese resettlement camp established after the closing in 1969 of Sar Pa, a Civilian Indigenous Defence Group gathering surrounding villages, mostly Bunong.<sup>20</sup>

Under the South Vietnamese regime of general Nguyen van Thieu, around 52,000 highland people were resettled between 1970 and 1971 according to official US government reports (Clark 1988, 464-465).<sup>21</sup> Various forms of resettlement villages, also called “new life hamlets”, were conceived to receive people from cleared free-fire zones and to keep them away from the Communist threat. They appeared to be even more important in strategic border zones like the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Although South Vietnamese government sources claimed that the highlanders had chosen to join these camps of their own free will to escape communist slavery, there is, however, evidence brought to light by former resettled highlanders, that South Vietnamese soldiers had moved them, some even by force.<sup>22</sup>

### *Missionaries in the camps*

These resettlement camps seem to have been of particular interest to missionaries. By the time the effects of war had become more noticeable, the Christian missionaries' presence was also growing (Hickey 1982, 72). Besides the Christian and

---

19. Terms as used during the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975): Duc Minh district, Quang Duc province, (after 1975 Dak Lak province). Another part, mostly the more southern villages fled to Bu Bong (Kien Duc district, Quang Duc Province, close to the Bu Prang military post). As the described situations appear to have been quite similar, I will focus on the example of Duc Lap in this article. It is important to note that in several villages, some inhabitants stayed in Cambodia, e.g. in Lumpek, which had been attacked by Khmer Rouge soldiers, one part of the villagers was captured while another part succeeded in escaping across the border. Some people also returned to their village if it had not been destroyed, but all of them, sooner or later, had to follow the Khmer Rouge. By 1973 all the villages of this part of Mondulkiri had been emptied.

For further information on Mondulkiri under the Khmer Rouge, see Colm 2007.

20. According to Thomas Eban, interviewed in Greensboro (July 2010). The CIDGs were established in 1963 by the Special Forces as part of their counter-insurrection programme financed by the United States. They aimed at training para-military highlanders in order to prevent them from becoming the targets of communist propaganda. The first phase of the programme went from 1961-67 (establishment). The second one, from 1968-71 worked towards the integration of these forces into the Vietnamese army (Vietnamisation). The Bunong from Cambodia seem to have arrived too late to be integrated in these paramilitary units.

21. Nguyen van Thieu formed a military junta together with Nguyen Cao Ky that came to power in 1965 after the Ngo Dinh Diem regime (1953-1963). In 1967, Nguyen van Thieu became president and stayed at the head of South Vietnam almost until its fall in 1975. He ordered forced large-scale relocations of the highlanders in 1967. On the resettlement issue, see Hickey 1993, xxx-xxxi.

22. Interview by Thomas Pearson with Nay Jak, a refugee now living in Raleigh, North Carolina (Pearson 2009, 162).

Missionary Alliance, the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, created in 1956 by former Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary G.H. Smith and his son Stanley, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators (SIL) were also present in the highlands at that time (Reimer 1975, 568-570 quoted by Salemink 2003a, 213).<sup>23</sup>

More specifically in Bunong territory, evangelisation had little success before resettlement took place. According to an article published in 1964 in the Christian and Missionary Alliance publication *Jungle Frontiers*, despite the fact that students from Ban Mé Thuot Bible School had been going out to preach the Gospel in the remote area of Dak Song since 1950, the progress of evangelisation had been slow and discouraging (*Jungle Frontiers*, Summer 1964, 1).<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, one finds evidence that the camps' own existence has been working in favour of the missionaries. In one article, the author explains how people "[r]elocated by the government in large road-side settlements [...] were readily accessible" and "[...] ready to hear [God's] message" (*Jungle Frontiers*, Summer 1964, 4). Additionally, an American SIL missionary and linguist who had arrived in 1958 to work on the Mnong languages, specifically Bunong Buneurr, started his research in 1961 in a camp, Buon Ale-A, close to Ban Mé Thuot. According to this missionary's wife, it was a lot easier to work with the people all grouped together in one place rather than having to reach various remote villages (Personal communication, Charlotte, North Carolina, July 2010). Hence it was mainly in the context of such camps that Protestant Christianity began to spread among the Bunong.

When the refugees from Cambodia arrived in Vietnam in 1970, the resettlement villages were some of the few places that remained reachable for foreign missionaries, if not by road, then by helicopter.<sup>25</sup> The war had expanded to such an extent that Western evangelists only occasionally came to the camps. Nonetheless, some Protestant Bunong told me, not without pride, that they had met the American "teacher" who knew how to speak their language. However, most of them had come

---

23. Pearson adds the Southern Baptist Convention (Vietnam Baptist Mission) and the United World Mission (Pearson 2009, 147). The SIL began to work in South Vietnam in 1956, receiving authorisation from president Ngo Dinh Diem to establish a study programme in linguistics, in order to create literacy primers and, on the other hand, to translate the Bible into local languages, including some of those spoken in the Highlands, e.g. Mnong.

24. Dak Song is located close to the former colonial post called "Les Trois Frontières". A chapel was erected there in 1950 and in 1953 "a Vietnamese co-worker was placed there", *Jungle Frontiers*, Summer 1964, 1. The three borders (*trois frontières*) referred to in the name of the colonial post were the borders of the Indochinese entities: Cochinchina, Annam and Cambodia.

