

Article

Khmer Nuns and Filial Debts: Buddhist Intersections in Contemporary Cambodia

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Abstract: Cambodian Buddhist nuns, including the white-robed *ṭūn jī*, occupy a fraught confluence of competing cultural and religious narratives. Chief among these narratives is gratitude to mothers, among the most powerful structuring forces in Khmer Buddhist culture. By ordaining as nuns, Khmer women break no explicit moral rules, but violate implicit conventions to bear children for their husbands and care for their parents in old age. To explore how this tension plays out in the lives of individual nuns, I draw on public statements and social media posts of two of the most prominent nuns in Cambodia today, Chea Silieng and Heng Kosorl. The two nuns have taken a divergent approach to filial debts, with Silieng emphasizing freedom from her birth family, husband, and children and Kosorl frequently posting about acts of devotion to her parents and grandparents. Both approaches reveal the profoundly gendered dimensions of filial piety and the complex intersection of such narratives with the growing stature of nuns as Buddhist leaders and teachers in Cambodia.

Keywords: Cambodian Buddhism; Buddhist nuns; filial piety; gratitude, *ṭūn jī*/doun chi; upāsikā



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1. Introduction: Khmer Nuns, Familial Renunciation, and Filial Gratitude

The imperative of renunciation for seeking ultimate liberation and the importance of filiality for repaying debts to parents have long structured social relationships in Buddhist societies. The usual model, particularly prevalent in Theravada Buddhist cultures, is that sons should repay their debts to their parents through monastic ordination (Kourilsky 2022, p. 165). To demonstrate filial gratitude, especially for one's mother, generations of Southeast Asian men have ordained as novices or monks. As Nancy Eberhardt's fieldwork among Shan Buddhists shows, such ordination ceremonies are as much a rite of passage for the mothers involved as they are for their sons (Eberhardt 2006, pp. 135–41). However, what of mothers and daughters, including those who ordain as nuns? How do they figure into Theravada Buddhist logics around renunciation and repayment?

The situation of Buddhist nuns in Cambodia offers an important test case for these questions. Khmer Buddhist nuns, particularly the white-clad renunciates known as *ṭūn jī*, face a fraught confluence of competing cultural and religious narratives in Cambodian society. As is true elsewhere in Theravada societies across Southeast Asia, gratitude to mothers is among the most powerful structuring forces in Khmer culture. Unexpectedly, however, the societal imperative of women to bear children is left unstated in the traditional didactic poetry that has long reinforced normative gender roles in Cambodian life. These texts call on women to be subservient to their husbands, framing their arguments in Buddhist terms, but say nothing of the value or importance of procreation. While Khmer Buddhist texts make more of the duties of sons to their mothers, particularly the need to temporarily ordain as a monk to repay this maternal debt, the duties of daughters to their parents are scarcely mentioned. By ordaining as nuns, Khmer women break no explicit moral rules, but violate implicit conventions to bear children for their husbands and care for their parents in old age.

This article offers a pair of case studies on two prominent Khmer nuns in order to explore how these tangled issues of motherhood, filiality, and monasticism intersect in the

lives of Cambodian Buddhist women. As a specialist in Buddhist texts, including their written, material, and performative dimensions, my contextualization of Buddhist nuns within Cambodian approaches to gender and gratitude is mostly drawn from Khmer print and manuscript sources, rather than formal ethnography. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not able to return to Cambodia to conduct field research on Buddhist nuns, so my primary sources for the two cases studies in the second half of the article include public Facebook posts, online articles from Cambodian news organizations, and a video interview posted to a Buddhist social media channel, all dating from the past five years. These online sources open many new windows for appreciating Khmer perspectives on the intersections of female renunciation and filial gratitude in Buddhist contexts.

To explore how the tension between renunciation and filiality plays out in the lives of individual women monastics, I draw on online sources pertaining to two of the most prominent nuns in Cambodia today. The first, Chea Silieng (*Jā Śīlien*), age seventy, is a well-known meditation teacher in Battambang province who has attracted hundreds of students, including monks, nuns, and laypeople, to her community set in a series of hill-side caverns. While not an active social media user herself, Silieng is a frequent subject of discussion in Cambodian media outlets, and several extensive interviews with her and sermons of her teachings circulate on Facebook and YouTube, two of the leading social media venues among Cambodians today. The second, Heng Kosorl (*Heñ Kusal*), is in her late twenties and currently studying for her BA from the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She is perhaps the most active and popular nun on Cambodian social media, posting pictures, poems, and Dharma reflections to her nearly 5000 followers on Facebook up to several times a day. In the course of my research, I listened to all of Silieng's available online sermons and interviews, transcribing and translating selected portions, and read through the past three years of Kosorl's public-facing Facebook posts, choosing relevant portions to analyze and translate here. In their public presentation, the two nuns have taken a divergent approach to filial debts, with Silieng emphasizing freedom from her birth family, husband, and children and Kosorl frequently posting about acts of devotion to her parents and grandparents. Both approaches reveal the profoundly gendered dimensions of filial piety as well as the complex ways gratitude and renunciation intersect in Khmer culture, particularly in light of the growing stature of nuns as Buddhist leaders and teachers in Cambodia.

