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Dharmawara Mahathera, Sihanouk, and the Cultural Interface of Cambodia's Cold War Relations with India

John A. Marston*

Following Heonik Kwon, this article explores the social and cultural underpinnings of the Cold War (and Cambodia's stance of neutrality in relation to it) as illustrated through the life of a colorful Cambodian monk, Dharmawara Mahathera. Long resident in India, Dharmawara became a confidant of Norodom Sihanouk as the latter negotiated independence and Cambodia's new geopolitical realities. Dharmawara was one point of connection between Sihanouk and India at the time Sihanouk was drawn to a position of neutrality and to the Non-Aligned Movement associated with Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai, and his story illuminates some of the cultural interface underlying the politics. He would assume a profile in emerging institutions of international Buddhism, such as the World Fellowship of Buddhists, which in their own way related to developing geopolitics. He subsequently attracted the attention of American diplomats in Cambodia in ways that illustrate something of how the Cold War came to be negotiated on the ground. His tensions with the Cambodian monastic hierarchy help us better understand the latter's role at a historical juncture. I argue that Dharmawara helps us understand Sihanouk's emerging philosophy of "Buddhist socialism."

Keywords: Dharmawara Mahathera, Norodom Sihanouk, Jawaharlal Nehru, Cold War, neutrality, Cambodia-India relations, Cambodian Buddhism, Indian Buddhism

Heonik Kwon, in formulating a new way of looking at the Cold War, has advocated "turning our attention from geopolitical to social and cultural dimensions" of the period (Kwon 2010, 32) for a more nuanced, interpersonal vision of the historical transition. In this article, with a biographical focus, I offer a close reading of the role of the Cambodian Buddhist monk Dharmawara Mahathera, an often contradictory transnational figure connected to political elites in both India and Cambodia. With his movements between India and Cambodia, Bandung and Washington, Dharmawara illuminates something of the

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moment Cambodia achieved independence and its young king, Norodom Sihanouk, came to assume a stance of neutrality. Dharmawara, above and beyond his contributions as a Buddhist writer and institution builder, was a colorful figure who captured the imagination of many religious and political actors—albeit representing seemingly different things to different people. His personal drama can serve as a lens for examining how social and cultural practices formed a dimension of geopolitics at a point of historical conjuncture and the ways by which, in practice, individuals maneuvered both cultural and political aspects of an evolving geopolitical constellation. It gives a perspective on the Cambodian monastic hierarchy at the time of independence and emerging institutions of international Buddhism.

In *The Other Cold War*, Kwon (2010) formulates a major rethinking of the theory of the Cold War, addressing in particular the limitations of conceiving of it as a unitary phenomenon and calling for a “multidimensional, multifocal” theoretical approach. Such an approach would recognize the underlying ambiguities in the very definition of “Cold War” and the range of realities it represented in practice, from region to region and at different social levels: “The history of the global cold war consists of a multitude of these locally specific historical realities and variant human experiences, and this view conflicts with the dominant image of the cold war as a single, encompassing geopolitical order” (Kwon 2010, 6–7). Part of this rethinking involves a shift in focus away from the state and its actors to the social and cultural realities growing out of the era. Kwon writes: “We need to develop an alternative mode of narration, one that incorporates but does not exclusively privilege the state’s perspective and agency” (Kwon 2010, 19). His work is often in dialogue with postcolonial criticism and the theory of cultural globalization; like them, he is concerned with changing discursive regimes as they relate to agency from below and above. At the same time, he calls attention to the ways in which these theoretical schools have ignored the “bipolar order” that evolved out of the end of colonialism. Kwon, an anthropologist, is ultimately concerned with the most local grassroots meaning of the Cold War, such as in his work on politics surrounding the dead in Vietnam and Korea. While also influenced by anthropology, I do not go so far; the social world represented in this study is largely that of elites, broadly defined. But I likewise take a step away from the state-centered view of the Cold War, in the belief that this provides a new vantage point to historical events that would otherwise be invisible.

The post-independence period of Cambodian history has often been framed from the perspective of realism as a school in the field of international relations—the frame, as Kwon tells us, for much of Cold War analysis. Michael Leifer’s 1967 study of Cambodia, in this mode, depicted the country as an actor coming into play with a community of nations, developing its position of neutrality in the framework of geopolitical realities.

The newly independent country, in his vision, struggled to secure itself in the face of the Cold War order and the presence of the larger countries, Thailand and Vietnam, on its borders. Thus, Sihanouk, who soon abdicated to play a more active political role, understood from the beginning the need to position the country as neutral; contact with India moved him in the direction of political philosophies promoted by Jawaharlal Nehru:

Following a visit by Indian Prime Minister Nehru in November, 1954, Sihanouk began to see that, by following the example of Nehru's neutral way, he could avoid incurring the displeasure of Communist China. . . . Sihanouk seemed particularly receptive to the notion of a league of peaceful states committed to neither bloc. . . . In March, 1955, Sihanouk visited Prime Minister Nehru in New Delhi. A joint communiqué issued on this occasion expressed Sihanouk's appreciation of India's approach to world problems and India's willingness to assist Cambodia in whatever ways it could. (Leifer 1967, 61)

Sihanouk readily affiliated himself with the Non-Aligned Movement and attended the 1955 Bandung Conference.

This overarching account is consistent with the way many historians have written about the period and Cambodia's stance of neutrality following independence (Jose 1993, 38–44; Osborne 1994, 94–95; Gunn 2018, 417–419). Sihanouk's position of neutrality figures prominently in his statements at the time and later. He would write, after he was deposed in a 1970 coup, that he had rejected membership in the US-dominated Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, "because such an arrangement was contrary to the pledge of neutrality accepted by Cambodia at the 1954 Geneva Conference, and which I was to reaffirm at the Bandung Conference in April 1955" (Sihanouk 1973, 75). Cambodia's constitution was amended in 1957 to define neutrality as "Non-commitment to a military Alliance or ideological bloc" (Leifer 1967, 83).

At the same time, Cambodia's economy was small and agriculture based, and the country remained dependent on foreign aid as it developed infrastructure and made the gesture of moving toward modernization. Neutrality can mean, in practice, a range of things; and, as Cambodia watchers have often pointed out, Sihanouk's involved not withdrawing from the theater of the Cold War but playing off different powers against one another—a tightrope act that proved, ultimately, unsustainable. All this provides an essential frame for viewing the period—something, to return to Kwon's phrase, which must be incorporated in our narrative, even as our analysis gives a less privileged role to the state. Beyond this, we are concerned with the interpersonal and cultural dimensions of how Cambodia's independence, Sihanouk's stance of neutrality, and the response of Washington were negotiated.

Pre-India

While significant gaps and ambiguities underlie much of what we know about Dharmawara, a basic narrative emerges. Dharmawara (née Ouk Bellong) was born in the late nineteenth century (variously reported as 1889 or 1895) to a family with connections to the court and French authorities. He was in one of the first cohorts of the Cambodian school of colonial administration and completed exams to enter colonial service in 1918. Bellong held a variety of provincial administrative posts in the colonial bureaucracy from January 1919, from clerk to trainee judge to class four judge in Kampong Svay District, Kampong Thom. He then worked in administrative positions in different provinces, eventually achieving the post of *balat srok* (which at the time meant assistant district governor) in Banteay Meas, Kampot, in March 1925. A few months later, in July, he was made district chief in Prey Chor District, Kampong Cham, and served there a year and a half before being removed from office. He was married in 1921 and had recently had a child when the crisis developed that would cause him to leave Cambodia.

His work was suspended on December 23, 1926, when he was arrested for financial irregularities. He escaped the Kampong Cham provincial prison on February 13, 1927. When he was tried *in absentia* the following July, he was found guilty of having diverted public money in the sum of 9,344.36 piastres for his personal use as well as having asked for money from subordinate administrators in the sums of 46.80, 81, and 135.65 piastres.¹⁾ He was sentenced to 16 years of hard labor. By the time the trial took place he may well have already ordained as a forest monk and gone to Laos or from there to Siam.