25. According to a Bunong Protestant from Vietnam now living in the US (interviewed in Charlotte, North Carolina, July 2010), after 1973, the year the peace-agreement was signed and also when the Communists gained power, there was only one airport in the area where it was still possible for foreign missionaries to land, that of Nien Co—or Nhon Co—camp, close to Quang Hang Kien Duc district, Quang Duc province.

into contact with Christianity mainly through fellow highland missionaries—some of them Êdé (from Ban Mé Thuot area) but also a number of Bunong—or through Vietnamese pastors.<sup>26</sup> For this reason it is worth taking a closer look at these early indigenous missionaries.

Many of the first-generation Cambodian Bunong Protestants mentioned that they had heard about Christianity through Mbrong, a Bunong pastor originally from the Dak Song area. According to his son, whom I met in North Carolina, Mbrong's career started when the French recruited him after he had completed the Franco-Montagnard school in the "Trois Frontières" area. During his work as a secretary for the colonial administration, Mbrong met a Protestant missionary who took him to Ban Mé Thuot to study at the local Bible school. He would have returned in 1961 to Quang Duc province in Vietnam to preach the Gospel among his fellow Bunong around Kinh Duc as in Bu Bong and Teak R'tih. One can imagine that this agent of a new kind of knowledge may have enjoyed a certain prestige when he came back from Ban Mé Thuot, where he had obtained new learning from foreigners.

According to an article printed in *Jungle Frontiers*, another way Protestantism had started to expand in this region was through a group of Bunong that had been treated in the leprosarium of Ban Mé Thuot (*Jungle Frontiers*, Summer 1964, 4-5).<sup>27</sup> There they had converted to Christianity before coming back to Teak R'tih in 1957.<sup>28</sup> In 1961, a few of these early converts took a Bible class before going out to preach to the nearby road-side settlements. Apparently some people then came to the chapel of Teak R'tih for help and once back home, decided to convert. This expansion of Christianity to surrounding camps in the district is described in Christian and Missionary Alliance reports as being related to the "ministry of healing".<sup>29</sup>

---

26. In 1973 a Bible School opened in Quang Hang and may have helped training local evangelists. In the absence of precise information about these Bunong teachers' training programmes and specific SIL positioning, it is probable that the indigenous missionaries also insisted in their evangelisation efforts on the stopping of ritual activities. The statements made in the Christian and Missionary Alliance magazines as well as the stories told by the converts leave this impression.

27. Financed by Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Mennonite Central Committee and American Leprosy Missions, Inc.

28. Situated in the Nien Co (Nhon Co) – Kien Duc district, Quang Duc province.

29. The articles in *Jungle Frontiers* (1964, 5 and 7) shed some light as to the number of newly converted Mnong:

They travelled 50 kilometers south where people wanted to believe. [...] 20 Mnong households in the strategic Hamlet had offered their fetishes to the flames. And 99 new believers were added to the Mnong Church through the simple preaching of two men with leprosy from the village of Dak R'tih.

The break has come in the Mnong! We pray that it will spread and deepen. We commend to you the approximately 800 Mnong Christians, of whom over 150 have been baptized [...].

These various descriptions suggest that different factors may have persuaded Bunong people to convert, which are not all mentioned in accounts given by Christian Bunong. For example, it is probable that the Christian emissaries' influence was strengthened by Western military power, by the efficiency of western medicine, and also by their assimilation into what may be described as new behaviours, conveyed by an educated local elite.<sup>30</sup> As an outcome of war, Christianity among highlanders has become a politically sensitive topic for discussion, with the Vietnamese and—to a lesser extent—the Cambodian governments regularly presenting it as a sign of former allegiance to the French or American invaders. Rather than ignoring the probable impact of these and other elements on the apparent success of evangelisation expeditions to the camps, I will draw closer attention here to the Bunong's ideas their regarding conversion.

### *The Christian god: a remedy to difficulties in performing rituals*

In the unfamiliar environment of the resettlement camps, the Cambodian Bunong had to deal with the losses of war that they had experienced. Even if not everybody saw their house burning, as did Chhé Laa, the villager quoted at the beginning of this article, most people had to leave their animals and their belongings behind without knowing what would happen to them, but fearing their killing or destruction, either by bombs or by soldiers. This sudden loss of parts of their household, and the fear of the possible harm they might have been exposed to, was described as very difficult by several Bunong depicting the time of their escape.

What becomes apparent in their stories is that the accidental destruction of a house meant far more to the animist villagers than a simple material loss, which is confirmed by their ritual practices. Not only does the Bunong house contain spirit-invested objects such as precious jars and gongs, it also includes the household rice stock, kept in the central cellar, which shelters an altar for the rice spirit (*njoh baa*). Furthermore, the main altar (*kuat njoh*), as well as the “head” of the house (*bôôk chuaanh*) and the fireplace (*lu- nak*) are all considered to be important intercessors with the spirits (*brah jaang*) and ancestors (*paan*).<sup>31</sup> At any given ceremony, all of these entities are addressed to summon the various spirits to join the feast and to support those who organised it. To forget to attend to even one of them is considered to be a lack of care. Similarly, if one or a few grains of rice drop by accident into the fire or into the water, according to animist Bunong, one has to apologise to the rice spirit, usually by sacrificing a chicken. Taking this into consideration, one may imagine the difficulty of purifying entire houses after their destruction by fire (*kuaaq unh chhaa chuaanh*).

---

30. A more thorough analysis of this question falls outside the scope of this article, I will thus develop it in detail in a forthcoming work.

31. Marked by a small piece of bamboo (*ngéy*), a basket used for rice picking (*chhiaaw*) and sometimes the jaw of a sacrificed animal, the “head” is located inside the house, outside the rice stock.