2. Female Renunciation in Context: Buddhist Nuns in Cambodia

Like other contributions to this Special Issue, I begin with a brief survey of Buddhist nuns in the country this article focuses on, Cambodia. My aim here is to place issues of gender, gratitude, and renunciation within the broader context of female Buddhist monastics in Cambodia. As is true across much of the Buddhist world, Khmer male and female ascetics face grossly asymmetric prospects in terms of ordination, education, and societal recognition. Despite the vigorous presence of nuns in Cambodian Buddhist life, female renunciants figure very little in official discourse in Khmer. Entrenched by explicit cultural logics of patriarchy and misogyny, this silence on nuns effaces their considerable social and religious roles, both within and beyond Cambodia's political borders. The glaring omission of female monastics from most Khmer writing challenges us to look beyond conventional sources.

Despite the dominance of Buddhist discourse in Cambodia, discussions of nuns are only rarely found in stone inscriptions, palm-leaf manuscripts, printed books, newspapers, recorded sermons, and social media posts. Buddhist publishing has burgeoned in Cambodia over the past three decades. This boom includes the reprinting of pre-Khmer Rouge material from the 1920s to the 1970s—initially on the basis of Khmer books stored in Japanese libraries (Harris 2005, p. 206)—as well as a plethora of new writings. Yet, to my knowledge, there are no books entirely focused on nuns in Khmer, and only one short article in *Kambuja Suriyā*, the most prominent academic journal in Cambodia for much of the twentieth century, is devoted to nuns (Gai' Ved 1996). Very few Buddhist books

in Khmer mention the most common terms for eight- and ten-precept nuns, even when discussing the core ordination rites such nuns partake in. These omissions extend to the vernacular manuscript tradition, which primarily represents texts composed between the sixteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though as many as 95% percent of Cambodia's manuscripts were lost between 1970 and 1990, the main genres appear to have survived intact (de Bernon et al. 2018, pp. xiii–xxviii). Within this surviving manuscript corpus, nuns are not mentioned in texts on ethics or comportment, nor in sermons or narrative compositions transmitted on palm leaf.

A number of works in English and Japanese over the past quarter-century have advanced our understanding on Cambodian nuns in important ways. The work of Heike Löschmann advocates for specific social programs and policies based on nuns (Löschmann 1995), with a particular emphasis on the work of the Association of Nuns and Laywomen in Cambodia, whose registered members had reached over 6000 by the end of the twentieth century (Löschmann 2000, p. 93). The work of Aing Sokroeun includes a research report on nuns published by the Buddhist Institute in 2006 and a comparative study of Thai and Khmer nuns (Sokroeun 2006). The most detailed and sustained work on Cambodian nuns by a single author is that of Takahashi Miwa, whose articles in Japanese include extensive research into Khmer nuns' motivations for religious life (Takahashi 2006), their liminal status vis à vis monks (Takahashi 2009), their intersections with parent-child relationships in Cambodian culture (Takahashi 2012), and the emergence of nuns as Buddhist teachers (Takahashi 2014). Only one of her works on nuns—a careful study of the roles nuns play in cooking and offering food in Cambodian monasteries—has been published in English (Takahashi 2015, based on Takahashi 2013).

Many recent works on nuns in Cambodia are indebted to Elizabeth Guthrie's essay on the country's long history and contemporary trajectory of Khmer female ascetics (Guthrie 2004). As she points out, Cambodian epigraphy prior to the mid-eighteenth century does include a number of references to Buddhist nuns more generally, starting with mentions of Mahāyāna nuns in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century and ending with the ordination of several nuns recorded in 1747 (Guthrie 2004, pp. 144–46; Jacobsen 2006, p. 18; 2008, p. 81). The word for ordination in Khmer-language epigraphy, *puos* (the root of the Thai and Lao word *buat*), was originally used in reference to Śaiva practices for both men and women (Guthrie 2004, p. 145). In fact, the very earliest dated inscription in Old Khmer, K. 600 from 612 CE, mentions the ordination of a group of women into religious life (Cœdès 1937–1966, II, p. 21). By the fourteenth century, *puos* is clearly linked to Buddhist ordination (Pou 1981, p. 113), and in ordinary use has applied to both monks and nuns up to the present. In recent decades, however, the use of *puos* in reference to nuns has become contentious. Guthrie argues that contemporary attempts to deny the use of the term *puos* to *upāsikā*-status nuns are rooted in modernist reforms of the early twentieth century as well as socialist sangha reforms of the 1980s, both of which tried to limit Cambodian Buddhist practice to a more narrow Pali-based, androcentric model, that sees nuns as extraneous aberrations at best or baleful influences at worst (Guthrie 2004, pp. 146–47).

Even in the early 2020s, accurate statistics on nuns in Cambodia are hard to come by. The Ministry of Cults and Religions tracks the number of monasteries and monks but is silent on the numbers of nuns. According to the latest available figures, there are over 70,000 *bhikkhu* and *sāmaṇera* in Cambodia, around one percent of the male population from a total population of nearly 17 million (Samṃbhī 2018). There are only a few dozen *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* in Cambodia, most belonging to an originally Taiwanese temple—known as Dà Bōrě Sì in Chinese, Vatt Paññā Dham in Khmer, and Mahā Paññā Vihāra in English—on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. This community maintains both Pali-based Theravāda practices and Taiwanese Mahāyāna rites, and is officially recognized by the Dhammayut-tikanikāya sect in Cambodia, the smaller of the two main Theravāda sects in the country (Dà bōrě sì jījīn huì 2016). The enthusiasm of the Cambodian Dhammayuttikanikāya toward this *bhikkhunī* community, which now includes women of Khmer as well as Taiwanese descent, is all the more remarkable given the general opposition to higher ordina-

tion for women within the Dhammayuttikanikāya sect in Thailand. A handful of Khmer women have sought *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* ordination in Sri Lanka as well, though they remain unrecognized by the Cambodian Ministry of Cults and Religions and the Sangha Council. A number of them have continued their monastic training in the United States. The energetic work of Marlai Ouch as both an advocate and a scholar has been especially important in drawing attention to this emerging community of Khmer *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* in Cambodia and in diaspora communities abroad (Ouch 2020).

