


# Scarecrows: Supernatural Sentinels Against COVID-19 in Cambodia

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## ABSTRACT

Responses to the threat of COVID-19 have unveiled the underlying cultural theories of contagion across various countries. In Cambodia, erecting scarecrows has emerged as a popular response. This ethnographic study on contagious diseases and cultural deathscapes, which included participant observation with 185 informants, revealed that the human perception of scarecrows was less significant than the perception of ghosts that these scarecrows were intended to repel. To serve as effective sentinels, these scarecrows must appear menacing and be well armed. These observations offer insights into the cultural construction of contagion, threat, and defense in the context of an epidemic or a pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

Apotropaic methods; Cambodia; COVID-19 response; cultural theory of contagion; epidemics; scarecrows

## ទីងមោង: អច្ឆរិយសេនីយ៍ (ទិព្វសេនីយ៍) យាមការពារប្រឆាំងនឹងមេរោគ ជំងឺ COVID-19 (កូវីដ-១៩) នៅក្នុងប្រទេសកម្ពុជា

### សេចក្តីសង្ខេប

ការឆ្លើយតប ឬ ដំណោះស្រាយផ្សេងៗ ដែលមានទំនាក់ទំនងនឹងទំនាមទំលាប់វប្បធម៌ ទៅនឹងការគំរាមកំហែង នៃ ជំងឺ COVID-19 បានលាតត្រដាងអោយឃើញពី ទស្សនវិស័យ (ទ្រឹស្តី) វប្បធម៌សំខាន់ៗនានា អំពីជំងឺឆ្លងរាតត្បាត (ដូចជា ជំងឺ វិបល័) ដែលរាលដាលក្នុងប្រទេសជាច្រើន។

នៅក្នុងប្រទេសកម្ពុជា គេបានឃើញការដាក់តាំងទីងមោងរបស់ប្រជាជន ជាការឆ្លើយតបទៅនឹងវិធីការពារ ប្រឆាំងនឹងជំងឺឆ្លងរាតត្បាត (ដូចជា ជំងឺ វិបល័ COVID-19)។

ការសិក្សាស្រាវជ្រាវ (ethnographic study) លើជំងឺឆ្លងរាតត្បាត និងទស្សនវិស័យជំនឿទំនាមទំលាប់អំពី មរណភាព ដែលនៅក្នុងវិធីសាស្ត្រការសិក្សានេះមានបញ្ចូលទាំងការចូលរួមអង្កេតជាមួយអ្នកផ្តល់ព័ត៌មានចំនួន 185 នាក់ បានបង្ហាញអោយឃើញថា វិញ្ញាតកម្ម (សេចក្តីយល់ដឹងច្បាស់) របស់មនុស្សអំពីទីងមោង មិនសូវសំខាន់ដូច វិញ្ញាតកម្ម របស់មនុស្សអំពីខ្មោចព្រាយ (អមនុស្សភាព) ដែលនឹងត្រូវបានបណ្តេញចេញដោយ ទីងមោងដែលគេបង្កើតឡើងទាំង នេះ នោះទេ។

ដើម្បីបំពេញតួនាទីជាអ្នកការពារដ៏មានប្រសិទ្ធភាព ទីងមោងទាំងនេះត្រូវតែបានគោតកំតែងឡើង អោយមាន លក្ខណៈកាចខែងខែង និងមានបំពាក់ដោយអាវុធ (អាវុធយុទ្ធភណ្ឌ) យ៉ាងល្អត្រឹមត្រូវ។

ការចូលរួមអង្កេតទាំងនេះ ផ្តល់នូវវិស័យស្សនានានា (ការយល់ដឹងប្រាលប្រៅ) ទៅក្នុង ស្ថាប័នវប្បធម៌ (នៃចំណេះ ដឹង ជំនឿ ទំនាមទំលាប់ គំរាម អត្តសញ្ញាណសង្គម) នៃការឆ្លងរាតត្បាត ការគំរាមកំហែង និង ការការពារប្រឆាំងមេរោគ នៅក្នុងបរិបទនៃជំងឺឆ្លងរាតត្បាត (epidemic) និង ជំងឺឆ្លងរាតត្បាតជាសកល (pandemic) ។

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**Media teaser:** In Cambodia, scarecrows are supernatural sentinels against epidemics and COVID-19. These scarecrows equipped with masks and weapons, embody cultural beliefs about contagion and spiritual defense.

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COVID-19 was first reported in Cambodia on January 27, 2020. By May 17, 2023, 136,736 confirmed cases and 3,056 deaths were reported (World Health Organization 2023). Despite warnings from the Cambodian prime minister at the beginning of the pandemic against following blind superstitions /*ʔappəyɛaʔ cumniəʔ*/ (អប្បិយជំនឿ) that were ineffective against the spread of COVID-19, citizens began to erect scarecrows /*tiŋ moonʔ*/ (ទីងម្រាង), which quickly popped up in front of one house after another in many villages. Clearly, people’s belief in the power of scarecrows cannot be dismissed as mere superstition. Rather than considering it a curio, as news reporters around the world have done, scholars must conduct serious research to discover more about popular views on contagion.

I ask what is it that people are defending themselves from by using scarecrows. I start by considering local understandings of germs and contagion, describe the making of the scarecrow, and illustrate why the personification of the scarecrow to appear human-like in terms of clothing, decoration, and weaponization with clubs, swords, axes, and guns was meant to empower the scarecrow so that it could defend the human owner against death ghosts. I highlight the adaptations made to scarecrows in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic: they wore disposable face masks and helmets, and the potent fury and ghostliness of their faces were intensified to appear thuggish. The contexts in which these scarecrows were erected became a kind of socio-political metaphor. In an apotropaic process, the scarecrow is transformed into a supernatural weapon in its own right, exemplifying the adage that “to pull out a thorn, use a thorn.” Nevertheless, my findings prove that, beyond what humans think of the scarecrow, what matters is how it appears to the ghost that it is meant to repel.