We know little about the period from his assuming the monkhood until 1948 except from the stories he told and what we can conclude from the history of the places where he lived. A third-person account he wrote when he was at least in his eighties describes the time he spent in both Siam and Burma, re-ordaining in each instance (Dharmawara n.d.). In Siam he spent time in meditation as a forest monk but also completed monastic exams to the third level, the basis for his title “Mahavihara.” In Burma he studied a form of Vipassana meditation distinct from the types of meditation he had studied in Siam. Followers from the last decades of his life recall that he had considerable command of both the Thai and Burmese languages. (His status as a senior monk was never questioned in his later association with the Maha Bodhi Society or the World Fellowship of Buddhists, or in his frequent visits to Thailand and Burma.) A 1934 document in the

1) National Archives of Cambodia RSC #27048, RSC # 19656. David Chandler mentions that the yearly salary for a French official could be as much as 12,000 piastres (Chandler 1996, 155), so a figure of 9,344.36 piastres would have been considerable in relation to Bellong’s own yearly salary. According to Margaret Slocomb (2010, 116) the piastre in 1950 had an official value of 17 francs.

possession of his family may suggest that he was part of one of the groups of monks the eccentric Italian-American Buddhist monk Lokanatha organized in the early 1930s to go to India and help revive Buddhism there (Ito 2012; Deslippe 2013).

India

In a 1987 speech referring to his 1934 arrival in India, Dharmawara stated:

Although my purpose in coming to India was to study English, Pali, Hindi, Sanskrit, and particularly the teachings of love and compassion for one and all without discrimination as preached by the Buddha, Ghandiji's [*sic*] non-violent methods created such an irresistible interest in my mind that I felt impelled to visit his Ashrams in Ahmedabad and Wardha. In Wardha I stayed with him for a few months. (Dharmawara 1987)

Part of the standard narrative surrounding Dharmawara is that while he was wandering around India, after struggling with his own health—and a time of extreme disability when he lost his memory and the ability to walk—he suddenly discovered he had a gift for healing. He consequently began to be sought out as a healer.

In his 1987 talk, he mentioned staying for several years in Lahore, in what is now Pakistan, with Deva Raj Sawhny, an Oxford-educated barrister-at-law who had been a justice in Jammu and Kashmir since 1928. In 1938 Sawhny introduced Dharmawara to a prominent couple, Brij Lal Nehru and his wife Rameshwari Nehru (née Raina). Rameshwari was a social activist closely involved with Mahatma Gandhi and his movement. Her husband was Jawaharlal Nehru's first cousin. A few years older than Jawaharlal, Brij Lal was studying at Oxford (like Sawhny) and was close to finishing his studies when Jawaharlal went to Harrow in 1905. He was still in England preparing for the colonial service exam when Jawaharlal entered Cambridge. On returning to India, Brij Lal assumed high-ranking positions in the colonial government. He was “a Sanskrit scholar, a Yogi, and a staunch believer in natural healing” (Dharmawara 1987). Dharmawara wrote:

Pandit Brijlal Nehru was particularly interested in my natural healing works and I in his. Therefore there was no difficulty for us to come together and share with one another what we have learned to make life grow richer, healthier and wiser. They [Brij Lal and Rameshwari Nehru] became my greatest benefactors in no time. (Dharmawara 1987)

In his 1987 talk, Dharmawara recounted how Rameshwari worked directly with Gandhi and discussed her advocacy for the rights of women and members of lower castes.

Biographical writings about Rameshwari (Nehru 1950; Paliwal 1986; Mohan 2013) also discuss her activism on behalf of women and lower castes—as well as her work for refugees at the time of partition and, later in her life, involvement in world peace movements. She led protests as early as the 1930s and was briefly imprisoned twice in 1942 following demonstrations. These biographical sources make no mention of Dharmawara, but the accounts are consistent with his 1987 talk and the description of Rameshwari's role in the creation of the Ashoka Mission given by its current abbot. To a degree, the intellectual currents Rameshwari was engaged with—naturopathy, the rights of lower-caste populations, world peace—were those that Dharmawara pursued from a more Buddhist perspective.²⁾

The narrative of Dharmawara's life as told by his followers often states that his connection to the Nehru family was a result of his success in healing Jawaharlal Nehru's "uncle." According to the story told to me by Dharmawara's successor at the Ashoka Mission, the person cured was Brij Lal Nehru himself.

The overall picture evoked is intriguing and suggests something of the social possibilities in the era—a wandering Buddhist monk taken into the household of an elite Hindu judge convinced of his healing capacities and living there for several years, then taken up by a prominent couple, likewise intellectual Hindu elites of some influence, indebted to him for healing and devoted to the possibilities of naturopathic health practices.

During this period, according to the 1987 talk, Dharmawara set up a health center in Gujranwala, 70 kilometers from Lahore:

A friend in Gujranwala placed one of his buildings at my disposal. I used it as a health home where all kind of patients came to seek health and well-being, and because hundreds of them returned home cured. The number of patients increased many fold. (Dharmawara 1987)

Like Deva Raj Sawhny, Brij Lal was an official in Jammu and Kashmir—the accountant general. The Kashmir connections of these two men may relate to a plan, referred to in a couple of sources, to include Dharmawara in a naturopathic health center project in the hill stations of Kashmir in the post-independence period. This was to be headed by a Belarussian woman who assumed the name Indra Devi and would herself achieve renown (Goldberg 2015). Dharmawara was to teach meditation. Indra Devi would claim in the

2) There is some further documentation of the couple's interest in naturopathy and yoga, such as a mention in a tribute by a daughter-in-law in one of the biographies of Rameshwari to the fact that Brij Lal "believed in nature cure and was totally against allopathic drugs," and that Rameshwari deferred to him on these issues (Paliwal 1986, 92). There is also a September 1945 letter from Jawaharlal Nehru to his sister expressing displeasure at Brij Lal's plans to go to the United States and give lectures on yoga asanas (Sahgal 2000, 493).

1950s that the project had been approved by Jawaharlal Nehru. The project came to nothing, perhaps due to developments in the wake of independence, including increasing unrest in Kashmir. Indra Devi went instead to the United States as a pioneer teacher of yoga.

As one of his followers tells the story, Dharmawara said, metaphorically, that he meditated under a tree in Kashmir, and at the time of partition the tree that gave him shelter was divided into two. We know, in any case, that his patrons were Hindu intellectuals and that, like many Hindus and Sikhs from all walks of life, he made the move to Delhi at some point during this chaotic time. Rameshwari and Brij Lal Nehru remained in Lahore and worked with refugees for as long as they could (Paliwal 1986, 40). It was only a few months after they came to Delhi that Rameshwari came up with a plan to help Dharmawara establish a center in Mehrauli, on the outskirts of the city. The land, not far from the archeological site of the Qutub Minar, juts off from the main road into what is now the compound of the archaeological site. According to the Ashoka Mission's current abbot, the site had been used to house Muslim refugees but was then left vacant when, following partition, the refugees moved to Pakistan. The land was thus under the administration of the rehabilitation ministry, and Rameshwari worked there without compensation as the head of women's issues after arriving in Delhi. No doubt Rameshwari and Brij Lal conceived of it as operating along the lines of the center Dharmawara had directed in Gujranwala.

Mehrauli was still considered remote from the city and the land not particularly valuable. It was deeded to Dharmawara for a nominal fee (*Kampuchea*, June 14, 1956). Called the Ashoka Mission or the Ashoka Vihara, by the 1950s the center was probably functioning much in the way it did during the rest of the period Dharmawara was in charge. The mission eked out a modest subsistence from rent paid by villagers working part of the land and from a YMCA youth hostel, established in 1952, some distance from the vihara proper. The Ashoka Mission was a naturopathic health center, and Dharmawara was sought after as a healer by Indians regardless of religious affiliation. A logo from the 1950s suggests that it was marketed as a yoga center: a dharma wheel floats above a lotus flower in a bucolic scene of a lake surrounded by mountains with a deer and tiger grazing peacefully on one side and the silhouette of a figure in a yoga pose on the other. At the same time, it was a Buddhist temple and a point of reference for Buddhists.