The two nuns I focus on in this article are not known as *bhikkhunī* or *sāmaṇerī* but come from the much larger community of nuns typically referred to as *ṭūn jī* or *yāy jī* (often phonetically spelled *doun chi/daun chee* or *yeay chi*), who may be eight- or ten-precept *upāsikās*. *ṭūn* and *yāy* are variant terms for “grandmother”, and in this context *jī* means “ascetic” (as in *tā jī*, “grandfather ascetic”). Less common terms in contemporary Khmer include *nān jī* (“young lady ascetic”) and *m’è jī* (“mother ascetic”). The latter term is cognate with *mae chi* (graphically transliterated as *mè₁ jī*) in Thai. Contrary to a common understanding in Thailand, the word *jī/chi* is not derived from Sanskrit but rather from Old Khmer *ajil/jil/jī*, whose original sense was “venerable ancestor” before it came to mean “ascetic” (de Bernon 1996, p. 88). Outside of kinship terms (such as *jī ṭūn*, “grandmother” or “female ancestor”, the inverse of *ṭūn jī*), *jī* also appears in Khmer in the word *brah jī*, meaning the largest or most venerable (*jī*) Buddha image (*brah*) in a temple (de Bernon 1996, 89n7). The terms *ṭūn jī* or *yāy jī* can thus be understood as meaning “venerable grandmother”, namely a celibate *upāsikā* who is to be revered on account of her status as an ascetic renunciant.

Despite the etymology suggesting that only elderly women can take on this status, women of any age may ordain as *ṭūn jī*. Ten-precept *ṭūn jī* are expected to wear white robes at all times and shave their heads and eyebrows every two or four weeks; some eight-precept nuns follow a similar practice. As they are often living in monastic settings, I agree with Martin Seeger (personal communication) that the term “lay nun” is not appropriate for *mae chi* in Thailand or *ṭūn jī* in Cambodia, even if their status as white-clad eight- or ten-precept nuns is distinct from *sāmaṇerī*, *sikkhāmānā*, or *bhikkhunī*.

The number of *ṭūn jī* in Cambodia was estimated at around 3000 in 1995 (Guthrie 2004, p. 147, citing Löschmann 1995, p. 5), 10,000 in 2000 (Löschmann 2000, p. 93), and 20,000 in 2006 (Sokroeun 2006, p. 112). If those numbers have continued to increase to the present, then the number of nuns may be close to half of one percent of the female population, or around half the number of *bhikkhu* and *sāmaṇera*. However, reliable data remain scarce. The government began to track the number of nuns in 2009, though only sporadically, and no further official statistics have been made available (Takahashi 2015, p. 254). Many nuns are unable to read or write, and few have opportunities for formal education in Pali or Buddhist studies (Sokroeun 2006, p. 121). Most are over 50 years of age and are expected to spend considerable time engaged in acts of service for the monasteries where they live, including cooking for the monastic community (Takahashi 2015, pp. 242–45). In this sense, their voluntary labor, remunerated more in merit than in money, echoes a centuries-long tradition of temple servants in Cambodia. Work performed by hereditary slaves and bonded servants through the middle of the nineteenth century (Antelme 2012) is now largely performed by nuns and temple boys (*kmeñ vatt*). A limited number of temples around the country have formal study and practice programs for *ṭūn jī*; dozens or even more than a hundred nuns may live together permanently in such locations, their numbers swelling during the annual three-month rains retreat. A handful of nuns have become prominent for their prowess in teaching the Dharma or meditation (Kent 2011, pp. 203–5).

The outward success of a few of the most prominent nuns in Cambodia, including the two I focus on in this article, stands in sharp relief to the gender inequities faced by Khmer Buddhist women of all stripes. Additionally, even the most prominent nuns are confronted with a range of challenges that male monastics never have to face. The subject of my first case study, Chea Silieng, was accused of impersonating a *bhikkhunī* and forced

out of her own monastery. As Heng Kosorl, the subject of my second case study, notes, being a nun in Cambodian means having one's very existence constantly challenged:

In our country, is Buddhism the religion of the state, or is it the religion of men? If you're a man, no matter rich or poor, good or bad, wherever you're from, if you ordain, study, and practice, whether as a lay priest (*ācāry*), white-clad renunciate (*tā jī*), *bhikkhu*, or *sāmaṇera*, everybody will praise you with "Excellent, excellent! (*sādhu sādhu*).” But if you're a woman, they'll only ask you, "Why?"

I began to be afraid of this question. Whenever I went out I'd have to answer it. Even if I just stayed in my room I'd get this question. Imagine if you had to answer the same question two or three times a day for decade, how would you feel?! I'm fed up [mask emoji] and now I'm no longer just afraid of people asking this question but the whole of Facebook! [smiling emoji] No matter what, I'm stressed out to no end on account of this question from those who wonder [smiling emoji]. (Heng Kosorl 2022b, my translation)

For both nuns, the challenges they face as female ascetics in Cambodian society intersect in various ways with the cultural expectations around mothers, daughters, and the bonds of familial gratitude. Before returning to Silieng and Kosorl's distinct perspectives, in the section that follows I turn to the articulation of filial debts in Cambodian Buddhist literature and ritual performance, with an eye to how they impact social expectations placed on Khmer nuns.

3. Filial Debts: Gratitude to Parents as a Gendered Construct

Gratitude to parents is a dominant Buddhist teaching across Southeast Asia, one that is constantly invoked as the primary motivation for religious acts of giving, ordination, and the dedication of merit (Kourilsky 2008, 2015, 2022). In Cambodia in particular, books on filial gratitude have proliferated over the past twenty years. Acknowledging moral debts to parents remains a prime subject for Buddhist poetry and sermons. Though filial piety is an important theme in a few early Buddhist texts, including several suttas in the Pali Tipiṭaka, the most important Pali source on this theme in Southeast Asia is the *mātāpitu-upaṭṭhānakathā*, a long chapter from Sirimaṅgala's sixteenth-century commentary on the *Mangala-sutta*, the *Mangalatthadīpanī* (Kourilsky 2022, p. 159). Repaying debts to parents is also an important theme in the bilingual Pali-vernacular sermon texts composed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Some of these texts, such as *Mātugun sūtr*, emphasize the Buddha's debts to his mother and his repayment of these debts through preaching the Abhidhamma (Walker 2020, pp. 84–85; Kourilsky 2022, p. 164). Others, such as *Supin kumār*, weave a narrative on the importance of ordination for repaying one's mother (Walker 2018a, pp. 1531–77). The traditional meditation texts of the region, largely composed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, detail the ways that certain body-centered contemplative practices can be used to address filial debts to both mothers and fathers (Kourilsky 2015, pp. 579–87; 2022, pp. 165–66; Walker 2022, pp. 67–70).

In Cambodia, the emergence of modern works on filial piety began in the mid-twentieth century with influential books by leading monks such as P'ān Khāt's *Jīvī m'ae* ("A Mother's Life", P'ān Khāt 1964) and Suñ Śiv's *Brah̄ ras'* ("Living Deities", Suñ Śiv n.d.). These works provide a modernist take on canonical and commentarial approaches to filial piety, underscoring the efforts undertaken by parents not only in caring for young children but also in preparing them for the new economic order of postcolonial Cambodia. Present-day works in this genre by leading writers such as Buth Savong's *Bāky beca(n) m'è uv* ("Parental Dicta", Buth Savong 2005) and Chhim Bunchha's *Tjñ gun tap gun niñ niyamanāy kamñāby* ("Knowing and Repaying Moral Debts, Expressed in Verse", Chhim Bunchha 2009) tend to highlight the emotional dimensions of parental debts. This affective emphasis is developed with particular precision through sung poems, known as *smūtr* or Dharma songs (*dharma*

pad), that are recited for funerals, memorial rites, and other Buddhist ceremonies (Walker 2018b, pp. 290–91).

The song *khamā dos aubuk mtāy* (“Asking for Parents’ Forgiveness”) is typical of this genre:

I now ask your forgiveness
for all I have done to you
and for all my careless words:
O mother, please forgive me!
My debt to you is immense.
I offer my body and speech
and bow in respect to you:
O mother, please forgive me!
I prostrate myself to you
hands raised in prayer, head lowered
to touch your feet, O mother:
Please release me from my faults!
When I was inside your womb
I put you through constant pain,
whether you walked, stood, or sat,
and made you eat simple food.
Salty, spicy, hot, or cold:
these you eschewed for my sake.
You suppressed your desires
to protect me in your womb.
For nearly ten months you toiled,
the pain spreading through your body,
without a moment’s relief
to bring you joy, ease, or peace.
I offer you the merit
that may arise from this gift
of the Teaching, so lucid.
Receive it, mother, and rejoice!
I dedicate this merit
to my mother and father.
May the three treasures be theirs
and may they be free from pain. (Walker 2022, pp. 83–84)

This poem makes several key elements of Cambodian Dharma songs on filial debts clear: First, the mother’s role is paramount, even though both mother and father are mentioned. The difficulties undertaken in parenting are mapped entirely onto the mother. Second, the language throughout is framed in terms of humble supplication, establishing a strict hierarchy between child and parent. The terms adopted to address and venerate parents in these texts echo those used with monks and buddha images. Third, the child’s existence implies an automatic debt to their parents, one that requires an act of ritual repentance. Finally, the ultimate repayment of a filial debt comes through the dedication of merit generated by Buddhist rituals.

These songs form the basis for a new kind of Buddhist sermon in Cambodia, delivered by one or several monks to a group of schoolchildren or novices to spark a deep emotional sense of filial debt and gratitude to parents. In video form, these sermons have become of a fixture of Buddhist social media in Cambodia over the past decade, including those by Saṃ Sār'ūn (Hak Sienghai 2016) and Tòk Tùm (Layhong Sabay 2019). The climax of these rituals involves panning shots that show row after row of kids in meditative posture, rocking back and forth and bawling. Close-up shots on particularly tear-stricken faces reinforce the idealized response to such sermons and the songs that anchor them.