## Germs and contagion

Early studies on contagion in colonial Cambodia (Au 2006) often focused on the bubonic plague. Today, reports suggest that diseases such as epilepsy, autism, and intellectual disability are considered contagious, as are the ghosts of “bad death,” for example, after suicide, and the fear that foreigners could contaminate the local people, as revealed in the contemporary Labor Law, “foreigners . . . must have no contagious diseases” (Article 261) (Falkus and Frost 2002). The forerunner to the present study began in the early 1990s, focusing on HIV/AIDS (Eisenbruch 1998), malaria (Eisenbruch 1997), bird flu, SARS, and COVID-19 (Eisenbruch 2021b). These illnesses were believed to arise from the supernatural “obscure and dark road” /*pləv nɔŋitʔ*/ (ផ្លូវងងឹត), where death ghosts associated with sudden, premature, and often violent death /*ʔaʔkaal mɔɔnaʔ*/ (អកាសមរណ) attack the living (Eisenbruch 2021a; Kidron 2018; Ledgerwood 2012). Villagers respond to these threats by using crude images and activating scarecrows to ward off the evil effects of these death ghosts. Malaria, for example, was said to be caused by the spirits of forests in the highlands who retaliate against men intruding from the lowlands by “breaking” (អ្នកកាត់), or “taking away” life (អ្នកតាយក) through inflicting malaria (Eisenbruch 1997).

## Scarecrows, epidemics, and pandemics

Scarecrows, found in many societies worldwide (Król et al. 2019), have been used throughout history to repel supernatural entities. In the Epistle of Jeremiah 69/70, a *probaskánion*, or a scarecrow, was erected to safeguard against ghosts and the evil eye (Elliott 2016). In Graeco-Roman mythology, Priapus is represented as an ugly scarecrow holding a club that scared birds away (Van Driel 2010). In practices of monastic Buddhism in ancient India, as a mark of their usefulness, child candidates for ordination had to act as scarecrows for monks (Clarke 2013; Langenberg 2012). Adventurer John Thomson described isolated slaves being stationed as scarecrows in the fields of Siam (Thomson 1875). In contemporary Japan’s “scarecrow village” of Nagoro, *kakashi* or scarecrows replace people who have died or moved away (Hashimoto et al. 2021). According to the popular press in Japan, *kakashi* have been adapted to defend against COVID-19 infection. However, to the best of our knowledge, except for Merli’s article on Amabie, a female chimeric being in Kyushu, Japan (Merli

2020), no peer-reviewed papers exist on scarecrows and COVID-19. Scarecrows were erected in England during COVID-19 (Rich 2020).

In Cambodia, once known as the rice-bowl of Asia, scarecrows were an integral part of daily farming life, used mainly for crop protection (Nesbitt 1997). However, going beyond the agricultural context, in this study I focus on anti-COVID-19 scarecrows: according to a spate of media reports, scarecrows were erected in front of houses to protect the inmates against cholera and later against COVID-19. In a report from Thailand, Buddhist monks were reported to have built a scarecrow, which they named COVID Omicron, in a substitution ritual before cremating it in the hope that the COVID-19 virus would fatally attack it rather than the villagers (Petpailin 2022).

In early 2005, when Cambodia was struck by avian flu, I noticed that people in affected areas hastily erected scarecrows, first to repel a supernatural being, which they believed was wandering the villages to kill as many birds as it could load onto its shoulders, and then to protect the villagers from being attacked by the ghosts of the dead. Overall, it was believed that people dying of epidemics had been attacked by spirits, in response to which the villagers urgently erected scarecrows to frighten the diseases away (Eisenbruch 2010).

Photojournalist Jade Sacker reported the curious story (now enshrined by having been copied word for word by someone into Wikipedia) of the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, when “people made effigies of Khmer Rouge soldiers, trapping their spirits inside scarecrows that were then burned in mass bonfires.” In alternative renditions of this story, “a disease spread throughout the provinces that year, associated with the dead cadres, and scarecrows were erected to banish it” (Sacker 2020:1).

My ethnographic work in Cambodia has demonstrated how living beings of different orders, ranging from deities to malevolent spirits, are part of the landscape of health and illness. I argue that a scarecrow of straw stuffing and wearing rags is perceived as no less living than another living being and brought to life as a sentinel against contagion. The scarecrow reveals the cultural constructions of contagion and enables us to extend, shift, and challenge cultural understandings of contagion. Rural Cambodians build scarecrows with the image of a malevolent supernatural entity called a death ghost in mind. I argue that the important aspect is what the scarecrow looks like to “the ghost that is to be repelled,” in this case “the ghost that is the cause and agent of the pandemic.” I describe the weapons, adornments, and clothing on scarecrows to enable a discussion about perception (the perception by malevolent entities), which is not well explored in other work on contagion.

## Method

The research team comprised a male Khmer-speaking medical anthropologist and transcultural psychiatrist (ME), a female Cambodian linguist (PC), and a male Cambodian research assistant (SC). The study received approval by the National Ethics Committee for Health Research in Cambodia (0212 NECHR) and the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (ID 11,370). All participants provided verbal informed consent. Interviewees have been anonymized. Fieldwork commenced in the mid-1990s, when ME conducted participant observation of people who had erected scarecrows as a defense against “poison,” cholera, malaria, leprosy, HIV/AIDS, and avian influenza. ME added a second group of informants between 2000 and 2018 in the wake of avian flu and other contagious diseases and followed up with the first and second groups until 2020. The final group was added during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), with interviews conducted by SC. Special attention was paid to villages like Kampong Lvea in Sitor district, 27 kilometers to the northeast of Phnom Penh, and villages in Kampong Tralach district of Kampong Chhnang, where most houses had at least one scarecrow in the front, with others scattered at entrances to the village or the temple.