Thus, in the context of war, the Bunong not only confronted extreme disruption, but also had difficulty acting according to the rituals necessary to restore order. If the highland refugees were not immediately alert to performing a sacrifice to appease the spirits that had been hurt and left behind, when facing sickness or death, they came to worry about its causes and about how to provide the necessary ritual compensation. One woman whose village had been bombed remembered how, after arriving in Duc Lap, her mother lost several babies who died shortly after birth and did not know how to react to this misfortune. Similarly, Öw Laa, an elderly woman, talked about the situation she went through when her uncle got sick:

We went to see a [Bunong] healer who told us to return to the village to perform the purification ceremony required after the outbreak of fire in our house. We could not go back. We had almost no more animals to sacrifice. (Interview with Öw Laa, Bu Sra, 2009)

In fact, life in the camp appeared to have been quite distant from the villagers' everyday practices.<sup>32</sup> In my interviews, many people emphasised that they were not allowed to grow their own rice, nor could they keep animals in the camps, except perhaps for a few chickens, and had hardly any goods of value with them. Some Bunong, however, enumerated what had been distributed to them, at least during the first months, when they arrived in Duc Lap:

[...] we were given blankets and we stayed in tents. We did not do anything over there. Once a week we were given rice and canned food.  
[...] There were American soldiers who were looking after us. When they left, only the Vietnamese soldiers stayed. (Interview with Chhé Bjoan, Bu Sra, 2010)

Pieces of corrugated iron had been supplied and people could construct their own little shacks to replace the tents in which they had initially stayed.

While admitting on the one hand that the soldiers and some organisations took care of them, many of the former refugee villagers regret, however, that they could not do anything by themselves, emphasising their lack of freedom.<sup>33</sup> Not only was it almost impossible to return to their former villages, but to make matters worse, the

---

32. According to various accounts, during certain periods some families tried to work on a field close to the southern camp in Bu Bong, but these attempts were always quickly interrupted by war or forbidden by the authorities in order to prevent the villagers from coming into contact with the "communist threat".

33. The refugees used the Khmer word for "organisation" (*angkar*). They may have been referring to USAID representatives and Protestant organisations such as CAMA (the development arm of the Christian and Missionary Alliance). The particularities of life in refugee camps have been analysed by Michel Agier, who underlines how initial destruction is followed by a sort of imprisonment characterised by people's lack of autonomy and finally the refugees' quest for action (Agier 2002).

material and social contexts of the alienating resettlement camps were not suited to many of the Bunong's pressing ritual obligations. It was in this situation of minimal room for ritual manoeuvre that they came into contact with Christian missionaries.

In Öw Laa's story, when her uncle got sick back in Vietnam and the family could not find a way to make the necessary sacrifices, a group of Christians came to see them:

[...] they told us that if we joined their god, he would protect us and heal my uncle. In the beginning we did not want to stop drinking from the jar and having a good time but we were afraid of the sickness. The Christians came to pray in the morning and the same evening my uncle was healed. God had healed him, and we converted to Christianity.  
(Interview with Öw Laa, Bu Sra, 2009)

This is one of many similar stories about conversion I was told. Sometimes people did not specify what exactly the problem was in the first place, but very often they stressed that without animals to make a proper sacrifice, they relied on the Christian god's help and protection.

#### *One sacrifice, several interpretations*

Foreign Christian and Missionary Alliance missionaries had recognised the primordial place of ritual sacrifices in the highlander's spiritual practices.<sup>34</sup> In their evangelisation efforts, they insisted on the fact that their powerful god's assistance could be obtained without any material requests through prayer alone. This is an argument still commonly mentioned by Protestant Bunong today. For instance Pö Njéu, one of the church representatives in Bu Sra, explained that if one believed in the Almighty God, it was no longer necessary to sacrifice animals and offer "jar wine" to other gods to ask them for their support, since Jesus had spilled his blood to cover all of human sins.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the adoption of the missionaries' preaching, with biblical sacrifice presented as a solution to the human wrongs, there was probably a mismatch of categorical references between the Bunong and Western Evangelical narratives. While Christian dogma presents biblical sacrifice as freeing man from sin, thus conferring a sense of interiority, it appears to be more likely that the early Bunong Protestants saw this bloodshed as atonement for former misdeeds.

Hence their conversion may have been, at least partly, a reaction to a ritual need to reorder the world and to make it inhabitable again. This explanation seems relevant if we consider the context in which the first Cambodian Bunong turned to Christianity and furthermore if we take a closer look at the only village where nobody converted during their exile in Vietnam.

The villagers of Bu Chéng had followed similar war itineraries as had their other fellow Bunong and have certainly also come into contact with Christians. However,

---

34. Interview with Betty Mitchell in *Living in exile*, documentary movie, University of North Carolina, 1994.

35. "Jar wine" is a local alcohol produced by the fermentation of rice flour in closed jars.

none of the villagers of Bu Chéng had turned to Christianity. I found it revealing that one difference that emerged after extended talks about the troubled period of wartime resettlement was that these villagers had been ritually preparing their escape. As a case in point, Mé Chet, a native of Bu Chéng village, reported that her father, Chhé Ngrach, who was an important elder in the village, had planned their flight in advance.<sup>36</sup> Before leaving, this elder, followed by other villagers later on, had performed the “separating oneself from the charcoals, the stones of the fireplace, the ashes and the dog fleas” ceremony (*ndlaaoi chhaa ooyu lu-nak un h bôôk chhii chhô*) explaining to the spiritual agents in the house that he and his other family members had to leave but that they could not take them:

Here is the blood of a chicken, the head of the “jar wine”, to say good-bye to you Rice, to you Paddy, to separate from the Charcoals of the Fireplace. We are escaping. Who knows if someone will set you on fire, will hit you Jars, will hurt you, will destroy you once we’ve left you behind? We don’t know. Don’t be angry with us! (Interview with Mé Chet, Bu Sra, 2009)

After recalling her father’s incantation, Mé Chet added that it would have been better if they had performed a separate ceremony for each different spiritual entity but that they did not have much time and that it was better to warn the spirits, even doing just a little, than to do nothing at all.<sup>37</sup>

Apparently, the family also took their altar with them, carrying it all along the way to Kien Duc and Quang Hang camps. They were thus able to keep communicating with the spirits through the altar and seek continual protection from them. Besides, Pô Tenn, the village elder’s son, mentioned that Chhé Ngrach possessed magic plants and stones (*gun-nglaar*) that might have strengthened his father’s protective powers and influence as he was enjoining Bu Chéng people to continue performing animist rituals in their own way as well as they could. What becomes apparent here is not only the possible flexibility of ritual obligations, but also the strength of people’s spiritual logic in their decision-making. The example of Bu Chéng villagers can be seen as putting into perspective the missionaries’ importance in situations where spiritual practices were still sustainable and strongly adhered to.

The paths of conversion as narrated by former refugees provide some insight into the multiplicity of factors which may have influenced and contributed to the choice to convert to Christianity. Additionally, the major disruptions caused by

---

36. As a former intermediary between the Bunong and the French colonial administrators, he had in fact been alerted that the Khmer Rouge were pursuing him. His brother, who was a secretary under the French and had an administrative function under the Sangkum Reastr Niyum government, had been killed shortly before, since he had not fitted the Khmer Rouge ideal of a rural Khmer, uncorrupted by foreign influence. He thus decided to look for refuge among relatives living in Vietnam, close to Kien Duc.

37. The verb “to do” (*jann*) is commonly used in Bunong to talk about “doing a ritual”.

war affected the relations between men and their surrounding world, animals and artefacts included, and seem crucial in Bunong people's decision to search for a different channel to restore order.

While the potential healing effect of biomedicine as well as its Western origin may have played a part in the highland inhabitants' decision to follow the white man's religion, the possible relevance of the Protestant messages to the Bunong's world vision and spiritual logic are likewise important. According to the missionary's point of view, the Christian message had to result in an individual inner change; on the other hand, to the Bunong, conversion was probably more of a change in praxis. Since a supreme sacrifice had already been performed, one only needed to orally address prayers to this stronger god.<sup>38</sup> At the outset, the new converts seem to have retained a similar spiritual logic, still depending on orthopraxy, but related to a new god and defined according to new rules: praying as well as refraining from drinking and smoking.

Having focussed on the very specific context of the refugee camps, in the last part I will question the part that ritual practice may have played when Protestant Christianity was introduced to the Cambodian highlands.

## The sporadic spread of Protestantism in post-war Mondulkiri

Between the Christian Bunong refugees' return to Mondulkiri in 1986 and the Cambodian and Western missionaries' arrival starting at the end of the 1990s, Protestant religion appeared in a few villages across the province, but without giving rise to any large-scale expansion. As the majority of the Bunong who had fled to Vietnam were resettled in Cambodia in Dak Dam and Bu Sra, it was also in these two communes that Christianity—both Protestantism and Catholicism—took root since the Bunong had been brought back to Mondulkiri. According to former Bunong refugees, Cambodian government representatives of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (or PRK, 1979-1989) repatriated them from the various places where they had settled since the end of the Vietnam War, which was also the end of the South Vietnamese camps. In fact, after 1975 some of the Cambodian Bunong had followed their relatives from Vietnam to their former villages, while others had been resettled in cooperatives.<sup>39</sup>

---

38. The change in practice is marked by the Bunong expression "to pray with the mouth only" (*mbö chööm maa mbuong dööm*).

39. This was especially the case for those who had been staying in Quang Hang camp and went on, at least at the beginning, to Dak Ndrung, where they describe having done organised work. A few people had to spend some time in re-education camps for having occupied an official position under the former regime. Depending on the position, this could vary between a few weeks for simple soldiers or paramilitaries, to some years, as for former officials in charge of the Ministry of Ethnic Minorities, like Pierre K'briu, a Catholic Sré from Vietnam (interview July 2010, Greensboro).

When people started to come back—some from Khmer Rouge camps and others from Vietnam—they were not allowed, however, to return to their original villages because of the still unstable situation in Cambodia at that time. Even if the country had been “liberated” from four years of Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) by soldiers of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, fighting was still continuing and Mondulkiri’s rough terrain was particularly suited for guerrilla warfare. While the returnees were generally regrouped in protected communes, most of those coming back from Vietnam were placed in the area of Bu Sra and Dak Dam.

While it looks as if the majority of these Bunong returning from the neighbouring country had converted to Christianity, it is very difficult to establish clear figures on how many people were repatriated and how many considered themselves to be Christian at that time.<sup>40</sup> What appears to be clear, however, is that most of the Protestant returnees chose to stay in Bu Sra, in Cambodia.<sup>41</sup> According to Pö Neen, the former pastor of Lumpek, a village inside of Bu Sra commune, immediately after coming back to Mondulkiri they started with only eight families who met under a tree for Sunday prayer.