An important element of the standard narrative surrounding Dharmawara is his connection with Jawaharlal Nehru. We should be careful about drawing any conclusions. He was never such an important part of Nehru's circle that he would be, for instance, mentioned in a biography. Because of his strong connection to Brij Lal and Rameshwari Nehru, however, he had access to and familiarity with the Nehru family as a whole.

Dharmawara's connection to Nehru is rather different from his connection to Sihanouk (at this point still king of Cambodia), which is less often mentioned but better documented. The most convincing evidence of Dharmawara's connection to Nehru is that Sihanouk later seemed to use Dharmawara as a way of linking to Nehru. Among documents held by members of Dharmawara's family are brief notes from Indira Gandhi from the 1970s. For our purposes, the degree to which Dharmawara was connected to Nehru is not so important as the fact that he had links to the higher echelons of the Indian government and sufficient understanding of the currents of Indian political philosophy that he could be a sounding board for people like Sihanouk or Western diplomats in Cambodia. Dharmawara's granddaughter recalls being taken as a child to see Jawaharlal Nehru in the early 1960s and Nehru playfully knocking together the heads of her and her brother.³⁾

The Cambodia of Sihanouk and Beyond

Prior to World War II, the Maha Bodhi Society, founded by Anagarika Dharmapala and based in Calcutta, was the most prominent organization purporting to represent international Buddhism. Following the war, there was a period in which relics of two disciples of the Buddha, Sariputta and Mogallana, repatriated after decades in a London museum, became a major focus of the Maha Bodhi Society. The society organized tours to bring the relics to different places in India and elsewhere before enshrining them in a stupa in Sanchi (Rewatha 2013). An article about the society published on the occasion of the 1956 Buddha Jayanti states: "The vast sub-continent welcomed the relics as if the dearest sons of the country had come back after long years of absence" (Valisinha 1956, 472). The tours were wildly successful. Capturing the imagination of the public more than anticipated, the relics attracted huge crowds, and ceremonies with speeches by dignitaries greeted them wherever they went—helping to raise the profile of the Maha Bodhi Society, which still marks the return of the relics to India as one of its major accomplishments. The relic tours inspired religious devotion but had a political dimension as well, in the degree to which they represented repossession of cultural traditions checked by colonialism.

The last foreign tour of the Sanchi relics was to Cambodia and took place on October 5–14, 1952. Dharmawara was among the groups of monks accompanying the relics, thus returning to Cambodia—still under French control—for the first time in 26 years. The

3) Interview with Phobol Cheng, October 21, 2015.

plane was met at the airport by King Sihanouk, all his ministers of state, the patriarchs of the two Buddhist orders, and ten thousand monks; and the relics were transported in an elaborate procession to the Silver Pagoda on the grounds of the Royal Palace. They were paraded around the city the following day, and ceremonies were attended by representatives of neighboring countries. Similar to the response to the relics in other countries, crowds of people from all parts of Cambodia thronged to see them on display. Considerable donations were collected, to be used for two other emblematic projects: a hospital for monks (Marston 2007) and a major relic stupa to be built near the railroad station (Buddhasāsna Paṇḍity 1952; Marston 2016).

We have no way of knowing to what extent Dharmawara had maintained his connections in Cambodia. His former wife had remarried, and his daughter, whom he had last seen as an infant, was now an adult. A photograph from this period shows him at the airport with the Mahanikay patriarch, Chuon Nath. He quickly reactivated his connections to the circle of elites he would have known and associated with in his youth. He probably stayed on after the rest of the delegation left, since he later made reference to having attended the groundbreaking of the hospital for monks in February 1953.

Dharmawara soon connected with the young king, Norodom Sihanouk. This was a time of heady historical change, and the next five years—the period when Dharmawara seems to have been closest to Sihanouk—was also when Sihanouk undertook some of the tasks that would most define him historically: leading Cambodia to independence, affiliating himself with the Non-Aligned Movement, and abdicating in order to take on a more active political role in his vision of a popular movement giving direction to the country.

Dharmawara allied himself with Sihanouk in the latter's drive for independence. The most obvious way to see Dharmawara's connection to Sihanouk is with respect to the young ruler's push for independence and the ways in which he turned toward India and the political philosophy of Nehru. The details of Sihanouk's maneuvering to bring about Cambodia's independence are well documented. He had already disbanded the National Assembly before the October relic tour, in effect dismantling the parliamentary system the French had tried to set up and moving toward taking the reins of power more into his own hands. If Dharmawara did not leave Cambodia until after February, he would have also been in Cambodia when Sihanouk declared martial law and vowed to lead a campaign for national independence. (According to Chandler [1991], Sihanouk was responding to fears of a coup that would leave him a constitutional monarch without power.)

But Dharmawara arrived in the company of the Sanchi relics, and it is also telling that there is evidence of Sihanouk's continuing interest in relics over the next few years: on a trip to India in 1955 and on the occasion of the Buddha Jayanti celebration in 1957—

occasions when Dharmawara was present. This, in an odd way, resonates with the death by leukemia of Sihanouk's beloved daughter Kantha Bopha on December 14, 1952, not long after the relic tour, at a time when Dharmawara would have been in the country. One of Sihanouk's biographers suggests that the crisis of his daughter's death may have had some bearing on Sihanouk's more intense involvement in politics (Osborne 1994). Sihanouk would carry with him a portion of his daughter's ashes when he traveled, even after he built a stupa on the grounds of the palace for the rest of the ashes in 1960—the stupa where his own ashes would be interred after his death.⁴⁾

Taking up his campaign for independence, Sihanouk first went to Paris, where he was rebuffed by the French. Next he went to Washington, where he felt condescended to by American officials. But he became increasingly adept at publicizing his plea. In June, while based in Siem Reap, he issued a call for the formation of a militia to resist French control. How much impact this had on the French is not clear. Historians say it was because of developments in Vietnam as much as because of Sihanouk's campaign that France did an about-face and announced it would grant Cambodia's independence. This was formally initiated on November 9, 1953. Since control to Cambodia was turned over in stages, the date of full independence is often regarded as 1954.

During Sihanouk's self-styled "Royal Crusade," in the summer of 1953, Dharmawara was apparently asked to rally support in India for Cambodian independence. Among the documents Dharmawara kept is a July 22, 1953 letter from the US embassy addressed to the Free Cambodia Committee in New Delhi, suggesting he played a major role in it.⁵⁾ A formal September 1953 letter to Dharmawara from Sihanouk in Siem Reap, once the latter had already reached an informal agreement with the French, thanks him for his help, which enabled Sihanouk and the whole nation to meet their goals; there is specific reference to Nehru. Sihanouk expresses thanks to "*all* the Cambodians in India who are faithful and love me."⁶⁾ A handwritten letter from Sihanouk the following month has a

4) Personal communication, Julio Jeldres, March 5, 2017. See also Lancaster (1972, 54): "Sihanouk is extremely superstitious and, on travels abroad, was always accompanied by the ashes of an infant daughter, Princess Kantha Bopha, who had died in 1952. These ashes were contained in a small jewel case, which was generally entrusted to an aide-de-camp, and were deposited—beflowered—by his beside on arriving at his destination. Although he pretended to make light of such things, he was attentive to the predictions of the palace horae, and to the predictions obtained through this channel of the spirit of a young princess, devoured by a crocodile more than a century ago, whose ashes are interred in a stupa at Sambor-on-the-Mekong (this stupa was restored and regilded on the instructions and at the expense of the Head of State)."

5) The US embassy letter acknowledges receipt of a letter from Dharmawara the previous day. Collection of Konthal Cheng.

6) Letter from Norodom Sihanouk to Dharmawara Mahathera, number 350, dated August 18, 1953. Collection of Konthal Cheng.

tone of greater familiarity. It is harder to understand out of context but states:

In the future, if matters of this nature really come up again, please provide an explanation to the country of India in such a way that they understand the difficult, painful situation of our country. We desire independence very much, and we have taken appropriate measures peacefully in order to achieve independence.⁷⁾

According to an ex-monk who knew him since the 1950s, Dharmawara had organized demonstrations in front of the French embassy in New Delhi demanding Cambodian independence. He drew on members of the Kamboj community—a population in India whose members believe they are of Cambodian descent. He would surely have done this only with the approval of Indian officials to whom he was connected, perhaps Nehru himself. As it happened, India was at that time negotiating for the French colonial city of Pondicherry to be incorporated into the Indian union.

Dharmawara probably had nothing to do with Nehru's visit to Cambodia in 1954, when Cambodian independence was still in its infancy. (The story is that Nehru, arranging a trip to Vietnam, contacted the Cambodian government to request overflight clearance on his way to Vietnam; Sihanouk told him he would give clearance only if Nehru visited Cambodia as well [Patnaik 2012].) But Sihanouk's sense of rapport with Nehru and the attraction he had for Nehru's political philosophy may have served to bring Dharmawara, perceived as connected to India, further into his inner circle.

By 1954 Dharmawara was assuming more and more the role of representative of Cambodian Buddhism in international Buddhist events. He published a short, cogent article about Cambodian Buddhism in the magazine *Buddhist World*. In it he praised Sihanouk and the patriarch Chuon Nath and made reference to the historical role of the French scholar/colonial official Suzanne Karpeles. In January, a Burmese publication devoted to Sixth Buddhist Council activities mentioned that he had been in Burma "recently"; since it referred to him returning "home" to Cambodia, he seems to have stopped in Burma on his way back to Cambodia (*Sangāyanā* 1954). He was then back in Rangoon in May as part of the Cambodian delegation to the opening ceremonies of the Sixth Buddhist Council, a landmark event in Theravada and international Buddhism, itself representative of the possibilities of global post-independence cultural communities. (Chuon Nath, as the most senior monk in the Cambodian delegation, made his opening remarks in French before yielding the floor to Dharmawara to say something in English.) Dharmawara's knowledge of English and Burmese may have made his inclusion in the delegation seem natural. Soon after returning to Cambodia from Burma, he left for Japan;

7) Letter from Norodom Sihanouk to Dharmawara Mahathera, Siem Reap, dated September 18, 1953. Collection of Konthal Cheng.

a magazine photograph shows him together with the second-ranking Cambodian monk, Huot Tath, leaving on Thai Airways for Japan on June 21. He spent two and a half months there, brought relics to a number of temples, and attended the World Pacifist Conference. He accompanied Sihanouk on a trip to Burma again in November 1954 (*Kambujā* 1954, 1). It was also in 1954 that Burmese Prime Minister U Nu sponsored the building of a small ordination hall at the Ashoka Mission.

The year 1955 is when Dharmawara's connection to Sihanouk is most clearly documented, just as it is when Sihanouk's stance of neutrality came into clear focus. It was an important year for Sihanouk. In February he arranged for a referendum that could be used to show overwhelming support for him among the general population. Later that month he received a visit from US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to negotiate military aid (Clymer 2004, 43–45); he resisted the latter's calls to join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. Then, on March 2, in a dramatic announcement on the radio, he declared his decision to abdicate and turn the throne over to his father, Norodom Suramarit. He felt that as a political leader, rather than the king, he would have more legitimacy in organizing and leading a popular one-party movement. He would set up a political movement that he personally headed, in effect a single national political party, to be called Sangkum Reastr Niyum, usually translated as People's Socialist Movement.

Only two weeks after abdicating, Sihanouk went to India for eight days. This trip was planned before he had made the decision to abdicate, but it underlines his increasing orientation to Nehru's political philosophy. Sihanouk wrote of the trip:

The outcome of my eight-day visit to India had been an agreement to establish diplomatic relations between our two countries at legation level and, as set forth in a joint communiqué, to base our relations on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence which had been formulated less than a year earlier during Zhou Enlai's visit to New Delhi. Nehru and I got along well together, and he influenced me in opting for neutrality. (Sihanouk 2005)

This visit to India is often described as decisive, and Sihanouk would over the years quite consistently write in glowing terms about Nehru and his influence over him. Nehru would publicly praise Sihanouk's decision to abdicate as

a rather unique and possibly unparalleled thing. I do not know if there is a similar example anywhere else. Many kings have disappeared as kings and people have chosen their leaders in a different way. I do not know any example of a king giving up his kingship and joining with the people and functioning as the national leader of the people. That is remarkable. (Jagel 2015)⁸⁾

8) "Prince Sihanouk and the Khmer People," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 21(10) (September 6, 1956), p. 312. Cited in Jagel (2015, 90).

However, there is also record of Nehru in private conversation expressing wariness of Sihanouk.⁹⁾

While in India, Sihanouk met with members of the Kamboj community. Following official business, Nehru arranged for Sihanouk to visit several Buddhist sites, including Sanchi, where relics that had toured Cambodia were now enshrined—thus making Buddhism and Sihanouk’s past connection to the relics an element of the diplomatic exchange. Dharmawara no doubt accompanied him. The *Times of India* wrote: “Incense was burned and sutras were recited by Buddhist priests from Cambodia as the Prince knelt down” (*Times of India*, March 20, 1954). The article mentioned that a donation was made by Sihanouk’s young daughter Suriya, who accompanied Sihanouk as his daughter Kantha Bopha once had. It was at the end of this trip, on March 22, that Sihanouk visited the Maha Bodhi Society offices in Calcutta together with Dharmawara; Sangharakshita would recall Dharmawara being referred to there as Sihanouk’s adviser. In his address, Sihanouk thanked the society for sending the relics to Cambodia. Sihanouk, with Dharmawara accompanying him, then went on to Burma before participating in the Asian-African Conference in Bandung.

Sihanouk’s participation in the Bandung Conference further consolidated his stance of neutrality. In a book on the 1955 Asian-African Conference, “Dhamavara” is included in the list of delegates. Titles are provided for the other members of the delegation, while Dhamavara is listed merely as “Counsellor” (Indonesia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1955). There are references to Dharmawara’s participation in Asia Foundation (TAF) memos from later that year and a passing mention in a book by Robert Lawrence Balzer (1963). It is probable that Sihanouk was in active dialogue with Dharmawara and brought him along for his language skills and as someone who could help him interpret what was going on. It is also possible that at this point he simply found Dharmawara a source of comfort or spiritual empowerment. After Bandung, Dharmawara accompanied the Cambodian diplomatic team setting up formal relations with India. At about the same time, Sihanouk named a boulevard in Phnom Penh after Nehru (Bhati and Murg 2018). Dharmawara was at this time clearly identified as an adviser to Sihanouk. What should be emphasized is that Dharmawara’s role, while very much that of a Buddhist monk, also had clear political overtones.

By this time Dharmawara had come to the attention of US officials in Phnom Penh, and before long an invitation was extended to him by the US Information Agency to attend a conference on education in Washington, DC. While this was in some ways a logical

9) Memorandum of a Conversation, Department of State, Washington, September 25, 1956, *FRUS 1955–1957*, 1: 741. Cited in Jagel (2015, 90).

extension of his activities with Sihanouk, it also represented a shift from the role he had assumed in the Cambodia-India nexus (and Cambodia's developing policy of neutrality) to a direct connection with one of the Cold War powers—and one with thinly veiled agendas. Again, we see public recognition of his role as a monk while at the same time having political undercurrents. This was not an Asia Foundation-sponsored trip, but because TAF was to host Dharmawara in San Francisco, we learn a good bit about the visit from the TAF archives.