Although the government restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 allowed opportunities for fieldwork (Eggeling 2023; Nguyen et al. 2022; Rahman et al. 2021), they prevented free travel at various points in time. In some regions, the authorities required vaccination certificates

to be produced before the fieldwork team member could enter the local community. Sometimes, it was not clear in advance whether the intended informants had these certificates. The interview environment was affected as the interviewer and informants were wary of contracting COVID-19 from one another, and adjustments had to be made to address this. Some informants planned to wear masks or adhere to social distancing for the interview, and the interviewer could not start until they did so. In some instances, the interviewer had to return to the site again to conduct the interview, or it was necessary to conduct telephone interviews. A few interviews were conducted when the scarecrows were being erected. However, most scarecrows had already been erected by the time we met the informants, who described in detail what they had done, why they had done so, what the consequences were, and what their plans were going forward.

### **The sample**

The fieldwork encounters involved 203 participants (81 women and 122 men). The mean age of the informants was 54.5 years, and the age range was 14–90 years for women and 12–89 years for men. Key informants comprised the following: 3 village heads (1 woman and 2 men; 59.3 years), 52 from religious and traditional sects, including 25 Buddhist ritual officiants (64.8 years), 19 healers or *kruu* (1 woman, 18 men; 70.2 years), and 12 monks (all men, 47.5 years); a female traditional birth attendant (77 years); and two Buddhist devotees (56 years). The informants were distributed across Phnom Penh and 16 provinces: Battambang (4), Kampong Cham (37), Kampong Chhnang (30), Kampong Speu (3), Kampong Thom (2), Kampot (5), Kandal (48), Koh Kong (5), Kratie (5), Mondulkiri (1), Phnom Penh (17), Preah Vihear (1), Prey Veng (5), Pursat (3), Ratanakiri (6), Siem Reap (5), and Takeo (265).

At least 75 percent of the families of the informants had erected scarecrows as protection against earlier epidemics or the COVID-19 pandemic. My assistant SC made photographic or videographic recordings of 44 of these scarecrows.

Khmer terms are spelled using Huffman, Lambert, and Im's (1970) adaptation of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcription from sound to script, rather than as transliteration from one writing system to another. Pali words are transliterated.

### **Results**

Scarecrows in Cambodia, other than those simply placed in rice-fields to scare off birds, are essentially of two types. The first kind, known as “Yaksa basket” /yeak ciel/ (យក្សដាវ), are oversized, sport particularly ugly faces, and are paraded throughout the village, dancing with accompanying music known as /laak c<sup>h</sup>ay yam/ (ឡាក់នៃយាំ) (These ceremonies are organized during the annual Kathen and Bon Pka festivals and are held to frighten away “ghosts that cause mishap.” The second kind are smaller scarecrows /tiij moon/ (ទីដំណាង) used to frighten supernatural entities that are believed to cause epidemics. Although examining the history of colonial medicine in Cambodia (Au 2006, 2011; Ovesen and Trankell 2010) is beyond the scope of this article, it is evident that the French brought elements of public health and vaccination. However, as Au (2011:1) put it, a “cultural insolubility” was evident in the epistemologies of the French and Cambodian medical systems. Overall, the locals perceived foreigners as not only part of the solution but also part of the problem. According to Ang (2020:1), during the French colonial rule, the villagers were frightened by the colonists’ “large build, knife-sharp noses, hairy faces, and incomprehensible language” [our translation], and in their fear, they made scarecrows, which they employed against both cholera and the marauding French. The invading colonists were often likened to the invading cholera germ, and the villagers mounted any possible defense, including scarecrows, against both.

## The germ and contagion: The menace against which the scarecrow is a sentinel

The popular Khmer word for germ is /mee rook/ (មេរោគ), from the Pali *mee* + *roga*, thus revealing a link with *roga* in Ayurvedic medicine. Buddhist sources provide accounts of epidemics in ancient India, from which Cambodia draws its legacy of traditional medical theory and practice. The /mee rook/ does not cause an epidemic, such as the bubonic plague, cholera, bird flu, or COVID-19, by itself. Rather, it is the /rumbal/ (រូបល់), the invisible ghost or spirit that arrives under the cover of darkness through the dark and obscure road /pləv ŋəŋit/ (ផ្លូវងងឹត), that is responsible for spreading the epidemic. In Cambodia, outbreaks of contagious and communicable diseases include syphilis or “crouching mango” /svaay kraap/ (ស្វាយក្រាប) and HIV/AIDS or “king of mango” /sdac svaay/ (ស្តេចស្វាយ), malaria /krun caŋ/ (ជំងឺគ្រុនចាញ់), H1N1 swine flu /pdaahsaay cruuk/ (ផ្តាសាយជ្រូក), H5N1 avian flu /pdaahsaay baksəy/ (ផ្តាសាយបក្សី), and Chikungunya arbovirus, all of which are considered to be, literally, a “chief germ that crosses” /mee rook claŋ/ (មេរោគឆ្លង), an “illness that crosses” /cumjii claŋ/ (ជំងឺឆ្លង). This group comprises two taxa. The first taxon is poison (តិស), extending to /pih-ʔaapəeh/ (តិស-អាប៉េស or តិស-អាប៉េស្ត), which is derived from *viṣa*, or venom, according to Ayurveda, and the second is respiratory disease or /pdaahsaay/ (ផ្តាសាយ), caused by forest-dwelling ghosts named /takao/. Some monks and ritual officiants believed that COVID-19, like other pandemics, stemmed from the “snake wind disease” or /ʔa?he? vieta? rook/ (អបិវិតរោគ), which originated in the ancient Indian city of Vaishali (Aggamahapandita Buddhadatta Mahathera 1957). Nath (1967) defines the Khmer word as borrowed from the Pali and Sanskrit *Ahivātakaroga*, snake wind illness, an epidemic, and the disease resulting from the poison borne in the wind, literally /kyaal pih/, as if it were venom exhaled or sprayed by the snake. Its symptoms were largely similar to those caused by the plague or cholera, and it was called the “disease of emergency” /ʔaasan rook/ (អាសន្នរោគ).