#### *Bunong Protestants on their own: few restrictions and little support*

Although under the PRK freedom of religion was officially restricted, the regime’s Khmer civil servants, who had been sent to the area to establish administrative control, stayed mostly in the provincial capital and in model communes in the south, leaving many of the surrounding indigenous dignitaries some freedom

---

40. According to information obtained during my fieldwork, most of them had become Protestant; in two former villages people had become Catholic and one village (mentioned above) did not count any Christians.

41. According to Pö Hil, pastor of one of the Protestant churches in Bu Sra, among approximately eighty families who had come back from Vietnam, there were around 300 Christians. This number is most probably drawn from his church member lists. It is not clear whether this number includes the approximately ten Catholic families that would have returned to Mondulkiri (settled in Bu Sra and Dak Dam) as reported by Gérald Vogin, a priest with the Missions étrangères de Paris (interviewed in Phnom Penh, February 2008). While a total of eighty families corresponds approximately to 400 people, according to a former employee of the Department of Planning in Mondulkiri, there would have been 700 people brought back from three Vietnamese provinces: Dak Lak (now living in Bu Sra), Dak Nong (now living in Bu Sra and Dak Dam), Song Bäh (few people, now living in other districts of Mondulkiri province). In this case, it would be plausible that the number advanced by Pö Hil only includes people resettled in Bu Sra. It remains difficult to verify these figures, as there are no data available from this period at the Department of Planning.

Only three Protestant families would have settled in Dak Dam.

in decision-making (Guérin *et al.*, 2003, 119-129).<sup>42</sup> In 1988, the commune chief of Bu Sra—a fellow Bunong—thus gave permission to the first small group of Protestants to celebrate Christmas and to build a church.

According to one of the first Protestant Bunong, in this initial period they were quite on their own, without much official church or missionary support backing them. In fact, the years under PRK as well as a good part of the 1990s have been generally described by the inhabitants of Mondulkiri as a time of little foreign interference besides the presence of Vietnamese soldiers.<sup>43</sup> However, after weekly church prayers, a few Bunong men went out to the surrounding villages to talk about their new god.

While each story about how people came to convert to Christianity in the few villages where Protestantism appeared in the decade after 1986 has unique characteristics, I have chosen two as a representative example.

### *The incidental appeal of the Protestant's form of communication with God*

Döen, a Protestant man from Dak Dam who had converted in Vietnam, told me about the support the Christian villagers gave to a woman in Bu Heam, a village which is also called “Yesu village” today because almost all the people who live there have become Christian:

Pik Bum had died a bad death—he had been killed by a falling tree. Villagers asked his aunt to burn all of his belongings. He was a rich man—he had an elephant, buffaloes, cows, and jars—and his aunt didn't want to burn everything, to throw everything away. She was excluded from the village and had to live in the forest. She had heard about the Christians, that we were not afraid of bad death. She contacted us, we went to see her. We told her about God and she converted. (Interview with Döen, Dak Dam, 2009)

---

42. A circular from the People's Revolutionary Council, entitled “Concerning the implementation of the Policy on religion” signed on 5 December 1989 by Heng Samrin says on Point 3 that freedom of religion is to:

depend on the people and the masses in order to help block and scatter all the ruses of the enemy which use religion as a means to endanger the united cause of the people and the masses.

It continues on Point 4 to state that:

Clergy or religious organizations do worthwhile activities for the nation and the people. Those clergy or religious organizations are protected. Any clergy or religious organization operating illegally, doing activities contrary to the advantages of the people and the nation must accept the responsibility of the law. (Translated and quoted by Slocumb 2003, 180)

43. Even if villagers from Bu Sra reported on new infrastructure appearing in the 1980s and 1990s, such as a school and a health centre, they were very basic and not built in smaller villages. The first foreign NGOs only appeared in the beginning of the 1990s (Lutheran World Service first and some years later Médecins du Monde and Nomad).

Although in this situation the context did not make it impossible for Pik Bum's aunt to follow the requested ritual behaviour, as it seemed to have been the case for people exiled in Vietnam, she still decided to look for a different solution.

Confronted with a "bad death" (*ndrééng*)—characterised by its sudden, unexpected and often violent expression and recurrently explained as resulting from a serious offence against the spirit world—Pik Bum's aunt was facing important ritual obligations. In addition to a first purification ceremony, necessitating the sacrifice of a cow, a duck, a dog and a pig, the dead person's belongings must be burned. Exclusion from the village is another consequence as the Bunong describe the contagiousness of a bad death like an epidemic, polluting the environment of the deceased person and everything coming near it.<sup>44</sup>

It was in this particular set of circumstances that the aunt of the man who had died a bad death called the Protestants from Dak Dam. She was not only facing one of the strongest ritual requirements but was also compelled to live outside of the village context, exiled in the forest. She had already heard of the Christian returnees earlier, as they had been coming to the village to talk about God, but by then they had not attracted anybody's interest. It was only in a moment of relative social exclusion and material precariousness that the Protestants' example started to look appealing to this woman from Bu Heam. If she had not been struck by the Protestants' ability to bypass ritual sacrifices, she probably would not have thought of relying on them in this particular situation. One may thus consider that for the surrounding Bunongs these Christians had replaced ritual practices by oral prayer and were also probably following a new set of rules.

