

Notes on the Ancient Khmer Contribution to the Religious Culture
of Southeast Asia

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Spring, 2010

1. Introduction

My initial interest in taking up this study was to attempt to locate what (if any) Brahmano-(s)ind(h)ic-yogic cultural markers may have existed in early Cambodian society. Secondly, I wanted to know what (if any) of these cultural markers might be traced: (i) to the process of formation of Siamese/Thai culture in general, and (ii) to the highly refined and individualized philosophic-based yogic technology I had personally come to rediscover, in the sense that these asceto-philosophico-yogic components and principles may signify the presence of salient, self-referential cultural antecedents. Furthermore, these notes represents an attempt to lend students with interests in the region, an array of conceptual access tools as to compliment the given indigenous methodologies "exdogenously" classed as Shamanism, Brahmanism, Bauddha and Yoga, and aid such students as they venture though the region rich in obscurity and shrouding neglect.

2. A Note on Early Thai Religion

As I have elsewhere related, the sasana or "religion" of the modern Thai (and Khmer for that matter) is by and large Buddhist and decidedly of the Southern Hinayanic School of the "so-called" Theravada, 'the Doctrine of the Elders.' But as I have elsewhere suggested, it may much more aptly be described as "Sri Lankan" Buddhism as it gained its early form in very ancient times when in and amongst an educated elite of the island's Sinhalese speakers. Yet it could also be depicted as "Pali" Buddhism due to its adherence to the Pali Language literature, compiled however by the ancient Sinhalese from Sinhalese translations of earlier Pali texts; and further, due to the fact that this "entity" that we are very much obliged to rhetorically label "Theravada Buddhism" regards the body of Pali literature as its paramount

ecclesiastical authority. All the same, it needs to be suggested that the Theravada sect is a historical construction as well as misnomer. It is a highly differentiating class of Buddhist faith with the strong propensity for conceiving itself in contradistinction to all things "Hindu," and the perceived state of disciplinary and doctrinal corruption into which all other Buddhist sects have strayed.

But for a period extending about nine hundred years before the thirteenth-century arrival of Sinhalese Buddhism, a multitude of religious approaches coexisted in thought Southeast Asia. Looking at ancient Thailand alone, these ranged from the Brahmanistic styles of ascetic endeavours to the sundry systems of Shaiva-Shakti worship, from the Vaishnava and Krishna bhakti schools to the Pure Land cults of the Mahayana. Yet in contrast to the conformity-imposing system found there today, the people of Thailand would well be flabbergasted to learn of the great multiplicity of religious forms that flourished in the region before the 14th century. They could hardly accept that there also once existed an awe-inspiring variety of independent religious figures such as shamans, sadhus, yogins and the rishis, that dwelt beyond the pale of any specific community or social convention. These indigenous wisdom-knowers roamed free as the breeze and practiced now-vanished forms of ascetic technology. Such holy men were often skilled healers, as well, and commanded high respect from prominent sectarian leaders.

Today most Thais could hardly begin to fathom the opulent fabric of religious diversity that had formerly been woven between the ancient ruling houses of Tun-sun, Pan-P'an, Lopburi, Nakhon Ratchasima, Chaiya (or its ancient name Grahi),¹ Si Chon, Tambralinga, Sathing Phra, Langakuka, Phatthalung, Pattani, Nakhon Sri Dhammaraj,

¹ Michael Vickerey, "Cambodia and Its Neighbours in the 15th Century," 2004: 14.

and others. Spanning a near one thousand-year period beginning as early as the 5th century CE, a broad range of Brahmanical and Buddhist schools flourished in the independent kingdoms and principalities that once comprised the Central Plains of Thailand and the southerly lying Isthmus of Kra. Numerous forms of Indian religion thrived there. Brahmanic, Mahayanic, Tantrayanic, Vajrayanic and the Pure Land Amitabha and Avalokitesvara sects flourished side by side throughout the overlapping states. They dwelt in a spirit of mutual appreciation with no one heritage having authority over another. The fifth-century Hindu kingdom of Sathing Phra (present day Songkhla province) is an interesting but little-known case in point. This extremely ancient city is one of the earliest and most fascinating kingdoms on record. It was a purely Hindu society and important port and from the 5th to the 8th century. A Hinayana Buddhist school prospered there in the 7th and 8th centuries. During the late 9th to the early 11th centuries, Mahayana Buddhism from Nalanda and Java took root and flowered.²

