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Negotiated Identities: Christianity and Ethnicity in a Diasporic Cambodian Church.

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Social Sciences in Anthropology

at

The University of Waikato

by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

July 2023

Abstract

As a global religious movement, Christianity has throughout history come into conflict with the traditional cosmologies of those who choose to convert, drastically changing the ways in which people express their spirituality. While much work within anthropology has focused on the cultural rupture that inevitably comes with conversion to Christianity, in this thesis I contribute to a growing body of work that understands conversion as incorporating both the changing and continuation of culture. This thesis is an ethnography of a Khmer language church in Aotearoa/New Zealand that provides a unique opportunity to examine a faith community embodying both radical change and strong connections to tradition. My investigation into the lived experiences of Cambodian Christians in the diaspora explores how initial decisions to convert, as well as church members' engagements with society in both Aotearoa/New Zealand and Cambodia reflect both rupture and continuity. As evidence of this I show that Khmer migrants' decisions to convert to Christianity have been heavily impacted by their ethnic identity, as they, like most Cambodians, look to religion as a way to establish order in a chaotic world. Alongside this, I examine ways in which Cambodian Christians relate to both their own cultural heritage and the wider religious landscape of Aotearoa/New Zealand, showing that the Christian life of CCF members is heavily influenced by both aspects of their Khmer identity and a desire to faithfully worship the Christian God. In exploring these aspects of Christian conversion, I join others in arguing for the need to view conversion as a dynamic and multifaceted process involving more than just rupture or simple syncretism.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to start by thanking my supervisor Dr Fraser Macdonald, whose input and guidance have been a huge help over the last eighteen months. Thank you for your support, understanding and guidance, all of which have been essential in producing this thesis.

I would also like to thank all of my other lecturers in the Anthropology Programme, especially Dr Fiona McCormack and Dr Bronwyn Isaacs. You both have had a great impact on my academic journey, and I thank you for helping to grow my understanding and interest in so many different areas.

Thank you to all my fellow students at the University of Waikato, particularly all those studying Anthropology at the post-graduate level. You have all been great tutors, friends and colleagues, and our wide-ranging discussions have been a highlight of the time I have spent in J block.

A huge thank you to all those at the Cambodian Christian Fellowship in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton who have taken the time to talk with me. This project would have been completely impossible without your generosity and kindness. Thank you also to all those who agreed to sit down with me for interviews, your insights have been so immensely helpful. An especially big thank you to Kimsa and Sa for your warmth and hospitality. Thank you for inviting me into your home, feeding me, telling me your stories and being such great friends.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family, who have been so supportive throughout all of my studies. Thanks mum and dad for giving me many amazing experiences as a child and teaching me so much about the importance of understanding and appreciating cultural difference. Thank you also to my brothers, in-laws, uncles, and aunts who have supported and encouraged me over the years. Most of all though, I would like to thank my best friend and wife Jo, whose love, affection, support, generosity, and patience have really carried me through the past year and a half. Thank you for encouraging me to follow my passions, even though I know it has cost you time, energy, and money.

Abbreviations and Terminology Used

CCF – Cambodian Christian Fellowship

OMF – OMF International, previously Overseas Missionary Fellowship

WKA – Waikato Khmer Association

CMA – Christian and Missionary Alliance

YWAM – Youth With A Mission

ICCI – Inter-Church Commission on Immigration and Refugee Resettlement

As a short note on terminology used, throughout this thesis I have used both the terms "Khmer" and "Cambodian." While the term "Khmer" is sometimes used to refer to an ethnic identity, and "Cambodian" to the national identity, I have chosen to simplify and use the terms interchangeably. All of my participants at the CCF are both ethnically Khmer and Cambodian citizens and use the terms interchangeably when referring to themselves.

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Introduction

The main object of this thesis is to describe and analyse one Cambodian diasporic church, made up of Khmer immigrants in the city of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and through this process to develop an understanding of how this congregation connects with and diverges from traditional Cambodian expressions of religious faith. Throughout the history of the Kingdom of Cambodia, Theravada Buddhism has been strongly linked to both national and ethnic identities, as can be seen clearly in the nation's motto of "Nation, Religion, King" (Khmer: ជាតិ សាសនា ព្រះមហាក្សត្រ, anglicised as *Cheate, Sasanea, Preah Mohaksatr*). As such, any move towards adopting the Christian faith (and to move away from Buddhist traditions) has the potential to be seen as a step away from an integral part of what it means to be Khmer. In this thesis, which is based on four months of ethnographic fieldwork with the Cambodian Christian Fellowship (CCF) of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, I explore this central problematic and examine some of the ways that church members retain a strong connection to their traditional Khmer identity while embracing the Christian faith, as well as how their experiences and perceptions of their Cambodian heritage have shifted. To do this I engage with both the personal histories and lived presents of my participants, showing that being Cambodian has shaped not only their decision to become Christian, but also the ways in which they express their faith by how they relate to those around them.

My interest in this topic has come about due to my own connection to and passion for the nation and people of Cambodia. I first encountered the "Kingdom of Wonder" when I applied for and was given a job working with an international development agency based in Northern Cambodia, with whom I was employed for two years between 2017 and 2019. My experiences over this time fostered a passion for understanding how my Khmer friends experience and understand the rapid changes that have occurred in their nation over recent decades, and of which, as a development worker, I played a small part.

The Anthropology of Christianity and conversion

While examples of anthropological studies directed at Christian worship can be found dating back to the earliest roots of the discipline (Simon Coleman 2013), the Anthropology of Christianity as a sub-discipline in its own right is much younger, emerging as a theoretically

defined area of study in the early 2000s (Robbins 2014). As S. Coleman (2013) has argued, one reason for this relatively late development of an Anthropology of Christianity may be "that Christianity is too close to the culture of Western anthropologists: the discipline may be largely secular in its approach, but it retains implicitly Christian ideas about the linear passage of time, the construction of religion out of texts, priesthoods, distinctions between the sacred and the profane, and so on. Thus Christianity was perhaps simply not noticed as a valid topic of study; or alternatively acknowledgement of its influence might have undermined the worries over ethnocentrism that anthropology has generally maintained as part of its disciplinary identity" (Colman 2013, paragraph 1). Several scholars, including Bielo (2009) and Robbins (2014), point to a special issue of the journal *Religion*, edited by Robbins and published in 2003, as the key moment in which the study of Christianity emerged as a discrete field of cultural anthropology. In the introductory article of the issue Robbins argues that anthropology had up until that point largely ignored Christianity, instead favouring other world religions, and highlighted the need for the development of a self-conscious anthropology of Christianity typified by a de-stigmatised view of anthropologists studying Christianity. As well as this, Robbins also points out the fact that anthropologists before then had been largely predisposed towards focusing on cultural continuity, and so when studying Christianity were biased towards looking for how Indigenous religion was behind their Christian conversion and practices (Robbins 2003, 2017). Since these early formations the Anthropology of Christianity has grown quickly, with important contributions on areas such as anthropology's need to address its own historical connection to Christianity (Cannell 2005), the importance of language in connecting Christian worshipers to the divine (Engelke 2007), the changing perceptions of gender amongst Christian converts (Martin 1995, Wong 2021) and Christianity's relationship with modernity (Keane 2007).

Alongside these topics, anthropologists have also developed a keen interest in the process of conversion to Christianity, examining the ways in which traditional cosmologies and worldviews are displaced or incorporated into new Christian faiths. Here again Robbins has left his mark, this time with an influential examination into the ways in which conversion to charismatic Christianity brought radical change into the lives of Papua New Guineans living in the remote interior mountains of the country (Robbins 2003). Over subsequent decades anthropologists have continued to examine the nature of Christian conversion, realising that rupture is a central feature (Robbins 2017), with accounts of cultural change coming to dominate a majority of ethnographies written of Christian conversion (Richman and Lemons

2022). Central to much of this work has, in line with Robbins work in Papua New Guinea, been focused largely on the degree to which conversion represents a break from or hybridisation with traditional world views. As Robbins (2003) himself has referenced, this focus on the cultural changes that come with Christian conversion was a result of anthropologists tending to focus their attention on Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian groups. As such, the theological emphasis on the need to break away from your old self and be "born again" within these church traditions contributed to a preoccupation with rupture. As the discipline has matured and more in-depth studies on the nature of conversion have been produced there has been a growing understanding that conversion entails a complex mixture of rupture and continuity, representing a radical break from traditional forms of religiosity, yet necessarily retaining existing knowledge and experience in a directional passage towards new forms of relatedness (Austin Broos 2003). Premawardhana (2018) for example has used the idea of "existential mobility" to argue that rather than viewing conversion as either "continuity" or "change", it can be seen as "continuity of change". Working from an ethnography of Christianity in Mozambique, Premawardhana demonstrates that conversion to Pentecostalism builds on and reinforces existing predispositions towards both spatial and cosmological mobility in a way that simultaneously brings cultural chance while reinforcing tradition. Another example, and one which I shall refer to in more depth in chapter four, is Kimberly Marshall's (2016) formulation of "resonant rupture", which accounts for the ways in which traditional expressive forms are incorporated into new religious belief systems so that their meaning changes, while their style and emotive connection remains.

This report aims to add to this discussion on rupture and continuity, presenting a picture of a small immigrant church congregation that has in many ways been cut off both geographically and spiritually from their homeland and traditional culture. While much has changed for Khmer people who have moved to Aotearoa/New Zealand, my research shows a clear desire for Cambodian-New Zealander Christians to retain connections to their cultural background while being committed to their new Christian beliefs. My research adds to the discussion around rupture and continuity of Christian conversion more widely by presenting a unique example uncommon to anthropology. As Austin-Broos (2003) has noted, conversion accounts of transitions from local and traditional cosmologies to Christianity (and other World Religions) have become familiar within anthropology, while transitions between world religions are less common, and so less well understood. This thesis provides one such study, focusing on what has drawn Cambodian Buddhists towards Christianity, as well as how

conversion has been understood and acted out by Cambodian-New Zealander Christians living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton.

Cambodian Christianity

Throughout the formulation and writing of this research project I have also engaged heavily with existing ethnographies of Khmer people living both in the diaspora and in Cambodia. While detailed accounts of Cambodian culture written before the Khmer Rouge genocide of 1975-1979 are rare (May Ebihara's ethnography, *Svay*, first published 1968 (2018), is a notable exception), many detailed accounts of Cambodian life and culture have been produced since their removal from power. The majority of these do, by necessity, relate in one way or another to the period of intense violence that shook the country during the late 1970's, but also address a wide range of topics, from intergenerational conflicts that have arisen due to rapid cultural changes (Estes 2023), to the influence of international NGOs that proliferated in Cambodia during the period of national rebuilding from 1991 to present day (Mellquist Lehto 2023, Oh 2020).

Many accounts of Cambodian religiosity have also been published, giving a clear account of the factors that have shaped the spiritual lives of Khmer people. Given that Buddhism, the main religion of Cambodia, was largely dismantled by the Cambodian Communist party, much work has focused on the re-establishment of institutional Buddhism that began from the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 (Harris 2005, Marston and Guthrie 2004). Explorations of Cambodian Christianity are less common, and until recently were largely focused on the experiences of those living in the diaspora, especially in the United States and Canada (Cynthia M. Coleman 2019, McLellan 2009, Wong 2019). In more recent years closer examinations of the church in Cambodia have emerged, again largely focusing on how Cambodia's violent history and the subsequent years of national rebuilding have influenced the religious landscape of the country (Wong 2021, A. Marshall 2019, Brandner 2019).

My work fits build on this larger body of work by providing a new perspective on the diasporic Khmer church. While several accounts have been written describing the religious lives of Cambodians living in North America, very little has been written about Khmer communities elsewhere in the world, including Aotearoa/New Zealand. Alongside this, many of the existing accounts have presented extensive ethnographies of the lives of Cambodian

immigrants, and while religious experiences are explored, they are not the central focus (C.M Coleman 2019, McLellan 2009). Amongst those accounts expressly directed towards understanding Khmer religious expression in the diaspora, few are directly interested in those practising Christianity, and instead are largely focused on how Buddhism has been replicated and adapted to a Western cultural context (Ong 2003, Douglas 2003), meaning my work will join a small body of literature directly focused on the shape of Cambodian Christianity in the diaspora.

Methodology

This thesis is the outcome of a four-month period of ethnographic field work that I conducted between August and December of 2022. All the participants for this period of fieldwork were selected due to their connection with the Cambodian Christian Fellowship, a small Khmer language church that meets in a northern suburb of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton.

I recruited my participants through existing relationships with a few of the church members whom I met due to my ongoing connections to Cambodia. After returning from my two-year stint there in 2019, I met several members of the church through mutual connections, and we soon became friends due to our shared love of fishing and Cambodian food. When I began to think about potential topics for my Masters thesis, I approached Kimsa Heng, the current leader of the CCF and asked him if he would be willing for me to spend time with him and the wider congregation. Kimsa was interested in my proposed project and so invited me to a church service where he introduced me to more church members and was a huge help in explaining my project to those who do not have a high level of English language competency. From this introduction I was able to approach church members and ask them if they would be willing to meet with me to be interviewed about their life history and experiences with church and Christianity in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

I began interviewing participants once my application for ethical approval had been accepted. As a part of the ethical considerations of my research, interlocuters were given an explanation of my project and then provided the opportunity to consent to or decile participation. During the course of my field work I conducted six semi-structured interviews with Khmer church members, and two interviews with Pakeha-New Zealanders that have

become connected to the church due to their past experience working as Christian missionaries in Cambodia during the mid-2000's. During interviews, participants were asked to share their life histories, especially in relation to what led them to becoming Christian and how they became connected to the CCF. Participants were also asked about how they saw their cultural and personal backgrounds affecting their Christian faith, as well as how they continued to construct and maintain connections to their identity as Khmer. Interviews were conducted either in the homes of my participants or following weekly church services and ranged from between 30 minutes to two hours in length.

Over the course of my fieldwork, Kimsa Heng became both a gatekeeper who helped me meet and befriend other church members, and a key informant that provided many insights into the history and functioning of the CCF. His role as a gatekeeper came about due to his position as the leader of the congregation and host of weekly services and church events, though overall I found that CCF members were more than willing to help with my research. As one of the first members of the church he also had a good understanding of its history, and his high proficiency of English made asking in-depth interview questions possible. Out of all the CCF members that I interviewed, Kimsa was also the most deeply connected with a western church, and so helped me gain an appreciation for the complex dynamics that exist between the CCF and wider Christianity in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

In addition I attended a number of church services at the CCF over this time, where I was able to use participant-observation, attending and joining in on weekly Saturday evening services in order to see and feel how my participants worshipped together. Alongside this I also attended weekly English lessons that were hosted by the church, where I was able to observe how Khmer Christians interacted with other Buddhist members of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton's Khmer community. Towards the end of my fieldwork I attended the annual church Christmas party, where anyone, both Christians and non-Christians, Khmer and non-Khmer, who were involved in any way with the church or English classes are invited to share a meal at the pastor's house. The use of participant observation was hugely beneficial to my fieldwork, giving me a greater appreciation for the daily lives of the Cambodian community of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. Especially helpful were the conversations that I was able to have with church members after each week's worship service, which gave me the opportunity to listen to the congregation's thoughts on the sermon, hear them share news from Cambodia, and regularly ask the congregation questions about aspects of the service or their lives more widely.

Thesis outline

This thesis is divided into two broad sections. The first of these is spread across the three opening chapters and is directed towards painting a clear picture of the Cambodian church in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, looking first at the historical context of both the CCF and Cambodian Christianity more widely and then giving a closer view of the field site as it was during my research period. The latter three chapters take a different focus, examining how CCF church members relate to other Khmer immigrants in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, the Pakeha church of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and the domestic church in Cambodia. By looking at how the CCF relates to these three different groups, I aim to provide insights into how cultural heritage and social context influence the shape of the Cambodian church in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

In chapter one I provide a brief, overarching picture of the history of Christianity in Cambodia, which aims to give context to the rest of the thesis. In particular, this first chapter focuses on the period of violence under the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) as a key moment that has drastically altered the shape of the Cambodian church.

The second chapter introduces the field site of the Cambodian Christian Fellowship of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, giving a concise view of the church's historical, geographical, theological, and socio-cultural context, upon which the remainder of the thesis is built. By providing an overview of church worship services and other activities, this chapter begins to show the CCF congregation as a group with a desire to faithfully worship the Christian God while simultaneously retaining their identity as Khmer.

Building on the first and second chapters, chapter three looks at the life histories of my participants with a clear focus on their conversion stories. As the context of conversion remains an important part of the spiritual lives of CCF members, this chapter aims to provide further, more narrowly focused, background to the lived experiences of Khmer Christians living in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This chapter engages with existing scholarship on conversion amongst Khmer people in order to better understand how and why refugees living in camps along the Thai border began to convert to Christianity, arguing that conversion can be seen as a "passage" by which Cambodian migrants can come to terms with their experiences and begin reordering their world. Throughout this chapter I also show that as a directional "passage", CCF members'

conversions have been heavily shaped by their traditional world views, and argue that their conversion histories continue to be an important force in shaping their Christian faith.

The fourth chapter begins to put forward an understanding of the concurrent rupture and resonance that can be seen in the religious experiences of CCF members by giving an account of the relationship that has formed between Christian and Buddhist members of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton's Cambodian community. In this section I give evidence from both CCF worship services as well as their relationship with the Buddhist temple to show that the experiences of Cambodian Christians in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton cannot be summarised in terms either of complete rupture or simple hybridity. Drawing on K. Marshall's (2016) idea of resonant rupture as well as Zehner's (2005) conception of orthodox hybridity, I show that CCF members creatively weave aspects of their traditional culture and heritage into their Christian worship, while retaining a firm hold of their Christian faith by refusing certain aspects of Buddhist ritual and practice.

The fifth chapter expands the view of the CCF by illuminating their relationship with the wider Christian churches of Aotearoa/New Zealand. The chapter starts by giving some context to how relationships have formed between individual members of the CCF and English-speaking Pakeha-New Zealander churches throughout Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, focusing again on the centrality of the refugee background of most Khmer Christians. Following this I describe one important way in which traditional Cambodian patron/client power relationships have been replicated within interactions between CCF members and Western churches as an example of how cultural heritage continues to shape the religious experiences of Khmer Christians, despite their non-traditional religious convictions and diasporic context.

The final chapter of this thesis completes my account of the CCF by focusing on the relationships that have formed between the CCF in Aotearoa/New Zealand and domestic churches in Cambodia. In this chapter I argue that the decision by CCF members to reconnect with their homeland, specifically through the vehicle of Christianity, shows a clear desire to both reclaim their Khmer identity and assert their Christian beliefs.

Chapter One: Historic Context

> "(The temple is) first and foremost of course, a moral centre. The temple and its monks not only exemplify and disseminate the Buddhist teachings but also offer various opportunities for laymen to earn merit. Second, the temple is also a major social centre. The various annual Buddhist festivals and other events are occasions for large festive gatherings and an important source of entertainment for the villagers; the Buddhist holidays, along with the stages of rice cultivation, are the main markers in the annual cycle of the village. Third, the temple retains importance as an educational institution. The temple schools or the period spent as a monk were once the only means of education for peasant children; in modern times, monk instructors and temple schools continue to operate as part of the public school system" (Ebihara 2018, p.160)

Within Cambodia there is a common phrase that has come to represent and typify religious identity for Khmer people: "to be Cambodian is to be Buddhist" (Nancy 1994; Poethig 2004), a phrase that within the anthropology of Cambodian religion has been closely associated with Ebihara's (2018 [1968]) influential ethnography of Svay, a small rural Cambodian village. In this rare ethnography of pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodian society, Ebihara gives a comprehensive picture of religious life during the mid-1960's, focusing on the centrality of Theravada Buddhism and the temple in the functioning of Cambodian society as a core institution for religious expression, education, and social events. It is this centrality of the temple to daily life and societal functioning that has led to an intimate connection between Buddhism and Cambodian cultural identity, a feature that has come to dominate the religious landscape of the country. This connection between Buddhism and Cambodian identity is a theme that has been explored in depth within cultural anthropology, including considerations of the importance of Buddhism in powerfully shaping aspects of society and culture, such as material, cosmological, political and moral security (Kent 2006), cultural identity (Hansen 2004), a sense of national pride (Marston, 2004), community resilience (Eisenbruch 1991), and social cohesion (Brown, 1999). Given this clear importance of Buddhism to Cambodian people, it is of no surprise that Buddhism continues to dominate the country's religious environment, with around 95% of the country's population practising Theravada Buddhism (US Department of State 2021). Against this background it would therefore be easy to assume that any attempt to break away from traditional Buddhist institutions and form a Christian church in Cambodia would be slow and met with significant resistance. Against these odds, however, a range of historical and cultural

factors have coalesced in Cambodian history in such a way as to break down reliance on Buddhist teaching and institutions and so facilitate Christian conversion. In the following section I will, with the aim of providing context for the remainder of this thesis, provide a brief history of the church in Cambodia.

