



Erik W. Davis. *Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 320 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-16918-9.

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Published on H-Buddhism (July, 2019)

Commissioned by Thomas Borchert (University of Vermont)

Erik W. Davis's book *Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia* is an important and brilliant study that seeks no less than "to represent a portion of the Cambodian religious imaginary through a study of rituals involved in the management of death and spirits" (pp. 8-9). *Deathpower* is a seminal contribution to the field of Mainland Southeast Asian religious studies as well as a superb ethnography of everyday religious life in contemporary Cambodia. Everyday religiosity and ritual practice in contemporary Cambodia are still under-researched, and the book, thus, fills an essential gap in the scholarly literature. However, the book contributes not only to an understanding of contemporary Khmer religion but also to the comparative study of funeral cultures in the region. The book's greatest achievement is, therefore, the persuasiveness with which it locates death at the center of lay religiosity as well as Khmer imaginations of the social. Scholars and students interested in vernacular Buddhism, funerary practices, and everyday religiosity in Mainland Southeast Asia will benefit immensely from an in-depth reading of this far-reaching study.

Beyond this, *Deathpower* also offers unique ethnographic windows into contemporary Khmer lifeworlds, and the book certainly has the potential of becoming a classic alongside Melford

Spiro's *Burmese Supernaturalism: A Study in the Explanation and Reduction of Suffering* (1967), Stanley Tambiah's *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in Northeast Thailand* (1970), Barend Terwiel's *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand* (1979), and Justin McDaniel's *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magic Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand* (2011). Similar to these monographs, *Deathpower* looks at Southeast Asian Buddhism's everyday engagement with spirits, ghosts, and magical objects as an aspect of what tends to be imagined as Buddhism's Others in scholarly and vernacular discourses alike. These imagined Others of Theravada orthodoxy usually float under such ambiguous signifiers as animism, Brahmanism, and magic. Davis traces these ambivalent relations in contemporary Cambodia and reads them through the eyes of a Buddhologist. Buddhism in one way or the other, thus, centers the analyses of everyday ritual life presented in *Deathpower*, which leads to the book's central conclusion that the Buddhist monk, as the principal tamer of death, is the central source of morality in Cambodia.

The book consists of a thickly written and theoretically dense introduction and eight substantive chapters, each of which explores a different aspect of death's complex place in the Khmer ritual imagination. All of the eight chapters stress the

domestication of death as the core institution of Khmer religion. Every chapter ends with an ethnographic vignette, usually related to the foregoing discussion. While the immediate relevance of some of these vignettes to the theoretical reflections of the preceding paragraphs remains sometimes opaque, they help, nevertheless, to develop a sharper sense for contemporary Cambodian lifeworlds and show how these lifeworlds unfold through everyday practices.

Chapter 1 describes the two major research sites in urban Phnom Penh: Wat Koḥ Yakkha and Wat Trī Loka. Davis emphasizes that these urban temples are quite different in regard to their followers, financial resources, interpretation of Buddhism, and ritual personnel. Their comparison, therefore, offers a more complete picture of death-related rituals in contemporary Cambodia. While the first temple is well maintained, follows a modernist interpretation of Buddhism, and has a well-to-do followership, the second temple appears “poor and empty” and has the monopoly for cremating unclaimed bodies from the hospitals and streets of Phnom Penh (p. 35). In both temples morticians known as *ācārya* as well as their four helpers, the “burning men” or *anak bhluk*, assist Buddhist monks in performing funerals and death-related rituals. Although Davis also visited rural temples, he concentrates on these urban research sites and uses the material gathered outside Phnom Penh merely as contrast material or as a way to substantiate his central claim that urban funerals reproduce rural customs, which remained largely unchanged despite the ruptures caused by the Khmer Rouge.

Chapter 2 is, at forty pages, the longest chapter. Titled “The Funeral,” the chapter entails detailed descriptions of contemporary funerary practices in urban Cambodia. This chapter outlines the ethnographic observations and theoretical reflections of the subsequent chapters. Davis explains how the human person is imagined in contemporary Cambodia, where death is imag-

ined as a “decomposition of the self,” and describes the various non-human elements that animate the human person (p. 42). Central to the Khmer imagination are two kinds of soul-like entities known as *braling* and *viññāṇā*. The chapter introduces both entities and discusses their differences and similarities. Davis classifies both entities as forms of “spirits,” which makes it difficult to distinguish them categorically from other non-human beings mentioned throughout the book, like the *khmoc* or malicious spirits. Central for the maintenance of good health in the Khmer imagination is a ritual known as *hov braling*. This ritual binds the soul-like *braling* back to the social bodies they animate. The practice of binding the *braling* to the human body is part of most life-cycle ceremonies and an essential aspect of all healing rituals in Khmer folk etiology. Davis describes an idealized version of this ritual, compares it with analogous rituals in Thailand, and mentions the various contexts in which it is performed. The chapter concludes with a summary of various types of funerals in Cambodia and describes central elements in the ritual process, like the shroud known as *pamsukūla* that is placed on top of the coffin in Buddhist funerals.

Chapter 3 outlines the central pillars of Khmer cosmology and identifies the opposition of civilized and wild realms as the fundamental grid informing the Khmer worldview. Davis argues that rice agriculture provides the missing middle term that relates both ontologically opposed realms of the Khmer imagination. The forest is, thereby, identified as “the dialectical other of the Khmer identity” (p. 83). Davis does not question this modern notion of identity or the cultural appropriateness of its dialectical foundation in the Khmer context. Who are “the Khmer” Davis is talking about? Throughout the book the category “Khmer” functions as an undifferentiated container that is sometimes used synonymously with “Cambodian.” A central critique of *Deathpower* is, therefore, the methodological nationalism that speaks through Davis’s reference to “the Khmer,”

who are imagined into being by their sharing of a social imaginary. The chapter portrays contemporary Khmer speakers as imagining the forest as a source of immense potency and the monk as the only person able to tame this potency and render it usable through the domestication of spirits. The Buddhist monk, therefore, occupies a special place in Khmer imaginations of human sociality. Davis finally tries to fit this dualist reading of the cosmos and humanity's place in it into a structural reading of emboxment, a model that is used by various authors to represent the way Mainland Southeast Asian sociocultures imagine sociality. Rice, water, and hierarchy are thereby identified as the central elements that render this social imagination meaningful, which substantiates Davis's claim about the Khmer social imaginary's rootedness in an agricultural imagination.

Chapter 4 specifies the notion of "deathpower" and explains how it is generated by various rituals of binding wild potencies into place(s). The Buddhist *sīmā* ceremony is one example of such a binding, as is the monk's domestication of various spirits, which takes the form of binding them into human habitations. This binding harnesses their wild potencies and puts them to human use. The monk's binding of ghosts finally allows the living to enter into meaningful relations of exchange with their dead ancestors. These ongoing relations between the living and the dead are, according to Davis, at the heart of Khmer sociality and the Buddhist monk is identified as the mediator of these relations.

Chapter 5 gives a more detailed account of the offering of the rag robe to Buddhist monks that was already mentioned in chapter 2. This ritual is known as *paṃsukūla*, which is also the name of the rag robe itself. The ritual is practiced throughout Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia as a central aspect of Buddhist funeral culture. The acceptance of the rag robe symbolizes the monk's conquering of death and the domestication of its contaminating potentials. The ability to digest the

contamination caused by death is the principle source not only of the monk's deathpower but also of various other magical abilities. This chapter, which was already published in essay form in an edited collection, certainly represents one of the most illuminating discussions of the magical potency associated with death and its ambivalent place in contemporary Theravada Buddhism.[1]

Chapter 6 provides the first detailed description of the annual *Bhjuṃ Piṇḍa* ritual, in which rice balls are offered to the hungry ghosts known in Buddhist mythology as *preta* during the fifteen days in which the gates of Buddhist hell are open every year. The ritual represents an essential element of the living's ongoing relationship with the dead in the Cambodian imagination. While Davis argues that the ritual is only known in Cambodia and Laos, his detailed description reveals that the ceremony of offering a specific form of rice to the ancestors is also practiced in Thailand's lower Northeast as a variant of Wan Sat Duean Sip, locally known as Wan Don Ta.[2] This identification of similarities between Thai, Lao, and Khmer rituals addressing the dead is only one example of how a close reading of *Deathpower* has helped me to make sense of my own ethnographic observations from Thailand's lower Northeast. Reading the ethnographic descriptions of ritual practices and Davis's analyses in *Deathpower* provided me with many such "aha" moments. However, while Davis emphasizes the ritual's rootedness in Buddhism, a close reading of the ritual in Thailand's Khmer-speaking Northeast suggests its origin in local animism.