A letter to the Asia Foundation president from the Asia Foundation representative in Cambodia says of Dharmawara:

Domestic politics notwithstanding, the Venerable is incontestably Cambodia's most interesting monk. Fluent in English, French, Thai and several Indian languages, his 20 years outside of Cambodia have given him a perspective far wider than that possessed by any other monk and the majority of lay leaders. He has an almost unmonkly interest in social progress and economic growth and he is able to judge his country severely and constructively. (Asia Foundation)¹⁰⁾

The Americans' interest in him was no doubt because of his connection to Sihanouk and what they perceived as his ability to influence Sihanouk's thinking on the politics of neutrality espoused by Nehru and the Asian-African Conference. His categorization as "the most interesting monk" is a reflection of his charisma as well as his ability to converse in an idiom of diplomacy. (Never mind that to all appearances he had nothing to do with education—the topic of the conference he was invited to attend.)

The trip was from November 1955 to February 1956, and, at his request, the Asia Foundation paid for him to spend some time in Japan on the return leg. An August 1955 State Department telegram, in preparation for his visit, stated: "His catholicity of interests admittedly involves difficulty. Although pisitical [*sic*] factor and political interests must not (repeat not) be forgotten, stress should be laid on US educational activities, particularly primary and secondary education."¹¹⁾

The only documentation I have found of his days in Washington, DC, is a confidential memorandum of his conversation on successive days with State Department officials Kenneth T. Young and Walter S. Robertson.¹²⁾ Despite some token references to education, these conversations were concerned primarily with political issues. Dharmawara showed his continuing animus against the French: "He did blame the French for much of the trouble in Cambodia at the present time and in the recent past." He made a point

10) The Asia Foundation, Box P-174 3A5144, "Dharmawara Venerable Vira."

11) National Archives. Incoming telegram of the Department of State. Re Department WIROM 152 leader grant Dharmawara. 511-51H3/8-1555.

12) National Archives. "Memorandum of Conversation," November 21–22, 1955. 851H.43/11-2155.

of mentioning that English rather than French was the language of the Bandung Conference. He seemed at pains to stress that neither Cambodia nor India was likely to become Communist:

[H]e is convinced that Cambodia will never go Communist for it is against all principles that the Cambodian people know and in which they believe. There has never been native-grown Communism in Cambodia. What has existed is grown in Vietnam or in other countries.

Robertson expressed to Dharmawara his dismay at “the indifference of Nehru to the threat of international Communism.” In response, “The Venerable stated his belief that India would never go Communist, citing Nehru’s fight against the Communists in India.” Robertson seemed to be using Dharmawara to send a message to Sihanouk when he “expressed the opinion that Sihanouk, who had fought so long and earnestly for Cambodian Independence, would not see such Independence lightly given up.”

To the general public in the United States, however, Dharmawara very much maintained the role of a Theravada monk—and it is the ambiguity of his role that most interests us, in keeping with our goal, from Kwon, to explore the underlying cultural links of the era. He gave talks on Buddhism in New York City and at Kent State and Stanford Universities, and he traveled to several other cities as well. He visited the Berkeley Buddhist Center, and a reception with 26 guests was held for him by TAF in San Francisco—mostly people connected with Buddhism or religious studies.

It was on this trip that the groundbreaking yoga teacher Indra Devi introduced Dharmawara to Balzer, a journalist and one of her students. While Balzer seemingly had little to do with the kinds of diplomacy we are concerned with, his writing is a major source about Dharmawara and helps us see the public persona emerging, a charismatic Buddhist figure crossing cultural borders, often representing the religion before non-Buddhists. He reminds us that the 1955 trip was not just about politics. Balzer’s account also serves to document Dharmawara’s presence at key post-independence state ritual events in Cambodia.

Balzer was at the Los Angeles train station to receive Indra Devi and Dharmawara when they arrived from San Francisco. Described as the first serious American wine critic, he was at ease in the social world of the Hollywood celebrities who bought his wines. He writes of how, upon meeting Dharmawara, he was overwhelmed by the sense of his spiritual presence. He was already planning a worldwide trip that would take him to Asia following travel in Europe, and Dharmawara suggested he change his plans and accompany him to Cambodia, where he could attend Suramarit’s coronation. Balzer readily agreed. During Dharmawara’s visit, Balzer took him to the set of *The King and I*. A photo shows Dharmawara together with Balzer, Indra Devi (in traditional Indian garb),

and Yul Brynner (in costume as the king of Siam). On the trip back, Balzer joined Dharmawara in Japan and flew with him to Cambodia. On a stopover in Bangkok, Dharmawara took Balzer to pay respects to the Thai patriarch at Wat Benchamabophit.

In Cambodia, Balzer's first week was spent attending the ordination festivities on March 2–8, a ceremonial representation of Sihanouk's new role. He then briefly took on Buddhist robes. A tone of exoticism comes to the fore in Balzer's genial travel book, *Beyond Conflict* (1963), which describes his time in Cambodia, mixing personal anecdotes, history, and an attempt to introduce basic Buddhist concepts to a popular audience. Through Dharmawara, Balzer had access to King Suramarit and, especially, Sihanouk, on this trip and on one the following year when he attended the Buddha Jayanti celebrations. He would be a consistent defender of Sihanouk's policies of neutrality.

Buddha Jayanti Celebrations

As I have discussed elsewhere (Marston 2016), the Buddha Jayanti celebrations held in different countries in 1956 and 1957 became key events in an emerging international Buddhism—which, with the recent independence of several Buddhist countries, coalesced in new types of organization and interconnection—itsself part of a Cold War cultural dynamic. The Sixth Buddhist Council in Burma concluded in 1956. While the official 1956 Buddha Jayanti celebrations of India were held later in the year, there were celebrations at the Ashoka Mission in May on Wesak, the day it was celebrated in Sri Lanka and Burma, with the participation of monks from India, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (*Kampuchea*, June 14, 1956).

On this occasion a booklet authored by Dharmawara, *Through Light to Peace (Path of the Arya Dhamma)* (1956), was issued. The publication of the booklet is interesting for a number of reasons, first of all because it is the only publication purporting to present Dharmawara's vision of Buddhism. It discusses the Buddha's historical importance and stresses the degree to which Buddhism is a religion of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Published a few months before the Indian social reformer Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's public conversion to Buddhism, the booklet reflects the intellectual climate in India of the time in seeing Buddhism as representing the "equality of man"; it situates Buddhism in opposition to the caste system. It also stresses the degree to which Buddhism was historically opposed to cruelty toward animals—consistent with Dharmawara's interest in vegetarianism. It closes with a call for peace and the suggestion that a Buddhist king like Ashoka can be a model in that direction:

Will leaders of countries give ear to the message of this great Sage and follow the example of Asoka the Great by renouncing hatred and the sword and planting the tree of love and virtue in their place and thus make their countries peaceful heaven worth living in? If they do, I have no hesitation in saying that all round peace will prevail everywhere. (Dharmawara 1956, 12)

Buddhism is described as “a message that made an empire-thirsty monarch like Asoka renounce his ambition, hatred and the sword” (Dharmawara 1956, 12).

The booklet begins with two quotations by Jawaharlal Nehru, probably made in recent speeches welcoming the Jayanti celebrations—suggesting, as with Ashoka, a call for peace. One states:

In this world of storm and strife, hatred and violence, the message of the Buddha shines like a radiant sun. Perhaps at no time was that message more needed than in the world of the atomic and hydrogen bomb. 2500 years have only added to the validity and truth of that message. So, on this memorable occasion while we pay homage to the Buddha, let us remember that immortal message and try to fashion our thoughts and actions in the light of that teaching so we may face with equanimity even the terrors of the atomic bomb age and help a little in promoting right thinking and right action. (Dharmawara 1956, 1)

As will be discussed later, some themes of the booklet would appear in an article on Buddhist socialism written by Sihanouk a decade later, perhaps an indication—if not necessarily that Sihanouk had read and been influenced by the booklet—that these themes were prominent in the discourse of international Buddhism of the era or even played a role in Sihanouk’s dialogue with Dharmawara: the association of Buddhism with peace, the criticism of “selfish craving” in modern society, and the foundational role of the emperor Ashoka.