Beginnings

While the earliest origins of Cambodian Christianity are not well documented, the first Christian missionary to what is now Cambodia was probably Gaspar da Cruz, a Portuguese Dominican Priest who arrived in 1555. Spending only one year in Cambodia, da Cruz soon left for China, citing the strength of Buddhism's influence on Khmer culture as the leading reason for his mission's failure (Lach 1994). In his own words, da Cruz claimed that "the Bramenes (Cambodian royal class) are the most difficult people to convert, since they are very attached to their rites and idolatries… this is a very great obstacle to the propagation of Christianity in that country" (Da Cruz, translated by Boxer 2010, p.60). He then gives an account of his attempts to preach to both the King and his ministers, a disastrous undertaking, the end result of which was that "the hatred of the Bramenes increased towards me (da Cruz), and from thence forward I had disfavours of the King, who was moved for the zeal of his God" (p.61).

This early struggle to establish Christianity in Cambodia would continue for the next 400 years of Cambodia's history, as a succession of attempts by both Catholic and Protestant groups to missionise the region ended with little or no success (Wong 2020). Throughout this period the spread of Christianity was hindered not only by the pre-eminence of Buddhism as reported by da Cruz, but also the persecution of Christians at the hands of the Cambodian monarchy who, fearing that Christian churches were too closely tied to Western, especially French and later American, interests outlawed any open church gatherings and jailed several prominent church leaders (Cormack, 2009). The persecution of the Cambodian church was especially harsh up until Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863, with many reported instances of missionaries being deported and Khmer converts being martyred between 1750 and the mid 1800s (Ponchaud 1990). In one such instance, Ponchaud recounts that in 1740 all Western missionaries working in Cambodia were expelled, though some would later return in secret (1990 p.48).

Under the French colonial administration that was established in 1863, the situation would see some important changes as Christians were given a much higher level of religious freedom, which in turn precipitated the arrival of Christians fleeing persecution elsewhere in South Asia. The most notable instance of this was the arrival of Vietnamese Catholics fleeing religious persecution at the hands of the anti-Western and anti-Catholic Nguyen emperor from 1858-1863 (Wong, 2020). However these increased freedoms that came with the introduction of a French colonial authority did not by any means result in a complete end to the religious persecution of Christians, with many more violent attacks perpetrated over the next 100 years. In the period between 1940 and 1953 for example a number of nationalist movements would form which viewed Christianity, specifically Catholicism, as opposed to Khmer cultural identity. The most notable of these was the *Khmer Issarak,* a guerrilla group that organised a number of attacks on Christian communities, including one in 1946 that left 42 Vietnamese Catholics dead (Ponchaud 1990).

One of the key underlying factors behind this continuing oppression of Christianity, especially before Cambodian independence from France in 1953, was the close relationship between missionisation and colonialism, as European powers sought to increase their influence throughout South-east Asia through conversion. This was especially true of several attempts by French Catholic missionaries who became active within the region of Indochina with the explicit support of the French government following the establishment of Cambodia as a French protectorate in 1863 (Pounchaud 1990, Thyu, 2012). This history of colonisation and Christian missions working hand in hand has had a lasting effect on the common perceptions of Christianity for Cambodian people, with many still viewing Christianity as a Western, especially French, and therefore colonial religion (Ponchaud, 1990). In a similar manner, the arrival of Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia contributed to the perception of Catholicism as a Vietnamese religion, a view that has led to continuing persecution of Catholics within Cambodia. As Amer (1994) and others have shown, there has been a long history of anti-Vietnamese sentiment within Cambodia, stemming from decades of warfare and subjugation by Vietnam. This view has led to several periods of ethnic and religious violence in Cambodia, where tens of thousands of Vietnamese Catholics became the targets of deportation, violence, and imprisonment (Thun and Keo 2021, Wong 2020). All of these histories of Christian activity in Cambodia, and the resulting perceptions of Christianity as a Western, and in the case of Catholicism, Vietnamese, religion of colonialism has had a lasting impact of cementing Buddhism as innately Khmer, and thus further distanced and discouraged Christian conversion.

While Vietnamese Catholic communities were most commonly the targets due to their ethnicity, violence also was regularly directed at Khmer protestants, such as one attack in 1951 that resulted in the deaths of two evangelical pastors (Ponchaud, 1990). The resulting slow growth of the church over this period can be highlighted by the fact that by the late 1960's, more than 400 years after Gaspar da Cruz's first missionary journey, as well as the many subsequent visits by European missionaries, the total population of Khmer Christians in Cambodia, excluding a sizable population of around 60,000 ethnically Vietnamese Catholics that had arrived as refugees (Mowell 2021), was around only 300 individuals (Cormack 2009).

In 1970 an event occurred that would, as well as shifting the entire course of Cambodian history, leave a lasting mark on the Christian church of Cambodia. In January of that year, Prime Minister Lon Nol staged a military coup against the incumbent President, King, and national hero, Norodom Sihanouk. Sihanouk had gained great favour amongst Cambodians due to his role in securing independence from France, but his tolerance of Vietnamese communists operating within Cambodia inflamed not only widespread anti-Vietnamese sentiment but also fears of communism that had been provoked by US involvement in the Second Indochina War (Clymer 2004, Chandler 2007). While claims that the CIA masterminded and facilitated the coup are largely unfounded (Kiernan, 1993), the new government, now led by Lon Nol, did enjoy increased American support (Kiernan, 2004). This sudden cementing of Cambodian-American relations and the weakening of the Cambodian monarchy brought with it newfound freedoms for both foreign missionaries and Cambodian Christians, as laws that protected Buddhist institutions and cemented the King as a divinely inspired ruler were abandoned. These increased freedoms were felt much less strongly by the mostly Vietnamese Catholic population though, as the government of Lon Nol would almost immediately embark on an attempt to completely remove Cambodia of any Vietnamese influence. As a result of this, around 7,000 Vietnamese living in Cambodia were murdered within a month of the change in government, and as many as 200,000 were forced to flee into Southern Vietnam (Cormack 2009). For the mostly Khmer protestant churches, however, the almost immediate result of this political shift was a sudden boom in church growth, as missionaries from around the world began to arrive and preach a Christian message throughout the country. Don Cormack, an American missionary working with OMF International (formerly known as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, hereon referred to as OMF) in the capital city Phnom Penh during the early 1970's would later go on to describe the spread of Protestant Christianity within Cambodia at this time:

> "Over the five-year period from 1970-1975, the three leading churches in Phnom Penh exploded into thirty major centres of worship, as well as countless other cell groups and home fellowships. Towards the end, it became impossible, even irrelevant, to attempt to total the number of churches and house groups flourishing all across the beleaguered city and surrounding refugee shanty towns" (Cormack 2009, 126).

While this boom in church growth originated in the capital city, it was not confined to it, and soon Protestant churches became established in every province in the country.

While several accounts of this period of church growth exist, the exact reasons as to why the church grew so rapidly in the first half of the 1970's are poorly understood. As Wong (2020) suggests, one important factor that is likely to have contributed was the support given to the burgeoning church by Buddhist temples. As she notes, Buddhist temples frequently provided help in translation services, spaces for worship services, and even support for some Christian doctrine, such as the observance of the sabbath, all of which gave some licence for people to convert. Another of the key driving factors in this rapid growth was the presence of several American mission organisations in Cambodia, some of which had been intermittently active in the country since the 1920's and were able to quickly mobilise following the relaxing of pro-Buddhist government policy. Most notable were the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CMA) and OMF (Wong 2020, Cormack 2009). While the number of protestant Christians living in Cambodia at the end of 1975 is still debated, estimates of more than 10,000 individuals have been given (OMF International website 2021).

The Khmer Rouge

This relative boom in Cambodian Christianity would be short lived, as April of 1975, following an extended period of violence, the Communist Party of Kampuchea (better known as the Khmer Rouge), under the leadership of Pol Pot, defeated pro-US government forces and took control of Cambodia. This would begin a four-year period of intense political turmoil, religious violence, and ethnic cleansing of the Cham and Vietnamese minority populations (Amer 1994, Killean 2022) that would lead to the death of two million Cambodians, a quarter of the nation's pre-1975 population (Chandler 1999). The Khmer Rouge modelled their political ideology on Chinese Maoism, expelling all city dwelling citizens to the countryside in an attempt to create

an agrarian autarky that replicated Mao's "Great Leap Forward." Along with these strategies, the Khmer Rouge adopted a range of other Maoist policies, including completely outlawing all forms of religious worship. This resulted in almost all religious institutions within the country being completely destroyed in the four years that the Khmer Rouge maintained control, with religious buildings such as temples, mosques and churches torn down or confiscated, and anyone unwilling to recant their religious beliefs murdered, forced into hiding, or expelled into neighbouring countries.

While it is important to note that during this period the majority religions of Cambodia, namely Theravada Buddhism and the various Indigenous religions followed by highland groups in the North of the country, were harshly oppressed, the majority of the Khmer Rouge regime's anti-religious sentiment was directed at the two most influential minority religious groups, Islam and Christianity (Mowell 2021). Over the period that the Khmer Rouge remained in control of the country, the destruction of the Christian Church in Cambodia was almost complete, and most estimates of the 1979 Christian population of Cambodia put the total number of surviving Christians at less than 200 individuals (Mam 2012), down from a pre-Khmer Rouge figure of more than 10,000 (Cormack 2009) with thousands of Christians either murdered or forced to flee to refugee camps across the Thai and Vietnamese borders. During this time, Christians may also have been the targets for especially harsh and violent treatment due to the conflation of Christianity with Western influence, so that many Khmer Christian leaders were accused of acting as American CIA informants (Pounchard 1990), or for Catholics, being closely connected to the Vietnamese (Mowell 2021).

The Khmer Rouge would remain in power for only four years, as political tension with their Vietnamese neighbours and subsequent border skirmishes would escalate into a full-scale invasion by the newly formed Socialist Republic of Vietnam in January 1979, forcing all remaining Khmer Rouge leaders into hiding in Thailand and initiating a guerrilla war that would last for more than ten years and claim more than 35,000 lives (Khoo 2011). This change in government would not, however, signal the end of Christian persecution, with the new Vietnamese backed government being equally as suspicious of the potential Western influences that came with Christianity. It would not be until 1989 when, after 20 years of Vietnamese proxy rule, the Paris Peace Accord would be signed and Cambodia would be reunified as a democratic state, allowing greater religious freedom to return (Chandler 2007).

This period of almost unimaginable suffering for the Cambodian people led to another key occurrence that had a drastic influence on the Cambodian Christian church: the establishment of refugee camps along the border with Thailand. Beginning in 1970, the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis (as it later became known) was characterised by largescale displacement, famine, and death due to violence and disease (Allegra et.al 1984). Initiated by fighting between government and Khmer Rouge forces and the associated campaign of United States Air Force bombing, continued by the Khmer Rouge's takeover and violent rule of the country, and reaching its peak following the invasion by Vietnam and subsequent guerrilla war, the United Nations response to the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis remains one of the largest humanitarian aid projects ever undertaken (Barber 2014). While the exact numbers of those displaced during this especially turbulent period of Cambodian history are widely contested, some of the best estimates are given by Allegra, Nieburg and Grabe (1984) who, working from accounts of those involved with the administration of the international response to the crisis, estimate that more than 600,000 Cambodians, representing around one tenth of the total 1979 population, fled the country into refugee camps along the Thai border. While refugees began attempting to cross the Thai border as early as 1969, high levels of Khmer Rouge border security on the Cambodian side prevented most from attempting a crossing. In 1979, following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the chaos that erupted led to a lapse in border patrols and a sudden, massive, influx of Cambodian people seeking safety from the violence of the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese troops (Allegra et.al 1984, Chandler 2007).

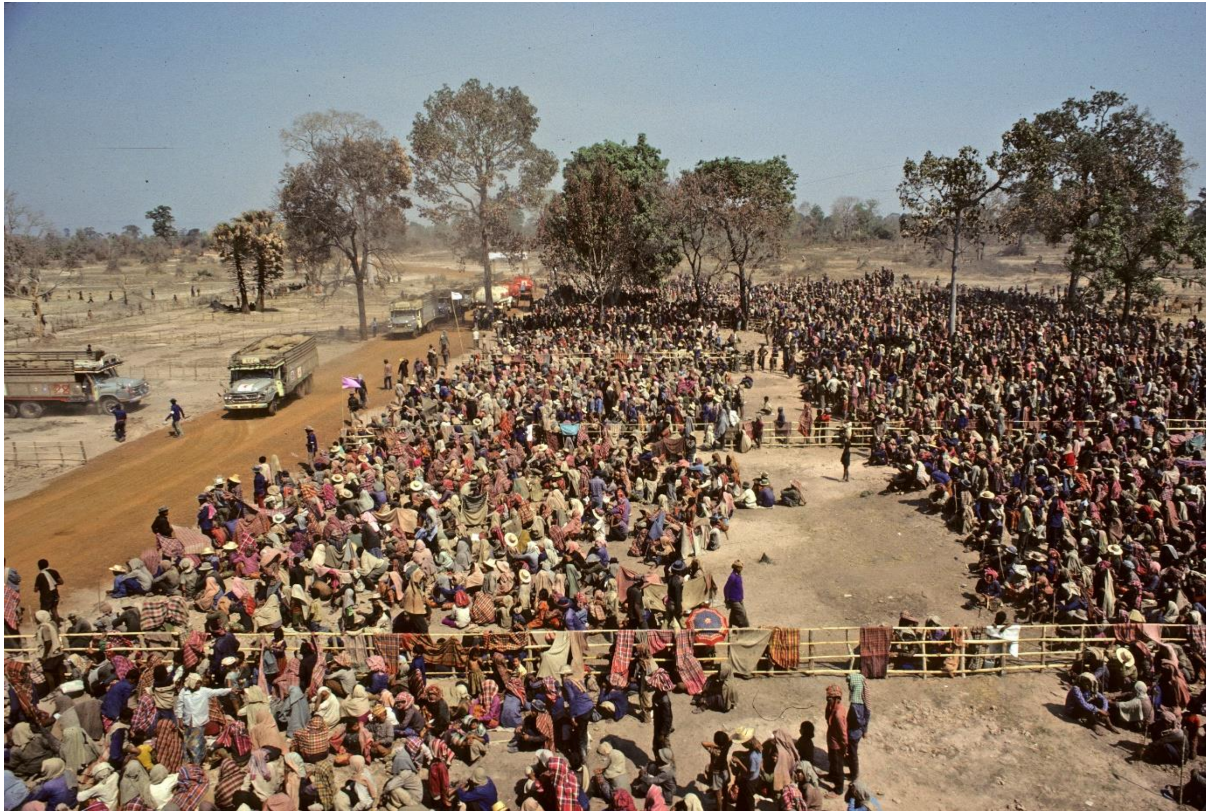

Figure 1: Nong Chan refugee camp at the peak of the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis, 1979. International Committee of the Red Cross, Gérard Leblanc, used with permission.

The camps that received fleeing Cambodian citizens were hastily organised by the United Nations and Thai Red Cross, and the exhausted refugees, many of whom had walked weeks or months in their attempt to escape, arrived starving, weak and in desperate need of medical care (Barber 2014). Conditions inside the camps were harsh, especially in the initial stages of the crisis, with poor sanitation, overcrowding, and inadequate water supply leading to outbreaks of malaria, typhoid, cholera, and measles (Allegra et.al 1984). Refugees that made it to camps had not, however, fully escaped the violence that they had left behind, as pro-Vietnamese forces, claiming that refugee camps were actually Thai-backed Khmer Rouge training camps, led raids and artillery assaults directed at those located closest to the border as well as against Thai police and guards. The continuing conflict between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese troops was not the only source of violence either, as the members of the Thai military entrusted with protecting and maintaining order within the makeshift camps often resorted to violence and intimidation to control residents (Terry 2002).

Figure 2: Red Cross hospital in Sakeo refugee camp, 1979. International Committee of the Red Cross, Gérard Leblanc, used with permission.

Amongst this chaos, the international response was both extensive and immediate, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), World Food Program (WFP), World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and International Red Cross stepped in with emergency relief programs that aimed to supply food, sanitation, water, education and healthcare (Suenobu 1995, Rogge 1990). These larger United Nations groups were quickly joined by a range of smaller non-governmental organisations seeking to address the harsh conditions experienced by refugees, and over the period 1970 – 1980 nearly 100 different agencies would become involved in the running of camp programs such as English language classes, the provision of medical care, food distribution and schools and training programs (Suenobu 1995). One key aspect to note regarding the involvement of these aid agencies is the prevalence of Christian missionary and aid organisations within the camps. Some of the Christian aid groups that became well established were Youth With A Mission (YWAM), Christian and Missionary Alliance (CAMA), World Vision and Catholic Relief Services, organisations whose volunteer personnel originated from the United States,

France, Australia, United Kingdom, Aotearoa/New Zealand and elsewhere (Rogge 1990, C.M Coleman 2019).

Figure 3: Aerial view of Khao I Dang, one of the largest and the longest running refugee camps in Thailand, 1979. International Committee of the Red Cross, used with permission.

While camp policies prohibited open proselytisation (Ong 2003), the presence of these Christian agencies nonetheless produced lasting effects on the religious landscape of Cambodia, the most obvious and important of which was the conversion of many Khmer refugees to Christianity. The conversions that took place inside the refugee camps along the Thai border have since been identified as a key moment in the history of the Cambodian church, jumpstarting a renewed interest in Christianity that was carried both by refugees and migrants into the diaspora and also back into Cambodia by those who returned to their homes (Mam 2012, 2020, McLellan 2009). Reflecting this, Barnabas Mam, a leading Khmer pastor who remains a central figure in the resurgence of the Cambodian church following the end of Vietnamese rule in 1989, has famously referred to Thai refugee camps as “the greenhouse of the Cambodian church” (Mam 2012, 173). As Mam suggests, the conversion to Christianity of Cambodians living in Thai refugee camps set the groundwork for the formation of the

contemporary church in Cambodia by providing an opportunity for Khmer people that had become disillusioned with Buddhism to befriend Western missionaries and aid workers who answered their questions about Christian doctrine (a process I will explain more fully in chapter three), which they then took with them into both Cambodia and the Western nations in which many were subsequently resettled. This emigration would begin in the mid-1980's and continue until the early 1990's, a period during which more than 260,000 Cambodians would be settled in various Western nations around the world. The majority were resettled in the United States (153,000) and France (52,000), with others relocating to Australia, Canada, and Aotearoa/New Zealand. While a large portion did leave as refugees, most of those who made their way to camps in Thailand would not be granted asylum in Western nations but would instead be repatriated to Cambodia by the United Nations from 1992 onwards (Robinson 2003).

Of the refugees who were resettled in the West, a little more than 4,500 would make their way to Aotearoa/New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry for Culture and Heritage 2014). Over the last four decades this population of Cambodians in Aotearoa/New Zealand has grown to almost 10,000, with Cambodian communities now established in every major city throughout the country. This growth has largely been driven by the arrival of Cambodians who travel to join family in Aotearoa/New Zealand under the government's family re-unification and culturally arranged marriage visa schemes. As of 2018, the total population of Cambodians in Hamilton/Kirikiriroa, the city where my study has been conducted, was around 1,800 individuals (Statistics New Zealand 2018).

In the early 1990's, once national re-unification in the wake of the Khmer Rouge violence officially began, a Cambodian church began to form once again. When the country re-opened and was accessible to foreigners, Western missionary organisations were quick to return to the posts and stations they had been forced to abandon nearly 20 years earlier, and small congregations quickly coalesced (Mam 2020). While accurate estimates of the total Christian population are difficult to obtain, it is most likely that as of 2019 the Christian population of Cambodia has grown to between 1.5% and 3% of the national population, representing between 250,000 and 500,000 individual church members (Brandner 2019), and the rate of church growth may be as high as 5% per year (Wong 2019). The majority of this growth has occurred amongst evangelical denominations, likely due to the fact that these churches tend to be the ones with stronger connections to Western missionary agencies and public outreach programs, meaning most missionaries working in Cambodia are tied to these

church traditions. Alongside this, many of the evangelical denominations have intentionally presented Christianity as a modern religious movement with strong transnational connections, and so have appealed to the younger generations who are increasingly connected to the global through social media (Brandner 2019, Mellquist Lehto 2023) As a result, more than 75% of Cambodian Christians are now associated with evangelical church groups (Clements, Huff and Nyotxay 2019).

Conclusion

I have presented this information on the Christian history of Cambodia to show the background in which the majority of the CCF members that I talked to were first introduced to Christianity and then subsequently converted. I have attempted to accurately portray the long and difficult history of Cambodian Christianity, with cultural expectations around what correct Khmer religiosity looks like and periods of harsh anti-religious and anti-Christian persecution being substantial obstacles to the Khmer church's growth. As I will discuss further in a later section, this history, especially the rise of the Khmer Rouge, has had a huge impact on the conversion stories of those in the CCF, both acting to introduce Christianity to a population to which it was almost completely foreign and providing a "perfect storm" of conditions that facilitated interest in conversion. These are themes that that I will discuss in much greater depth in chapter three, but first I will introduce the Cambodian Christian Fellowship of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, giving a detailed overview of the field site of my research.

Chapter Two: The Cambodian Christian Fellowship

> "On entering the home, it is immediately apparent that you are entering a Kiwi-Cambodian space. The walls of both the lounge and other areas of the house are decorated with Cambodian art, including paintings of rural Cambodia, photos of family still living in Cambodia, as well as both Cambodian and New Zealand flags. On entering the lounge, after expressing my appreciation for an especially large painting that decorates one of the walls, Kimsa proudly explained that it was by a Cambodian artist, he had commissioned it, and that it depicts his own village as he remembered it before the Cambodian civil war (1970). The lounge area, where services are held, is largely kept clear of any furniture, and instead church attendees sit on woven mats on the floor" – (personal fieldnotes 2022).

The above passage, paraphrased from my rough fieldnotes, was written following the first CCF worship service that I attended. I have included it here as I feel that it helps give a picture of the church environment as a space that embodies and exemplifies the dual identity of the congregation members meeting there each Saturday: Cambodians, inheritors of a strongly Buddhist cultural history, participating in Christian worship while living in a Western nation. In this chapter, I will present a picture of the CCF in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton as a uniquely Cambodian church group, shaped by the histories and cultural backgrounds of its congregation that I introduced in the first chapter. I will also give a description of the contemporary church as it was during my fieldwork, including weekly services, in order to provide a clearer picture of Cambodian Christianity in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton that I will build on over the rest of this thesis.

Origins of The Cambodian Christian Fellowship in Aotearoa/New Zealand

The CCF was first established in 1986 as a small Khmer language bible study group that began meeting in the homes of Cambodian migrants living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. The group was founded by Mich Dul and his wife Yorng, meeting once a month in facilities of the Fairfield Presbyterian Church where Mich and Yorng were regular attendees. Starting with three families, the group expanded rapidly over the following years as more Khmer people immigrated to Aotearoa/New Zealand, and others already living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton encountered the CCF, forming a small but growing network of Cambodian Christian families living in the city. Within a year, the group meetings went from monthly to fortnightly, and then

to weekly, as more members continued to join and the church flourished. During its first ten years, all of the members of the CCF were migrants that had arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand as refugees after extended stays in the Khao-I-Dang resettlement camp in Thailand, having fled their home country during the violence of the 1970's. Very few had come into contact with Christianity before their time in the camp, and chose to convert during their stay. Other members who have joined the CCF more recently are family members who were able to immigrate to Aotearoa/New Zealand under the government's family re-unification and culturally arranged marriage visa schemes (New Zealand Immigration 2023a). As well as those that became Christians before arriving in Aotearoa/New Zealand, there are several church members who converted from Buddhism after settling in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton.

Soon after the CCF became established in the Waikato, a drive was made to establish a network of Cambodian churches throughout the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. This move was initiated by Mich Dul, who in the late 1980's began commuting to Auckland, a major city situated approximately two hours' drive north of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, once a month in order to meet with a group of Khmer Christians that he had organised there. Mich was later joined by Kimsa Heng, and over time the two, with the help of local church leaders and missionaries, developed Cambodian church groups in the cities of Auckland, Palmerston North, and Wellington, which over the subsequent decades have become independent while still remaining connected to the CCF in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. For many years, the connections between the different Khmer church groups were strong, with yearly church conferences and regular contact kept between congregations. This level of connectivity was greatly reduced during the COVID-19 pandemic due to government mandated lockdowns that prevented in-person church gatherings and travel between different provinces.

The contemporary CCF

Mich Dul continued to work voluntarily as the pastor of the CCF for around 25 years, seeing the congregation grow to more than 50 members, before resigning from the position in 2012 due to workplace commitments. Following his resignation, the position of pastor was given to the current pastor Kimsa Heng, one of the earliest members who had arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1989, joining the CCF soon after. Both Mich Dul and Kimsa Heng arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand as refugees, each having lived in Khao I Dang and other refugee camps for more than a decade. As I will discuss further in chapter three, it was while living in this camp that both CCF leaders, as well as most of the other church members, became Christians.

Throughout the history of CCF, most of its members have simultaneously attended other English-speaking churches throughout Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, including Discovery Christian Centre, Central Baptist, Knox Presbyterian, Horsham Downs Presbyterian, and St Peter's Catholic Church. From this eclectic denominational background, the CCF has developed the unique characteristic of having no strong theological or organisational connections to any particular denomination or group. While CCF members continue to be associated with a range of other churches throughout the Waikato region and wider Aotearoa/New Zealand, there is an enduring and especially close relationship that exists between the CCF and Fairfield Presbyterian Church, which changed its name to Discovery Christian Centre (hereafter referred to as Discovery Church) in the early 2000s. This connection largely arose from many CCF members, including Mich Dul and Kimsa Heng, also attending weekly services at Discovery Church. Discovery Church have supported the group by making their church facilities available for CCF meetings and events as well as advertising and financially supporting CCF ministries in Cambodia by organising fundraisers and donating funds (Discovery Christian Centre 2022). While early meetings were held in the facilities of Discovery Church, services were soon moved to the homes of the church leaders and congregation members, a move which was aimed at making the space more comfortable and welcoming to attendees. During the period of my fieldwork CCF meetings were held in the large family home of Kimsa and Sa Heng, located in an upper-middle class neighbourhood at the northern end of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton city. Weekly church services are held on Saturday evenings, a decision that was made so that members could continue to attend Sunday morning services at English-speaking churches throughout the area.

Along with the connections to other Cambodian churches in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the CCF has developed and maintained close relationships with several Christian churches in Cambodia, an important dynamic which I will discuss more closely in chapter six. This connection back to domestic Cambodian Christianity is centred on seven churches in Battambang Province on the Western edge of the country. Around half of the CCF Church members are originally from the Battambang area, and so when the country became open to international travel following the end of United Nations peacekeeping operations in 1993 (Chandler 2007), visits were made by local CCF members to reconnect with families with which they had lost contact. During these visits, connections were also made with the few Christian churches that had sprung up in the country.

A defining feature of the CCF is that, since its inception, all linguistic aspects of worship have been carried out in the Khmer language. During the services that I attended, some English was used and much of the sermon and worship music was translated for my sake, but during a normal service English is completely absent. All of the worship songs, prayer and preaching is in the Khmer language. Worship songs are either played from a laptop computer or chosen from a book of Cambodian hymns, and all scripture readings are taken from a Khmer bible. This is a key factor in the growth of the CCF, as many participants related that attending church services in English is often confusing and tiring, especially for recent immigrants with little or no grasp of the English language. While most of CCF members now speak English to a high level, almost all of my participants conveyed to me that language is still a key factor motivating their attendance of weekly services.

The weekly service

As discussed above, the CCF currently holds services each week on Saturday evening, so as to avoid clashing with other English language church services that congregation members may also wish to attend on Sundays. These Saturday night services serve as the backbone of CCF activities, and while church members meet on other occasions throughout the week, such as at English classes run by the CCF, social gatherings and special events, Saturday evening gatherings serve as the key place where members can gather to socialise, discuss topics of interest, organise events, and worship. While the CCF remains very active within the local Cambodian community, the number attending regular worship services has decreased from 50 to around 20-30 over the last five years. This change is due both to the ageing congregation, as well as the COVID pandemic which as mentioned above has prevented in-person gatherings due to lockdown regulations introduced by the government of Aotearoa/New Zealand. The average age of congregation members is around 60 years old, as younger Cambodian Christians (i.e. those born in Aotearoa/New Zealand or who arrived as young children) generally attend services at English speaking churches. This is likely due to a higher level of English language proficiency (and commonly a corresponding lower comprehension of Khmer language) amongst second generation Cambodian-New Zealanders, a fact that helps them integrate more completely into English speaking congregations.

When approaching the house that hosts weekly worship services for the CCF, the building almost immediately stands out from those around it, not only due to its prominent position on the corner of a major crossroads but also because of the large, sprawling stand of banana trees that sits next to the driveway. On approaching the front door of the house, visitors familiar with the cold winter climate of the Waikato will be surprised to find a wide range of tropical fruit trees, herb bushes, vegetables, and climbing vines that fill every available space in the tidy yard that wraps around the house. Patches of lemongrass, turmeric bushes, bitter melon vines and green-leafed vegetables grow between pomegranate, guava, lime and of course banana trees that Kimsa and his family have carefully cared for since buying the property a little over a decade ago. On entering the house, you are met by a large lounge space and adjoining kitchen, which more often than not will have plates of food laid out for guests. The inside of the lounge area is a warm and inviting place, a typical modern home, but decorated and furnished in a mix of European and Cambodian styles. The walls are heavily ornamented with family photos, paintings of the Cambodian countryside, bible verses, flags of Cambodia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, and maps of Cambodia. The floor is covered with two large woven mats, and ringed by a large lounge suite to allow for as many people to comfortably fit as possible. If a visitor continues to walk through the lounge and out through the large sliding door on the other side, they will find themselves in the back yard, which is dominated by a second, larger, outdoor kitchen, a traditionally Cambodian way of ensuring that large groups of people can be catered for (Ebihara 2018). As well as being the usual location for Saturday evening services, the Heng's home has also become the de facto centre for many of the events held by both the CCF and wider Cambodian community in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton.

While the services that the CCF hold every Saturday evening are clearly and intentionally influenced by the Cambodian cultural heritage of the congregation, the actual form of weekly meetings is also heavily influenced by Western church standards. This Western influence can perhaps most easily be seen in the usual format of the services, which tend to follow a pattern that most people who attend Western evangelical church services would be familiar with. The standard service at a weekly CCF meeting is as follows:

1. Opens with a time of worship music. Generally around three songs are sung, all in the Khmer language.

2. Time of communal prayer. During this portion of the service congregation members are encouraged to share needs for which they would like prayer, after which the entire congregation pray for the shared concerns.
3. Prayer for "the seven pastors." During this time, the leader of the service gives an update on the seven pastors and churches that the CCF support in Cambodia, and the congregation as a whole prays for their ministries. Common themes of prayer are illness within the church congregations, success for the church's evangelical outreaches, and safety for church leaders and members.
4. Time of preaching. During this time, a short (generally less than 30 minutes) sermon is preached. Members of related churches in Cambodia and Aotearoa/New Zealand are also often asked to share sermons at CCF meetings, which are done via video calling platforms such as Zoom or Skype.
5. A tithe is collected. The money gathered goes towards supporting both weekly English lessons and outreaches to churches in Cambodia.
6. Closing prayer. One member of the congregation is asked to close the service by praying for the week ahead.

Once the formal portion of the service has concluded congregation members share a time of conversation and discussion, talking about aspects of the service, daily life, news from the week and making plans for other church events. This time fluctuated between being full of fun and laughter, to being a setting for serious discussion where concerns were raised. While not a formal scheduled part of the service, the time after the service ended serves as an important opportunity for connection between congregation members.

Worship music

As European Christianity spread throughout the world, Western musical traditions were carried with it and over time, as Christianity became enculturated and contextualised, worship music began to take more localised forms (Ingalls, Reigersberg, and Sherinian 2018). This process of the Indigenisation of Christian musical traditions is an area that has been taken up by anthropologists seeking to better understand the ways in which Christianity has morphed in response to different cultural environments. An example of this is the recent work of Poplawska (2020), who has shown that evangelical Protestant churches in Indonesia, while drawing on the

Psalms or European hymns for lyrical content, have begun incorporating traditional gamelan music in worship services. K. Marshall (2016) similarly has examined the ways in which Navajo Pentecostals in Arizona include traditional forms within Christian worship services, a phenomenon she terms "resonant rupture". Likewise, in the context of the CCF, worship music takes a hybrid form, as Western hymns, translated into the Khmer language, are sung to music played on Cambodian instruments such as the *khloy* (flute), *pin* (harp) and *roneat* (xylophone). As well as the more traditional songs that feature these instruments (known as *mahori* music) the CCF has, in recent years, begun to adopt more modern worship music, played in the *rom kbach* (Cambodian pop) style that features electric guitar, keyboard and drums. In the case of the more traditional *mahori* music songs are generally sung from a collection of Khmer language hymn books with musical backing played from YouTube videos that have replaced the original cassette tapes, while the *rom kbach* songs are sung to lyric videos on a large screen TV at the front of the lounge space. As with the examples given by Poplawska (2020) and K. Marshall (2016), when rendered in English the lyrical content of the songs would be familiar to those that have spent time in Western church services, with many being direct translations of both hymns and contemporary worship songs.

Prayer

For most forms of Christian worship in Evangelical contexts, prayer forms a central part of communal worship, allowing Christian devotees to form a personal, reciprocal, and unmediated relationship with the Christian God, in turn strengthening devotion and commitment (Luhrmann 2012). CCF meetings are no exception to this, with prayer being greatly emphasised throughout the entire service. Perhaps the most salient instance of prayer within CCF worship meetings is the regular time of communal prayer that is included each week. During this portion of the service, church members are encouraged to share requests for prayer so that other members of the church can collectively pray on their behalf. Once prayer requests have been shared, two or three members volunteer to pray for the specific concerns. Common themes include prayer for healing from physical ailments as well as various issues facing both the CCF and Cambodian church more widely. As an example of this second point, during the time of my fieldwork Cambodia was experiencing widespread flooding that caused extensive crop damage and displaced several thousand people (Davies 2022). Consequently, prayer for relief for those affected became a prominent part of weekly services. Another important instance of

prayer during CCF meetings is the weekly prayer that follows an update given about the seven churches in Cambodia that the CCF support.

Preaching

One central feature of CCF church services are the short sermons that are preached each week. These are usually given by Kimsa, but other pastors and missionaries associated with the group are also often asked to prepare and perform sermons. Topics of sermons that were shared during my fieldwork period were generally theologically dense, covering subjects that required intense exegesis, such as the hypostatic union of Christ or the theology of intercultural mission. Having grown up attending church services in various Baptist and Presbyterian churches in Aotearoa/New Zealand, I found the interactive and dialogic nature that sermons took both unique and interesting. When preaching, Kimsa would often solicit input from the congregation, asking for answers to questions or personal examples to help illustrate sermons. This made sermons a lively experience, as people would share personal applications, laugh at a humorous anecdote, and on at least one occasion start a theological debate. Also surprising was the depth and complexity of many sermons. During these sermons most of the congregation would remain keenly engaged, asking questions and sharing their own perspectives in the interactive style discussed above. While the use of Khmer language limited my discernment of how much theological detail church members understood, it was clear in every meeting that they exhibited a strong desire to learn and engage with what was being shared.

Other church events

As well as the regularly scheduled Saturday evening meetings, the CCF host a number of other events and programs throughout the year designed to cater not only for church members but also the wider Kirikiriroa/Hamilton community. The most regular and prominent of these are the English language classes which are hosted by the CCF on Wednesday evening each week. These classes are provided free of charge to anyone who wants to attend, and lessons are facilitated by Kimsa with the help of volunteers from local churches. While most people that attend these English lessons are Cambodian, usually Christians from within the CCF or

Buddhists from the wider community, there are also a number of Chinese and Brazilian students that regularly attend. The CCF has two motives for hosting these classes: the first is a recognition that English competence is an essential part of successful integration into Aotearoa/New Zealand society, and the second is to connect with other members of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton's migrant, especially Cambodian, community. Other major church events that the CCF host include the annual marking of *Pchum Ben* (Khmer new year) and Christmas. Both of these events are celebrated with parties that the CCF host in the same house as their weekly services, inviting both members of the church but also other family, friends, neighbours, and workmates. The annual Christmas party, which I attended as a part of my fieldwork, is the larger and more highly anticipated of the two celebrations, and weeks of preparation as well as hours of cooking go into it each December.

Conclusion

Over this chapter I have given a brief introduction of the CCF, building on the account of Cambodian Christianity I introduced in chapter one. What emerges is a picture of the CCF as a church group that spans religious and cultural traditions, a community that is obviously influenced by Western Christian tradition while still asserting their Khmer cultural identity. This is a central theme to my thesis, and one that I will continue to explore over the subsequent chapters. Before beginning to look at specific ways in which the CCF incorporated aspects of both its Khmer and Western influences, I will first give an account of how the members of its congregation were first introduced and converted to Christianity, again looking at how their conversion histories are a key site of complex interaction between their cultural heritage and Western religious tradition.

Chapter Three: Becoming Christians in the Midst of Chaos

Within the anthropology of Christianity, conversion has long been a primary object of interest, as researchers try to discern exactly why people embrace new, and abandon existing, religious convictions. While early writing on the topic of conversion focused almost entirely on the role of external factors (such as missionisation, globalisation, technological changes, or histories of colonialism) in driving religious change (Nock 1933, Raboteau 1978), more recent work has taken a holistic approach, acknowledging the role of cultural background, established kinship and social networks, as well as personal histories in driving conversion (Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Following this trend, existing examinations of Khmer conversion to Christianity have aimed to take into account a wider range of features, both internal and external, in attempting to understand how Christian conversion has occurred despite the strength and importance of Buddhism in Cambodian society (Smith-Hefner 1994, McLellan 2009, A. Marshall 2019). While a range of factors have been presented in explaining why some Cambodian people have moved towards embracing Christianity, almost all agree that the period of violence following the rule of the Khmer Rouge, as well as the conditions experienced by those who fled to refugee camps, represent perhaps the single most important element in facilitating the adoption of a Christian faith. While in Chapter one I outlined some of the ways in which the Khmer Rouge and the associated Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis influenced the spread of Christianity in Cambodia, here I will more thoroughly explore the drivers of conversion by engaging with existing scholarship and the accounts of my participants. In this chapter I present four theories that have been used by anthropologists to explain why Khmer people have chosen to become Christians. In doing this I will follow the established pattern of Khmer-Christian ethnography by looking to Cambodian refugee experiences as a primary catalyst of religious change for Khmer Christian living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. By incorporating the idea of "conversion as passage," as formulated by Diane Austin-Broos (2003), we can gain understanding of conversion as an ongoing transformational process that radically shapes peoples' lived experiences. This makes having a clear picture of the path that conversion has taken for Khmer immigrants vital in building an appreciation of their daily lives and wider religious experience.