Chapter 7 is about Khmer conceptualizations of witchcraft and the shortest chapter of *Deathpower*. Davis's discussion of Khmer witchcraft and its relation to death appears somewhat unfinished and partly superficial. Davis reiterates basic premises of structural-functionalist explanations of witchcraft accusations, where witchcraft is usually associated with outsiders occupying marginal positions in society. The discussion centers on the

role of ritual leftovers and their association with a potentially malevolent potency, especially if these leftovers are acquired and consumed in secret. The chapter also introduces the figure of the vampire, which Davis uses to translate the Sanskrit-derived word *pisāca* (demon). The description of this being provided by Davis indicates, however, that his informants are actually not talking about a “vampire” but about a witch-like creature.[3] Whereas the term *pisāca* may be used to talk about this being, the vernacular designation most commonly used in contemporary Cambodia for this blood-consuming being is *Arp*. Davis’s emphasis of the Sanskrit-derived term indicates how he tries to make sense of contemporary phenomena by tracing their origin to ancient texts.

Chapter 8 is also the book’s conclusion. It is an attempt to contextualize the Buddhological readings of contemporary Khmer religion that characterizes the preceding chapters of *Deathpower*. The chapter entails a detailed discussion of the “syncretic” character of Khmer Buddhism and the ways to approach the reciprocal relation of Brahmanism and Buddhism that shapes contemporary Khmer religion. Davis concludes that Khmer Buddhism needs Brahmanism as a foil to imagine its moral supremacy and therefore constantly recreates Brahmanism through its ritual practices.

A book review is certainly not able to do justice to the depth and ethnographic detail of a book that summarizes the findings of three years of fieldwork as well as the insights it offers into everyday negotiations with the dead in contemporary Khmer-speaking lifeworlds. In the rest of this review I will, therefore, examine questions of disciplinary dogma and epistemic power and the ways they impinge on Davis’s outline of a Khmer social imaginary and lay religiosity.

Questions of power are inevitable in a review of Davis’s book, as “power” features prominently in its title and is the recurrent theme that runs throughout his portrayal of contemporary Khmer religiosity. Questions of power and its contextual

imagination have shaped the study of Southeast Asia like perhaps no other topic. There is still a lively debate about the characteristic form power takes in Southeast Asia that draws on a long tradition, which ranges from Benedict Anderson’s account of classical Javanese imaginations of power, which are not abstract but entail a fluid-like substance; to Clifford Geertz’s famous dictum that in nineteenth-century Bali “power served pomp, not pomp power”; to Paul Durrenberger and Nicola Tannenbaum, who argue that power derives from proper comportment and generosity and that this shared understanding links lowland and highland societies in the region.[4]

On the other hand, questions of epistemic power, its hegemony, and its reproduction as an invisible aspect of our scholarly common sense are at the heart of poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of “power,” which are currently burgeoning in the anthropology of Southeast Asia. To approach the empirically grounded notion of “deathpower,” we thus have to ask not only how Davis’s conceptualization of this power, which he explicitly contrasts with Michel Foucault’s notion of “biopower,” shapes his reading of the Khmer social imaginary, but also which forms of epistemic power speak through his portrayal of Khmer religiosity. Questions for the epistemic power speaking through Davis’s analyses emerge right at the beginning of the book. Reading the note on transliteration one wonders why it is so important to transliterate modern Khmer by using a system that renders Indic-derived words properly so that their Indian origin remains recognizable in a study that seeks to understand lay religiosity in contemporary Cambodia. Is it more important that religious studies scholars well versed in Pāli and Sanskrit literature recognize the apparently Indian origin of a word than that anthropologists unfamiliar with Buddhist texts but working in regional vernaculars recognize a word on the basis of homophony? The principle question becomes, thus, whether Davis’s approach allows for non-Buddhist readings of every-

day negotiations with the dead or whether this is precluded by his privileging of urban Buddhist temples as research sites and monks or former monks as principal interlocutors. Although Davis emphasizes that he is interested in the minds of laypeople, their voices are seldomly heard in the text.