Contagious diseases are considered to be caused by a cascade of evil and savage spirits, /rumbal/, from the world of non-human beings /a?mea?nuh/ (អមេស្ស), which invade through the obscure and dark road /pləv ŋəŋit/ (Eisenbruch et al. 2021). In the cultural metaphor of exponential growth, the germ has a leech-like quality, in Pali called *rātapata*, which gave it the Khmer image of /rook riet tbaat/ (រោគរាតត្បាត), meaning “to invade and seize by force.” The image of the contagion is expressed in the serial verb /riik riel daal/ (រីករលដាល), a burning twig /riik/ (រីក), bursting into fever and jumping onto passersby, /riel/, and culminating in the image of a stampeding elephant herd spooked by wildfire /daal/ (ដាល).

Elderly persons and people in the monastic community, who are more closely affiliated with Buddhist morality, or *sīla*, tend to believe that COVID-19, like other disasters, was a consequence of the nation’s rampant violation of morality, or *sīla*, in Khmer, /k<sup>h</sup>oh səl t<sup>h</sup>oa/ (ខុសសីលធម៌). Not surprisingly, the pandemic was depicted on social media in millenarian terms. According to the apocalyptic Khmer text, the “Buddha Prophecies,” the Buddha Damnaay (de Bernon 1994), morality and order are inverted, with disastrous consequences in the “Three Vast Plains:” during the Khmer Rouge regime and the civil war, the nation had endured the Vast Plains of War, /viel sənkrjem/ (វាលសង្គ្រាម) and of Famine and Food Insecurity /viel tu?rəp<sup>h</sup>ik/ (វាលទ្វិក្ស), and now, with COVID-19, the “Vast Plain of Diseases that Cross,” /viel cumjii claŋ/ (វាលជំងឺឆ្លង). It was reported that Prime Minister Hun Sen himself had said this.

## Making a scarecrow

The feverish building of scarecrows was triggered by several stimuli. First, on hearing the hoot of an owl (ខ្ញីឡូ), people rushed to erect scarecrows – the owl as “protasis,” the fatal illness as the “apodosis,” and the scarecrow as the countermeasure. Second, people were spurred to erect scarecrows anew during periods of national vulnerability, which were predicted by the Royal Astrologer, His Excellency Im Boren, at the Moha Songkran (មហាសង្ក្រាន្ត) Brahmanic ceremony, conducted on the first day of the Khmer New Year

festivities and, a few weeks later, at the Royal Plowing Ceremony /bon crat preah neajkoal/ (បុណ្យប្រគំព្រះនង្គ័ល).

People considered supernatural beings such as ghosts as agents that spread pandemics; hence, the scarecrows that we spotted during our fieldwork were often propped up on the fence adjacent to the front gate or steps or on the pathway to their houses. Scarecrows were often designed to look like young men – strong, brave, and impetuous – presumably to offer the toughest defenses. Chuon Samon, 67, from Kampong Chhnang province, dressed his scarecrow in jeans and a cowboy shirt. He said that his scarecrow was a strapping youth and called it a /kmeɛj stiev/ (ក្មេងស្រ្តី), a word used to describe young animals like bulls and roosters, as well as young hoodlums or gangsters, underlining their hyper-masculinity.

A few of the scarecrows were female. Phat Nat, 62, a farmer in Kampong Cham province, dressed her feminine-looking scarecrow in her own clothing. Unlike humans, ghosts and spirits can see each other. She knew that the /rumbal/, with its supernatural powers, was perfectly capable of penetrating the visor with its gaze and seeing the activated scarecrow, which was no longer mere straw and rags but now a supernatural sentinel in its own right, for that is what it truly was. In other words, if the scarecrow is given sufficient military clout, it becomes capable of fighting the war on the supernatural battlefield with the /rumbal/ as its military foe and can resist the potency of its enemy. People in Cambodia, where civil war, paramilitary, and police have been commonplace for well over half a century, are more than familiar with the intimidating power of a military uniform, and Uon Vichara, 66, a farmer in Kandal province, dressed her scarecrow as a paratrooper commander, who, she said, had sufficient powers to frighten invisible enemies, including the /rumbal/.

### Weaponizing the scarecrow

Scarecrows must appear menacing and well-armed to serve as effective sentinels. Just as the nation mobilized against COVID-19, it was as though the scarecrows had also been recruited into an (ultra) grassroots national defense system. Some were equipped with stylized weapons. Some were armed right from the start; for example, the “Red Neck Guardian Spirit” /neak taa krahaam kaa/ (អ្នកកាត្រាហមក) and the “Iron Rod Guardian Spirit” /neak taa dambaŋ daek/ (ដំបងដែក) wielded club-shaped rods. The death ghosts that had caused COVID-19 considered scarecrows to be supernaturally armed guards. The participants believed that seeing the weaponized scarecrow would stop the COVID-19 germ in its tracks.

The club /dambaŋ/ (ដំបង) was a common weapon. In Kampong Chhnang, Dong Chay, 78 years old, armed his scarecrow with a club over its right shoulder, which he said represented a B-40 rocket launcher (Figure 1). He said that when this weapon was discharged, it would hit a supernatural target from afar.

Some scarecrows were armed with swords /daav/ (ដាវ) that were either held across the body or sheathed. Nang Hak, 62, and his family in Kandal, had armed their scarecrow with a timber weapon painted with quicklime to prevent it from rotting. Since Nang Hak was disabled and could not make the weapon himself, he instructed his grandson, Kay Him, who was 12 years old at the time, to make it. Kay Him’s mother said that the weapon would be a deterrent to the invading enemy, the COVID-19 virus.

Syn Sovady, 37, came from a broken home in Kandal province. His mother, who constantly defended herself against his father’s drunken attacks, taught him that whenever the nation was under attack, he had to make a scarecrow and arm it with the necessary weapons. As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic began, Syn Sovady erected a scarecrow and armed it with a disproportionately large ax (Figure 2).

In early 2020, *Voice of America*, in its special feature on scarecrows in Cambodia as part of its YouTube series, published photographs of the scarecrow. Our attention was drawn to the bamboo pole placed diagonally across it with a red cloth tied to its end; however, as is typical of media publications on scarecrows, no exploration of the meaning of this placement of the

bamboo pole was found in the article. We met the owner, Chum Vanna, 64, a villager in Kandal province, who told us that this was no ordinary red cloth but a /cətəy/ (ជានី), a special cloth with magical powers. While a white banner signifies surrender, a red one signifies victory. He explained that the red cloth on the bamboo pole held by the scarecrow was a sign that the scarecrow had been magically activated by reciting prayers to call upon a potent, renowned spirit known as the “Red Neck Guardian Spirit” to inhabit and empower it.

Weapons can vanquish powerful enemies, as Nim Doeun, 72, in Takeo pointed out, using the example of the late King Father Sihanouk, who, around 1945, instructed the Khmer Issarak anti-French insurgents to arm themselves with wooden toy guns that were painted to resemble real ones. Doeun said that even the well-armed French troops fled the battlefield: Ky Phany, 48, and her nephew in Kandal did something similar, performing a substitution ritual, /ʔuʔpaʔkəc/ (ឧបកិច្ច), by arming their scarecrow with a toy gun, which they had symbolically transformed into a real weapon by performing a substitution ritual.

### **Adaptations in the face of COVID-19**

In a fascinating adaptation to the challenges posed by COVID-19, some informants turned to innovation and used more durable materials to erect scarecrows. In Kampong Cham, Sang Um, 59, and his wife, Chey Chhunly, 51, had long known that epidemic ghosts, such as those associated with bird flu, were scared of quicklime. However, given the persistence and unprecedented virulence of the COVID-19 pandemic, they realized the need for a long-term deterrent. They made their scarecrow on a zinc sheet, knowing that domestic animals would not eat it and that the scarecrow itself would withstand the onslaught of the elements and last indefinitely. Using quicklime, they drew a ghost with bulging eyes on a zinc sheet (Figure 3).

The couple propped up this two-dimensional scarecrow under a tree in front of their house. Each night, they beseeched the spirit in it to keep the enemy at bay. Since earlier epidemics, such as bird flu, were considered to be of local origin, scarecrows made of simple materials, such as hay, were erected. However, since COVID-19 was imported from China, it was only logical for them to rely on non-Indigenous scarecrows. Karn Lim, 66, the village head in Takeo province, called his creation a “Foreigner Scarecrow” /tiij mouj baarəteeh/ (ទ្វីបម្រាមបរទេស). It comprised the top



**Figure 1.** Dong Chay and his scarecrow carrying a club on its right shoulder, in position, ready to fire like a rocket launcher at any enemy including the COVID-19 virus. (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).



**Figure 2.** Syn Sovady’s scarecrow brandishing an oversize ax, with the column of Sovady’s protective spirit house partially visible to its left. (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).

half of a mannequin that his children salvaged while working at a store selling European clothing in Phnom Penh. This can be viewed from two perspectives. First, the scarecrow would be just as effective, even though its “skin and bones” seemed “foreign,” as the activation was achieved by performing a local cultural figure scarecrow with the power to do its job as a sentinel. Second, it makes sense to adapt the traditional scarecrow to a Western form because the prevailing view was that the germ was foreign. The word /baarəteeh/ (បារទេស) is borrowed from the Pali *paradesa*; therefore, finding a foreign-looking mannequin to make the scarecrow seemed only logical (Figure 4).

Mak Houng, 67, lived as the security guard in his nephew’s vacant house in Phnom Penh. With the outbreak of COVID-19, realizing that even a security guard needed protection, he made a scarecrow to protect himself while guarding the house (Figure 5).

Mak Houng procured a full-length plastic mannequin of a young man and dressed it in sports attire. He gave it sunglasses and, just for a hint of menace, a somewhat incongruous helmet, too.

### **Weaponry**

Of all the weapons borne by the scarecrow, the club is the most evocative in imitating the government actors who beat protesters with batons. Perhaps, here, people could subconsciously identify with others who feared for their safety. For instance, forcibly evicted people could, like the scarecrows, arm themselves by holding nonviolent protests, in keeping with the Buddhist teaching, literally, “to persist in your opinion” /taa suu mea?te?/ (តស៊ូមតិ).

The global presentation of the fight against COVID-19 as a war influences the way people conceptualize the pandemic, with socio-political variables being important (Panzeri et al. 2021) and



**Figure 3.** Scarecrow made of a zinc sheet rather than hay, with a ghost inscribed on it in white quicklime. (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).

changing the cognitive frames of people from passive victims to active fighters against harm (Romano 2024). I suggest that the weaponized scarecrow in Cambodia can be viewed in the context of a long history of war, starting with anticolonial resistance extending back to the Khmer Issarak movement of the 1940 and, obviously, marked by the years of the Khmer Rouge regime and the ensuing civil war in which the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government militarized the citizenry, creating slogans such as “Every Citizen is a Revolutionary Fighter” (Slocomb 2001). Here, the war against COVID-19 has a clear socio-political context, and the scarecrows are the spiritual embodiments of militarized sentinels.

### ***Disposable face masks***

Some of our informants said that scarecrows, although playing the role of a protector, could also catch COVID-19 and die, that is, disintegrate. Thus, virtually all scarecrows sported disposable face masks, making them seem more human. Some informants felt a sentimental attachment to their scarecrows and masked them to prevent them from *inhaling* COVID-19 through their noses. Furthermore, the masked scarecrows sent a strong social message to the community members that they, like the scarecrows, should wear masks for their own protection.

### ***Intensifying the potent fury of the face***

For generations, scarecrows have been made with dark faces and huge staring eyes capable of seeing the marauding ghost. In a new development, a few scarecrows were made with crimson faces, which, according to some of our informants, were generally associated with rage. Chuon Samon, 67, in Kampong Chhnang, painted his scarecrow’s face crimson (Figure 6), lending it the emotion of fury as if it were shouting at the /rumbal/, “You \*&\$!@^\* get out of here! You \*&\$!@^\* are prohibited from entering! Get lost, or I will attack!”

In line with the trope of the carnivorous and angry tiger, Soriya Kumar, 33, of Kandal province, drew a picture of a scarecrow that his aunt had erected over a year ago. He had learned from public health campaigns that COVID-19 affects the lungs. He said that COVID-19 resembled a man-eating tiger, pouncing as a tiger-like /rumbal/ ghost-spirit, to rip into the victim’s chest and destroy the lungs



**Figure 4.** Karn Lim standing alongside his “foreigner scarecrow” dressed in modern clothing. As the head and torso alone were salvaged, the scarecrow was mounted on a chair. Despite having only the upper half, being made of plastic, it was considered more durable than most other scarecrows. (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).

in no time. Ky Phany said that if her scarecrow were to be a match for the tiger, it should have an even more ferocious face than the tiger.

### ***Intensified ghostliness of the face***

In Cambodia, white signifies death, that is, a corpse. A white “crocodile banner” or “soul banner” is tied to a bamboo stick and flown at the house of a bereaved person, and ghosts, like corpses, are believed to have white faces. The best way to whiten the face of a scarecrow and make it more ghostly was to apply quicklime, which our older informants had done in earlier epidemics to “kill” and “poison” /pɨh-ʔaapɛh/ cholera, and malaria. In Kandal, Saet Satya, 65, and his wife, Chay Tina, 64, recalled that their parents simply smeared quicklime onto earthenware cooking pots and slung them in front of the house to frighten away a rampaging epidemic: the morphosyntactic /rumbal/ is a derivative from the causative prefix /rum/, meaning that which intensifies, and /bala/, in English, means ballistic. Traditionally, among their various



**Figure 5.** Mak Houg with his full-length male mannequin scarecrow (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).

treatment approaches, Cambodian healers use apotropaic methods, such as fighting poison with poison, as expressed in the common saying, “A sharp thorn can be removed only by another thorn” /*banlaa mut træv yók banlaa cuəh/* (បន្លាមុតត្រូវយកបន្លាជួស). With the onslaught of COVID-19, as with other new and emerging diseases, such as bird flu, this apotropaic struggle of fighting fire with fire had to become more emphatic. Nov Seang, 75, in Battambang, who had faced various epidemics over the years, drew on his scarecrow’s face using quicklime, white chalk and, more recently, domestic house paint.

### ***Helmeted, thuggish scarecrows***

Since COVID-19 was more potent than prior epidemics and required more potent responses, scarecrows were made to wear helmets in a manner reminiscent of the plain-clothed internal security forces proliferating in the area, especially the area around Phnom Penh, where they were reported to crack down on protesters and strike them with their batons while remaining unidentifiable under their oversize helmets. It was as if the scarecrows could challenge even the invading /*rumbal/* ghost spirits. Similar to the anonymity of thuggish paramilitary security guards wearing visored helmets, a helmeted scarecrow wearing a visored motorcycle helmet made it impossible for mere humans to identify its features, unlike ghosts, who could with their supernatural vision.



**Figure 6.** Chuon Samon's helmeted crimson-faced scarecrow, its huge eyes capable of seeing the marauding ghost. (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).

### ***Modern “engineer scarecrow,” not requiring crude weapons***

Mao Phirom, 53, a Vietnamese engineer, lived in Takeo province, and his wife was a Khmer woman who taught mathematics. Although he was skeptical of the efficacy of scarecrows against the supernatural, he realized that, in Cambodia, everyone built scarecrows; so, he decided to build one too. He dressed his scarecrow in a Hi-Vis safety vest, heavy-duty safety boots, and an industrial safety hard hat (Figure 7).

### **Social and political contexts**

A nation under the threat of COVID-19 is a nation mobilized for war, a metaphor well-harnessed in the region, for example, in the Vietnamese government's war against COVID-19, in which every citizen was a soldier (Luong 2022). For the older population who had lived through the long years of the Khmer Rouge regime and the civil war from the 1970s to the 1980s, COVID-19 evoked wartime memories and associations. For instance, Karn Lim, who remembered the war, fashioned models of military planes using old bottles. One was a reconnaissance or spy plane, and the other was a bomber. He strung them up from the electricity wires in front of his house (Figure 8).

In the early 1970s, Karn Lim served in the army of Marshal Lon Nol and was trained to recognize American B-52 and Khmer Air Force T-28s, which dropped bombs and caused destruction on land. His two airborne scarecrows reflected both offensive and defensive strategies to protect against COVID-19 germs, which, metaphorically, were airborne and dropped from the sky.

Some scarecrows were heavily adapted to convey multiple public safety messages while still targeting supernatural enemies. Nol Sorn, 47, an ex-soldier in Takeo province, made a curious-



**Figure 7.** Mao Phirom's "engineer scarecrow" had no need for rudimentary weaponry as the engineer's skill was used to restrain COVID-19 and other kinds of magical danger. (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).



**Figure 8.** A spy plane and bomber fashioned from bottles made by Karn Lim and suspended from electricity cables in front of his house. (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).

looking scarecrow of a girl wearing a school bag and straddled on her bicycle, which was propped against the food stall in front of his house (Figure 9).

He put a mask on her face to spread awareness among children in the village that they had to wear face masks to protect themselves from COVID-19. He also mentioned that a helmet had been placed on her head to warn the public in his village that they must be vigilant and on guard against tragic deaths resulting from traffic accidents, which were the main cause of death among young people. The



**Figure 9.** Nol Sorn’s “schoolgirl Cyclist scarecrow” replete with a helmet and schoolbag draped over her shoulder. (Photograph Chou Sam Ath).

school bag and bicycle sent a message to the children that, during the lockdown in 2021, which involved curfews and sealing red zone areas, they had to use their newfound free time to help their parents by riding their bikes around the village while selling their parents’ wares. His scarecrow is a model of good conduct for the villagers.