Conversion as "passage"

In attempting to unpack the complex dynamics that often follow from the radical changes in worldview that arise from religious conversion, many different analytical lenses have been employed. For this thesis I have chosen to use Austin-Broos' (2003) formulation of "conversion as passage" in looking at Khmer conversion, as in the context of my field site it helps to capture the complex, multifaceted nature of religious change. Building on Turner's (1974) work on rites of passage, Austin-Broos' conception of conversion as passage focuses on conversion as a process that straddles hybridity and change. As Austin-Broos explains, "Not mere syncretism, neither can conversion involve a simple and absolute break with a previous social life… Conversion as passage is also a quest, a quest to be at home in a world experienced as turbulent or constraining or, in some particular way, as wanting in value. The passage of conversion is a passage to some place rather than no place. It is not a quest for utopia but rather for habitus. It involves a process of continual embedding in forms of social practice and belief, in ritual dispositions and somatic experience." (p.2). Thinking of conversion as neither syncretism nor absolute break but instead as a gradual, dynamic, yet directional "quest" to understand human belonging gives us insights into both why people choose to convert, but also how traditional and newly adopted belief structures both effect peoples lived reality. As a "quest" to be at home in a turbulent world, conversion stories become a central part of the identity of the CCF and its members, influencing both theological and practical aspects of church life. In this chapter I will argue that, for my participants, conversion can be seen as a quest to make sense of their histories as they attempt to come to terms with the hardships that they experienced. In doing so I will show that their worldview has been drastically altered, but also remains heavily influenced by traditional cosmological understandings.

Conversion narratives

During my field work I collected a total of six life histories from CCF members, all of which included their conversion narratives. Of these six, five were from a Buddhist background, and had converted to Christianity as adults, while one had grown up in a Christian household and was forced to flee Cambodia as a young adult to escape religious persecution at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Of all the church members that were interviewed, all but one had arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand after having lived in refugee camps in Thailand, which was also where

all (except the participant discussed above) initially came into contact with and embraced Christian teaching and practice through the availability of Christian literature and opportunities to befriend Western aid workers.

When thinking of conversion as passage, Austin Broos (2003) notes that, as with any passage, conversion stories are remarkably varied. Some will be fuelled by immediate and intense experiences, while others may be drawn out, occurring over months or years in what Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) refer to as "long conversion". The conversion experiences of Khmer refugees living in Thai camps falls somewhere between the two, stimulated and strongly effected by dramatic events surrounding the Khmer Rouge genocide, yet for most, including all of those that I talked to, involving a series of gradual steps over years or even decades. Accounts of this "long conversion" in the context of the Kao I Dang refugee camp took a form that, over my period of field work, began to show something of a pattern, with several noticeable features appearing in most participant's accounts of becoming Christian. The three repeating features of conversion stories which I will discuss later in this chapter are: a sense of dissatisfaction with the Buddhist worldview; ascription of divine intervention in explaining miraculous events; and a minimisation of the role that missionaries had played in facilitating conversion. In the remainder of this chapter, I will look at these three recurrent features in depth but will first begin by examining some of the theories that have commonly been employed elsewhere in attempts to understand Cambodian conversion.

"Rice-Bowl" Conversion - the perks of being Christian

One of the leading theories that has been used by many anthropologists aiming to understand Cambodian conversion to Christianity is that religious change has been driven partially, if not primarily, by pragmatism – conversion for the sake of personal gain or material incentive. As many Cambodians practising Christianity today were converted in refugee camps, where the imbalance in both power and material wealth between camp residents and the primarily Western NGO staff was immediately clear, the potential practical logics behind Christian conversion quickly become apparent. As such, the concept of pragmatic conversion has been closely associated with the time that many converts spent in border camps where they were largely reliant on assistance from expatriate NGO staff, the majority of whom worked for faith-based organisations. In a discussion on the role that NGO assistance played in encouraging conversion for ex-refugees living in the United States, Mortland (2019) suggests that amongst those living in camps there was an assumption that being aligned with church groups would

give greater access to material assistance, and Christians were more likely to be sponsored to be resettled overseas. Cambodian refugees that are seen to have converted for pragmatic reasons are commonly referred to as “rice-bowl Christians”, a term that initially arose as a criticism of opportunistic missionisation (Mortland 1994), but has since been adopted within both the anthropology and missiology of Khmer Christianity to refer to Cambodians that either convert or at least profess conversion for the purpose of material benefit or personal gain (Parker 2013, Ong 2007, Mortland 1994, Smith-Hefner 1994). Those that suggest conversion may have been driven by potential material gain have argued that refugees who attended church services were given preferential treatment, such as clothes, food, money, and greater access to education (Mclellan 2009). Furthermore, the possible benefits derived from conversion to Christianity are not limited to an increase in direct access to material advantages, but also to the potential relational benefits that come with the connection with Western church communities. Smith-Hefner (1994), for example, reports that attendance of young Cambodian immigrants at evangelical church services in Boston has been an intentional move aimed at developing friendships and connections that assist them in assimilating into life in their new home country. Building on this, Mortland (2019) argues that these relationships were made not only to provide friendship and community assimilation, but many were also motivated by a secondary, materially driven goal. In this She asserts that many Cambodians living in California saw church attendance as a means to gain access to the American middle class, helping them to gain a greater grasp of the English language while providing contacts that could give access to better opportunities for work and education.

In the context of Khmer Christians living in Aotearoa/New Zealand, it does become clear that there have been some social and educational benefits that may have influenced individual decisions to convert. While Khmer Christians that I met with have only occasionally gained some direct access to material support from church groups, the data from my fieldwork suggests that the main benefit afforded to them are the social connections that have been made within the Christian circles of the churches that they attend. Several participants who had converted while living in refugee camps related the importance of the social aspects of church attendance in the camps, especially at a time when family and friendship relationships had been greatly disturbed by years of hardship. This is a point that Ong (2003) emphasises, arguing that the anti-religious programs of the Khmer Rouge were so damaging to the Buddhist institutions which traditionally ensured the stability of the community that they were unable to be quickly repaired once residents had reached the relative safety of the refugee camps. “Families were

fragmented by war, mass relocation, labour camps, torture, death, and exile. Conventional Khmer-Buddhist notions of family obligation, gender roles, and personal propriety were scattered to the winds as displaced urban dwellers struggled to survive in the harsh labour camps of Democratic Kampuchea, and later found refuge in the world of Thai border camps" (Ong 2003, p.25-26). In contrast to this, Christian church groups, with the support of Western missionaries and aid workers, were established more quickly and small churches could soon be found in all of the major camps. Through church attendance converts were able to form friendships, both with other Khmer and with the foreign missionary volunteers, which helped them cope with the harsh conditions of life inside the camps. The connections that they made with Western aid workers were also of great assistance as they gave much greater opportunity to improve English language skills, which in turn helped them better integrate into their new home countries following their resettlement.

The relational benefits of church attendance have also continued while in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and for many have helped with assimilation into the wider society. First and foremost, attendance of Western churches provides further opportunities for English language learning, through which closer relationships can be made with other congregation members. In her ethnography of Cambodian Christians in Ontario, Canada, McLellan (2009) notes that for many converts in the diaspora, the friendship that churches provided was one of the key factors that drove their decision to attend church services, especially when there were few other Khmer speaking people living nearby or no Buddhist temple had been established. I suggest that a similar effect has occurred in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as almost all of those that I interviewed emphasised the feelings of loneliness and isolation they had felt, contrasting it with the warm receptions they had received at churches in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton.

In relation to the possible material benefits those living in the refugee camps had received in exchange for their conversion, almost all my participants denied that any extra financial support, medical aid, or education was provided to those who attended church groups within the camps. For example, one participant describing the time they spent in Kao I Dang camp reported that:

> "We didn't need to buy food. We got food, free food... Yeah, we got plenty… They've got a lot of programs as well, they taught us how to make tofu from soybean, we have to grind the soybean. They (camp residents) also learn how to make soap, how to do

> fish farming, English (lessons), all of that. YWAM (Youth with A Mission) do that for everyone, two hundred thousand people in the camp (Kao I Dang)." – Personal interview, 14/12/2022.

Noteworthy in the quote above is the emphasis given to the fact that YWAM missionaries provided the training programs and material support free of charge to all camp residents, not just those that became associated with church groups. Likewise, several participants made it clear to me that attendance of church services within the various refugee camps was entirely voluntary, and their regular attendance was of their own volition, dispelling the notion of "rice-bowl Christians" whose faith was motivated only by the pursuit of material benefits. I would here like to clarify that while participants did express that many of their needs were met, they were also clear that conditions inside the camps were generally very harsh, and life for residents was not easy. In line with the accounts given by Terry (2002) and Allegra et.al (1984), participants relayed the struggles of camp life, remembering that the cramped conditions led to poor sanitation and outbreaks of disease, while treatment given by the primarily Thai army soldiers who policed the camps was often brutal and intimidating. Rather than seeing these seemingly conflicting reports of camps being both a difficult place to live but also providing security, shelter, and food, as inconsistent, I believe they give important insight into what made conversion appealing for so many. When discussing what factors had made camp life difficult, emphasis was always given to the feelings of loneliness, isolation from family and friends, and the difficulty in knowing who around them could be trusted. Amongst these conditions the friendship and care given by Christian missionaries and aid workers stood out to many, especially when considered alongside the decades of internal violence that had occurred in Cambodia. The compassion that was shown by Christian missionaries was in fact one of the most common themes expressed by interlocutors when asked about what had attracted them to Christianity. As I have already mentioned in an earlier section, this was especially important for many people living inside the camps as the Buddhist structures that historically facilitated community cohesion and upheld the virtues of generosity and friendship had been almost completely destroyed by the Khmer Rouge's campaign of anti-religious violence (Ong 2003). One man from the CCF that I interviewed, who had suffered from leprosy while living in Kao I Dang, shared a story from his experiences recovering from his illness in a missionary hospital which highlights this well:

> "In the hospital there's a lot of missionaries, a lot of doctors, but you can see they are Christians. They show it by their actions. They come and they're hugging the leprosy patients and they clean their feet, and they do exercise for leprosy (patients) and they're touching all the lepers and all that, right. And when you see all that, you are thinking wow, the missionaries were so good. I've been rejected from my people many, many years now (due to his illness). Now come to the camp and these people treat me differently. Now they say they do that because they are loved from God." – Personal interview, 31/12/2022.

In the same interview the man goes on to compare the actions of the missionary doctors to those of his Buddhist neighbours and Thai camp guards. The guards, despite their shared religious belief, treated the Khmer residents harshly, while other Buddhist Cambodians within the camps refused to visit or talk to him due to his illness. In summary then, while the CCF members that I talked to did not see the material benefits associated with conversion as an enticement, the friendship that arose both while living in the refugee camps and after having immigrated to Aotearoa/New Zealand, did play an important role. As church attendance provided opportunities for English language learning and then community connection, Christians were more easily able to assimilate into the wider community.

Conversion as an answer to suffering

Alongside personal incentives, another key reason for conversion that arose from the stories relayed to me was a dissatisfaction with the existing worldview that had been inherited from Cambodian culture and society. Commonly tied to complaints around the selfish nature of other camp residents or to Buddhism's failure to account for the violence they were fleeing from, several participants related that they had all but given up on their belief in Buddhist practices and cosmology before ever leaving their homeland. While one informant conceded that the Khmer Rouge's persecution of Buddhist institutions was at least partially responsible for the abandonment of his former faith, it was more common to hear the phrase "I just knew there had to be another God." This ties in to a second key theory that has been suggested as a way to understand the conversion of Khmer people to Christianity, especially in the context of the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis: Christianity provided refugees with an alternative explanation of largescale human suffering. Over the decades since 1975 when the Cambodian

Communist Party took control of Cambodia, anthropologists have identified two questions that have arisen for survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide, to which Christianity offers unique answers. The first of these is around how violence and hardship can occur on such a large scale, and the second is around how individuals can make sense of and move forward from the suffering once traumatic events are over.

Central to this first point is the idea that for many Cambodians the sheer scale and ubiquity of suffering during the Pol Pot era cannot be fully explained by the Buddhist precepts of karma and dharma. Buddhist doctrine holds that suffering is both evil and inevitable but can, and should, be avoided through detachment from the world and the making of merit. For Buddhists, the necessary connection between making merit and the avoidance of suffering is governed by the natural law of karma, which shows that every action produces a karmic effect, with moral actions bringing pleasant consequences and immoral actions bringing negative consequences that will play out in either this lifetime or the next (Spiro 1971). The concept of making merit is a central theme of Buddhist thought, and one that will be referenced further in Chapter four of this thesis. In the Cambodian Theravada context, merit making can most simply be understood as positive actions that are taken to improve one's karma, or the karma of one's ancestors. Examples of merit making are donating to local temples, showing generosity to monks or the poor, or correctly showing respect to authority figures (O'Lemmon 2014). When, as happened in Democratic Kampuchea between 1975 and 1979, around a quarter of the population are killed, this Buddhist emphasis on suffering, merit and karma is challenged by so much suffering egregiously inflicted upon so many people. Writing on this topic, Mortland argues that:

> "A primary challenge to traditional Khmer Buddhism in the United States is to explain the events that have occurred in Cambodia in the past two or three decades, most especially, finding explanations for the years when the country was ruled by the Khmer Rouge. For Khmer Buddhists, when ordinary conditions do not respond to physical or propitiatory measures, the lack of a solution can be attributed to error in specific human action. When extraordinary events occur, however, the very essence of a social group's otherworldly explanations becomes problematic. So while Khmer have for centuries utilised karmic theory to explain unusual or threatening events, the Democratic Kampuchea years were of such extraordinary horror that usual explanations for the extraordinary did not always suffice" – Mortland (1994, 72).

Or, as Mortland later writes, quoting a Khmer immigrant participant:

> "Now look at the holocaust in Cambodia. Why did the communists kill people? Most of the people were obedient to the dharma. Especially babies who were just born; why did communists throw them against the rock to shatter their skulls? Most Cambodians say 'because we had bad karma.' But we have to ask questions about this understanding. How could three million people have bad karma at the same time?" – Mortland (1994, 86).

This raw existential challenge to the Buddhist doctrine of karma was made even more salient to those living in refugee camps and the diaspora as they found themselves surrounded by non-Khmer and non-Buddhists who, despite their complete disregard for good and bad karma avoided the same levels of suffering (Mortland 1994, p.88). So, according to Mortland (1994), and others (C.M Coleman 2019, A. Marshall 2019), Buddhism did not provide those fleeing violence with an appropriate answer to the philosophic question of how such horrific violence could be inflicted upon such a large population. Christianity, however, due to its emphasis on the fallen state of mankind and the importance of forgiveness, supplies those who survived the journey into refugee camps with an opportunity to understand how so much violence was possible. This is a theme explored by Manning et.al (2019) in their exploration of the conversions of ex-Khmer Rouge cadre in the West of Cambodia, where they relate that many converts they met with saw Christianity as a means to both receiving and giving forgiveness for those who had perpetrated violence during the Democratic Kampuchea years.

Another factor that has possible links to a growing dissatisfaction with Buddhism during the Democratic Kampuchea period is the incorporation of Buddhist theological terms into Communist Party thought. As Hinton (2005) explains, when initially forming what would become the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot and other party cadre developed a policy of "Buddhist Socialism", replacing Marx's proletariat consciousness with the Buddhist conception of viññāṇa (the animating consciousness of all human actions), in order to construct a form of communism that was not reliant on strong class or economic distinctions within society (p.150). Building directly upon this Buddhist understanding of human consciousness, party leaders were able to forge a uniquely Khmer brand of Communism that was both attractive to the country's largely poor population and heavily reliant on Buddhist thought. While anthropologists and historians have written about the influence that this appropriation of

Buddhist concepts had in the Khmer Rouge's rise to prominence (Kiernan 1985, Short 2005) and how they operated (Hinton 2005), its effects on contemporary perceptions of Buddhism or religion more widely have not been studied in detail. Though a closer exploration of this idea is outside the scope of this thesis, the effects of the Khmer Rouge ideology on Cambodian people's perceptions of Buddhism is a potentially important area for future consideration. As Short (2005) notes, despite the party's strongly anti-religious stance, Buddhist thought and doctrine was thoroughly incorporated into the character of Cambodian Communism, leading to close links between the two.

As for my participants in the CCF in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, almost all professed that their decision to "give their hearts to the Lord" was a direct result of the perceived shortcomings of the Buddhist worldview, especially in the context of the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis. While those that I talked to downplay the role that Christian missionaries had in actively promoting conversion as a means to gain forgiveness and emotional healing (a topic that I will discuss further in a later section of this chapter), feelings of disillusionment with the Buddhist worldview were commonly connected with their subsequent conversion to Christianity. This was largely evidenced by many participants noting that they had ceased practising Buddhism before they ever encountered Christian teaching. On several occasions during interviews, interlocuters told me that when they arrived into the border camps they had already started to look for an alternative cosmological explanation. Kimsa Heng, for example noted that:

> "I was trying to find a real God, *before* any missionary met me, but when I was almost there, *then* I met the missionaries" – (Personal Interview 31/10/2022, emphasis mine)

Going on to elaborate further, Kimsa notes that the hardship and suffering that he had endured both while living under the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and after first arriving in the Thai camps had distanced him from the Buddhist beliefs he had grown up with, and it was only once he started looking for an alternative that he began pursuing Christianity. While he did not directly relate this dissatisfaction to the Buddhist conception of karma, he did note a more generalised disconnection with Buddhist understandings of suffering. As a further example Daniel, another ex-refugee member of the CCF, shared a similar story, relating that he had "given up" on Buddhism before he crossed the border into Thailand, where he readily accepted Christian teaching given by Western aid workers.

An important second point is that for many Cambodian refugees, Christianity provided an alternative solution to not only comprehending but also moving past the years of violence and suffering they had endured. As Ong (2003) relates, the Pol Pot era left social structures which were once supported by Buddhist teachings that promoted community cohesion, in ruin, opening the way for Cambodian immigrants to explore alternative narratives and cosmologies that could recreate a cohesive social order. For many refugees Christianity provided this alternative, focusing on the Christian doctrine of forgiveness as a means to move forward and rebuild a sense of national cohesion. Expanding on this idea in an article looking into conversion amongst Cambodian refugees living in Ontario, Canada, McLellan (2009) notes that:

> "Conversion provided them (Cambodian refugees) with a mechanism to come to terms with their past actions, their enormous hatred and thoughts of revenge against those who perpetuated so much violence and suffering, and to move beyond debilitating depression, despair, and hopelessness. Several Cambodians stated that conversion was their opportunity for 'forgiveness,' receiving God's forgiveness first, then developing their own towards others. Forgiveness enabled them to continue to live"– (McLellan 2009, pp. 126).

This idea of Christianity being a religion that promotes forgiveness has also been linked to another common and highly publicised phenomena, the conversion to Christianity of Khmer Rouge cadre who were the perpetrators of much of the violence. This trend was first brought to international attention when in 1996 "Comrade Duch", the head warden of the infamous Khmer Rouge prison camp Tol Sleng who was responsible for the torture and murder of at least 12,000 Khmer prisoners, was found to be working as the leader of an evangelical church in his home province. This pattern reaches far beyond Comrade Duch though, and in some of the strongly pro-Khmer Rouge areas in the West of Cambodia it is estimated that around 70% of practising Christians are former members of the regime (Manning et.al 2019, p.52). This tendency for Khmer Rouge soldiers to be "born again" has been linked, both by anthropological studies (Manning et.al 2019) and also by Khmer Rouge converts themselves (Chen 2017), to the emphasis that Christian doctrine places on the personal forgiveness of sin. Reflecting on this, Manning et.al (2019) have argued that under a traditional Buddhist framework there is little room to negotiate and understand the atrocities that individuals inflicted upon their fellow countrymen, where as Christianity provides a means for the perpetrators of such extreme

violence to understand their own position and role in the "Cambodian holocaust". Others have pointed to the more pragmatic logics behind Khmer Rouge conversion, noting that under Buddhist teaching the atrocities committed would have earned many lifetimes of bad karma, to which Christian conversion provides an escape (Narin 2013). This echoes the theme that McLellan (2009) explores amongst the Cambodian diaspora in Canada introduced above, where she relays that many of her participants "stated that conversion was their opportunity for 'forgiveness,' receiving God's forgiveness first, then developing their own towards others. Forgiveness enabled them to continue to live" (McLellan 2009, p.126). During one CCF evening service I saw a clear expression of this, when on one evening guest preacher delivered a sermon on the need for God's grace and forgiveness for all mankind. In closing his talk, the preacher asked the congregation how they had seen this need for themselves. One lady in the audience was quick to raise her hand in reply, sharing that in her view the Christian message of God's forgiveness for sins was a key means to attract other Khmer to becoming Christian. In response to her, another man from the group joined in, explaining that he had been drawn to faith in the Christian God as a focus on forgiveness had allowed him to come to terms with his childhood experiences growing up soon after the chaos of the Khmer Rouge.