Analyses of power continue to feature prominently in current debates about lay religiosity in the region. In anthropological studies of contemporary Thailand there has emerged a consensus that modern forms of instrumental and amoral power (*amnat*) need to be conceptually distinguished from a Buddhist-inspired charismatic authority (*barami*) and various kinds of mystic potency (*saksith*, *khvam khleng*) that are rooted in a regional animist doxa.^[5] Whereas critical approaches inspired by poststructuralism tend to translate these local concepts unequivocally as “power,” studies sensitive to Thailand’s ontological multiplicity emphasize their qualitative differences and their rootedness in different epistemological registers. This approach to questions of power’s multiplicity in the region is also adopted by Anne Yvonne Guillou, who differentiates between two kinds of “power” in Cambodia that resonate with the charismatic authority known as *barami* in Thailand. In her recent account of the cult of Khleang Muang, a local culture hero, Cambodians identify Buddhist virtues associated with kings and royalty as *pāramī*, whereas a less specific energy circulating in potent places, objects, and people is known as *paramī*.^[6] Guillou, thus, emphasizes multiple forms of potency animating the Cambodian cosmos in addition to and as aspects of Buddhism’s power monopoly in the public sphere. In contrast to this context-sensitive reading of various forms of “power,” Davis speaks of only one kind of supernatural power known as *pāramī*. It remains unclear how Davis’s idea of “deathpower” and its inseparable association with Buddhism relates to this alternative description of various forms of power and potency ani-

inating the cosmos and shaping everyday life in contemporary Cambodia.

Davis introduces the term “deathpower” as a concept to describe a form of authority Khmer religious experts generate through their ritual taming and control of death and the potencies death generates in the Cambodian imagination. “Deathpower” is defined as “the social power to care for, and in doing, manipulate, the dead.” By “manipulate” Davis means “to transform the dead in either secular memory or ontological status. Deathpower implies pastoral care for the dead and transforms their social meaning through that care” (p. 5). The Khmer version of pastoral care (*cura animarum*) rests on the monk’s “ability to conquer and domesticate spirits that resist their appropriate moral stations” (p. 2).

Davis traces this idea of power, rooted in the capacity to tame and domesticate the potent wilderness generated by death, back to an agricultural imagery that evolved from specific techniques and practices of fixed-field, rain-fed rice agriculture he identifies as being characteristically Khmer. Central to this agricultural imagination is the necessity of binding water into fields. Buddhist monks draw on this agricultural imaginary in their ritual practices and thus become “farmers of the dead” who bind souls to dead bodies and non-Buddhist spirits to human residences like houses or monastery buildings (p. 7). Both forms of binding are about the domestication of powers that reside in a wildness beyond the boundaries of Buddhism and their incorporation into an ordered sociality through the agency of Buddhist monks. The image of “binding power into place,” thus, becomes the central cipher to understand Khmer Buddhism and lay religiosity in contemporary Cambodia. Death is a primary site for the generation of this wild power and Buddhism’s fundamental role is its domestication for human use.