While oral traditions in Sri Lanka never lost sight of Ashoka’s importance for Buddhism, scholarly work in India on the Ashokan inscriptions, begun in the eighteenth century, did not achieve any level of completeness. The first comprehensive analysis is found in B. M. Barua’s *Asoka and His Inscriptions*, published in 1945 (Guruge 1994, 201), three years before Dharmawara named his temple the Ashoka Mission. Ananda Guruge describes how Ashoka “burst into the limelight” (Guruge 1994, 203) in the late 1940s and 1950s, with statements by Nehru and writings about Ashoka in the context of the 1956 Buddha Jayanti, as well as some mythification of the Ashoka story.

From Balzer’s account, we know Dharmawara was in Cambodia at the time of the 1957 Buddha Jayanti celebrations there; and, given his complex connections with Sihanouk, Cambodian independence, King Suramarit, and Buddhist relics, we can imagine him being very much part of the festivities. I have written elsewhere how the celebrations became a kind of ritual of charter for the newly independent country, with popular prophecies interpreted to show that Sihanouk was ushering in a new era (Marston 2016).

Once again, relics come into play. Sihanouk brought a relic of the Buddha from Sri Lanka to be installed with great fanfare in a newly constructed stupa in front of the Phnom Penh railway station—projected at the time as a sort of palladium of the new nation. As in other Theravada countries, stupas and the relics they contained, in a tradition seen as dating to Ashoka, were conceived as linked to the Buddhist *dhamma*, the body of the king, and the body of the kingdom.¹³ The post-World War II era, as we have seen, saw much attention to relics, with relic tours and relic donations; and, although it has not been well studied, this shared some of the momentum of the growing interest in Ashoka, as we see in the case of Dharmawara.

In a September 1957 *Times of India* photo, Sihanouk, en route to Paris, appears with Dharmawara, seated with the French consul and a government of Bombay official. He would send Dharmawara a handwritten note from Paris in November describing his activities there.

There is already some evidence that by 1957 Cambodia had construed its stance of neutrality as being related to its Buddhist culture, such as a speech at the UN by Penn Nouth, head of the Cambodian delegation, who began talking about how the Buddha opposed ambition and violence; he went on to express the country's opposition to any sort of military pact (*Cambodge d'Aujourd'hui* 1958). With reference to Kwon's analysis of the literature giving a cultural turn to Cold War Studies (2010, 139–152), it is interesting to see how at this time Cambodia's neutrality was construed not solely in diplomatic or economic terms, but as a natural outcome of its culture.

Disengaging from Cambodia

It is not clear whether Dharmawara ever seriously considered abandoning his base in India when he spent considerable time in Cambodia, although he sometimes gave that impression. As resident in India at independence, he had rights of citizenship. However, according to the ex-monks Keo Pama and Sam Be (repeating Dharmawara's anecdotes), he was given a Cambodian passport after that country became independent. As these monks tell the story, Dharmawara was later confronted by Nehru over holding two passports. He chose to keep the Cambodian one, at a period when he was being invited to

13) Ashley Thompson writes: "A similar structure can be found in Khmer Buddhist culture where the time-bound living King *embodies* the essentially atemporal *dharmā*. Here the royal body is one in a series of substitute bodies, including the Buddha and the *stūpa*, each being an image of Mount Meru, which substitute for one another in substituting for the kingdom or the universe governed by the *dharmā*" (Thompson 2004, 92).

represent the country at Buddhist councils and meetings of heads of state.

The delicateness of his position in India is underlined by a time in the 1950s when Dharmawara opened the Ashoka Mission to Tibetan refugee monks—the beginning of another important chapter in international Buddhism. During one of his absences from India he put an English-born Tibetan Buddhist, Freda Bedi, in charge. Bedi would later become the first Western woman to be ordained as a Tibetan nun. She was at the Ashoka Mission when the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama visited in December 1956.

Bedi was at the Ashoka Mission following the official Indian celebrations of the Buddha Jayanti. The English monk Sangharakshita was part of a group of Buddhist specialists invited by India to tour Buddhist sites; he stayed at the Ashoka Mission in Delhi. While there, he realized that Bedi was making moves toward taking control of the mission.¹⁴ According to Sangharakshita, a “nephew” wired Dharmawara about this and he returned immediately to deal with the situation.

The challenges to Dharmawara’s position in Cambodia were more profound. Even before he traveled to the United States, there were indications of tensions between him and the Buddhist hierarchy. The August 1955 Asia Foundation letter which praised him as Cambodia’s most interesting monk also stated:

Although he occupies no active position in internal Buddhist affairs, he remains closely identified with Sihanouk in the present political campaign. By doing so there are indications that his standing with other members of the hierarchy, which is predominantly inclined toward the Democratic Party, is not particularly high.

This may or may not be an accurate description of the political dynamics of the monkhood, although it hints that they were more complicated in this period than is usually recognized. What is clear is that by the following year the monastic leadership had managed to voice its indignation over the fact that Dharmawara, essentially outside of the Cambodian monastic tradition, had been invited to the United States. Why would he be invited to a White House Conference on Education instead of the second-ranking Buddhist monk, Huot Tath, who at the time of Dharmawara’s trip was probably already positioned to head the Pali school following Lvi Em’s death?¹⁵ In the end, US officials decided it was neces-

14) Sangharakshita, personal communication, October 30, 2015. Sangharakshita also refers to this incident, in very general terms, in his *In the Sign of the Golden Wheel* (1996).

15) A September 9, 1955 US State Department memo (751H.00/9-655) states that the previous day Sihanouk, in a radio broadcast, denied rumors that he intended to remove Samdech Chuon Nath as the Mahanikay patriarch. This was two weeks after the United States began proposing that Dharmawara visit as a guest of the State Department. It is perhaps too much to assume that Dharmawara was rumored to be a replacement for Chuon Nath. It may have been relevant as an indication that the Mahanikay hierarchy was insecure in its relationship with Sihanouk at that time.

sary to invite Huot Tath the following year. A letter from the Cambodian head of TAF to the head of the foundation stated:

For the benefit of the Home Office it should be pointed out that Dharmawara is considered an outcast by the traditional members of the Cambodian hierarchy and by Huot Tath in particular. For this reason it is not recommended that allusions be made about Dharmawara during Huot Tath's visit. It was to atone for the Dharmawara visit that the Embassy has awarded a similar grant to Huot Tath.¹⁶⁾

Whereas the tone of the previous year's letter in support of Dharmawara was one of unrestrained enthusiasm, the letter regarding Huot Tath's trip was cautious in its wording while making a show of respect for a monk who, in fact, would be a key partner in TAF projects to fund Cambodian monks studying abroad.

The memo indicates some apprehension about hosting Huot Tath, who, "speaking no English and very little French," would be accompanied by an interpreter and, it was feared, might be particularly strict in his adherence to monastic codes of behavior:

The Venerable, ranking among the first five of the Cambodian hierarchy and possibly the next head of the Mahanikay Order, lives extremely strictly and will probably present a number of problems in connection with diet and housing. Compared to Huot Tath, the Venerable Dharmawara is much more liberal.¹⁷⁾

The memo becomes a touch nasty in a line that is crossed out but still legible: "His automobile in Cambodia is equipped with his private cuspidor but San Francisco can probably overlook this item."

The use of the word "outcast" to refer to Dharmawara indicates quite clearly that the monastic hierarchy was by this time aware of the circumstances under which he had left Cambodia in the 1920s, as Keo Pama's recollections also confirm. But there were issues of rivalry and personal style involved as well. Eng Sokhan, a secretary to Chuon Nath and Huot Tath in the late 1960s and early 1970s who later had contact with Dharmawara in India and the United States, was also aware that Chuon Nath did not approve of him—because he believed "a monk should be a monk."

A US State Department memo from this same period is more diplomatic but goes into even more detail in comparing Dharmawara with Huot Tath:

The Venerable Huot Tath differs considerably in a number of ways from the last Cambodian priest

16) The Asia Foundation Memorandum, Nov. 6, 1956, from Joel Scarborough to Mr. Pierson, Mr. James, Mr. Conger. Box P. 259 3A5319, Huot Tath, Venerable.