## Discussion

A pandemic poses an ontological threat to existence: it is only natural that, besides heeding public health messages, people also seek to defend themselves by using culturally embedded means. As demonstrated in this study, the scarecrow is one such method. Scarecrows form a bulwark against contagious and communicable diseases, all of which are considered to originate from the obscure and dark road. Thus, the action of erecting a scarecrow is considered effective, and to make it work, it must become a supernatural being in its own right. The scarecrow functions as a sort of apotropaic device based on the principle of fighting fire with fire. In Buddhist societies, apotropaic methods are ubiquitous in efforts to protect against epidemics such as the plague and cholera (Gramlich-Oka 2009; Higa 1986; McGrath 2021) and, more recently, against COVID-19 (Merli 2020). Apotropaic methods of magical protection are ubiquitous in traditional Cambodian society, and scarecrows are a prime example of such methods of protection, in this case, against COVID-19.

Once activated, the scarecrow is no longer a mere bunch of straw; it becomes a living entity, a military-like figure specially adapted to guard against the supernatural enemy. In his report of livestock as sentinels against the influenza pandemic in Hong Kong, Keck (2014) portrays the bird as a sentinel for pandemic influenza, where various entities, both human and non-human (such as birds,

pigs, viruses, and spirits), engage with each other in anticipation of potential future dangers. Cambodia adequately illustrates Lyttleton's (2018:328) observation that social vulnerability and structural factors can lead to embodied threats to health and insecurity, and, in Lyttleton's terms, "sentinels are expected to offer their bodies." Indeed, people fashioned scarecrows with two key physical features: eyes to see the enemy, a requirement for sentry duty, and a mask, which, in the spirit world, would unravel the face of the terrifying scarecrow to the eyes of the invading enemy. Both processes occur close to the home of the scarecrow owner and their family. The observation that a terrifying face alone, or even a quicklime cross painted out in the front, can do the work of an entire scarecrow resonates with Wickremeratne and Bond's (2006) description in Candy, Sri Lanka, of large scarecrows and demonic masks hung in front of houses under construction to detract *aswaha dosa* or the evil eye.

Traditional forms undergo change, as illustrated by the examples of modernized forms such as the engineer scarecrow, although the underlying belief systems remain. Grant's recent ethnographic work on ultrasound and the visuality of care in Phnom Penh (Grant 2022) reveals a similar case. People view ultrasound images through not just biological but also spiritual lenses, guided by ontologies of how these "images relate to referents;" even within the Buddhist ontology of the impermanence of being, the fetus is viewed as a malleable biological and spiritual entity.

However, in this study, the scarecrow's appearance to humans was not as important as how it appeared to the ghosts that were to be repelled. Anthropologist Kohn (2013:89), in his work with the people of Avila, made this point about the Runa people in Ecuador's Upper Amazon. They made scarecrows with big painted eyes on the head in what was

... an attempt to imagine what from the parakeet's perspective a raptor looks like. The scarecrow is an icon. It stands for a raptor by virtue of the likeness it has with the raptor for somebody—here, the parakeet. By virtue of ... big eyes ... the scarecrow captures something of what a raptor is like for a parakeet. This is why parakeets, but not humans, confuse these scarecrows with raptors.

In Cambodia, the scarecrow is known to be effective in chasing away the invading /rumbal/ ghost-spirit, and, therefore, as mentioned by Kohn (2013:89), "We can know something of what it is like to be a parakeet, and we know this by the effects that our guesses at how parakeets think can have on them." Kohn's impressive deduction is an echo of the nature of perception, as elaborated in Buddhist theory. Cambodian speakers are familiar with the Khmer word /sajjṇaa/ (ស្យាប្រាណ), meaning a sign; it is a loan word from the Pali term central to Buddhist theory. Bhikkhu Sujato (2012) noted the importance of a perception, *saññā*, in Buddhist theory, and cited Buddhaghosa's classic Theravādin treatise *Visuddhimagga*, wherein the section on the Perception Aggregate (*Saññākhaṇḍa*) provides the example of fawns that perceive scarecrows as humans.

The scarecrow, through its clothing and overall form, is personified as a human and sometimes even resembles the owner. It may wear a helmet and look like a human security guard. It does not take a detailed gaze to see that the scarecrow, far from being human, radiates the quality of being a supernatural entity and that the "security guard" is actually a titan in the realm of invisible deities, demons, ghosts, and spirits. This is evident in the demonic forms of the face and eyes. The weaponry of the scarecrows is also interesting to note. Król et al. (2019), in their global review of scarecrows, note that scarecrows in Cambodia are often equipped with spears and wooden rifles. My findings show that scarecrows invariably have weapons of some sort, even if they are not physically apparent. If a scarecrow was magically infused with a protective guardian spirit, it is only logical that it would bear the traditional weaponry of that spirit, as listed comprehensively in these studies (Forest 1992). The villagers add an assortment of clubs, spears, and the like, and in recent times, facsimiles of more modern weapons have been added.

I suggest that, as demonstrated by the behavior of the informants in erecting the scarecrow as a spiritual security guard of the house, parallels can be observed in the work performed by a tutelary guardian spirit /neak taa/ (ង៉ែកតា) and a scarecrow, popularly known as /tiinj moonj/ (ទីងម៉ែង). The tutelary guardian spirit is in charge of the local territory and is capable of protecting humans from supernatural harm arising in that territory (Arensen 2017; Guillou 2017). Kwon (2008) provides

a useful context in Vietnam for thinking through ghostly legacies of war and soldiers that return as spirits, and the same is true in Cambodia. I propose that the scarecrow has a somewhat similar function, as it defends humans against invasion by malevolent spirits associated with diseases and epidemics. The guardian spirit bears weapons, and I suggest that the link between a guardian spirit and a scarecrow is revealed in the alternative linguistic expression /taa moon/ (តាម៉ែង), a compound of “grandfather + club,” where “grandfather” alludes to the guardian spirit /neak taa/ (ង៉ែកតា) armed with a large club /moon/ (ម៉ែង).