Conversion as the product of the miraculous

Another common feature of conversion accounts that I collected during field work is the inclusion of miraculous accounts that people had either while traveling to the refugee camps or while they were staying there. In these stories, participants would relate an event, or series of events, which they would claim were the result of the miraculous intervention of the Christian God. These were often related to their safe arrival into refugee camps, which as a rule involved overcoming great hardship and danger. One participant, for instance, relayed to me that when he had set out for the Thai border from the South of Cambodia, he was traveling with a group of more than 50 friends, of who only he and two others would safely arrive at the temporary holding camp in Thailand four months later. He explained to me that his survival was a sign that, though he did not know it yet, a powerful God was protecting him from the violence, disease and starvation that killed or waylaid so many of his friends. Similarly, the fact that some were able to secure a refugee visa that allowed them to immigrate to a Western nation, while others remained in the camps or were repatriated back to a Cambodia ravaged by decades of violence, also pointed to God's miraculous provision. Mich Dul, the founder of the CCF, related

one such story to me, showing God's provision in providing him and his family with visas to come to Aotearoa/New Zealand.

> "At that time, we had a family in New Zealand that wanted to sponsor us to go there, their daughter was a preschool teacher in the camp and her parents in New Zealand wanted to sponsor us. But those days that was against the law because you were not allowed to sponsor anyone that is not a relative, and we have no family overseas that can sponsor us, so we need to wait. It was against the law, yeah, how impossible that is! So we put our heads together and say that we keep praying. Yeah, we have to keep praying because we knew God had planned for us to go to New Zealand, God had given me a dream that confirmed to me that New Zealand is where we were heading. I know that sounds impossible, but we have to trust God and keep praying and (the missionary teacher) pray by herself, and her parents over here, pray for us as well… Then after a while we got a meeting with a New Zealand government… and the man we met, he said, quite a stern kind of ambassador looking guy, you know, and he quite serious. There's no smile or anything on his face, and he said, "maybe you can come, but the law would need to change." (And I told him) It doesn't matter how long, I'll wait. But then a Canadian ambassador came back and asked me, do you want to go to Canada? You can go in the next couple of days. But I said no, I'll wait for New Zealand. We should have jumped at the opportunity because we are not sure if we can ever go to New Zealand, we are against the law of New Zealand. We don't even know they're going to change that law or not. Think about that, Isn't that faith?... Then seven months later it was confirmed, we got a New Zealand visa under special case." – (Personal Interview, 13/12/2022.)

For Cambodian Christians, these miraculous occurrences served as unequivocal evidence that the Christian God was both real and powerful. More than evidence of a simple practical exchange of one religious belief system for another, more potent one, however, it appears as though the inclusion of miraculous stories in conversion accounts points to a deeper search for order and cohesion (A. Marshall 2019). In the context of traditional Cambodian society, Buddhism had provided Khmer people with the social structures that gave the world order. With the removal of Buddhist institutions at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, alternative ideas about how to bring order from chaos became possible, even necessary. Adam Marshall (2019) suggests that miracles are evidence of this, as people whose worldview has been shaken refer

to super-human occurrences as pointing towards a new, cohesive mode of existence. Working from accounts of converts to Christianity in Cambodia's capital city Phnom Penh, A. Marshall argues that the topics of miraculous stories, namely healing from disease and the provision of material needs, helped Khmer converts to… "deal with the chaos and radical uncertainty of life…" acting as evidence of "Jesus working within the world… for these Christians to bring order and stability in such an uncertain and precarious context' (p.131). Already familiar with the important role that religious institutions have in bringing order, Christianity's potential to do the same has been easily recognised by Khmer converts. By focusing on the ways in which the Christian God miraculously provides physical healing, material provision and future stability, the conversion of Khmer people to Christianity, like Austin-Broos (2003) suggests, can be seen as "a quest to be at home in a world experienced as turbulent or constraining or, in some particular way, as wanting in value" (p.2). In this sense, conversion to Christianity is a means through which to defend against, and ward off, the existential pitfalls and chaos produced by the Khmer Rouge regime. This is one thing that clearly stuck out to me during conversations with members of the CCF, as they would willingly share stories of their experiences of suffering and hardship that they had endured. When I asked one CCF member, Daniel, about his time in Sakeo camp for example, he began with this story:

> "When my family and I were in the camp we were there illegally, as we had no formal paperwork, and so had to lay low and hide, and it was difficult to go to the hospital… One time I got very sick, and I had to be rushed in a truck to another camp with my wife and young child to have surgery that saved my life. That happened more than once, because I had a problem with my stomach. In the time we were in the camps I nearly died three times, but each time I was saved. So that's how I knew that God wanted to help me, and I began to follow him" – Personal interview, paraphrased 13/12/2022

On multiple occasions CCF church members, who like Daniel I had only just been introduced to, would relate the dangers and suffering they had overcome in getting to Aotearoa/New Zealand, and likewise would point to these experiences as a sign of God's power to restore order and protect them.

Lack of missionary input

Finally, another key pattern that emerged across conversion accounts was a minimisation of the role that missionaries had played in participants' initial exposure to Christianity. Rather

than having Christian doctrine explained to them by Western missionaries those that I met with explained that they had, through various means, come across Christian teaching themselves, before seeking out missionaries who could explain the finer details of Christian life. As previously discussed, this initial discovery of Christianity was also frequently tied to miraculous events, demonstrating to those living in the camps that the Christian God was not only real, but personally invested in their conversion story. Continuing Kimsa Heng's conversion account introduced above gives a good example of this, focusing on how the gospel of John was miraculously delivered to him after he began to feel disillusioned with Buddhist teaching.

> "I was trying to find a real God, before any missionary met me, but when I was almost there, then I met the missionaries, and the missionaries did not push me, but sort of like, guided the way… So, what happened was when I lived in the camp, I had a severe disease. I was so sick, and they put in the hospital and at that time I don't know any Christians at all. I don't know what a Christian looked like or even what Christian was called, nothing. So, I was in the hospital and then the hospital bed was against the wall. The wall was a bamboo wall and then when you've got a bamboo wall, you sort of like, you can see from the other side to the inside, and some people put some cardboard there to stop the wind, or to stop people seeing in from the outside. So in between there there's the book of John. It has got English one side, Khmer one side. The book of John was in between there. So, the cardboard, as many years gone by it fell down, and the book of John fell out as well. So that's when I see it, and the first thing I noticed was that it had English writing on one side, Khmer on the other. So, what I think is that I want to learn English… what I have in my mind is that if I could learn English I could communicate with the doctors. That's my aim." - Personal Interview, 21/10/2022

As Kimsa states, his initial interest in reading John's gospel was learning the English language, but as he went on to explain later in the interview, he soon became captivated by the biblical narrative and moral message that he found. Following from this, he took steps to seek out someone that could explain what he was reading in greater detail, making contact with the Christian medical staff, and eventually becoming connected with a YWAM church. Similarly, other CCF members related that they came across old Christian tracts that had been distributed within the camps before laws banning proselytisation were introduced, all of which were eagerly consumed, both out of a similar desire to learn English, but also simply out of boredom.

When asked about how she was first introduced to Christianity, Yourng Dul related one such example:

> "We all loved to read, so we tried to get flyers, small books, small stories, because we had nothing to do... I remember one day I got a book from my friend. Somehow she had got a hold of it, and it was a lot bigger than the other things I had read. It was the first book of the bible, Genesis, so you know it was about God creating everything. I'm thinking that, oh, maybe it's just a story, you know like a fun story. But I keep reading, and it said that it was all real and I read some more and found out some more. And I thought, okay, I guess that's what I've been looking for. You know, someone that can do all that stuff that I always wondered about. Like I love nature, love trees, things like that, and I always wondered, where did it all come from? It can't be that they just happened, and here I found the answer. So, it wasn't hard for me to start believing." – Personal Interview, 14/11/2022

After reading the book of Genesis, as well as a number of other Christian tracts that were being passed around the camp, Yourng and her husband approached some YWAM missionaries that were running aid programs and were soon active members in one of the small churches that had formed. Once an interest in Christianity arose, camp residents were easily able to seek out church groups that they could attend, as there was no shortage of faith-based groups working on various programs while border camps were active. Running parallel to this, however, were the strict anti-proselytisation rules that were enforced by the Thai army camp administration (Ong 2003), a fact that several participants pointed out. This rule, my Khmer friends explained, meant that converts had to be intentional about developing a better understanding of Christianity, seeking out missionaries for themselves.

In many ways this diminishing of the role that missionaries played in encouraging Khmer refugees to convert to Christianity shows parallels to Joel Robbins' (2004) famous ethnography of conversion amongst the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. Robbins explains that during the 1960s and 1970s Christianity was rapidly adopted by the Urapmin within the context of an intense charismatic revival, displacing their traditionally important male cults which were completely abandoned by the time of Robbins fieldwork, despite the fact that no Western Christian missionaries were ever active on Urapmin land. Instead, Urapmin proactively sought out Christian mission schools in neighbouring communities, willingly embracing Christian

teaching to the degree that by the 1970s the Urapmin had established themselves as "a community of Christian specialists" (p.119). In seeking to explain this strong desire to abandon traditional spirituality in favour of Christian belief, Robbins turns to an examination of the effects that colonialism had on Papua New Guinean society, arguing that while the Urapmin had been regionally important ritual specialists, the actions of colonial authorities had marginalised and humiliated them. With this history in mind, the Urapmin's eager acceptance of Christianity can be seen as an attempt to regain some of this influence, reclaiming their traditional role as central to ritual life in the wider region.

A major fact that separates Robbins example from the situation in Cambodian refugee camps is the free availability of missionary teaching to Cambodian converts. While the Urapmin were compelled to travel for bible training to a neighbouring community, Khmer camp residents were in daily contact with Western Christian aid workers and easily made friendships with them. Despite this significant difference the example of the Urapmin can help shed some light on the Khmer people's decisions to convert. In his argument, Robbin gives a clear picture of the ways in which existing religious life can affect people's conversion passages, as traditional ritual and spirituality that have been displaced by external forces are replicated in new ways. For Cambodian-New Zealander Christians a similar process has occurred, as refugees sought to replicate or replace Buddhism's traditionally important structures which ensured cohesion and resilience within natal Cambodian communities. As has already been discussed, the phrase "to be Cambodian is to be Buddhist," relating to the complete centrality of the temple to all areas of society, has come to typify Khmer identity. Therefore when Buddhist structures were challenged by experiences of intense suffering (Kent 2022, Ong 2003), Khmer refugees turned to new forms of religious experience in order to ensure community cohesion in the same way as the temple once had. Just as the Urapmin looked to reclaim connection to traditionally important processes, Cambodian Christians do the same, looking to religious expression and practice as the key means by which social order is constructed and maintained. Just as A. Marshall (2019) argues in relation to accounts of the miraculous as a means for creating order, Khmer converts actively sought out alternative spiritualities for the same purpose. For them, Christianity provided the community cohesion and order that had always been ensured by religious teaching and practice.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have argued that the conversion stories related to me by my participants show a clear example of conversion as a "passage" from one form of existential assemblage to another. By engaging both with existing literature that deals with the conversion of Cambodian refugees living in border camps during the end of the Khmer Rouge era as well as the life histories given to me by my participants, I have contended that conversion helped members of the CCF to come to terms with and address their experiences during the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis. Throughout this time, the extensive violence that occurred throughout the country provided a "perfect storm" for Christianity to be embraced by sections of the Khmer population. Not only did it give an opportunity for people to meet Western missionaries working in the camps, it also compelled those who had fled the violence to begin exploring alternative religious narratives. For people that had experienced great hardship, Christianity provided answers to questions about widespread and pervasive suffering that Buddhist teachings on karma could not. Paired with this, the perceptions of power and order that converts saw in the miraculous ways that the Christian God made himself known to them established Christianity as a viable means to pursue personal and communal stability.

Chapter Four: Khmer Christians' engagement with their Buddhist heritage.

Returning to Austin-Broo's conception of religious change as passage, we can understand that religious conversion can be conceived as a "turning from and to that is neither syncretism nor absolute break" (p.1), but rather a directional passage that moves towards a definite goal at the same time as being strongly influenced by existing culture and sociality. With this thought in mind, it becomes important to realise that any examination of conversion should be viewed as not only a move towards new, but also against existing modes of religious experience. This conception touches on a key theme that has dominated much of anthropology's interest in Christianity, especially in the last decade: the degree to which religious conversion constitutes either a rupture from or a continuation with traditional cultural forms, or else some hybridisation of the two. In this chapter I add to this discussion, using K. Marshall's concept of "resonant rupture" (2016) and Zehner's conception of hybridity (2005) to argue that Cambodian Christians in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton are both committed Christians and thoroughly dedicated to retaining their Khmer cultural identity and heritage. I will begin by providing a description of the theoretical underpinnings of my argument, before looking at how CCF church members negotiate the complex relationship between their cultural heritage and newfound belief in Christianity. Examining how church members choose to abandon some aspects of their cultural heritage while carefully retaining other gives a clear demonstration of how conversion entails more than either complete separation or full retention.

Theories of change

As I have previously discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the anthropology of Christianity is a fairly young sub-discipline, emerging as an area of study in its own right only over the past two decades. Theories of rupture and continuity as a means for understanding the processes of religious conversion have been an important area of consideration since the earliest emergence of the Anthropology of Christianity, beginning with the publication of Robbins' *Becoming Sinners* (2004). In his influential book, Robbins describes the conversion to Christianity of the Urapmin of Highland Papua New Guinea, emphasising the radical changes that occurred after they embraced charismatic Christianity.

One theory that builds upon Robbins ideas of rupture, but which seeks to reconcile them with processes of cultural continuity, is K. Marshall's conception of "resonant rupture," a term she coined to help understand Pentecostal conversion amongst Navajo in Arizona (2016). I feel that this particular notion is also very useful for helping to analyse Cambodian Christianity. K. Marshall found that Navajo Pentecostal Christians have developed a means to use traditional performance within their Christian services in such a way as that "feelingful attachment to expressive form persists, but… the inherent ambiguity of these forms allows for the attachment of drastically different meanings." (p.15). The picture painted is of church groups assigning new, Christian meanings to traditional cultural performances such as dance and song, allowing them to continue their practice while also fulfilling desires to be wholly devoted to the Christian God. In this way we see that existing cultural mediums can, by virtue of their inherent cultural plasticity, be reimagined and given new religious meaning.

Another lens that can be used when examining the inherent tensions between change and continuity that arise with conversion to Christianity is Zehner's conception of hybridity (2005). This notion addresses the difficult position Christianity creates by both placing great importance on the strength of its truth claims while also engaging in cross-cultural and trans-local dialogue. Zehner argues that, as a means of overcoming this issue, forms of hybridity have been employed that allow the incorporation of some cultural practices and rejection of others. In this he argues that "while evangelical Christianity presents as being vigilant on all matters, evangelical anti-syncretism is in practice narrowly focused, being concerned primarily to forbid resorts to alternative sources of spiritual power and to techniques that had been associated with those alternative sources" (p.587). As a result of this, "most evangelicals have little problem with tolerating differences in ritual form, as long as the underlying meanings seem the same. They don't care where the church meets, they can tolerate a lot of differences in service style… It does not matter if the Eucharist (more commonly called "communion" or "the Lord's Supper) is celebrated with bread, matzo, wheat crackers, rice crackers, or pieces of yam" (p.593), as long as core Christian doctrines such as the affirmation of the Trinity, belief in the hypostatic union of Christ, or notion of Christ's atonement are protected from cultural interpretations and distortions. This argument is one that links to and compliments K. Marshalls "resonant rupture." While K. Marshall's work is useful in giving an understanding of the forms that the continuation of traditional religious practices can take, Zehner's ideas are helpful in giving some insights into what rituals and practices can and cannot be easily incorporated into Christian practice. The two theories are also complimentary in that K. Marshall's insights into

"feelingful connection" for traditional forms helps us to see not only how, but also why they are continued following conversion to Christianity, a question that Zehner does not endeavour to answer in any depth.

With these two theoretical positions in hand, I will now give an ethnographic account of the ways in which CCF members negotiate rupture and continuity within their own context. Drawing from the forms that worship services take, their relationship with the Cambodian Buddhist temple in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, and their observance of some traditional festivals and disregard for others, I will show that CCF members are heavily invested in walking the fine line between Christian conversion and Buddhist heritage.

No longer Buddhist: changing religious practices of the CCF

From the initial decision to become Christian, the CCF members living in Aotearoa/New Zealand have demonstrated a clear willingness to break from certain aspects of their Buddhist heritage. This is a recurrent theme within ethnographies of Cambodian Christians living elsewhere in the diaspora. For Cambodian Christians living in Canada, McLellan (2009) shows that this attempt to break from their Buddhist heritage was centred largely on rejecting traditional Buddhist merit-making and spirit worship, practices that were presented by local evangelical churches as incompatible with "God's will or truth" (p.125). In the United States, merit-making and veneration of ancestors has likewise been condemned by Christian churches, some of whom also criticise aspects of Buddhist morality and the karmic system (Mortland 1994, Mortland 2019, Smith-Hefner 1994). This rejection of specific aspects of their Buddhist tradition, especially those connected to karma and merit-making, are closely tied to some of the factors I discussed in the previous chapter on conversion stories. As Mortland has noted, many converts were drawn to Christianity after having become disillusioned with Buddhist teaching on karma, which provides some explanation as to why they have distanced themselves from these aspects of Buddhist teaching. In the Aotearoa/New Zealand context, similar trends emerge as Christians try and break from their background in Buddhist teaching, rituals, and festivals.