17) The Asia Foundation Memorandum, Nov. 6, 1956, from Joel Scarborough to Mr. Pierson, Mr. James, Mr. Conger. Box P. 259 3A5319, Huot Tath, Venerable.

sent to the United States, the Venerable Vira Dharmawara. Where the Venerable Dharmawara is of political but not hierarchical importance, Huot Tath exercises great influence throughout the whole Buddhist structure of Cambodia; where Dharmawara is outgoing, speaks English easily, and evidences self-confidence, Huot Tath is retiring, quiet, speaks no English (but some French), and is extremely modest; whereas Dharmawara is liberal in his ideas and beliefs, Huot Tath is extremely orthodox. Dharmawara is widely traveled and quite unabashed about discussing politics, whereas Huot Tath keeps his opinions very much to himself (although enough is known about them to indicate he does not share all of Dharmawara's views). For these and other reasons the feelings between these two Buddhist monks is perceptibly cool and the Embassy cautions those persons who will be assisting his program and who may have met his predecessor to be particularly careful not to brim with enthusiasm when speaking of the Venerable Dharmawara, whose hierarchical rank is, in fact, much lower than that of Huot Tath. On the whole, however, the Embassy believes that those persons assisting in his program will find the Venerable Huot Tath a man of as much charm and kindness as his predecessor.¹⁸⁾

Despite this evidence of growing tension with the monastic hierarchy, Dharmawara maintained a presence in Cambodia for the next two years. We do not know how often he went, how long he stayed, or what he did while there. The TAF international president, Robert Blum, met with Dharmawara on a visit to Cambodia at the end of 1958, referring to him in a memorandum as a monk "with a rather shady past" who had previously traveled to the United States with American funding, and to Dharmawara's plans to go soon to Los Angeles, "probably on the invitation of Mr. Balzer."¹⁹⁾ There is much less documentation of the 1959 trip than of the 1955 one, but a short May 8 *Los Angeles Times* article described him arriving from Washington and being met by Balzer and two other persons. Balzer, the article wrote, was working with him on a book on Buddhist philosophy. Dharmawara had come to attend a conference "dedicated to the religions, arts, and culture of Asia" at the UCLA Lake Arrowhead center. The article mentions Dharmawara's connections with Sihanouk, Nehru, and the Dalai Lama, whom, it intriguingly states, he had met recently. This was only five weeks after the Dalai Lama had fled to India, and Dharmawara is quoted as saying that the Chinese had "lost a great deal of their prestige in Asia through their treatment of Tibet and the Dalai Lama"²⁰⁾ (*Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1959, 2)—perhaps further evidence of Dharmawara taking more

18) Foreign Service Dispatch from American Embassy, Phnom Penh, to the Department of State, Washington, October 5, 1956. RG 59 File 511.51H3-10-2356 Box 2155.

19) "Memorandum for the Record: Visit to Cambodia, Dec. 1-4, 1958." Robert Blum papers, Box 2, Folder 24, Yale University, p. 4.

20) In stating that he had met the Dalai Lama "recently," Dharmawara was most likely referring to the Dalai Lama's visit to India in 1956-57. We do not know the date on which Dharmawara traveled to the United States and whether it is possible he could have met the Dalai Lama soon after the latter arrived in India. The Dalai Lama crossed the border into India on March 30 and had reached Tezpur in Assam by April 18. Nehru met the Dalai Lama in Mussoorie on April 24.

often an explicitly anti-Communist stance.

In my interview with Keo Pama, he said that the Cambodian monkhood finally (at about this time) came to assume a unified stance against Dharmawara when he called the Mahanikay patriarch Chuon Nath a Communist. It is difficult to know how to interpret this. (Keo Pama also said that Dharmawara was not, in the long run, particularly ideological politically.) If Dharmawara made a statement like this, it was no doubt only one of a number of political and personal factors coming into play in his growing tension with the monastic hierarchy. Queen Kossamak asked Dharmawara, “as a compromise measure,” to go back to India. Some of Dharmawara’s family members have suggested that another factor in his fall from favor was his friendliness with two figures, Dap Chhuon and Sam Sary,²¹ who were around this time involved in plots against Sihanouk supported by the Thai and South Vietnamese governments, and probably the CIA; this could also suggest his increasing anti-Communism. But the break with Sihanouk was not permanent. Our sources here are minimal, and there is an inherent ambiguity about this moment. Personal style, questions of turf, and assumptions about proper monastic behavior doubtless factored in, as well as the combination of political and religious factors that relate to our basic theme.

Dharmawara had developed a connection with two novice monks, Por Won and Keo Pama, who were on friendly terms with him and often hung out at his *koti* (monastic residence) in the Chraoy Chongvar wat near Phnom Penh. Dharmawara arranged for them to go before him to India to help him at the Ashoka Mission. The two monks flew to Calcutta, stayed overnight at the Bengali Buddhist temple, and took the train to New Delhi. There they were met by the Cambodian ambassador and taken to the Ashoka Mission on the first day of the decade, January 1, 1960.

Dharmawara returned to Cambodia a year later, and on that occasion he took his two oldest grandchildren to India to live with him and complete their primary and secondary education. At least some of his expenses were paid by Sihanouk’s secretariat as he traveled between Sihanoukville, Kep, Bokor, and Phnom Penh. He would not return to Cambodia until the 1990s.

In the early 1960s Dharmawara was largely occupied with the routine of the Ashoka Mission. With some interesting exceptions, he largely disappeared from the public record until around 1972, although we know he remained in active contact with Cambodian monks studying in India. Several people important to him died in the course of the decade. Suramarit died shortly after Dharmawara left Cambodia, on April 3, 1960. A typewritten letter from Sihanouk dated August 16 acknowledges a gift Dharmawara sent

21) Interview with Konthal Cheng, June 11, 2018.

at the time of the cremation. Brij Lal Nehru died in 1964, the same year as Jawaharlal Nehru, and Rameshwari Nehru in 1966.

Dharmawara maintained friendly relations with Sihanouk. In 1963 Sihanouk sent Dharmawara 1,000 rupees after the latter sent him a copy of an English-language article about him. There are also photos from that year of Sihanouk coming to the Ashoka Mission while on a state visit, recalled as well by Dharmawara's grandchildren. However, Sihanouk never had the same sense of connection with Indira Gandhi as he had with Nehru, and as relations between India and China deteriorated following the 1962 war, Sihanouk showed greater allegiance to China and his connections with Zhou Enlai, dating to Bandung.

Independent Cambodia remained very much an agriculture-based country, with rice and rubber its principal exports. Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum represented modernization, not in the form of multiparty democracy but in the form of mobilization of the population under his direction. The movement rarely challenged private ownership, but it initiated large modernizing state projects to build infrastructure such as roads, schools, hydroelectric plants, hospitals, and an Olympic stadium, some with foreign funding (Slocomb 2010, 124). Culturally, it was a fertile time, and the book *Cultures of Independence* (Ly and Muan 2001) details how the country took new directions culturally in architecture, theater, cinema, and modern music and painting. Cambodia's identity as a modern, newly independent country was also exemplified in the way Sihanouk very publicly claimed its position as a nation among nations.

Sihanouk's 1965 essay article, "Notre Socialisme Buddhique," defining a political philosophy of Buddhist socialism, was published several years after Dharmawara had stopped coming to Cambodia, although many of its principles may have implicitly informed policy since the establishment of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum a decade earlier.²²⁾ Robert Garry (1965, 5–7, 9, cited in Sam 1978) quotes Sihanouk making reference to Buddhist socialism in earlier speeches. In a 1958 commencement speech he said that socialism suited the country because it fitted the Cambodian mentality and the Buddhist ideas of charity and humanity, with tolerance, fraternity, and the pursuit of happiness. In a 1961 speech at the meetings of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Phnom Penh, he stated, "I feel this Buddhist socialism which inspires our natural effort is a straight and true path" (Garry 1965, 5–7, 9, cited in Sam 1978).