The social imaginary, a concept Davis introduces with reference to the French philosopher

and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis, is after “deathpower” certainly the book’s most interesting conceptual contribution to the field of Khmer studies and the anthropology of Mainland Southeast Asia in general. For Castoriadis, society is an imaginary institution that is created by the sum of meaningful significations. Davis emphasizes that Castoriadis’s social imaginary is, however, not only a mental construction but also a social reality continuously recreated through everyday ritual performances. The central argument of Davis’s book, therefore, is that death-related rituals fulfill a crucial function in the imaginary reproduction of Khmer society. Unfortunately, the book lacks an in-depth discussion of Castoriadis’s far-reaching reconceptualization of the social and its imaginary constitution. In Davis’s account it remains unclear how Castoriadis’s idea of the imaginary is different from Émile Durkheim’s collective consciousness, although this difference is fundamental for Castoriadis himself.[7]

More important, *Deathpower* does not engage with Castoriadis’s emphasis on the revolutionary character of the imaginary and its potential for social change. While change is essential for Castoriadis, Davis emphasizes reproduction rather than change in his portrayal of Khmer funeral culture. Finally, Davis’s argument seems to deny the potential for change, which contradicts his own performative reading of ritual events. A theoretical reflection on these contrasting emphases in the reference to the role of rituals for the reproduction of Khmer society is, unfortunately, absent in the book. It remains, furthermore, unclear how the social imaginary relates to alternative theories of the social like Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas of field and habitus, which Davis uses in other sections of the book. This is probably not the author’s fault but rather the publisher’s decision, as many publishers shy away from in-depth theoretical reflections for fear this would annoy the general readership. In this case it is particularly unfortunate, as Davis’s cursory treatment of Castoriadis’s theory creates more questions than it an-

swers such that the full potential of his idea of a Khmer social imaginary remains largely untapped.

Throughout the book, Davis emphasizes the complex interconnectedness of ritual practices scholarly common sense treats as mutually exclusive or classifies as belonging to opposed fields of social practice. The most important opposition of the Khmer religious imaginary is according to Davis that between Buddhism and “brahmanism” or *brahmanya-sāsanā*. However, this is not the scholarly Brahmanism of Indic and Indological studies but rather a collective term used in contemporary Cambodia to talk about ritual practices addressing a vast range of spirits of diverse and often indeterminate origins and to classify them as non-Buddhist. The Khmer idea of “brahmanism” thus includes those practices other scholars have tended to associate with animism. This fundamental distinction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices in everyday contexts is closely tied to the reproduction of Buddhism’s moral supremacy in the Khmer imaginary. Davis classifies Buddhism as the principle and sole source of morality in the Cambodian imagination, whereas Khmer brahmanism, as Buddhism’s principal Other, is morally ambiguous or identified with amorality. This dual opposition of Buddhism and brahmanism on the basis of morality mirrors a classic understanding of religion that goes back to Edward B. Tylor’s conceptualization of religion in opposition to animism.[8] It is the religious studies scholar’s privileging of morality and its association with “religion” that makes Davis read the funeral, the calling of the souls, the inauguration of a house, and the installation of a ghost of a bad death (*brāy*) into an important building as drawing on the central image of the Buddhist monk binding and controlling non-Buddhist spirits. The Buddhist monk as farmer of death thus becomes the master narrative that renders everyday religious practices meaningful in contemporary Cambodia. This reading of Khmer religiosity along questions of morality identifies funerals as the

most important rituals in Buddhist practice, the monk as the principal tamer of death, and therefore monks as that category of persons controlling the largest amount of deathpower. On this basis Davis identifies the monk's pastoral care and his accumulation of "deathpower" as the main reason for the spread and success of Theravada Buddhism throughout the Khmer-speaking world and the social relevance of the Buddhist Sangha in contemporary Cambodia.

That the relation may be the other way around, that the monk's practice of binding spirits draws on non-Buddhist practices, and that everyday religious practices thus reproduce an animist ontology under the banner of Buddhism are precluded by Davis's Buddhological reasoning. However, the reproduction of an animist ontology under the banner of Buddhism is implied in the book's concluding chapter. Davis's Buddhist-centric reading of Khmer sociality, therefore, is subject to debate not only in light of the various recent studies that emphasize the role of local spirit cults for the reproduction of emplaced collectives in Cambodia but also with regard to the role ancestor-spirits have as guardians of village morality in Thailand's Khmer-speaking Northeast. Thus, the question arises as to whether Davis's identification of Buddhism as the sole source of morality in the Khmer social imaginary sustains the hegemony of Buddhism in contemporary Cambodia and contributes to the continuing marginalization of practices deemed non-Buddhist in the public sphere.

