

Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh Past Presentations

Those children who remember their former lives: Summoning up some of the departed and sealing partnerships

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In Thnaot Chum, a village of rice growers, located in the province of Kompong Cham, religious syncretism mixes theravada Buddhism and a system of beliefs in more "local" invisible beings. In that context, a certain theory of rebirth arises. Not only do the people of Thnaot Chum believe that the departed (khmoc) and their ancestors (cī tūn cī tā) have the power "to catch life" (cāp' jāti) - in other words, to be reborn - and moreover a child's family often agree in sometimes recognizing that the child "remembers his former life" (cām jāti ; ṭiñ jāti ; ṭiñ kaṃnoet).

Here I would like to study different cases of children in the village of Thnaot Chum whose identity has been troubled by the presence of the departed. What do his family do or say when they agree that a child "remembers his former life" On what criteria do they base such an affirmation? Why must a child "forget his former life" (bhlec jāti) ? How can we understand this scial questioning about the identity of a child?