A different way in which Protestantism spread even further away from the two Christian communes was through young men from Bu Sra who converted to Christianity with their parents while living in Vietnam and who later served in the Cambodian national army.<sup>45</sup> While they were living in the provincial capital of Sen Monorom, these Bunong recruits gathered on Sundays to pray together in one of their parents' homes. It was in this context that Ngreup, a Bunong soldier from Kaev Seima district first came into contact with Christians.<sup>46</sup> He decided to join his friends and after some time a Protestant leader from Bu Sra came to the city to convert him.

Similarly, Thomas Pearson, an anthropologist studying Christian highlanders from Vietnam who have taken refuge in the United States, reports that several of them

---

44. According to my field observations (2009, 2010) the ceremony of purification after a bad death (*kuaač ndrééng*) is still common among animist villagers in Bu Sra while village exclusion seems to have become rare.

45. According to my fieldwork interviews (Bu Sra 2009), most of the young men were enlisted in the army in the 1980s.

46. Kaev Seima is the most westerly district of Mondulhiri province, bordering Kratie province.

had become familiar with Christianity as adolescents, when they went to school in one of the highland centres. Like Ngreup, these young people had left their families and were detached from the daily practices of village life. Disconnected from their usual socio-environmental context, the Protestant way of meeting and celebrating together therefore probably had a stronger appeal for them. The question that remains is precisely how these converted individuals reintegrated into their villages with their new-found god.

*The variable impact of new converts on returning to their villages*

The exiled aunt's return to Bu Heam after a few years was described as an uneasy one at the beginning, since several people condemned her nonconformance with ritual. However, there happened to be another case of bad death in the village. Ngleutch, whose family was affected by bad death, recalled how they decided to convert after having tried to gather all that they could for the ceremonies. Following their Protestant relative's example, they also called the Dak Dam group for support. Little by little, Ngleutch's wife's three sisters and their families joined them and ten years later the large majority of the villagers in Bu Heam, more or less closely related to each other, had become Protestants as well.

Apart from the socio-environmental vulnerability that may have helped to make the Protestant behaviour appealing, in Bu Heam as well as in other stories told about Vietnam, the practice of Christianity has spread from one family to another through various types of relations. It would lead us too far to venture into questions of kinship, but it appeared that in a cross-religious wedding matrilocality determined which religion the couple would adopt. When a man marries a Protestant woman, he goes to live with his wife's family during the first years and thus becomes a Protestant.<sup>47</sup> In a similar way, when one of several sisters living close to each other became Protestant in Bu Heam, it did not take much time for her close siblings' families to follow.

A final example of adopting Christianity by following others is that of people who own elephants jointly. The Bunong believe that elephants possess special abilities and that whenever a customary rule has been broken, the elephants notice it before anybody in the village and start behaving strangely. When this happens, apologies must be made to the elephant and to his owners through a religious ritual. It is thus unconceivable for Bunong that within the same group of joint owners, some follow the traditional ways and expect an animist sacrifice to be performed, while others would expect an apology in the form of a prayer according to Christian practice. Hence, should an elephant owner consider to convert to Christianity, the matter must

---

47. When going through the different church lists of Bu Sra—Protestant and Catholic alike—it became apparent that many of the new converts were men who had married Christian women and adopted their religion. The decrease in the observance of matrilocality in recent years has had an impact on the frequency of conversion in this way.



be discussed first between the joint owners and a collective decision will be reached to either convert all together or keep following animist practice.<sup>48</sup>

While these situations show how initial conversion spread because of the ritual changes it had caused, the opposite also occurred. When Ngreup returned home to Kaev Seima after his military service, he asked his family to follow his conversion to the Christian god. However, they remained the only Protestants in his village. After Ngreup's death about ten years ago, his wife and children said that they stopped practising for a while. It was only after being contacted again by Protestants from Bu Sra that the children built a small straw church behind their house, but Ngreup's family is still the only one to gather there on Sundays. If we look at Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary reports on conversions among Bunong in Vietnam in the early 1950s before mass resettlement, they also underline the difficulties the few converts had when they went back to their villages after passing by the chapel in the market town of Dak Song. They were frequently described as falling back into the local majority's ritual practices.

Rather than seeing conversion as an act of particular courage and of rejection of regular village life, as is common in missionary reports, this change more often seems to have been facilitated by some kind of socio-environmental disruption. Although in some cases fellow villagers, especially close relatives, followed the new Protestants in their practices addressed to their god who did not ask for sacrifices; in others the converts returned to animist practices, in which sacrifices were still actively practised and defended.

Through these examples from the 1980s to the early 1990s, the complex character of a declared religious change becomes particularly apparent. Conversions seem to be much more circumstantial than during the Vietnam War, when many people were facing similar troubles in similar settings. Back in Mondulhiri, the geographically limited presence of Protestant representatives, together with the contrast between some individuals, who were momentarily removed from their usual socio-environmental relations, and their co-villagers leads to a much more subtle picture. Finally, this period is interesting since the expansion of Christianity took place in the Bunong's familiar environment and does not seem to have been directly influenced by foreign missionaries and the western order they represent. This makes the change in ritual practices among local Protestants appear to be a more decisive factor in the conversion process.



---

48. Interviews with an exiled Bunong Protestant missionary from Vietnam (Charlotte, July 2010), a Protestant Bunong elephant-owner from Bu Sra (October 2010) and a French Catholic missionary (Paris, 2010).

My attempt to outline a historical sketch of Protestantism among the Cambodian Bunong has engaged in simultaneously exploring different missionary encounters and in reflecting upon various factors involved in the conversion process. Since I have relied on missionary accounts and on conversion stories, an unavoidable question concerns the significance one can give to this specific type of testimonies. I have tried to look at these narratives as expressing arguments which might have been meaningful for the Bunong without, however, agreeing with the sense of inner change given by the Western missionaries. While I consider that the Bunong made the decision to convert with reference to their own spiritual logic, I have aimed to shed some light on the sometimes very restricted room for choice by resituating the conversions in their larger socio-environmental contexts. When the space for ritual practices, especially sacrifice, became limited, the Christian missionaries' insistence on the power of words must have seemed more appealing.

While during the colonial era and Sihanouk's post-independence "Sangkum Reastr Niyum" period, Protestant missionaries were very limited in their outreach to the inhabitants of Cambodia's North East, the few existing reports portray cordial encounters with the Bunong. Rather than having been able to draw the Bunong into their ways of doing, the foreign Christian and Missionary Alliance representatives appear to have been integrated in the villagers' ceremonial practices. In this sense, a seemingly well-functioning ritual life along with the presence of very few missionaries may help to explain the absence of Protestant Bunong in Mondulkiri during these periods.

By contrast, Christian missionaries often described the turbulent times of war as having opened the South Vietnamese highlands to them, with governmental resettlement politics facilitating their work. While Protestant outreach was indeed linked to American military power and to medical support, conversion cannot be explained by these reasons alone. The refugees' disrupted orthopraxy appears then as another important factor that potentially contributed, to the missionaries' success.

In post Khmer-Rouge Cambodia, the Bunong Protestants seemed neither to have been restricted by the communist government, nor to have received much external missionary support. While evangelisation efforts were relatively modest until the end of the 1990s, sporadic conversions here and there were mostly contingent both on a Christian presence or proximity and on a frequent situation of social disorder, for instance a separation or an exclusion from the village context.

The effort to set these initial phases of conversion to Christianity into context is useful to understand how such a change might have initially affected the first generation of Bunong converts, that is the present elderly local Protestants. Conversely, it would be interesting to go further into the question of the indigenous Protestants' relations not only with the Bunong animists but also with their environment. The Christian missionaries' endeavour to lead the Bunong to redefine the function and meaning of spiritual agents and material objects, such as sacrificial meat, has to be understood as a complex process. W. Keane has for instance shown the "common

difficulties in distinguishing signs, objects, and subjects, and how these are to be assigned their proper values” (Keane 1996, 138), relying on discussions between Sumbanese Protestants, converted at the beginning of the twentieth century by Dutch Calvinists, and their neighbours who still adhere to ritual practices. Among the Protestant Bunong, addressing a god considered to be more powerful, the use of words seems to have replaced the offering of sacrifices. However, it remains to be seen how local Christians living close to animist Bunongs define themselves in their milieu and how they relate to animist components or concepts of Bunong culture such as precious jars or traditional beliefs regarding elephants. The recent influence of Christian and non-confessional NGOs, as well as of Buddhist Khmers, who are increasingly settling down in the highlands due to land speculation and the expansion of large-scale concessions, adds some complexity to this already knotty question.

## Acknowledgements

A first version of this paper was presented at the 31st Conference of the International Society for Sociology of Religion (Aix-en-Provence, 3 July 2011) in the panel « Evangelism in South-East Asia: the State of Research ». I thank its organisers, Pascal Bourdeaux and Jérémy Jammes, for giving me the opportunity to participate in the panel and for their useful comments. I am also grateful to Vanina Bouté and Rita Bernardes for their critical reading of this paper and advice.

## Bibliography

---

AGIER, Michel

2002 — *Aux bords du monde, les réfugiés*, Paris, Flammarion, 186p.

BAIRD, Ian G.

2009 — “Identities and space. The geographies of religious change amongst the Brao in Northeastern Cambodia”, *Anthropos*, n°104, pp. 457-468.

BOULBET, Jean

1975 — *Paysans de la forêt*, Paris, EFEO, 144p.

CLARKE, Jeffrey J.

1988 — *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973*, Washington D.C., Center of Military History, United States Army.

COLM, Sara and SIM, Sorya

2007 — *Khmer Rouge Purges in the Mondul Kiri Highlands. Region 105*, Phnom Penh, Documentation Center of Cambodia, 123p.

COMAROFF, Jean and COMAROFF, John

1991 — *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South-Africa*, Chicago, London, University of Chicago Press, 2 vol., 141p. and 588p.

Comité Central du Front & PRCK

1980 — “Circulaire concernant la mise en œuvre de la politique sur la religion”, n°453/80 KB, signé et tamponné président Heng Samrin, Phnom Penh, 5 décembre 1980.

CONDOMINAS, Georges

2003 — *Nous avons mangé la forêt*, Paris, Mercure de France, 495p. [1st edition 1957]

2006 — *L'exotique est quotidien*, Paris, Plon, 663p.

CORMACK, Don

2001 — *Killing fields, living fields. An unfinished portrait of the Cambodian Church—the Church that would not die*, Mill Hill, London/Grand Rapids, Michigan, Monarch Books, 463p. [1st edition 1965]

DESCOLA, Philippe

1992 — “Societies of nature and the nature of society”, A. Kuper (eds.), *Conceptualizing society*, London, New York, Routledge, pp. 107-126

GUÉRIN, Mathieu; HARDY, Andrew; NGUYEN Van Chinh and TAN BOON HWEE, Stan

2003 — *Des montagnards aux minorités ethniques. Quelle intégration nationale pour les habitants des hautes terres du Viêt Nam et du Cambodge?*, Paris/Bangkok, l'Harmattan/IRASEC, 354p.