Most important for the book's central argument, however, is Davis's effort to identify death as the most significant field of Buddhist expertise and its domestication as the source and sign of the monk's moral supremacy. Why death is such an important topic not only for an understanding of Khmer religiosity but also for the Khmer social imaginary is already outlined in the book's introduction. Davis locates death-focused ritual events at the core of the morality of lived Buddhism and

furthermore argues that Buddhist death rituals would rely almost exclusively on rural traditions, which have remained relatively unaffected by the suppression of the traditional ritual diversity by the Khmer Rouge. While this far-reaching claim is nowhere substantiated in the text, Davis presents death-related rituals as windows opening up views on authentic Khmer culture and a true Khmer Self. One of the book's central questions is thus "why were funerals so resistant to change and transformation while other rituals were affected"? Davis answers this question of funeral rituals' resilience by identifying them as central acts "in the re-creation of the sociohistorical world in which Cambodians imagine moral possibility. Funeral rituals perform, and through performance institute, key values in the Cambodian imagination that map geography and human beings, along with the techniques that mediate them for good and ill" (p. 4). This presumption explains why Davis emphasizes the reproductive dimension of the Khmer social imaginary instead of the potential for social change emphasized by Castoriadis. Khmer funerary practices reimagine morality and through this reimagination recreate a timeless Khmer society. Since this morality is an explicitly Buddhist morality, Khmer sociality is also essentially Buddhist. Davis presents a Khmer sociality that is centered on Buddhism, and although his argument acknowledges that meaningful sources of power lie outside Buddhism, they become socially effective only through their domestication by Buddhist monks. In this hermeneutical circle there is no way to question the foundational role Buddhism has for the imagination of Khmer sociality. Scholars who are not Buddhologist may question this interpretation, however.

Despite these critical remarks, I deeply enjoyed reading *Deathpower* and I have benefited immensely from it. The book is a fascinating study and an essential reading for everyone interested in contemporary Khmer society and ritual life in Cambodia. Crafting this review took quite some

time, as many of the points discussed by Davis had to be thoroughly digested and slowly found their way into my own interpretations of funerary practices in Thailand's lower Northeast. The book represents an invaluable source for regional comparisons of lay ritual practice, and I am sure that a deeper engagement with texts on ritual life in neighboring countries would have helped Davis to contextualize the Buddhist-centric perspective that haunts his analysis of lay ritual expertise in contemporary Cambodia.

Notes

[1]. Erik W. Davis, "Weaving Life out of Death: The Craft of the Rag Robe in Cambodian Ritual Technology," in *Buddhist Funeral Cultures of Southeast Asia and China*, ed. Paul William and Patrice Ladwig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 59-78.

[2]. Benjamin Baumann, "Ghosts of Belonging: Searching for Khmerness in Rural Buriram" (PhD diss., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2017), 445-48.

[3]. Benjamin Baumann, "The Khmer Witch Project: Demonizing the Khmer by Khmerizing a Demon," in *Ghost Movies in Southeast Asia and Beyond: Narratives, Cultural Contexts, Audiences*, ed. Peter Bräunlein and Andrea Lauser (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 141-83.

[4]. Benedict Anderson, "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture," in *Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Claire Holt (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 1-69; Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); and Paul Durrenberger and Nicola Tannenbaum, "Continuities in Highland and Lowland Religions of Thailand," *Journal of the Siam Society* 77, no. 1 (1989): 83-90.

[5]. Kaj Århem, "Southeast Asian Animism in Context," in *Animism in Southeast Asia*, ed. Kaj Århem and Guido Sprenger (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3-30.

[6]. Anne Yvonne Guillou, "Khmer Potent Places: Pāramī and the Localisation of Buddhism and Monarchy in Cambodia," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 18, no. 5 (2017): 1-23, esp. 4.

[7]. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 54, 366.

[8]. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:386.

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Citation: Benjamin Baumann. Review of Davis, Erik W. *Deathpower: Buddhism's Ritual Imagination in Cambodia*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. July, 2019.

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