Embedded in discussions about rupture and continuity within Cambodian Christianity is the argument that Cambodian religiosity is typified by open syncretism of religious

traditions. In an article detailing the links between religion and identity for Cambodian migrants living in the United States, for example, Briana Wong (2019) points to the inclusion of Hindu elements within Buddhist rituals as a sign that, though Buddhism remains the most influential and widely practiced religion within Cambodia, other religions do exert an important influence. Building on this, Wong argues that traditional understanding of religious systems as not being mutually exclusive has resulted in Cambodians in the United States being open to mixing aspects of Buddhism and Christianity. And it is true that in some contexts high levels of religious mixing can be found amongst the Cambodian Christian diaspora, with both Mortland (2019) and McLellan (2009) reporting that dual attendance at both Buddhist temples and Christian churches within Khmer migrant communities was a common occurrence. However, this open dual religious affiliation and syncretism though is not ubiquitous, with other researchers such as Smith-Hefner (1994) suggesting a clear delineation between Christian and Buddhist practices in some Cambodian churches, where those who attended both temple and church services were accused of "walking two ways" (p.31). My own experiences with the Cambodian community in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton align more closely with this latter point, as members of the CCF have clearly and intentionally rejected any practices with overt ties to Buddhism.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which CCF members have done this is through their open criticism of certain aspects of Buddhist morality, especially areas in which they view Buddhist teaching on family life as contradictory. The following quote, given to me by one of the original members of the church, points to one such contradiction:

> "When you worship Jesus, he your lord right? You worship the monk, the monk is like me (a human man)! My brother used to be a monk, right. And my mum, because she's a Buddhist, she will worship my brother! And I say mum, you're his mother! And you, you're her son, you know? And you get your mum to worship you, you think its right?.... So, you can see that's wrong right? You know its wrong straight away... After you become a Christian you can see that what the monks are doing is wrong? Yeah, and you're sort of thinking, they're completely wrong, she is your mum, you should be respecting her." - Personal interview 31/10/2022

For this man, his mother's veneration of her own son points out an important moral failing in Buddhist doctrine, the contradictory calls to honour your parents but also venerate monks, even

if they are your own children. Along similar lines, another common complaint that emerged during my fieldwork was the concern that Buddhist monks who travelled to Aotearoa/New Zealand from Cambodia did so out of selfish ambition. Following the establishment of the Cambodian Buddhist temple in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, several monks were sponsored from Cambodia to live permanently in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where they were expected to officiate at weddings, funerals, festivals, and other religious events. On at least two occasions, however, monks have left the temple and found secular jobs following their long-term residency visas being granted. Speaking about this topic, Kimsa Heng noted that:

> "You see that kind of thing quite often; it's been happening since 1989. There have been a lot of monks that come to New Zealand and then after four or five years they're not a monk anymore. When they come here, they become a New Zealand citizen, and then stop being a monk! So therefore, using the system, using religion to do their own thing, you know, which is wrong!" – Personal Interview 31/10/2022

These criticisms of the moral structures that Buddhism prescribe are not the only sign that CCF members are making a genuine attempt to cease engaging in Buddhist doctrine in favour of becoming Christian. Another key strategy is the abandonment of several traditionally important religious rites and festivals that appear on the Buddhist calendar. Most notably is the festival of *Pchum Ben*, also known as Ancestor Remembrance Day, but other yearly harvest festivals, moon festivals and ancestor remembrance practices have likewise been abandoned by those that attend church meetings. *Pchum Ben* stands out from the others due to its traditional importance for Cambodian Buddhists, serving to ensure community cohesion and the strengthening of familial ties. During the fifteen days of *Pchum Ben* Buddhist devotees travel to local pagodas and perform rituals aimed at transferring positive karma or merit to recently deceased ancestors, with the goal of decreasing family members' suffering in the afterlife. In recent years, *Pchum Ben* celebrations have also taken on a secondary importance, ensuring the strength of familial connections, and helping to bring healing and reconciliation to communities splintered by the violence inflicted during the Khmer Rouge years. As Holt (2017) suggests, since 1979 *Pchum Ben* rituals have become increasingly focused on both regenerating family cohesion and reforming community bonds through shared ritual experiences and pilgrimage. Those in the CCF view this festival in a very different light, as for members of the group, *Pchum Ben* relies too heavily on the presence of Buddhist monks, and for them the veneration of ancestors is completely contrary to correct Christian behaviour. Referencing this point,

Kimsa related that when he goes "to the temple I'm not here to worship the monk, I come to the temple to see my own people. I come to the temple to see, you know, my own culture" (personal interview 31/10/2022). Following on from other accounts of Khmer converts living in the diaspora, it is likely that this aversion to *Pchum Ben* and its ancestor veneration arises from the instruction of missionaries in refugee camps (Mortland 2019). It is with this example that Zehner's (2005) conception of hybridity becomes a useful tool. For CCF members to continue practising *Pchum Ben* would be the wrong type of hybridity as these forms of syncretism would constitute specific "processes of mixing that pose dangers to the Christian tradition" (p.592). The observance of religious practices such as the veneration of ancestors and worship of spiritual forces provide Christian converts with an alternative to the omnipotent spiritual power of God, and so must be expunged from religious life.

The attempts to break from the aspects of Cambodian culture closely associated with Buddhism detailed above have also, rather unfortunately, led to a certain degree of animosity between Cambodian Christians and the wider, mostly Buddhist, Cambodian immigrant community within Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. While it is difficult to come up with an accurate estimate of the number of Cambodian Christians living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, it is clear that at the time of writing they do remain a minority. Though many converted to Christianity while living in Thai refugee camps, most did not, and some rough estimates suggest that at the end of the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis during the late 1980s, between 60 and 95 percent of Cambodians living in the diaspora remained practising Buddhists (Mortland 2019). This is true of Hamilton/Kirikiriroa as well, with most of the Cambodian community regularly attending religious and social functions at Wat Aranhrangsey. This temple was established by the Waikato Khmer Association (WKA), a not-for-profit organisation whose goal is to support and connect Cambodians living in the region and serves as the main social and religious centre for Cambodian Buddhists in the city. As the functional epicentre for community events, Wat Aranhrangsey hosts the yearly *Pchum Ben* and New Year celebrations, as well as funerals, weddings, birthday parties and any other gatherings. For Christian Cambodians, however, the close tie between the Buddhist temple and the WKA is viewed as unbalanced and biased, favouring one portion of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton's Khmer community over another. As one participant put it to me:

> "It doesn't matter if one of the Cambodians are Buddhist, it doesn't matter they are Muslim, it doesn't matter they are Christians, they are Cambodians… But for the association (WKA) they mix them up (culture and religion). What the association should do is forget about religion, have a meeting to try and help or improve things for all Cambodians in New Zealand" – Personal interview 31/10/2022.

For this CCF member, as well as several others I met with, the WKA and Buddhist temple were almost synonymous. For them, this became an issue as, rather than providing support services for all Khmer people, the WKA focused too much on the organisation and running of Buddhist events, assuming that "to be Cambodian is to be Buddhist." In recounting his early experiences arriving in Aotearoa/New Zealand, one CCF member described another aspect of this relationship, explaining that he and many other Khmer Christians were treated with a level of distrust by fellow Cambodians because, in his words, "they think that I follow the foreign God… not the Cambodian God which is Buddhism" (Personal Interview 31/10/2022).

This seems to be a common accusation directed at those who embrace Christianity, with reports of similar occurrences appearing elsewhere in the diaspora. Smith-Hefner (1994), for instance, notes that Catholic converts living in Cambodia are frequently subjected to assertions by other Khmer that they had "forgotten their culture" (p.26), an accusation she ties to common associations between Christianity and European and Vietnamese imperialism in Cambodia's past. Mam (2012) suggests another possible source of these critical judgements, noting that, for many, a move away from Buddhism is seen as a rejection of traditional obligations to family. This may especially be true for Christians who refuse to participate in *Pchum Ben* celebrations, as refusing to correctly engage with ancestors is likely to be viewed as a rejection of the duty to care for and remember the deceased.

In building an understanding of how CCF members can separate some aspects of their culture from the Buddhist practices they would traditionally have performed, Zehner's (2005) insights are productive. In his conception of hybridity, those aspects of traditional religious practice that do not directly contradict core Christian doctrine can be stripped of their spiritual undertones and continued without raising questions about converts' loyalty to the Christian God. This allows for converts to separate aspects of their cultural identity from their traditional connection to religion, so their continued practise and incorporation into Christian life can be cast as a contextualisation of Christianity rather than a sign of divided loyalty or religious

dualism. For CCF members, this allows for the secularisation of cultural forms, divorcing religion and culture by accepting a form of anti-syncretism that only targets that which directly opposes central Christian doctrine. As Kimsa explained to me, discussing why he and his family continued to attend yearly *Pchum Ben* festivities at Wat Aranhrangsey:

> "Sometimes we go (to the temple) because of Khmer New Year. Sometimes we went because it's still a part of our culture… (When) I go to the temple I'm not (there to) worship the monk, I go to the temple to see my own people. I come to the temple to see my culture…. So, I completely separate between the culture and the religion… it's not Buddhist, and it's not Christian, no! So, it's the culture." – (Personal interview, 31/10/2023)

Resonant rupture and orthodox hybridity

While in the first section of this chapter I have shown that Khmer Christians in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton have made and continue to make wholehearted, genuine and enthusiastic attempts to faithfully follow Christian teaching by distancing themselves from various aspects of Buddhist religious practice and ideologies, it is also true that they are equally as invested in maintaining a connection to aspects of their cultural heritage that they deem compatible. Many of these aspects of culture are traditionally tied to Buddhism, leading to an apparently contradictory dualism. In their attempts to retain these aspects of their cultural heritage, CCF members must first go through a process of extricating their Khmer identity from Buddhist practices. The process in which they do this is a complicated mixture of secularising some practices that would otherwise be seen as Buddhist while Christianising others, all the while asserting that "to be Cambodian" is not inextricably tied to Buddhism. In the second half of this chapter, I will address how this process has taken shape for CCF members, examining how attempts by Christians to retain a morality partially endorsed by Buddhist belief, continuing to celebrate select Cambodian holidays, assimilating aspects of Cambodian culture into worship services and reforming relationships with the wider Khmer community in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, all point to an attempt to hold on to their Cambodian identity and reconcile it with their Christian faith.

As discussed in the previous chapter, questions around the effectiveness of Buddhist morality in dealing with suffering and chaos were for many Khmer people an important reason for their conversion to Christianity. Despite this, the similarities between Buddhist and Christian moral frameworks are also an important factor in conversion, and many examples have been given to show Christianity was attractive to Khmer refugees due to similar ethical teaching. This phenomenon is one that can be seen not only in the data collected during my fieldwork but also in other anthropological literature, which argues that a Buddhist background is an important factor in shaping Cambodian Christian theology, as Theravada Buddhism and Christianity share a similar moral framework. Smith-Heffner (1994), Ong (2003), and Cook et.al (2010) all emphasise this overlap, noting that both religious systems advocate a similar sexual ethic, the avoidance of excessive alcohol consumption, place great importance on the submission of children to their parents, and emphasise the importance of patience, generosity, and humility. Wong (2019) shows though that even amongst those Khmer Christians who have broken most abruptly with traditional religious practice, aspects of Buddhism can still be seen in the form that their Christian faith takes. As an example of this, she argues that some Khmer Christians have unconsciously incorporated Buddhist understandings of merit making as being connected with heavenly rewards. Giving an example, Wong recounts a story one participant relayed to her regarding the potential rewards that come with good works:

> "At one point, (a participant) related the story of when she first began volunteering to arrive early at church to help cook the post-service meal and then also to stay late in order to wash dishes. At first, she confessed, she was shocked that people used to eat and leave their dishes without offering to wash them. Eventually, she thought to herself, 'Thank God they don't want to do it … [In washing their dishes,] I earn my treasure in heaven.'… it seems that vestiges of the merit-based system might continue to affect her new identity as a member of a Christian community" – (Wong 2019, p.57).

This potential connection between Buddhist and Christian doctrine around correct morality rings true in the Kirikiriroa/Hamilton context as well, with all of the synergies mentioned above being regularly highlighted and encouraged during CCF services. The quote given earlier in this chapter, where a church member laments the contradiction of his mother venerating her monk son points to this, as in his view Christianity not only supports the respect of parents but does so in a way that is more rigorous and consistent than Buddhism. The shared

attention on the importance of generosity is also clear in CCF teaching, which emphasises the need for generosity to be directed not only at friends and family but towards all people.

Further evidence that supports the idea that CCF members are invested in retaining their cultural identity can be seen when looking at which traditionally important festivals they do and do not continue to attend. While I have already discussed the fact that Cambodian-New Zealander Christians refuse to participate in *Pchum Ben* day celebrations on the basis of its veneration of alternative spiritual entities, not all events held at the Wat Aranhrangsey are avoided. A second event, equally as important to the Khmer calendar is *Choul Chnam Thmey*, or Khmer New Year. This three-day celebration of the solar new year (usually around the fourteenth of April) is observed with a range of games, gift giving, and family reunions along with Buddhist meditation, prayer and recounting of the Buddha's teaching on generosity and forgiveness (Lim 2002). While *Pchum Ben* celebrations are largely focused on religious devotion, *Choul Chnam Thmey* celebrations contain but are not defined by Buddhist practices. For CCF members, this has meant that Khmer New Year can still be attended and enjoyed without breaking with Christian doctrine. In practice, this has resulted in several CCF members, including lead pastor Kimsa and his family, regularly attending *Choul Chnam Thmey* festivities at the Wat Aranhrangsey. This is done advisedly, however, as Kimsa told me that it is important to explain to both other CCF members and Western Christians that his desire to attend is based solely on connecting with his cultural background and strengthening ties with the wider Cambodian community. In developing an understanding of the means by which Christians choose to focus on the non-religious aspects of *Choul Chnam*, Zehner's work can once more be utilised. For CCF members, the New Year celebrations are more about the socially oriented concepts of generosity, forgiveness and building family ties than they are about the otherworldly implications of Buddha's teachings. Here we can see then, that with the continuation of traditional cultural practice, it is only those cultural forms that are not seen to directly threaten Christian spirituality that are maintained.

The attempts of CCF members to maintain and reconnect with aspects of their Cambodian culture are not limited to cultural events and activities outside of the church, however, with the format of weekly Saturday meetings equally pointing to a desire to express Cambodian identity, illustrating clearly what K. Marshall calls "resonant rupture." In fact, my

data suggests that this desire to be Cambodian, while also being faithfully Christian, was a driving force behind establishing the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. This can be seen firstly in the complete dominance of the Khmer language in all CCF events, where from start to finish all singing, worship, prayer, and preaching is done in the Khmer language. By their own accounts, CCF members hailed this as a central feature, noting that, as Yorng Dul conveyed to me, attending services in English proved a constant struggle to understand what is being preached, an exercise that many found exhausting. In the early years, when many had only recently arrived from refugee camps, converts specifically chose churches based on the pastor's ability to speak slowly and clearly when preaching. Aside from these more practical considerations, anthropologists have also shown that language is an essential part of the transmission and retention of culture, including when looking at religious conversion (Handman 2015). In the case of the CFF, as a key facilitator in cultural processes, speaking Khmer in church services can then be seen as an intentional attempt by congregation members to maintain a connection with their cultural identity.

Another key feature of weekly services that indicates cultural retention is the inclusion of traditional musical forms, which while lyrically Christianised, maintain strong links to "Khmer-ness." While many of the songs sung during Saturday evening services are simply translations of contemporary Western style worship music found in most evangelical churches elsewhere in Aotearoa/New Zealand, most take a distinctly Cambodian aesthetic form. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the CCF makes use of both more traditional *mahori* music, featuring traditional *khloy*, *pin*, and *roneat* instruments and contemporary *rom kbach* style, which while being heavily influenced by Western pop remain conspicuously Khmer. While the instruments used, or the style in which they are employed, will largely be unfamiliar to Pakeha-New Zealander churchgoers, the lyrical content will however be immediately familiar, with many lyrics being direct translations of famous hymns and worship music.

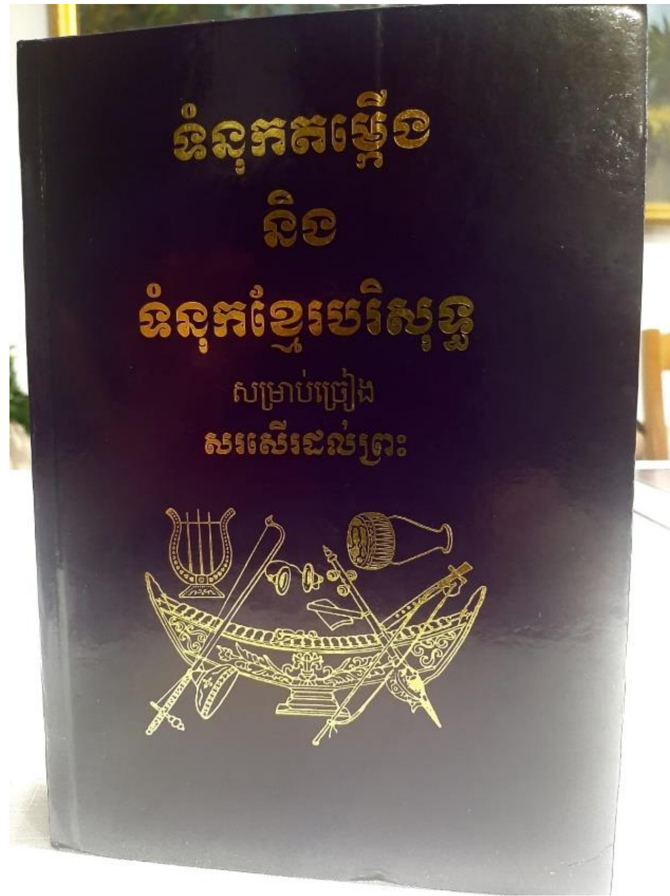

Figure 4: Hymn book used by CCF, showing an array of traditional instruments on cover, 2022.Credit: author.

This use of traditional performative media in a Christian context provides a good example of K. Marshall's (2016) resonant rupture, as existing musical traditions are given new meaning while retaining the emotive connection that exists with cultural identity. In an examination of resonant rupture amongst the Oksapmin Baptist church in Papua New Guinea, Macdonald (2019) provides an analogous example, where upon converting to Christianity many Oksapmin had incorporated traditional instrumentation, dance, and dress into worship services. These practices were looked at with fondness by Oksapmin churchgoers who felt as though the traditional association of these aesthetic forms with celebration made them a good fit for the "joy of experiencing the Holy Spirit" during worship services (p.130). This continuation of "feelingful" connection with traditional forms that both K. Marshall and Macdonald emphasise is also clearly present for CCF members, who expressed great pride and appreciation in the singing of Khmer songs with Khmer instrumentation during weekly services. Unlike Macdonald's Oksapmin Baptist Church or K. Marshall's Navajo Oodlání movement, however, the CCF church is not closely related to the global Pentecostal-charismatic

tradition, and so the forms of media that are incorporated into weekly worship services are superficially different, in that they are not specifically connected to experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit. While the CCF is not Pentecostal, the "feelingful" connection to traditional performative media remain. Another essential consideration is that while the Navajo and Oksapmin have converted to a non-traditional religion, they have done so while remaining in their country of origin. For members of the CCF, I would suggest that living outside of Cambodia reinforces the feelingful connection to traditional forms of media, especially when considering that their Buddhist counterparts may question their commitment to retaining a hold of their identity. By including traditional forms in their worship, Christians are able to show that though their religious affiliations may have changed, their identity remains Cambodian.

Still Khmer: re-connection with the wider Cambodian diasporic community

Another key aspect of the CCF that for me serves as proof of the importance they place in maintaining a connection to their Khmer identity is the efforts that they have made to rebuild connections with Buddhist Khmer living in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In the section above I have detailed some of the tensions and differences between those Buddhists that attend Wat Aranhrangsey and the Christians involved with the CCF, and while some animosity exists between the two, it would be easy to overstate the level to which the two hold themselves separate. The CCF has in fact made several intentional moves aimed at bridging the gap between the two religious groups. One way that they have done this is in the attendance by CCF members at *Choul Chnam Thmey* celebrations hosted by the Buddhist temple that I discussed above. While Khmer-New Zealander Christians living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton have chosen to attend this festival as a way of reconnecting with their cultural identity, a secondary goal is to reconnect with other Cambodians and prove to them that they do still value their Khmer heritage. By attending a temple event, CCF members hoped to show that the religious barriers separating Buddhists and Christians were not insurmountable and could be overcome through mutual appreciation for and connection with common traditional celebrations and cultural values.

Figure 5: A weekly CCF English class in session. Held in the same house as weekly church services, June 2022 Credit: Author

Another means by which CCF members pursue reconnection with the wider Cambodian diasporic community is through weekly English language lessons that the church provides to anyone wanting to attend. These classes are held weekly on a Wednesday evening in the same house that CCF worship services occur and are provided free of charge to anyone wanting to improve their English-speaking skills, meaning that while most students are Khmer, weekly sessions are also attended by Chinese, Brazilian, Colombian, and other non-Cambodian students. While the CCF organises and hosts these classes, most of the teachers are Pakeha-New Zealanders from local churches who volunteer to plan and run lessons. An important consideration is that, while one objective of these lessons was the obvious goal of helping migrants improve their language skills, the importance of which CCF members are very aware, the other key goal, as stated by CCF members, is to encourage friendship between CCF and Buddhist Cambodians. While the ties between the English classes and Christian Fellowship are made clear, those running the sessions are careful to avoid incorporating too much Christian

content, and other than praying before a shared meal I saw almost no other open expressions of Christian practice during any of the classes I attended. This is backed up by the fact that classes were initially held in the church building of Discovery Christian Centre but were moved to the Heng household with the hopes of making the space more comfortable for non-Christians. Instead of being seen as an opportunity to evangelise non-Christian students, English lessons are specifically set out to encourage friendship and connection within the Cambodian and wider immigrant community.