These public performances of filial debt have a sharply gendered dimension, in that it is always male monks who are preaching a message of maternal gratitude. The audience receiving the message of filial piety may be adults or children of any gender, and in the contemporary context the imperative to ordain, applicable only to boys, has been broadened to the imperative to be a “grateful child” (*kūn kataññū*), who is a model student and productive citizen, industrious to a fault and obedient to parents, teachers, and the state (Dibb Sau 2009).

This contemporary understanding of the dutiful child and citizen has been gradually replacing an older model that emphasizes markedly different gender roles for men and women. Didactic codes (*cpāp'*) from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries highlight the importance of women submitting to their husbands to maintain marital and social harmony (Jacobsen 2008, pp. 119–23). Such didactic codes rarely mention the role of daughters vis à vis their parents. An important exception is M''iñ M''ai's *Cpāp' Srī* (“Code for Girls”), penned in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries (Pou 1988, II, pp. 407–8). This text was studied by generations of Khmer elites until the twentieth century, when it reached a wider readership as part of the public-school curriculum. In one influential formulation, M''ai notes that a young woman's duties include caring for her mother, father, and husband, setting up each as one of “Three Hearths”:

Be vigilant, daughter. Keep the Three Hearths so they endure.
 They'll maintain your virtue and lift your life to lofty ranks.
 They'll bring you great renown, abundant wealth, and all things fine.
 The first two hearths are called the legacies of your parents.
 Follow the proper path of deference to your guardians.
 Strive hard to care for them; give them the food you cherish most,
 rather than hoarding it all for yourself—serve them daily.
 Endure all their advice, run their errands, or they'll feel hurt.
 “Third's the lord of the home, your own husband, to love for good.
 Respect him without fail—don't make him feel offended.
 Revere him, for you're just a girl; don't claim you're his equal. (Walker 2021, p. 48)

In addition to its explicit patriarchal demands for wives to submit to their husbands, the passage is notable for highlighting the importance of caring for one's parents. No such parallel duties for men appear in M''ai's “Code for Boys” (*cpāp' prus*) or in related didactic literature of the period (Buddhist Institute 1974, pp. 33–43). Daughters were given the special task of caring for their parents, particularly in old age. This arrangement reflects the matrilineal practices of Khmer society since the first millennium of the Common Era, in which the groom would traditionally come live with his bride's family after marriage (Jacobsen 2008, p. 33). It also ties back to the broader value of filial responsibility advocated by the Buddhist songs and sermons discussed above. Though not a homily or a typical religious poem, M''ai's “Code for Girls” is set within an explicitly Buddhist framework. Daughters who succeed in caring for their parents and submitting to their husbands will reap certain karmic benefits:

Thus goes the Code for Girls, for you, my dear, to learn and guard.
 Hold it fast in your mind so that you'll win the joy you seek,

both in this human world and for lives to come in other realms.
 Should you vow to become the mother of a future Buddha
 your prayers will be fulfilled. You'll gain a trove of vast riches
 and the highest renown for many lives, just as you wish. (Walker 2021, p. 52)

Modern poems on gratitude to parents, including Ū Cui's famous *Cpāp' gorab mātāpitā* ("Code for Honoring Parents"), first published in the 1950s and an inspiration for hundreds of similar compositions since, prize the importance of looking after parents, particularly though acts of bodily care such as bathing or providing food (Ū Cui 1967; Chhim Bunchha 2009, p. 117). These acts, implicitly feminized within a Khmer cultural sphere, are thus recast as special duties of grateful Buddhist daughters. To be a good daughter, in this emerging modern conception, means to be an active economic contributor to family and country, a diligent caretaker of one's parents, and a caring mother of one's own children. This last point is almost never spelled out explicitly, but the implicit expectation is that marriage will naturally produce offspring, and that children are necessary to secure caregivers for oneself in old age.

This constellation of religio-cultural forces puts would-be nuns in a difficult position. On the one hand, only ordination and other acts of Buddhist asceticism can truly help and transform one's parents, but this is only ever discussed as a male duty, or more specifically a young male duty, never a female one. On the other hand, daughters are expected to shoulder many of the burdens of caring for aging parents while simultaneously mothering their own children. To renounce family ties as a nun amounts to an abrogation of familial and economic duties in a way that monks are never asked to consider. Indeed, some of the most vocal opponents of *bhikkhunī* ordination among the male sangha, such as San Sochea, are staunch advocates of traditional constructs of filial piety.