Sacker’s (2020) story illustrates the fusion of politics and public health. As the peace process evolved, the Khmer Rouge were legitimized by being brought into the Supreme National Council. According to Peang-Meth (1992), Cambodians called the Council a /tiij moon/ (a scarecrow), and Hun Sen, who was previously condemned as a Vietnamese puppet, was feted as a legitimate leader.

Along similar lines, this study examines the socio-political idiom of the puppet. I describe a metaphor in the supernatural puppet, which spreads the epidemic among the people. The scarecrow is created as a facsimile of the puppet master. This image is rooted in the politics of Cambodia. In 1979, with the People’s Republic of Kampuchea coming to power, Prince Sihanouk accused the Vietnamese-appointed Deputy Prime Minister Hun Sen of being a Hanoi puppet, using the epithet “Vietnamese head, Khmer body.” A decade later, with the announced withdrawal of Vietnamese occupation troops, the government sought to shed its image as a Hanoi puppet (Pear 1990). In the 1990s, when I met soldiers from a recently demobilized Khmer Rouge battalion, they hurled a similar epithet; the Vietnamese were portrayed as poisoning the Khmer nation by spreading AIDS (i.e., they planted Vietnamese prostitutes to spread it among the nation’s soldiers). Forty years later, the opposition accused the government and called it a mere scarecrow, a lifeless and useless body, led from the front by an imported, that is, foreign power. Beyond this, there is a prevalent politically charged narrative suggesting that after years of conflict and control by military and authoritarian structures in Cambodia, people became passive, lacked initiative (O’Leary and Nee 2001), and came to be literally known as scarecrows or robots (Emerson 1997). In my work on gender-based violence (Eisenbruch 2018), I observe how a drunken violent husband is typified as /aa- tiij moon/; the /aa-/ is a particle denoting denigration of the person being referred to – no brains, the body stupid and robotic, resembling a puppet, and dangerous to the wife. In her analysis of a Cambodian Buddhist text, Hansen (2003) describes how children are naïve at birth and can be deceived by adults who may tell them, “Don’t cry or the scarecrow will bite you.” Evidently, a scarecrow on its own is effete, and for it to work, it must be activated with supernatural breath breathed into it.

In 2020, the motive to erect scarecrows was to ward off the COVID-19 germ. By 2022, with over 3,000 deaths, people were terrified when government regulations prevented traditional funerals and sensed that the “counterfeit funerals” were inadequate to bar the wandering spirits of the dead from transforming into and joining the hosts of malevolent *pisāca* and causing another wave of COVID-19. In response, some continued to erect scarecrows despite the government discouraging scarecrows as a superstition, but the practice did not reduce adherence to public health messages in a hybrid format. Older people, who had lived through earlier epidemics such as cholera in the ’50s and ’60s and were skeptical about using scarecrows, accepted their parents’ practices and considered it worth seeking solutions through a combination of public health campaigns as well as traditional healing and religious resources. Young and old alike referred to this double track, known popularly as /ʔaakum psam ʔaayuʔ/ (អាគុមផ្សំអាយុ), an idiomatic expression that literally means “magic compounded with one’s age or life” or in other words, magical protection added alongside medical interventions to increase longevity.

## Conclusion

This is the first comprehensive study of the anthropological significance of scarecrows during an epidemic. These findings prompt reflection on five issues. First, scarecrows are personified in

human form, complete with the accouterments of defense, such as face masks, and at the same time, they are weaponized with clubs, swords, and guns and empowered as superhumans. Given the characterization of the scarecrow as an active and armed sentinel, one can consider it a living being that interacts or confronts the enemy because, in some sense, both inhabit a shared, supernatural world. Investigating how people build and activate a scarecrow, whether through simple ways or by resorting to more elaborate methods through ritual specialists, will help us understand the “birth” of a spiritually and immunologically potent scarecrow. If a scarecrow is born as a living being, it will have a life cycle, indicated by repeated regenerations and, ultimately, by its demise and, if necessary, its replacement.

Second, people do not erect scarecrows randomly but only in response to signals of alarm and danger affecting the community, a fact that calls for investigating what triggers people to erect scarecrows, omens signaling imminent danger, and supernatural instructions.

Third, the findings shed light on the cultural construction of contagion. The scarecrow is a useful entry point for an insider view of (a) a community’s germ theory and the attributions of contagion, (b) the vulnerability of individuals and the nation, (c) risk and threat perception and local cultural solutions to these, and (d) the interplay between interventions by religious leaders or ritual healers and government policy. The scarecrow reveals something of the manner in which people seek protection against supernatural germs, as well as the cultural construction of fear and helplessness. The scarecrow is treated as if it shares some qualities with and might even be an embodiment of celestial deities such as Vessavana, one of the Four Heavenly Kings of Buddhist cosmology. This perception, along with the role of protective Buddhist formulae, the *paritta* recited on activation of the scarecrow, could provide insights into a kind of ethno-immunological system and shed light on the cultural construction of germs, contagion, transmissibility, and epidemics.

Fourth, the scarecrow illustrates the resourcefulness of people as they adapt to the situation, such as donning face masks on the scarecrow when faced with the specter of COVID-19. Although people have begun to fashion their scarecrows using new technologies, questions arise regarding the changing patterns in the purpose of the scarecrow, from defending against infection to being a harbinger of death as a pandemic grips the community.

Fifth, the scarecrow lends moral agency to the helpless or, one might say, the underdog; with the scarecrow, people do not feel as helpless. Although they may seem passive, the scarecrows have a job and the agency to do it. If, as seems likely, the scarecrow is a device that fights fire with fire or, in the classic Buddhist idiom, a thorn to remove a thorn, investigating the ritual ensembles associated with the scarecrow could reveal how society applies its standard principle of apotropaic defense and how this defense could help people feel rejuvenated in the face of moral injury, in this case, the ontological threat posed by the pandemic.

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