Pastor Kimsa Heng made it very clear that maintaining positive relationships within the Cambodian community was highly important to both him personally, but also to the CCF more widely. As a part of this, over the past 20 years he has provided an array of services to help other Cambodians become settled in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This includes translation for people going to hospital or to meetings with immigration officers, providing counselling services for those struggling with adapting to life in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and organising fundraisers to support development programs in Cambodia. All of this is done with the express intent of fostering good relationships within the community, as Kimsa himself put it:

> "We try to connect with the Cambodian community, in terms of me going out there, helping with translation, having an English class here, those kind of things… English class is the bridge to let them know this group is a Christian group. Me and my wife are wanting to bring the Cambodian community together to show that even though we are Christians we still want to help the Cambodian people… for them it's so they can get to know us, seeing that us Christians don't hate Buddhist Cambodians. But also, another reason is to show that our culture is still important to us." – (Personal interview 31/10/2022)

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have endeavoured to show that evidence of both rupture and continuity can be seen at work in the ways in which CCF members relate to their Buddhist heritage. In choosing to engage with some traditionally important calendar events such as *Pchum Ben* that can be easily bleached of their religious connections, while rejecting other festivals such as *Choul Chnam Thmey* that are more closely associated with Buddhist tradition,

CCF members demonstrate Zehner's (2005) "orthodox hybridity". I have argued in this respect that the perspectives of CCF members exhibit a clear desire to faithfully worship the Christian God by privileging Christianity's truth claims and avoiding Buddhist rituals that would offer competing sources of spiritual power. The inclusion of traditional expressive forms and Khmer language, however, give a clear example of K. Marshall's "resonant rupture," and, as I have argued, show an equally strong desire to maintain a connection to their Khmer identity. As further evidence of this desire to preserve their cultural identity, I have described the ways in which members of the CCF have intentionally reconnected with the wider Cambodian community of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. By attending yearly *Pchum Ben* celebrations as well as hosting weekly English language classes, Christian members of the Khmer community have shown that they are still invested in their cultural heritage and the wellbeing of their fellow Cambodians.

Chapter Five: Sponsors, Friends, and Patrons - Being a Khmer Christian in Aotearoa/New Zealand

While so far in this thesis I have focused almost solely on the relationships that exist between members of the CCF and their own cultural and religious histories, it is also important to understand that Khmer Christians living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton are continually shaped by the wider Aotearoa/New Zealand church culture around them. Most CCF members are also involved with congregations at other, English-speaking churches, relationships that shape not only their faith but also their daily lived experiences. In this chapter I will provide an overview of some of these connections that have formed between the CCF and other Christian groups in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. The interactions between the Cambodian and Pakeha-New Zealander church can be the site of complex intercultural relationships, as Cambodian-New Zealander Christians learn to negotiate what it means to be faithful Christians in a foreign land. In the second section of this chapter, I will provide a case study of one such intercultural interaction, focusing on the ways in which many CCF members have carried traditional Cambodian patron/client relationships into their connections with local Aotearoa/New Zealand churches.

Historic background

As with stories of conversion, most relationships that have formed between Cambodian Christians and the various churches that Khmer Christians now attend throughout Kirikiriroa/Hamilton were initiated as a result of the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis during the 1970s and 1980s. Amongst the multitude of Western NGO and aid workers that helped run programs in refugee camps in Thailand were a number of Pakeha-New Zealanders, including several from churches based in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. Khmer residents often lived in the camp for extended periods, with most staying more than a decade, during which time close friendships were often made with Western volunteers, including the mentioned Pakeha-New Zealanders. These relationships represent the first connection that many had to Aotearoa/New Zealand and encouraged many CCF members to direct their energy towards seeking a place in the government's refugee resettlement program.

When Aotearoa/New Zealand first started to accept camp residents into the country as refugees in 1979 (Ministry for Cultural Heritage 2014), however, only those with family already living within in the country were eligible for direct sponsorship under the Aotearoa/New Zealand government's refugee family reunion scheme (Immigration New

Zealand 2023a). Some, such as Mich and Yorng Dul, were able to gain entrance to Aotearoa/New Zealand under "special case" visas, but as very few Khmer were already living in the country, the majority would have no family to sponsor them and would have to wait in Khao I Dang camp for a space under the United Nations Refugee Quota plan (Ministry for Cultural Heritage 2014). Under this scheme around 600 refugees from the area of "Indochina", namely Vietnam and Cambodia, would be accepted into Aotearoa/New Zealand each year. Initially, the government was hesitant to sign up to this UN solution to the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis due to fears that refugees would be slow to integrate into Aotearoa/New Zealand society, but faced great pressure from the general public, the majority of whom were in favour of accepting Khmer refugees on humanitarian grounds (Liev 2008).

Once they had arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand, asylum seekers were first processed at the Māngere Refugee Resettlement Centre in South Auckland, where they would be given an orientation concerning life in the country. This continued right through the entire period that the country was accepting Khmer refugees and the Māngere Refugee Resettlement Centre still functions in this same capacity to the present day (Immigration New Zealand 2023c). Migrants stayed in this centre for approximately five weeks, before being placed into the care of preorganised community sponsors. The sponsoring groups would assume the responsibility of assisting with community orientation, finding employment, and helping to fund initial settlement needs such as food, accommodation, and transport (Immigration New Zealand 2023). During this period, the Inter-Church Commission on Immigration and Refugee Resettlement (ICCI), a Christian organisation that aimed to support refugees through various churches and other Christian groups, was the key link between new arrivals and potential sponsors (Liev 2008). The ICCI had been established in 1975 at the request of the Aotearoa/New Zealand government and given the role of promoting and supporting refugee settlement throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand (Ministry of Health 2012). As a result of this, most Cambodians who arrived as refugees, both Christian and non-Christian, were sponsored out of the Māngere Refugee Resettlement Centre by churches and other church-based organisations throughout the country. To give a few examples from Cambodian Christians in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, Mich and Yorng Dul were sponsored by Discovery Church and Kimsa Heng by St Peter Chanel Catholic chapel, while others from the CCF were sponsored by the Central Baptist, Knox Presbyterian, and Fairfield Baptist churches.

Planted in the Western Church

One of the results of the reliance on community sponsors in assisting with the settlement of refugees is that many Khmer became heavily involved with Christian churches and communities. While churches sponsored both Christian and non-Christian refugees, it seems as though only those that had already converted while living in refugee camps, or converted shortly after arriving in Aotearoa/New Zealand, felt compelled to maintain a connection to their sponsor churches past the initial settlement period. While those non-Christian Cambodians that I met during fieldwork did express great feelings of gratitude towards those who sponsored them, they did not seem to hold any enduring bonds of indebtedness to Kirikiriroa/Hamilton's churches. For many Christian Khmer, however, their sponsorship by church groups represented a very important and firmly held relationship.

Arising from this initial arrangement, most CCF members have become deeply involved within the churches which sponsored them. This involvement is not limited to attending Sunday services, and many have taken part in various church programs and ministries, including some who have risen to positions of leadership within their congregation. Even those with low levels of English language comprehension (generally the more elderly in the congregation) have become involved in Western churches, despite admitting that they understand little to none of the sermons or worship music. For these people, church attendance is both a means by which they can express gratitude to sponsors, but also an important social activity that allows them to connect and form friendships with Pakeha-New Zealanders. Gordon and Jan Meehan, a Pakeha-New Zealander couple who have been involved with the CCF since 2005 due to past experiences working in Cambodia, related a story to me which summed up this relationship well:

> "Gordon: Sometimes I'll preach at the Presbyterian church, and a couple of the older Cambodian ladies would go along as well.
>
> Jan: And these ladies, they'd have very little English.
>
> Gordon: Yeah, very little, but year after year they're sitting in this very traditional church, always helping with the cups of tea afterwards. These little old ladies nodding their heads, but they don't understand much at all… And the other members of the church know so little about Cambodian culture, the cultural differences are so big.

> Jan: But they are so well loved by the church, and they've become so well connected in… I think the love is like, the universal language between them, they've really become good friends" – (Personal Interview 7/11/2022).

For the most part this close relationship that Khmer Christians have with Western churches arose from an enduring sense of gratitude and obligation towards those who sponsored them. Even amongst the few who are no longer regular attendees at sponsoring churches, these strong connections remain, and most have kept in regular contact with those who supported them when they first arrived in the country. For Buddhists that were likewise sponsored by Christian churches, the sense of obligation that they feel seems to have taken a different form, materialising as a strong connection, but one that does not require dedicated church attendance. A Pakeha New Zealander elder from a local Methodist church, for instance, informed me that none of the twelve Khmer refugees that his church sponsored ever attended worship services, but nonetheless continue to visit him at his home. In a discussion of this issue, Liev (2008) reports that the majority of sponsoring churches in Aotearoa/New Zealand were intensely involved with migrants' daily lives but put no pressure on migrants to attend church services or convert, which likely played an important role in this dynamic.

When arriving in Aotearoa/New Zealand, then, rather than finding a church based on theological convictions or location, most Christians decided to attend the churches that had initially sponsored them. Additionally, participants relayed that what drew them to various churches was the social aspect, as many experienced loneliness and isolation when first settling into life in their new home country. Reflecting this, those who have continued to regularly attend church services outside of the CCF are generally well integrated into the immediate community and wider Aotearoa/New Zealand society. A large part of this is the increased access to English language learning that regular church attendance provides, especially for those who were not in full time employment. In the US context, Mortland (2019) observes a similar trend, noting that for many Khmer immigrants, attendance at Christian churches was a key means by which English language speaking could be improved. As Mortland also notes, aside from English practice, church attendance also offered immigrants a means by which they could be completely immersed in the culture of their new country, meaning that over time they became more comfortable in their new surroundings (p.181).

Aside from regular connection with the wider church community, some CCF members have also become closely involved with other aspects of Western church life. Both Kimsa, the current pastor of the CCF, and his predecessor Mich (until his retirement), have held positions at Discovery Church, serving as elders, helping to run events such as community outreach programs, as well as being involved in weekly Sunday services. As has already been suggested above not all church involvement is at a leadership level, and other CCF members have become involved in the weekly organisation and running of church services, church youth programs, or, as in the example given, making tea and coffee after Sunday programs.

Having chosen the English-speaking churches they want to attend based on sponsorship relationships, most Khmer Christians living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton have no strong theological connection to any single denomination, a dynamic that has transferred into the church structure of the CCF itself. Several participants even explained to me their surprise upon arriving in Aotearoa/New Zealand to find that there were denominational divisions beyond Catholic and Protestant and were immediately overwhelmed with the number and variety of congregations that they found. Speaking on the lack of denominational affiliation amongst many Khmer immigrants, Mich Dul relayed how he and his family began attending church services at Discovery Christian Centre:

> "When we look for a church, we do not really go around and choose a church in the same way as we chose the country we wanted to live in. We don't have a choice, we're not thinking about choice at all. We just think, we know these people and we go there. The only other thing that is important is that we feel in our hearts that the Lord is there." – (Personal Interview 14/12/2022).

While the diverse array of English language churches that CCF members relate to has led to the group having no strong denominational orientation, individual members within the church have, in some relatively uncommon cases, become thoroughly associated with the denomination of their sponsoring congregation. The clearest example of this is pastor Kimsa, who, as an elder at Discovery Church (which remains a part of the Fairfield Presbyterian parish), has developed connections with the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand (PCANZ). In his capacity as an elder, Kimsa regularly attends conferences held by the PCANZ, such as the "ONE conference" which Kimsa attended during my fieldwork in order to make connections with other church leaders and receive theological training (PCANZ 2022). During

a conversation with a group of men that attend the CCF after a Saturday evening service, I was told that this pattern does occur amongst Cambodian churches throughout Aotearoa/New Zealand and was informed of other Khmer Christians that have likewise become elders and pastors of English-speaking Baptist and Presbyterian churches in Wellington and Auckland.

Church as Patron

In the preceding section of this chapter the importance of the relationships formed between refugees and sponsoring church groups during the initial settlement period begins to emerge. While most Christian groups in Aotearoa/New Zealand have reported that their aim in sponsoring refugee families out of the Māngere refugee resettlement centre was to express the Christian virtue of generosity and charity (Liev 2008), an unexpected outcome was that churches became unintentionally, and often unknowingly, entangled with traditional Cambodian reciprocal power relationships. As with other countries in South-East Asia, Cambodia's traditional political structure was, and to a large degree still is, based on complex hierarchical patron-client relationships that operate across all levels of society (Hinton 2005). Describing the overall structure of patron-client relationships in South-East Asia, Scott (1972) shows that "the basic pattern is an informal cluster consisting of a power figure who is in a position to give security, inducements, or both, and his personal followers who, in return for such benefits, contribute their loyalty and personal assistance to the patron's designs" (p.92). In her now famous ethnography of pre-civil war Cambodia, Ebihara (2018 [1968]) demonstrates that during the late 1950s, when she was undertaking her fieldwork, all levels of society from the monarchy down to rural farmers played a part within this complex, multi-layered political structure. Adding to this, Ebihara shows that these relationships between powerful patrons and their loyal benefactors were traditionally enforced by Buddhist thought, which impressed, on the one hand, a moral obligation both to support and care for the powerless, and, on the other hand, also to respect authority and repay acts of kindness. Alongside this connection to Buddhist morality, Ebihara also describes patron-client relationships as operating in important ways within temple life, describing situations where village residents would choose a particular monk or order to which they will be constant, giving alms to them alone, sending children to only those monks for education and only attending rituals presided over by their chosen patron monk. The end result is that a reciprocal relationship is formed between more politically powerful or religiously influential monks, who

rely on their client's loyalty, and those who depend on their patrons for the provision of material or spiritual support. While these traditional power relationships were greatly disturbed during the Khmer Rouge era, when the Communist Party sought to eradicate class boundaries and so forbade the establishment of the verticalised reciprocal relationships (Hinton 2005, Ledgerwood 2012), patron-client relationships remain central to the functioning of Cambodian society and still represent the most important form of political relationship (Ledgerwood 2012, Un 2005).

As Khmer peoples have emigrated and become established throughout the world, they have, to a degree, continued to function under this same regime of patron-client relationships. Throughout the diaspora, the ways in which patrons and clients continue to interact has been examined by anthropologists and other social scientists. Liev (2008), for example, has shown that for Cambodian Buddhists living in Aotearoa/New Zealand, temple monks have retained their traditional role as spiritual patrons of the community. Outside of the religious context, Liev also examines how the leadership of the Cambodian Association of Auckland (a parallel to the WKA) operates in the manner of patron, while members of the association represent clients. Not limited to studies of how relationships are replicated in the diaspora though, anthropologists have also examined the ways in which patron-client links have changed with migration. One example of this can be found in Smith-Hefner's (1994) account of the Cambodian diaspora in Boston, USA, where she argues that for Khmer Christians, the role of spiritual patron that would typically be held by Buddhist monks is instead transferred onto church pastors. In explaining this relationship, Smith-Hefner relates that "in the most common pattern the pastor-patron dispenses goods and services and is repaid by the members of the congregation, as clients, with expressions of loyalty and deference which include regular attendance at his church… Often, especially for recent arrivals, they (pastors) assume primary responsibility for assessing a family's needs and allocating clothing, furniture and food" (p.29) and in return congregation members closely align themselves with the person of the pastor, expressing loyalty and deference to their church leader. Smith-Hefner notes that the history of the Cambodian Christian diaspora living in the Eastern United States has resulted in most Khmer pastors having a high degree of autonomy, arising from their tendency to start their own independent congregations, which in turn cements their position as sole spiritual patron. Interestingly, Smith-Hefner does not argue for any patron-client connection between Khmer converts and Western American pastors, but suggests the relationship is restricted to church leaders of Khmer speaking congregations. In the situation of the CCF in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton,

I will argue that the situation is almost completely reversed; with the egalitarian structure of the CCF, it is not the pastor, but rather the Western sponsoring church, which has unwittingly assumed the role of patron.

The indebtedness that Cambodian Christians felt to their sponsoring churches is, in their own words, derived from their complete reliance on them for support, income, accommodation, and friendship upon first arriving in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Speaking on the ties he felt to his sponsor, the St Peter Chanel Catholic Chapel in Te Rapa, Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, Kimsa Heng gives a good example of some of the relationship dynamics between him and his sponsor:

> "Anything at all, I talked to my sponsor, because in our culture we have to do what they ask. Apart from parents, it's your sponsor, you have to ask your sponsor first. Like, do I do this, or do I do that? You know the sponsor becomes just like your parents… They (Pakeha-New Zealanders) laugh at me sometimes because of this. One lady asked me if I wanted to marry her, so I said I will ask my sponsor, and they all laugh at me, you know? It was just, in those days I wouldn't know. So, they just laugh, and they say you don't have to ask your sponsor it's up to you if you want to marry her or not! But I didn't know that because I was new to New Zealand." – (Personal interview 31/10/2022)

Here Kimsa likens his relationship with the Catholic church to that of a child to their parents, feeling compelled to ask for their advice when faced with important life decisions such as marriage. This dynamic of patron-client relationships mirroring those of a parent and child is one that Hinton (2005) connects with the traditional expression of power, where he argues that in Cambodian society the ideal patron displays the kindness of a father or older sibling, and the ideal client reflects this by being obedient as a young person is to their elders.

On the side of the sponsoring churches though, there seems to have been little or no understanding of the relationships of power in which they have found themselves. As illustrated by Kimsa's story above, members of his sponsoring church found it humorous that as an adult he should treat them like his parents in asking for advice around a possible marriage partner, as in their view he had no obligation to involve them in his private life. Another factor involved with the perception by CCF members of sponsoring church as patron is the potential for Christian converts to view church attendance as mandatory due to the sense of obligation they felt to their sponsors. For example, Kimsa, who was committedly Protestant, felt obliged to

attend services and become involved at the Catholic church that initially sponsored him. He continued to attend services at the Catholic chapel for a number of months, despite having strong differences in his theological convictions. It was only after the leader of his sponsoring church made it clear to him that there was no obligation to worship there that Kimsa moved to Discovery Church because there were already other Khmer in the congregation.

As I have already discussed, anthropologists such as Smith-Hefner (1994) have identified a trend of Khmer pastors assuming the role of patron for their congregation. For the CCF however, this does not appear to have happened, and I saw no evidence to suggest that church members felt obligated towards the CCF pastor at all. In her discussion of some factors that she suggests have contributed to pastors becoming patrons, Smith-Hefner argues that it is the autonomy with which most pastors and churches operate that has led to this relationship forming. In the context of the Eastern United States, Khmer pastors generally operate in isolation from other churches, and so assume complete authority over their flock. In the context of the CCF, however, most members are in close relationship with English-speaking churches, and so are not solely dependent on the CCF to supply their spiritual needs. The structure of CCF worship services is also much more egalitarian than the situation that Smith-Hefner describes, as shown by the interactive nature of sermons. When anyone is preaching on a Saturday night, everyone else in the congregation is encouraged to give their own input, either by sharing personal examples of how the teaching could relate to their own life or by giving their opinion as to how specific passages should be interpreted. I believe that this interactive nature of the CCF meetings has arisen due to the group starting as a small bible study which grew to the size it is today, with the effect of preventing any one member from assuming total authority of the group. More evidence of this can be seen in the way in which church events are organised, which again allows for a high level of input from the entire congregation. For example, when planning for the yearly church Christmas party, a special Saturday evening service was called during which the entire group discussed and planned the event, with each person having the opportunity to share their ideas and opinions. It is important to clarify here that there does remain a formal structure within the church, with Kimsa having the title of pastor, a role that obviously garners the respect of other CCF members. In practice though, the running of the church is more participatory, with frequent discussions organised to help govern the practical aspects CCF life, such as when and where to have events, or how to run fundraisers and distribute finances to churches in Cambodia. As a spiritual leader Kimsa does seem to have a clearer leadership role, being that he the one that preaches most often, and so has the most

opportunity to give theological input. Even in this though there is evidence of a more egalitarian approach towards spiritual authority, with guest preachers being frequently invited to share, and congregation members being encouraged to ask and answer questions, share examples, and give feedback during services.