Even the most logical natural allies of *upāsikā*-status nuns, namely eight- or ten-precept white-clad "lay monks" known as *tā jī*, have not tried to forge a path out of the thicket of conflicting demands that nuns and would-be nuns find themselves in. A distinctive feature of Khmer Buddhism in the early twenty-first century is the prominence of *upāsaka*-status celibate teachers, rather than *bhikkhu* or *sāmaṇera*, on the popular Buddhist sermon circuit. By far the most influential Buddhist preacher in Cambodia today is a *tā jī* named Buth Savong, along with his younger protégé Kèy Vimutti (Marston 2015, pp. 267–69, 274n14). Adored by Cambodians from across the social hierarchy, their books and public teachings hardly ever speak of *tūn jī*, even in writings explicitly about Buddhist women (Buth Savong 2008). In public writings and sermons, they do not treat them as a separate category from other *upāsikā*. Additionally, like most of their fully ordained brethren, they never advocate for the possibility of female higher ordination. Savong and Vimutti are able to be such effective teachers in part because they are not monks and not beholden to the sangha hierarchy. The female voices they champion are those of the five-precept *upāsikā*, especially a growing group of wealthy lay women who are recognized as *mahā-upāsikā* or "great lay-women" through their financial contributions and occasionally for their skill in Dharma teaching. Celibate *upāsikā* with shaved heads rarely figure into this elite group. Excluded from both lay and monastic channels of power and recognition, they must find other avenues to pursue their religious aspirations and resolve the exhortations around debt and gratitude that are at cross-purposes with renunciant life.

4. Chea Silieng: Renouncing Family Ties

I now turn to case studies of two monastic *tūn jī* who have taken different approaches to resolving this conundrum—common to all Buddhist nuns in Khmer society—of competing cultural narratives around renunciation and filial debts. One such approach is to focus on the freedom to be gained in renouncing family ties altogether. This path is perhaps most prominently embodied by a seventy-year-old nun with the birth name of Chea Silieng. After getting married and giving birth to three children, Silieng received her husband's permission to ordain at age thirty. Silieng studied meditation at a variety of temples

and sacred sites throughout Cambodia before eventually settling on Neang Lem Cave in Battambang province, where she has spent the past ten years. This cave is named for a celebrated female ascetic of the pre-Khmer Rouge period, Neang Lem, who practiced for many years on the famous mountain. When she was cremated against her will during the Khmer Rouge era, local people believed that her powerful spirit came to inhabit the cave. Silieng eventually became known as *lok yāy nān lem*, meaning “Venerable Grandmother of Neang Lem Cave” (Maza and Meta 2017; Mao Voleak 2019).

As a sought-after meditation teacher, Silieng has attracted a plethora of students, including monks, nuns, and ordinary laypeople of all genders, to the series of caverns where she lives. In 2019, she was interviewed by Mao Voleak for *Strī kṇuñ braḥ buddhasāsanā*, or “Women in Buddhism”, a popular social media channel promoting Cambodian Buddhist teachings from female perspectives, including the voices of Khmer laywomen, *tūn jī*, and the emerging *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* communities (Mao Voleak 2022). In narrating her journey of becoming a nun, Silieng describes the sensation of release and freedom she felt during a family dinner, when her husband informed their three children that their mother was going to take the precepts and live in a Buddhist temple. The term Silieng used to describe her experience of this moment is *ruoc khluon*, literally “freed oneself.” *Ruoc khluon* typically refers to the experience of being spared from harm or danger. In this case, Silieng adopts it to describe her intense feelings of safety and relief in being freed from familial bonds. She then describes bowing down in thanks to her husband for granting his permission. In narrating this pivotal moment in her life, Silieng simultaneously displays her fealty to traditional gender hierarchies and expresses relief in finally finding freedom from such patriarchal structures.

In subsequent discussions with Mao Voleak, Silieng’s husband never surfaces again, though her three children come up occasionally. The progress of letting go of being preoccupied with her children’s welfare took longer, but eventually Silieng came to realize that she had fulfilled her obligations to her children by giving birth to them, and that she was fully released from this karmic bind. In her video interview with Voleak, Silieng boldly articulates the terms and consequences of her renunciation:

I have offered my life, offered my lovely flesh and blood, to the holy religion, until the day I die. I will not turn back, I will not retreat. I do not think about my children’s problems anymore. Even when they face difficulties, such as hunger or other hardships, I always tell them in their moments of pain to have forbearance. “You have merit, dear child. Think of your mother’s merit, and that will help you find happiness.” That’s what I say if they face troubles and come complaining to me. (Mao Voleak 2019, 14’29”–14’55”, my translation)

In Silieng’s interview and other public teachings, she never discusses the debts of children with regard to their parents. Apart from a brief reference to settling her karmic debt to her children by bringing them into the world, the narrative she weaves is one of continuous release and moving toward her stated goal of *nibbāna*. In later remarks, she emphasizes her gratitude to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, rather than lingering on the gendered structures of debt and gratitude between parents and children.

Chea Silieng is not without controversy in Cambodia. At various times in her life as a nun, she has worn yellow or purple robes in addition to the customary white robes. These sartorial choices have raised the curiosity and ire of those within and beyond her local community. In the late 2010s, Silieng’s religious hermitage, known in Khmer as an *āsram* (from Sanskrit *āśrama*), began an official process to become a monastery or *vatt ārām*. The latter status entails a more official status as well as greater subservience to the ecclesiastical system of governance, in which abbots are subject to supervision by the head monks of districts (*anugaṇ*), provinces (*me gaṇ*), and ultimately the supreme patriarch (*saṅgharāj*) of each sect (Buddhist Institute 1994). While nuns can hold considerable autonomy, including leadership roles, in hermitages, monasteries of the majority Mahānikāya sect must be led by an abbot who becomes part of the national sangha hierarchy. Nuns, in essence, cannot serve as abbesses or leaders of Mahānikāya monasteries in Cambodia. While Silieng

had drawn many monks as her students, in the new social organization of the monastery she would no longer have formal or financial control, and it appears that a power struggle ensued, breaking into national news in late 2021 ([Chhom Pisamay 2021](#)). Some monks claimed that Silieng, with her occasional yellow robes, was a fake *bhikkhunī* who stole donations that rightly belonged to the resident monks.

While the details of the current situation are not yet clear, Silieng's fate is similar to many female renunciants across the Theravada world, who are tolerated or even celebrated until they become a perceived threat to male monastic power and financial privilege. Even though women are expected to manage finances with Khmer families, the idea of a nun doing so for a monastery appears to have made her a target, with debates flaring on YouTube and Facebook among her supporters and detractors. By moving beyond the bonds of family into a position of spiritual authority, Silieng was placed in a vulnerable position as the leader of an autonomous hermitage that was rapidly transitioning into a state-supervised monastery. Senior nuns in similar positions of power are the subject of intense scrutiny in Cambodia, and few have survived with their reputations unscathed.

Moving beyond family ties and aspiring to roles of religious leadership can still prove dangerous for nuns in contemporary Cambodian society, as Silieng's uncertain future attests. The gender asymmetry that drives Khmer logics of filiality and renunciation, as explored in the previous section, remains an active force with which Silieng and other female Buddhist leaders must contend. Renouncing the bonds and protection of husbands and other men may offer the clearest path to developing female spiritual authority and fulfilling Buddhist ideals of liberation for women, yet the nuns who choose this route in Cambodia often face considerable difficulties.

5. Heng Kosorl: Rebinding Filial Gratitude

Not all Khmer nuns have made the same choices or faced the same challenges as Chea Silieng. Heng Kosorl is a nun in her late twenties who has so far managed to successfully bridge several different Buddhist worlds, including that of her native Cambodia; of Sri Lanka, where she is finishing her Buddhist studies degree in Colombo; and of the English-centered community of international *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇera*. Young, social media-savvy, and hailing from a prominent Buddhist family, Kosorl has carved out a unique place for herself in the Khmer religious landscape.

By positioning herself as a student rather than a teacher, Kosorl's frequent posts are greeted with welcome adoration by her thousands of fans on Facebook ([Heng Kosorl 2022a](#)). Her followers regularly comment on her beauty, as they make clear that, despite her shaved head and simple robes, she is still considered exceptionally attractive by Cambodian netizens. Photos of other young nuns from across the Buddhist world are a recurring element on her Facebook page, situating Kosorl within an emergent generation of social-media savvy nuns throughout Asia. In many of her posts, she quotes extensively from male lay teachers, including Buth Savong and his most favored poet, Kuy Sothun, as well as popular monks. Since these teachers never mention nuns directly, and take a generally conservative position on gender roles, the Dharma messages she shares do not generally advocate for improved social conditions or educational opportunities for nuns.

When writing directly to her followers, however, she does speak more candidly about the ideals of female renunciant life as well as the challenges and possibilities inherent in women's lives as Buddhists. Her words are gentle and self-effacing, though with a strong emphasis on the beauty and ease of renunciation. In a widely shared Khmer-language post, she alludes to her popularity in raising the profile of nuns and cautions against those who seek to idolize her:

Ordaining as a nun (*tūn jī*) isn't a game of sports or the mind. So don't ordain just because you like me, don't ordain just because you like those who like me, don't ordain if you think that renunciants have it easy, don't ordain because you think that ordaining as a nun will make you into someone worthy of veneration. . . Wearing white is only an external adornment; it doesn't make your mind any

more pure. Shaving your head won't mark the end of your suffering. . . . Those who have read up to this point will know that I'm no one special. I'm just normal like all the rest, except that I like some unusual things, like shaving my head because I am too lazy to comb my hair, hehe. (Heng Kosorl 2021, my translation)

These and other posts position Kosorl as a bridge between nuns and a broader Khmer public, who are often skeptical of female renunciants. She appears to embrace this role quite eagerly, as few other nuns have garnered such a wide following on Facebook, which is by far the more important social media platform in Cambodia. As discussed earlier in this article, however, she is acutely aware of the special challenges faced by nuns and a confident critic of the patriarchal structures of Khmer Buddhist society.

In her role as a young nun in the Cambodian context, Kosorl's position stands out in multiple respects. First, she is from a well-regarded Buddhist family, part of a multigenerational blood lineage of female renunciants. Her maternal grandmother is an eight-precept nun, her mother leads a ten-precept *ṭūn jī* community in Battambang, and a close friend was recently elevated to the status of *mahā-upāsikā*, with the formal title of *gandhameghādevānuraks mahā-upāsikā buddhasāsanūpatthambhak* ("the patron of the Buddhist religion, the great laywoman, protected by the deities of the fragrant clouds") presented to her by Samdech Bour Kry, Supreme Patriarch of the Dhammayuttikanikāya sect in Cambodia (Heng Kosorl 2022a). In addition, she is pursuing a path of Buddhist education rarely undertaken by Buddhist nuns in Cambodia. After her mother ordained when Kosorl was nine, she joined her in the monastery at age thirteen, and ordained as a nun once she completed high school. Nearly a decade later, she is finishing her degree in Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya in Sri Lanka. Lastly, she often uses the term *sīlavatī* (Pali for "female precept-holder") along with *ṭūn jī*. Part of this is practical; as a young woman, it is confusing to be addressed as "grandmother renunciant", the literal sense of *ṭūn jī*. She sometimes goes by "little grandmother renunciant" (*ṭūn jī tūc*), and others will address her in Facebook comments as "little sister, grandmother renunciant" (*ṭūn jī ūn*)—terms that highlight her unusual position as a young nun—but on her social media platform she uses the formal title *sīlavatī*. This connects her to a broader community of Theravada nuns that use this term, both in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia.