Indeed, a cursory survey of the Buddhist schools alone is enough to show that, by comparison, the Buddhism practiced in early Thailand was far more diverse than that of Tibet.³ The existence of multiple Hinayanic sects is adequately documented. Archaeological data indicate that the Mulasarvastivada was the dominant Hinayanic school. It prospered in Sathing Phra and in Phatthalung from the 7th to 8th century right alongside varied Brahmanic-Hindu cults. Mahayana Buddhism had already been introduced into the region at this time. By the 9th century, Vajrayana Buddhism reached the Shrivijaya kingdom, possibly through Java. Its particular sentiment was brilliantly expressed through highly evolved modes of religious statuary. Chinese

² My understanding owes much to the help Kamala Tiyavanich, private correspondence, fall, 1998.

³ Kamala Tiyavanich, 1997: 303-4, n. 22.

records, local inscriptions and archaeological remains show that from the end of the 7th through the 11th century the Mahayanic Madhyamika and Caityaka (or Mahasanghika) schools were especially active along the east and west coasts of the southerly Isthmus. So were the Pure Land cults of Avalokitesavara and Amitabha, which spread from China southward. The Pure Land cult was dominant there from the 8th to 11th century. Khmer-influenced sculptures of Avalokitesavara and Maitreya dating from the 7th to 9th century were found further north in Lopburi (an old Mon capital) and in villages around Nakhon Ratchasima and Buriram in the region known today as northeast Thailand.⁴

But the intricate tapestry bequeathed by these states has alas been rendered tenuous with time. One fact however is known for sure; around the second half of the 13th century, Sinhalese Buddhism entered the Central Plains and the Southern Peninsula region of early Thailand and steadily displaced all other religious traditions...

As a major leitmotif, I reiterate the fact that all of the traditions, schools and theories alluded to throughout the course this broader study are, culturally speaking, primarily Hindu, i.e. a product of the Greater Indian cultural milieu. Naturally those elements that arrived to Southeast Asia did so only by the process of filtration, through the various regional cultural screens, and by the gradual processes of accretion, adaptation and evolution. Thus certain features of Vajrayana Buddhism came to Thailand directly from Nalanda in Northeast India while other slightly altered forms came from Java. Khmer Vajrayana was introduced in the 12th century and established itself in two different regions. One infusion came overland through the

⁴ Pattaratorn Chirapavati, *Votive Tablets in Thailand (Origins, Styles & Uses)*, 1998.

Central Plains and Northeast regions while another arrived by sea to the southeast coastal kingdom of Nakhon Sri Thammarat.

At the end of the day, one can only concur with the youthful sentiment of George Coédès—that indeed; it is the tremendous variety of civilizations that existed simultaneously or successively in "Siam," not to mention the entirety of mainland, peninsular and archipelagic Southeast Asia, that makes this such an absorbing area of study.⁵

3. Brahmanism

Prior to the thirteenth-century arrival of Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism to the area that is known today as Thailand, a rich diversity of Hindu, Brahmanical, Mahayanic, Vajrayanic and Tantrayanic religious sects flourished side by side throughout the manifold early kingdoms. But the dominant socio-religious force of the region would best be described as Brahmanism. Brahmanism, per se, is a product of Ancient India. It is not equivalent to Hinduism. Brahmanism is a cultural child of the Pre-Hindu Vedic period in India and may also be referred to as Vedic culture. According to art historian Philip Rawson,

The culture of India has been one of the world's most powerful civilizing forces. [And] the members of that circle of civilizations beyond Burma scattered around the Gulf of Siam and the Java Sea, virtually owe their very existence to the creative influence of Indian ideas. No conquest or invasion, no forced conversion [was ever] imposed [on] them. [The ideas] were adopted because the people saw they were good and that they could use them...⁶

⁵ George Coédès, "Recent Archaeological Progress in Siam," 1927: 57-58.

⁶ Philip Rawson, *The Art of South-East Asia*, 1990, brackets mine.

Such Vedic culture was widely dispersed throughout the greater Southeast Asian region as early as the 1st century CE. Initially small colonies of Indian traders settled initially at landfall places and other advantageous points along the sea routes, in commercial harbours and towns along the extended coasts and on the various islands of Southeast Asia. They naturally imported "their code of living, their conceptions of law and kingship, their rich literature and highly evolved philosophy of life. They intermarried with prominent local families and dynasties evolved capable of organizing extensive kingdoms within which their populations could live ordered and fruitful lives."⁷ The earliest Brahmanic inscriptions discovered in Southeast Asia are those of King Mulavarman (c. 400) at Kutei, Kalimantan (Borneo), and King Purnavarman (c. 450), West Java.