Conclusion

While the CCF is proudly a Khmer church group that privileges the speaking of Khmer language, the singing of Khmer songs and a style of worship that reflects their cultural heritage, they are still deeply influenced by the wider church environment of their new home country. This owes mainly to the history of church refugee sponsorship in Aotearoa/New Zealand, which has meant that most Cambodian Christians are dual members of the CCF and other English-speaking churches. In this chapter I have used the relationship that has formed between CCF members and their sponsors as an example of how, despite radical change, elements of traditional Cambodian culture continue to inform the lives of Cambodian Christians living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. When Khmer Christians who had arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand as refugees were sponsored by, and in many cases became reliant on, Christian church groups, patron client relationships that have traditionally played an important political role in Cambodia were reproduced, leading to many Khmer Christians displaying strong bonds of loyalty to their sponsors. While the sponsoring churches have not actively or intentionally developed this relationship, patron client relationships have in many cases endured, and still exert an important influence on how CCF members “do Christianity” in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

<u>Chapter Six: The Seven Pastors - Connection to the church in Cambodia.</u>

Throughout the preceding chapters of this thesis, I have presented a picture of the Cambodian Church of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton that has largely focused on the domestic context, looking first at how they came to practice Christianity in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and then at how this has shaped the ways in which they relate to other Khmer immigrants and the wider church. In this final chapter I will expand my approach to look at how the CCF has engaged with Cambodian Christianity more widely. To do this I will describe the relationships that CCF members maintain with a network of churches in the Western provinces of Cambodia. I will argue that this relationship shows that CCF members have proactively engaged with Christians in their homeland as a means of re-enforcing and re-creating connection to their Cambodian cultural heritage, while remaining committed to their Christian convictions. By looking at the ways in which transnational engagement has allowed CCF members to reimagine what it means to be Khmer, this chapter continues to show how Cambodian Christians lay claim to a dynamic cultural heritage. Examining the ways in which the CCF relate to Christianity in their homeland I contribute to the small but growing body of work (Chow 2019, Wan 2014) that looks to understand return missions, that is, members of the diaspora engaging with international religious mission work in their homeland. While the important role that migration has played in spreading Christianity is well documented (Walls 2014), there is still much to learn about how and why refugees and migrants that practice Christianity outside of their home country return to engage in missionary work in their own nation. Those studying global Christian missions have understood the unique position that diasporic Christians occupy, and a number of Christian mission agencies have in the past decade undertaken projects to provide theological training to those living in the diaspora who wish to return as missionaries (Ball 2022).

The contemporary Khmer Church

While the religious landscape of Cambodia is still thoroughly dominated by Buddhism, and Christianity remains a small minority of the total population, church growth over the last 30 years had been remarkably fast. As of 2019, only around 3% of Khmer people in Cambodia were Christian, yet reports suggest that the church may be growing at a rate of between 4% (Wong 2019) and 7% (Zylstra 2020) annually, far higher than the global average of 1.19% (Wong 2019). This rapid growth has been tied to a range of factors, including the repatriation

from Thailand of Khmer people who had converted in refugee camps (Poethig 2001), the appeal of global connections that Christian conversion can produce (Ninh 2017, Rumsby 2020), and the increased levels of religious participation that evangelicalism provides for women (Wong 2021, McLellan 2009). On the global scale, the Cambodian church is demographically very young, with more than half of those attending church services being under the age of 25 (Brandner 2020), a trend that reflects the overall population of Cambodia, where more than 60% of the total population are younger than 30 (National Institute of Statistics 2019). Brandner (2020) also notes that another prominent feature of the Cambodian church is the prevalence of evangelical protestant denominations, to which at least 80% of Cambodian Christians belong.

Figure 6: A rural Cambodian church in Stung Treng province, 27/02/2019. Credit: Author

Connection to the seven churches

When attending regular services at the CCF, it quickly became apparent to me that church members still felt strongly connected to their homeland, with members frequently (before the

COVID-19 pandemic) traveling to Cambodia to visit friends and family. Ties to Cambodia also appear prominently within worship, with prayer for Cambodia being a regular feature of Saturday evening services. The most prominent connection between the CCF and Cambodia that appears in regular church life, however, is that between the church in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton and the "seven pastors," a group of rural church leaders that lead congregations in Battambang province in Western Cambodia.

When Cambodia once again experienced relative political stability following UN sponsored elections in 1993 (Chandler 2007), traveling back to visit family became possible for those who had fled as refugees and were now living in the diaspora. In 1999, Kimsa Heng made one such trip, traveling to his home province of Battambang to visit family members, some of whom had, like him, converted to Christianity while living in refugee camps. As a part of this trip he, with the support of the CCF, sponsored a gathering of pastors with the aim of building a regional network of churches that the Kirikiriroa/Hamilton congregation could support. Discussing this process, Kimsa related that:

> "In 1999, we went out there and I decided to get a group to have a pastors' conference. So, when we did the pastors' conference, we found that all of them needed (financial) support… But we can't support all of them because on the first day we had 60 pastors… (so) we chose the seven pastors that we think we can just concentrate on those seven… so those seven we still connect with to this day. And every year we send them some rice, we buy one or two ton of rice, and we send it to them, and the group here (CCF)… does fundraising and when we have money, we buy things they need. Or sometimes we buy children's books, school equipment, and sometimes wheelchairs for the people who are disabled. So that's what we do now, and concentrate on them, but it's not just those seven pastors, it's also their congregations as well." – Personal interview, 31/10/2023

Alongside the things that Kimsa mentions here, the CCF has also funded a number of other community development projects based around the communities that they support. All seven churches are based in rural villages to the north of Battambang city, and their congregations are largely composed of farming families, many of whom live below the poverty line (The World Bank 2022). This is what initially drove the CCF to establish their development projects, as they sought to help provide not only spiritual, but also material support. As a part of these projects, groups from Aotearoa/New Zealand made up of both Khmer CCF members and

friends from other English-speaking churches have made regular visits to the villages that the churches are based in, helping to build chicken pens, fish farms, dig wells for clean water and construct latrines to improve sanitation. Until recent COVID induced travel restrictions that were in place between March 2020 and March 2022 requiring periods of quarantine for anyone returning from international travel, these trips were made either annually or biannually. Now that these restrictions have been lifted, the first such trip in three years is planned for November 2023, during which they intend to construct some chicken pens for a group of church families.

McLellan (2009) presents a similar picture of international church connection among the Canadian-Khmer church in Ontario, Canada, reporting that more than 1000 Khmer Christians had returned to Cambodia for missionary work with an American based Christian organisation (p.145). These missionaries related to her that it was a desire to both reconnect with their family, friends, and traditional culture, as well as to provide relief for those suffering harsh poverty, which drove them to make these visits back to Cambodia. As with the Canadian example, my participants viewed their interactions with and visits to Cambodia as both a form of international Christian mission, and as an opportunity for them to reconnect with friends, family, and their cultural heritage. As a form of international missionary work, CCF members saw their trips back to Cambodia as helping local churches in their goals of evangelising local families. By providing resources such as bibles and songbooks, as well as training for the church leaders, the CCF hope that the Cambodian churches will be better able to appeal to those non-Christians living in the region. By the accounts of CCF members themselves, they have at least been partially successful in this goal, as the churches that they have been supporting have seen substantial growth in congregation size over the past two decades. The secondary goal of missionary trips to Cambodia, that of reconnecting with friends and family, was one that participants discussed openly, admitting that having the chance to visit their homeland was of equal importance to visiting churches and participating in development work, often referring to visits as “a holiday as well as a mission trip.”

In addition to these community development programs, the CCF has also helped to provide church resources to the pastors and congregations of the seven supported churches, such as bibles, songbooks, and other church equipment as well as theological training for the pastors themselves. This theological training is generally provided in two ways, both through conferences such as the one that was held in 1999, and through the donation of bible study

resources. As a part of the relationship, the CCF has also helped to fund study for several of the seven pastors, allowing them to undergo formal theological training within Cambodia.

As the relationship between the CCF and the seven Cambodian congregations has formed, Kimsa appreciates the possible imbalances that could come about as a result of their support of the churches in Battambang. In an effort to make sure that the relationship between the CCF and the seven churches does not become overly one-sided or based too strongly on the financial aspects, the Cambodian pastors are encouraged to preach sermons and share during CCF gatherings using internet video chat platforms such as ZOOM or Skype. This also provides an opportunity for Christians in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton to connect with the Khmer church, allowing them the opportunity to ask questions of the Cambodian church leaders which, in turn, helps them to understand how Christianity is developing and changing within Cambodia. Along these lines, Kimsa and other members of the church were clear that they viewed their relationship with the Cambodian church network as a dialogic partnership and saw their role as empowering the Cambodian pastors to work towards their goals and helping to address their material needs. Alongside these times when the Cambodian pastors connect with the CCF, Kimsa has also organised bi-weekly meetings in which all seven Cambodian pastors gather in person for a discussion, with Kimsa joining virtually. These regular meetings are again intended to help give the CCF a greater level of involvement in the Cambodian church, affording the seven pastors an opportunity to share the needs of their congregations and wider communities, and Kimsa the opportunity to convey the needs and plans of the CCF. This is also how the development programs that the CCF has instituted have been developed, arising from direct relationships with the Cambodian church, thereby fostering a clearer understanding of their daily lives and challenges.

International connections and the construction of dual identity

As Verkuyen et.al (2019) have argued, "for the immigrant, questions about ethnic and national identity (as well as religious, local and supranational group belonging) are almost inevitable" (p.393), as migrants must learn to negotiate the boundary between attachment to their home country and necessarily growing allegiances to their country of residence. Members of the Cambodian community of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton are no exception to this and, as I have shown in the preceding chapters of this thesis, connection to their identity as Khmer remains an important part of their lives as Cambodian-New Zealanders. In the remaining section of this

chapter I will argue that the decision by CCF members to focus their connection back to their homeland on rural churches shows one such attempt to negotiate the boundary between attachment to Cambodia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. Drawing on Poethig's (2001) work on dual identities of Cambodian's living in the United States, I show that by engaging with international community development programs centred around rural Cambodian churches, the CCF is able to contest commonly held ideas around correct religious expression for Khmer people.

In developing an understanding of how Cambodian Christians living in the diaspora imagine their dual status as both Cambodian and, in the case of her interlocutors, American, Poethig (2001) argues that conversion plays an important role by adding a third identity: Christian. When considering the trend of diasporic Khmer Christians returning to Cambodia with the intention of preaching to their fellow Cambodians, Poethig notes that converts are able to focus on Christianity as a trans-national movement that transcends the politics of citizenship, and their Khmer identity as being tied to shared genealogy, which in turn allows them to circumvent perceptions of Khmer identity as being inextricably tied to Buddhism: if Christians can be Chinese or American, then they could just as easily be Khmer. "Beyond the contentious earthly kingdoms, and the hierarchical pluralism in both countries of membership, was the heavenly kingdom, a kingdom that did not betray and brooked no competing loyalties" (Poethig 2001, p.198). Poethig also connects this line of logic to the desire of many Khmer Americans to undertake Christian missions in Cambodia, arguing that by proactively engaging in Cambodia during a time of national reconstruction they could challenge traditional conceptions about what it means to be Cambodian: "If cultural citizenship was constructed, it could be re-invented. As Khmer Christians, they reimagined a Khmer identity that was both transnational and non-Buddhist." (Poethig 2009 p.199). For Khmer-New Zealanders living in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, a similar dynamic is at play, as church members seek to reconnect with their cultural heritage in a way that subverts traditional ideas of "Khmer-ness" as being inextricably tied to Buddhism. A discussion that I had with Mich and Yorng Dul on this topic sheds some light into how they perceive their continuing connection to the Cambodian church:

> *Mich* - "So just remember, the country (Cambodia) is a Buddhist country… (but) the Lord is working miraculously, there are more Christians than ever before, which is quite good…but it has been difficult for them because they become completely cut off, you

know, confessed themselves as Christian, which means… they've probably been rejected from the Cambodian community."

Yorng – "Yeah, especially when they are disconnected from family, they have a very hard time."

Mich – … "(But things are changing), Christianity is now growing in Cambodia. My time, when I was a child, I hardly heard anything about Christianity… My mother once stayed in a Catholic hospital but other than that, that was the only time I came across a little bit about Christianity..."

Yorng – "But now you go along the street, along the highway: there's a church, there's another church, you know? Yeah, so it's exciting. My home village has got one church too."

Mich – Yeah, so we have to keep praying for them, and keep supporting them the best we can… because it is very difficult for them" - Personal Interview, 14/12/2023.

This line of conversation highlights that Khmer Christians living in Aotearoa/New Zealand are aware of the struggles the Cambodian church has faced that arise from the tendency for conversion to be seen, as Poethig (2001) has argued, as a denial of Khmer identity. The quote also suggests that the support offered to Cambodian Christians is seen by those in Aotearoa/New Zealand as a direct response to this, helping the relatively new and comparatively small church overcome the spiritual remoteness and local criticisms by providing transnational connection and moral support.

Contesting the expectation that Khmer identity and Buddhism are inseparable has an effect not only on Christians living in the diaspora, but also on the domestic church of Cambodia. As Marston and Guthrie (2004) report, there has been increasing tension between Buddhists and Christians living in rural areas of Cambodia, a point that both Poethig (2001) and McLellan (2009) have argued is a result of conflicting expectations around religious identity. Elaborating on this, McLellan suggests that Buddhists viewed Christians as too eager to proselytise and have likely taken offence to zealous Khmer Christians who denounce Buddhist practice and home shrines as "devil worship." In the case of Khmer Christians living in the diaspora, Poethig (2001) notes that there is an added level of distrust when they return

to their homeland, as they are likely to be seen as betraying not only their religious heritage, but also their nationality. “Christian *anikachun* (ethnic Khmer living abroad) then represented a betrayal of both the nation and the dharma… (and) returning Cambodians had to legitimate their Khmerness while professing a Christianity gained at the site of resettlement” (Poethig 2001, p.139). When expatriate Christians assert their dual identity as Khmer and Christian, they also contest expectations around religious identity for domestic Christians as well, using their transnational identity to recast understandings of what it means to be Khmer. In the case of the CCF, the long term and continuing connection to the church in Cambodia may play into this, with the regular connection providing, on the one hand, the church in Battambang with a unique claim to transnationalism and, on the other hand, the church in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton with a renewed connection to their cultural identity. As the quote given above shows, discussions with members of the CCF do point to this dynamic, with frequent reference to the difficult position that many Christians living in Cambodia find themselves in.

As well as building relationships with churches in Cambodia as a means for reasserting their dual identity as both Khmer and Christian, members of the CCF have also understood that sustained relationships with their home country can be used as a means for reconnecting with other Cambodians in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton. As I have already discussed, there has been a concerted effort by the Cambodian church to build bridges with the other members of the Khmer community in Kirikiriroa/Hamilton, including the use of English language classes and attendance of temple events which they hope will show a continuing dedication to their culture and community. Another way that they have nurtured these links is through their participation in community development programs, especially in relation to the fundraising events that they have run for this purpose. As Long, a regular CCF member, related to me in a conversation, the use of fundraisers makes the connections back to Cambodia more visible, allowing other members of the Khmer community the opportunity to see the ways in which the CCF cherish and respect their cultural roots. When asked about this aspect of their relationship to the seven churches, Long noted that some Buddhists had begun to join in with their plans, especially when the CCF raised money to go towards Cambodian farmers following a poor rice harvest:

> “Some of them (have) even come here and said: “when are you going to buy rice for Cambodians again, can we help you,” you know? Which is quite good, the (Cambodian) non-Christians see us doing that. – Personal interview, 19/11/2022.

Returning to the quote given by Verkuyen *et al* (2019) earlier in this chapter, I would argue that the long-term connections to their home country are a clear sign that members of the CCF still strongly identify with the Cambodian ethnic and national identity, even if they have jettisoned its Buddhist cosmology. More than just a signifier of their ongoing Khmer-ness though, I contend that their choice to focus their relations with Cambodia through engagement with the local church has allowed them to reimagine the Cambodian identity as one that is not inextricably tied to Buddhism. By actively engaging with churches in their homeland they highlight a view of Christianity as a trans-national religious movement, defending their dual identity as Khmer and Christian for both them and those in the churches that they connect with.

Conclusion

In this final chapter I have aimed to complete the picture I have been painting of the Khmer church of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton as being both strongly invested in their Christian faith and in maintaining connections with their cultural heritage. As transnational actors with dual national belonging, CCF members have chosen to focus their engagement with their homeland in a way that centres on their Christian identity, and so have challenged traditional views that inextricably tie the Khmer identity with Buddhism. I have argued that to do so does not suggest a rejection of their traditional heritage though, but instead demonstrates a keen desire to reconnect with their homeland and culture.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis my aim has been to contribute to persistent and complex debates concerning cultural rupture and continuity of Christian conversion that have powerfully defined the Anthropology of Christianity over the past two decades. I have done this by presenting a unique case study, that of a diasporic Cambodian church in Aotearoa/New Zealand, where Cambodians from a traditionally Buddhist background gather in Christian worship. Over six chapters I have argued that, while members of the Cambodian Christian Fellowship of Kirikiriroa/Hamilton are thoroughly committed to their Christian faith, they continue to be shaped by, connected to, and proud of their cultural heritage.

In the first three chapters of this thesis, I established the cultural and spiritual background of the CCF, showing that although there is a clear dominance of Buddhism in Cambodian religiosity, a range of historical occurrences coalesced to promote Christian conversion. Central to this are the experiences of those that fled Cambodia as refugees during the Cambodian Humanitarian Crisis, where the hardships they endured prompted many to begin exploring alternative cosmological explanations. Central to this, I have contributed to existing scholarship showing that many of those living in refugee camps had become disillusioned with Buddhist understandings of hardship and suffering, and so made clear efforts to break from traditional forms of religious expression. I have contested that this desire to break from Buddhist tradition can be seen in my participants conversion stories which, alongside expressing disillusionment with traditional religiosity, commonly featured accounts of miraculous events and downplayed the role Western missionaries had in introducing them to Christianity, all of which points towards a desire for order amidst chaos.

While the life histories and conversion narratives that I collected from my participants did have a clear focus on the religious ruptures that came with their conversion, I have also shown how their decisions to become Christian have been heavily influenced by their cultural background. By building on the work of Adam Marshall (2019), Ong (2003), and others I have presented evidence to show that at its heart the decision to convert was driven by a desire to bring order to an otherwise chaotic experience. In this CCF members have replicated and replaced Buddhist systems that traditionally ensured community cohesion and mitigated uncertainty. In this CCF members have followed traditional Cambodian understandings of religion as a means to ensure order and certainty.

In the latter three chapters I have built upon this to show how traditional Khmer cosmological understandings have continued to influence how CCF members "do religion," all while clearly remaining dedicated to faithfully worshiping the Christian God. In this I have explored how *Pchum Ben* is spurned due to its close association with the temple, other traditional holidays such as *Choul Chnam Thmey* are stripped of their religious associations and continued as a means to restore relationship with both cultural heritage and the wider Khmer community. Alongside this, CCF worship services are structured as to incorporate a range of traditional forms, such as the exclusive use of Khmer language and the incorporation of traditional Cambodian instruments and music styles in their worship. By looking through the lenses of "resonant rupture" (Marshall 2016) and "orthodox hybridity" (Zehner 2005), I have shown how Khmer converts are able to incorporate aspects of their traditional culture into their Christian worship. I have also argued that this is not restricted to religious expression within the CCF and shown that members have also unconsciously taken their cultural understandings of social hierarchy into their interactions with the wider church in Aotearoa/New Zealand, engaging with their Western church communities in a way that mirrors Southeast Asian patron client relationships. This desire to navigate between new and traditional ways of expressing religious faith can be seen clearly in the ways in which CCF members have chosen to engage with the Christian church in their homeland. By choosing to focus their relationships with Cambodia specifically upon an engagement with local churches there, CCF members are able to successfully contest existing ideas around what it means to be Khmer, clearly demonstrating that they are dedicated to their new faith, yet proud of their cultural and ethnic heritage.

In all of this I have contributed to the understanding of Christian conversion as a multifaceted, complex quest for understanding and order that incorporates and builds upon existing cosmologies. This is accomplished through the degree Christianity can absorb aspects of converts existing culture, a feature that Robbins (2017) has termed a "culture of secondarity". With this idea Robbins has argued that Christianity sets itself up as a religion that comes after others. As a result, the tendency to incorporate aspects of other cultural traditions should be seen as not just a possibility, but more a central characteristic of global Christianity.

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