The most striking feature of Kosorl's social media presence is her constant emphasis on gratitude to parents and grandparents. A recurring theme in the poems and other passages she quotes from Buth Savong and Kuy Sothun is the urgency of fulfilling the duties of filial piety. These quotes often accompany pictures in which Kosorl is conducting memorial rites on behalf of her deceased father, caring for her injured maternal grandmother, bathing her paternal grandmother, or bowing down in respect to her white-clad mother. These very public presentations of how to fulfill debts to ancestors make familial bonds front and center in a nun's life. In sharp contrast to Chea Silieng's journey of cutting off the shackles of family life and motherhood, Kosorl's social media presentation of her life as a nun means honoring and cementing these very bonds through acts of care and Buddhist practice.

In a recent Facebook post, dated 3 August 2022, Kosorl offers a window into the complex contradictions of her life as a nun and daughter. Sharing an explicit video that shows both the anatomical difficulties as well as the emotional peaks and troughs of vaginal childbirth for women, Kosorl adds the following comment:

Mothers are heroines, mothers are marvels, mothers are truly tremendous. I can never be as tremendous as you all mothers [kissing emoji] since I've asked to be a child forever and will continue to be a *ṭūn jī* like this onward into the future [smiling emoji]. (Heng Kosorl 2022c, my translation)

Kosorl's equation of nunhood with being permanently in the state of a child, never reaching the state of a mother, captures some of the many layers present in her simultaneous advocacy of female renunciation and gratitude to mothers. The ideal of female renunciation, celebrated as the peak of Buddhist life for women, appears to conflict with

the competing ideal of motherhood. Kosorl's delicate balance of advocacy for nuns and respect for the Buddhist establishment is anchored by her chosen role as student and child. As a daughter and devotee of her mother and her elder nuns, Kosorl's constant expression of filial gratitude reinforces her place within a blood family and a lineage of renunciants. At the same time, the celibate life of a nun precludes Kosorl and other childless *tūn jī* from becoming those whom she hails as "heroines" (*vīraṇārī*) and "marvels" (*ascāry*) by dint of the trials of pregnancy and parturition.

6. Conclusions

Multiple competing narratives around the ideals of renunciation, familial gratitude, and motherhood impinge on the lives of Khmer nuns today. The range in nuns' approaches to filial debts, as embodied by the examples of Silieng and Kosorl, can be explained through a multiplicity of factors. Some are, of course, quite personal—many Cambodians find teachings on filial piety to be meaningful and comforting, due to the close, emotionally warm relationships they enjoy with their parents and grandparents. Yet, other Cambodians may find cultural norms around filial gratitude to be confusing and even distressing. Other factors are social in nature. Marks of privilege in Cambodia such as high social class, deep social networks, fair complexion, and even conventional beauty can be powerful forces in shaping the experiences and beliefs of individual nuns; these factors alone explain much of the differing trajectories of Silieng and Kosorl. Another social factor is age. While both nuns ordained relatively young, they hail from divergent generations. Chea Silieng is a Khmer Rouge survivor and grew up in a radically different Cambodia than Heng Kosorl, who was born in the late 1990s. Both women attract followers across the age spectrum, but Kosorl much more effectively engages the young, urban, tech-savvy crowd that dominates social media.

A third set of factors connect to the religious teachers venerated by individual nuns. Chea Silieng is intimately tied to the powerful spirit of the pre-war nun who once inhabited the same cave. Along with her singular focus on meditation, this places her in a lineage of independent, reclusive nuns in Cambodia who have defied gender and social norms, often at considerable risk. Heng Kosorl draws from four separate groups of teachers: one, her fellow nuns in Cambodia, including her own relatives; two, her monastic teachers and professors in Sri Lanka; three, her fellow renunciants in the international community of *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī*; and four, the Khmer male lay and monastic teachers whose words on filial debts she regularly invokes. Both her family and the male teachers she quotes orient her practice toward the family bonds that have long shaped Khmer Buddhist practice, while her international experience confers alternative modes of authority. These multiple spheres of belonging help mitigate the fundamental risk of being a prominent nun in Cambodia.

Chea Silieng and Heng Kosorl may also point toward a different future for Khmer nuns that many thought possible in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The official silence on nuns may be thawing. The increasing recognition of nuns by the government and the media, including *bhikkhunī* and *sāmaṇerī* in the Cambodian Dhammayuttikanikāya sect as well as the growing prominence of highly skilled laywoman teachers of Buddhist studies, Pali, and meditation, are gradually making more space for women leaders in Cambodian Buddhism. The complex knot presented by Khmer notions of familial debts remains at the center of how *tūn jī* and other nuns articulate their religious vocation and the arcs of their spiritual lives. Some, such as Chea Silieng, are clear that being a nun requires severing these ties for the sake of freedom. Others, such as Heng Kosorl, make honoring such bonds a key part of their Buddhist practice. Either way, the gendered intersection of care, debt, and gratitude remains a central site of negotiation for female ascetics in Cambodia.

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