GUÉRIN, Mathieu

2008 — *Paysans de la forêt à l'époque coloniale. La pacification des aborigènes des hautes terres du Cambodge (1863-1940)*, Rennes, Association d'Histoire des Sociétés Rurales, diff.: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 356p.

HAYAMI, Yoko

- 1996 — “Karen tradition according to Christ or Bouddha: the implications of multiple reinterpretations for a minority ethnic group in Thailand”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, n°27, 2, pp. 334-349.

HICKEY, Gerald C.

- 1971 — *Some recommendations affecting the prospective role of Vietnamese highlanders in economic development*, Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 66p.  
 1982 — *Free in the Forest. Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands 1954-1976*, London, New Haven, Yale University Press, 350p.  
 1993 — *Shattered world. Adaptation and survival among Vietnam's highland peoples during the Vietnam War*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 297p.

JAMMES, Jérémy

- 2011 — “A space of conversion and protestation in process. Utopian discourses in evangelical churches (Center of Vietnam and North-East of Cambodia)”, paper presented at the 31st International Society for Sociology of Religion (ISSR), Aix-en-Provence.

KAMMERER, Cornelia Ann

- 1990 — “Customs and Christian conversion among Akha highlanders of Burma and Thailand”, *American Ethnologist*, n° 17(2), pp. 277-291.

KEANE, Webb

- 1996 — “Materialism, missionaries, and modern subjects”, Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Conversions to modernities*, New York, London, Routledge, pp. 137-170

MAURICE, Albert-Marie

- 1993 — *Les Mnong des hauts-plateaux Centre-Vietnam*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2 vol., 458p. & 745p.

MEYER, Birgit

- 1996 — “Modernity and enchantment: the image of the devil in popular African Christianity”, Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Conversion to modernities. The globalization of Christianity*, New York, London, Routledge, pp. 199-230.

PEARSON, Thomas

- 2009 — *Missions and Conversion. Creating the Montagnard-Dega Refugee Community*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 241p.

PONCHAUD, François

- 2006 — *La cathédrale dans la rizière. Histoire de l'Église au Cambodge*, Tours, CDL, 378p.

ROBBINS, Joel

- 2001 — “Ritual communication and linguistic ideology. A reading and partial reformulation of Rappaport's theory of ritual”, *Current Anthropology*, 2001, n°5, pp. 591-614.

SALEMINK, Oscar

- 1997 — “The king of fire and the Vietnamese ethnic policy in the Central Highlands”, K. Kampe and D. McCaskill (eds), *Development or Domestication? Indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia*, Chiang Mai, Silksworm Books, pp. 488-535.

- 2003a — *The ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders, a Historical Contextualisation, 1850-1990*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 383p.
- 2003b — "Enclosing the highlands: socialist, capitalist and protestant conversions of Vietnam's Central highlands", *RCSA Conference: The politics of the Commons, Chiang Mai University, July 2003 (invited plenary speaker)*, available online at <http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/archive/00001142>.
- 2009 — "Is Protestant conversion a form of protest? Urban and upland Protestants in South East Asia", Julius Bautista and Francis Khek Gee Lim (eds), *Christianity and the State in Asia. Complicity and Conflict*, London, New York, Routledge, pp. 36-58.
- SHAWCROSS, William
- 1979 — *Sideshow. Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*, New York, Pocket Books, 464p.
- SLOCOMB, Margaret
- 2003 — *The People's Republic of Kampuchea. The Revolution after Pol Pol*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 369p.
- SUNQUIST, Scott W.
- 2001 — *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity, Cambridge*, Eerdmans, 937p.
- TAPP, Nicholas
- 1989 — "The impact of missionary christianity upon marginalized ethnic minorities: the case of the Hmong", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. XX, n°1, pp. 70-95.
- UK, Krishna
- 2011 — *Living Amidst Remnants of War. Livelihood and Survival Strategies of a Jorai Village in Northeast Cambodia*, PhD thesis in Social Anthropology, Darwin College, University of Cambridge, 186p.
- VOGEL, Sylvain
- 2011 — *Aspects de la culture traditionnelle des Bunoong du Mondulkiri*, Phnom Penh, Tuk Tuk Éditions, 194p.
- WILLAIME, Jean-Pierre
- 2001 — "Les recompositions internes du monde protestant: protestantisme 'établi' et protestantisme 'évangélique'", Jean-Pierre Bastian, Françoise Champion, and Kathy Rousselet (eds), *La globalisation du religieux*, Paris, l'Harmattan, pp. 171-196.

## Sources

- ADE, Mildred
- 1964 — "Beyond the smoke of sacrifice", *Jungle Frontiers*, Winter 1964, pp. 6-7.
- SMITH, Gordon H.
- 1942 — *The Blood Hunters*, Chicago, The Moody Bible Press, 140p.
- 1947 — *The Missionary and Anthropology*, Chicago, The Moody Bible Press, 159p.

SMITH, Gordon H. and SMITH, Laura I.

2003 — *Light in the Jungle*, Chicago, Moody Press, 41p.

TAYLOR, Harry M.

1964 — “The Mnongs must hear the Gospel”, *Alliance Witness*, 29 April 1964, pp. 10-12.

THOMPSON, Carl E.

1957a — “The rest of the story”, *Alliance Witness*, 24 April 1957, pp. 9-10.

1957b — “Deep in Cambodian Tribes Country”, *Alliance Witness*, 28 August 1957, pp. 9-10.

---

Catherine Scheer

PhD Student, Centre Asie du Sud-Est,  
Unité mixte de recherche 8170, CNRS-EHESS