

Dharmawara mahathera, sihanouk, and the cultural interface of cambodia's cold war relations with India

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Abstrak

Following Heonik Kwon, this article explores the social and cultural underpinnings of the Cold War (and Cambodia's stance of neutrality in relation to it) as illustrated through the life of a colorful Cambodian monk, Dharmawara Mahathera. Long resident in India, Dharmawara became a confidant of Norodom Sihanouk as the latter negotiated independence and Cambodia's new geopolitical realities. Dharmawara was one point of connection between Sihanouk and India at the time Sihanouk was drawn to a position of neutrality and to the Non-Aligned Movement associated with Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai, and his story illuminates some of the cultural interface underlying the politics. He would assume a profile in emerging institutions of international Buddhism, such as the World Fellowship of Buddhists, which in their own way related to developing geopolitics. He subsequently attracted the attention of American diplomats in Cambodia in ways that illustrate something of how the Cold War came to be negotiated on the ground. His tensions with the Cambodian monastic hierarchy help us better understand the latter's role at a historical conjuncture. I argue that Dharmawara helps us understand Sihanouk's emerging philosophy of "Buddhist socialism."