



"Rebuilding Cambodian Buddhism anew: modernity at a cost or Khmer Renaissance?"

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A 2004 article in *Cambodge Soir* documented the demolition of a historic Buddhist temple, or *vihara*, in Tani Village in Kampot province, and bemoaned the loss of an important set of murals painted during the 1940s (at a time when Cambodia was occupied by the Japanese). Although historic buildings like Wat Tani are protected by law, such laws are often not enforced. When the abbot of Wat Tani applied for permission to the Ministry of Religion and Cults to demolish the old *vihara* and replace it with a new building, his application was rejected because of the building's heritage status. However, the temple's congregation was determined to replace the building, which had suffered damage during the Civil War and the Khmer Rouge regime, and was no longer usable for religious ceremonies. They raised US \$200 dollars to bribe government authorities to look the other way when they pulled down the old *vihara* over one weekend. Today a new *vihara* is under construction on the site. The abbot estimates that this new building will cost at least \$130,000 dollars to build; to date he has only raised \$10,000 but he expects that overseas Khmer – people who migrated overseas after the Khmer Rouge period, and who return to Cambodia to visit their relatives and make merit — would make up the shortfall.

Wat Tani is just one of many historic Buddhist temple in Cambodia that has been demolished and rebuilt since 1989, when the PRK (People's Republic of Kampuchea) government began to lift restrictions on religious practice. This "Khmer Buddhist Renaissance" has continued under the current Royal Government of Cambodia. In this paper, I will try to put Cambodia's desire to *kosang thmei*, "rebuild anew," into historical and religious context. I will illustrate the paper with mural paintings from three Buddhist temples in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh.