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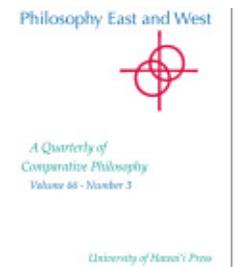
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Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot by Ian Harris  
(review)

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Philosophy East and West, Volume 66, Number 3, July 2016, pp. 1052-1053  
(Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press  
DOI: [10.1353/pew.2016.0075](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2016.0075)



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## BOOK NOTE

*Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot*. By Ian Harris. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. Pp. 242. ISBN 978-0-8248-3561-3.



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*Buddhism in a Dark Age: Cambodian Monks under Pol Pot*, by Ian Harris, is a natural follow-up to Harris's 2005 work, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*, also published by the University of Hawai'i Press. The present work, like the earlier one, is primarily focused on the social and political history of Cambodian Buddhism and expands on the final two chapters of that earlier work in that it deals with Buddhism in Democratic Kampuchea from 1975 to 1979 and the aftermath of Khmer Rouge control. Both works are heavily dependent on French- and English-language secondary sources and periodicals, with Khmer-language sources used infrequently. *Buddhism in a Dark Age* is, however, a very different book than *Cambodian Buddhism*. The present work makes use of sixty-seven interviews, conducted over 2003 and 2004, by the author with assistance from the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam); thirty-four interviews with Cambodian monks conducted in 1986 and housed at the DC-Cam; and twenty other interviews, eighteen of which were with monks, conducted by the author alone over a period from 1987 to 2006. These interviews provide an unparalleled glimpse into religious life under the Pol Pot regime that would be impossible to glean from any other sources. They are part of what makes *Buddhism in a Dark Age* such a valuable contribution to understanding not only the history of Cambodia and Cambodian Buddhism but also the intractable relationship between religion, state, and power in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

Harris's history begins more or less with the March 18, 1970 coup in which Prince Norodom Sihanouk was ousted from power and replaced by General Lon Nol as head of state. Lon Nol, an erratic man prone to mysticism, described the conflict as a religious war to protect Buddhism against the atheistic forces of communism. Massive mismanagement, military desertions, and popular dissatisfaction would soon bring about the collapse of the new Khmer Republic in the face of the well-disciplined communist forces that operated under the auspices of a shadowy leadership known simply as Angkar, "The Organization." With the fall of Phnom Penh on April 12, 1975, the Communist Party of Kampuchea could begin to implement its radical transformation of society without resistance.

Harris describes a shifting policy toward the *sangha* marked at first by accommodation, followed by appropriation, and finally by elimination. In the first instances, in areas newly under control by cadres, religious freedoms were largely not curtailed.

Monks were instead encouraged to endorse the revolutionary aims of a changed society, and, as other researchers have noted, Buddhist terminology was appropriated to explain Marxist concepts. Very quickly, though, the incompatibility between Cambodian Buddhism and the aims of the communists became apparent, and soon monks were forcibly defrocked. Many monks were forced into marriages, an experience for many people under the Khmer Rouge, and others were conscripted into military service. These actions were accompanied by the systematic destruction of religious sites and icons as well as religious texts. The *Édition des Manuscrits du Cambodge* estimates that 98 percent of the *sastra sleuk rith*, the traditional leaf manuscripts, were lost between 1970 and 1990. Many monks, particularly the ecclesiastic leadership, were executed. The numbers of systematic elimination are telling. Citing an official figure, Harris notes that there were more than sixty-five thousand ordained monks in Cambodia in 1969. In 1979 there were twelve. *Buddhism in a Dark Age* represents a worthy attempt to understand what those numbers actually meant for the Cambodian people.