Like U Nu, who had earlier tried to formulate a conception of Burmese socialism appropriate to a Buddhist society, and like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who wrote about

22) My ideas about Sihanouk's Buddhist socialism were further shaped, as I revised this paper, in a reading group on Buddhist socialism organized by Anne Hansen and, in particular, an August 2020 presentation by Linda Chhat and Catriona Miller.

Dhammic socialism in the 1970s, Sihanouk used the concept of Buddhist socialism to define a path that was neither capitalism nor Communism; to that extent it related to his philosophy of neutrality. The 1965 essay article, published a few months after Sihanouk had broken diplomatic relations with the United States, is particularly critical of US imperialism. Sihanouk states accurately that his conception of Buddhist socialism is different from that of U Nu. U Nu, in a country no longer a monarchy, was concerned with creating a sense of community based on Buddhist morality. Sihanouk, in contrast, conceived of Buddhist socialism as based on the compassionate generosity of the monarchy and other elites.

The connections between Sihanouk's 1965 essay article and Dharmawara's 1956 booklet *Through Light to Peace* are suggestive, and I would cautiously argue that they imply, at the least, the degree to which both men drew on ideas in currency, and possibly point to the influence of Dharmawara's ideas about Buddhism from the period when the two men were in regular contact. More than any other source, Sihanouk's 1965 essay article was composed with reference to a 1936 book on Buddhism by the French Buddhist Alexandra David-Néel, known primarily as a specialist in Tibetan Buddhism—to the extent that the article could be said to be developing Sihanouk's concept of Buddhist socialism in relation to David-Néel's writing. One should note, first of all, that in contrast, for example, with U Nu, whose vision of Buddhism in society seemed to have grown profoundly out of the Burmese tradition, Sihanouk gave no evidence of drawing on the Cambodian Theravada tradition represented, say, by monks such as Chuon Nath or Huot That. The Buddhism he invoked was an international Buddhism, more similar, perhaps, to that he would have had contact with through Dharmawara.

The most striking commonality between Sihanouk's essay article and Dharmawara's booklet may be the emphasis both place on the third-century BC Buddhist emperor Ashoka. Sihanouk cites Ashoka's inscriptions to make several points. Dharmawara, whose temple was named the Ashoka Mission, writes in the booklet, as quoted above, that countries should follow the example of Ashoka and renounce hatred and the sword, thus making their countries a "peaceful heaven worth living in." In 1965, would any Cambodian royal already be aware of the importance of Ashoka as a prototype of Buddhist kingship? The similarities here are in any case striking enough that one can easily imagine Sihanouk and Dharmawara discussing the foundational role of Ashoka at the time Cambodia achieved independence—the Ashoka who, turning from conquest and, though tolerant toward all religions, promoted Buddhism in edicts and social welfare at the same time that he collected and redistributed relics of the Buddha in multiple stupas. At the time of rethinking Cambodian polity, in the search for an alternative to Cold War polarities, the idea of Ashokan monarchy takes on salience.

With personal anecdotes of how he responded to visitors to Cambodia, Sihanouk quotes David-Néel to the effect that Buddhism is not an indolent religion but rather “a school of stoic energy training warriors to attack suffering” (Sihanouk 1965, 8). Similarly, Dharmawara writes that Buddhism “is not a religion of the weaklings” but rather a religion “for brave men and women who fear nothing in the world” (Dharmawara 1956, 9). When Dharmawara writes, “Is not this selfish craving, this greed for wealth, power and domination the root cause of all troubles and unrest in the world today” (Dharmawara 1956, 6), it is not so different from the critique of capitalism one would find in speeches of U Nu or the writings of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu on Dhammic socialism. Sihanouk’s criticism of the United States, while worded slightly differently, is in the same spirit:

Le Président des USA pratique justement la ‘mauvaise doctrine’ de la passion, de l’orgueil, du désir et de la violence, qui caractérise ce que nous appelons l’Impérialisme Américain. Selon la loi du Karma, cet impérialisme mourra de ses propres erreurs et crimes. (Sihanouk 1965, 13)

The president of the United States just practices the evil doctrine of passion, pride, desire, and violence, which characterizes what we call American imperialism. According to the law of Karma, this imperialism will die of its own errors and crimes.

While Sihanouk gives less emphasis than Dharmawara to Buddhism as a path toward peace, there is at least one section where he quotes the Tevijja Sutta and suggests that it is relevant to the goals of the United Nations: “Le disciple vit en conciliateur de ceux qui sont divisés, unissant plus étroitement ceux que sont amis, établissant la paix, préparant la paix, prononçant toujours des paroles de paix [The disciple lives as a conciliator of those who are divided, uniting those who are friends more closely, establishing peace, preparing peace, always speaking words of peace]” (Sihanouk 1965, 16).

While the era in which Dharmawara had significant contact with political figures had come to an end, by the late 1960s he began to attract interest and a following among backpackers and other visitors to India. He would come to have some prominence again in the 1970s, when he was discovered by J. G. Bennett, a British follower of the Caucasian mystic and teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866–1949), who had set up a school in the Gurdjieff tradition in Gloucester. Once Dharmawara began traveling internationally again, a new set of followers and international connections developed. Many of his most important connections were with Western followers, but he also played a role in the development of Cambodian Buddhism in the United States.

Conclusion

All of the above can be seen as part of the cultural and social maneuvering taking place at a moment of historical conjuncture—what Kwon would call the transition from a colonial to a bipolar order. My intention is not to show politics lurking beneath the surface of cultural matters, but to show the two as often inextricably linked. Dharmawara's story, at the interstices of this process, helps shed light on the historical conjuncture.

It is not difficult to compile a list of twentieth-century Buddhist figures whose impact was significantly shaped by their having crossed borders: Westerners such as Ananda Metteya, Lokanatha, Suzanne Karpeles, Frida Bedi, and Sangharakshita; and Asian figures such as Anagarika Dharmapala, Nichitatsu Fujii, S. N. Goenka, and the Dalai Lama. Dharmawara Mahathera (who knew at least some of these other figures) was in some ways a more minor figure, but he illustrates how transnational Buddhists could figure in emerging cultural and political narratives. Although we should not reduce his charisma to the fact that in various situations he could represent a link to an "other" of significance to his interlocutor, this was doubtless part of what was going on—assuming more far-reaching implications in times of change. A Rosencrantz and Guildenstern character, not Prince Hamlet, he nevertheless helps throw into relief the arc of the drama as a whole.

Thus, he helps us see that Chuon Nath and Huot Tath, so often depicted as timeless icons of Cambodian Buddhism, were to a degree still vulnerable in the 1950s, and defensive in maneuvering toward their position of prominence in the Sihanouk era. More at the heart of this article, Dharmawara helps us see the degree to which Sihanouk's neutrality, while surely motivated by Cold War geopolitical rationality, was also being negotiated with cultural and interpersonal reference; Sihanouk sought not only a political and economic but also a cultural basis for sovereignty.

The constellation of Dharmawara's connections reminds us of some of the odd juxtapositions of what occurred simultaneously in the period: how the heyday of Chuon Nath and Huot Tath was the same period in which Ambedkar converted to Buddhism and the Dalai Lama fled to India, how Buddha Jayanti celebrations occurred in the same epoch as the Bandung Conference—and the question of the degree to which there was an underlying logic to the ways post-independence national identities were crystallizing. Dharmawara's 1956 booklet and Sihanouk's 1965 essay article on Buddhist socialism were both products of this epoch, and both, perhaps, illustrate how societies were groping toward a new relationship between religion and the state. Monastic bureaucracies, like those of Cambodia, were in fact changing in relation to independence and bureaucratic modernity. This study shows that the relationship between religion and the state is also illustrated through the ways in which individual actors, like Dharmawara, would in prac-

tice negotiate their way through things like relic tours, invitations to conferences on education, and millennial Buddhist celebrations, which had their own relation to political realities. This gives us a glimpse of what the Cold War could mean on the ground.

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