Brahmanism is therefore known to have provided both the driving force and the cultural design for the wide-ranging Indianized kingdoms that blossomed in overseas Kalimantan, Java, Sumatra, Malaya, Cambodia, and the rest. In the case of the Khmer, their Hinduistic kingdom evolved into the powerful Angkorian Empire with its centre at the Great Temple City of Angkor Vat. From there Khmer culture expanded to control nearly all of what is now known as Thailand. Though obscured by centuries of chauvinistic disinheritance, this fundamental Vedic cultural-matrix continues to sustain Thai national culture. The heritage reveals itself in many unexpected ways. Perhaps the most striking is expressed by the fact that the Thai state religion, known today as "Theravada" Buddhism, is culturally derived from Brahmanism. This naturally calls into serious question the doctrinal supposition that Gautama Buddha

⁷ Rawson.

crusaded on an anti-caste, anti-Brahminist platform.⁸ In *Hinduism in Thai Life*, the Indian writer Santosh Desai confronts this very issue.

The Buddhists of ancient India rejected untouchability, Brahmin claims to superiority and ritual pollution. But this applied only to monks and monasteries. A lay Buddhist continued to live in the Hindu cultural milieu, as do Jains of present India. Moreover, some of the most well known Buddhist scholars like Ashvaghosha, Nagarjuna, Asanga and Vasubandhu were Brahmins. Although they adopted and interpreted the teaching of Buddha, culturally they were a part of the Hindu tradition.⁹

4. The Brahmanization of the Bhikkhu Sangha in Thailand

With regard to Thai "Theravadin" Buddhist culture, a feature relevant to our present discussion is its virtual re-instalment of high-caste priests in the form of Bhikkhus, or Buddhist clergy, but with one considerable differentiation. In vivid contrast to the divinely sanctioned caste of Brahmins, the exalted class-status conferred on the Bhikkhu has been perpetuated not by ancestral purity, but by a state-sanctioned system of monastic ordination and lineage construction. In recent times this was largely the work of the energetic Thai prince Mongkut who had joined the bhikkhu sangha (Buddhist monkhood) in 1824, only to disrobe 26 years later and be crowned as King Rama IV.

Mongkut was a reformist monk who studied classical Buddhist texts. He became the head of a highly influential reformist monastery in Bangkok and established a new qasi-orthodox sect called the Dhammayut-nikaya, literally "those who stick to the dhamma (Buddhist doctrine)." He then divided the entire population

⁸ Santosh N. Desai, *Hinduism in Thai Life*, 1980: 2-3, n.

⁹ Desai.

of gamavasi or "city dwelling monks" into two distinct groups within the sangha. Ranked first was his own Dhammayut-nikaya, which was very small and elitist in nature. The remaining vast majority of Buddhist monks were subsequently dubbed Maha-nikaya, literally "great majority sect." Sponsored by Mongkut's own royal family, the Dhammayut-nikaya, gained instant prestige among the lay population as the more austere and orthodox group of city monks.

During this period, however, the Bangkok-centred religious authorities systematically ignored another major segment of the Thai bhikkhu sangha. This group was known as the arannavasi or 'monks that dwelled in the depth of the forest (aranna)' in austere conditions in order to concentrate on yogic-asceticism. This mainly self-regulated sector of the sangha was greatly ignored but certainly not forgotten. In her valuable article, Heikkilä-Horn (1995) writes that after the turn of the 20th century all "unauthorized" wandering ascetics were increasingly marginalized and systematically discredited as aberrant, ill-disciplined and heretical elements within the government-regulated bhikkhu sangha.¹⁰ Now what this may have spelled for the widespread traditions of para-Buddhic tantrics, independent siddhas, yogins and gurus living on the margins of institutional religion is anybody's guess. Already by then a centuries-long campaign of Vedic disinheritance had deeply inculcated the collective Thai mind to malign and repudiate the slightest vestige of its own misunderstood Brahmanical legacy. Such bigoted perceptions would moreover prove crucial in fashioning the modern Thai nation-state just after the turn of the 20th century and the subsequent construction of "Thailand" in 1934.

¹⁰ Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn, 1996: 93-111.

As sovereign Mongkut was careful to cultivate contacts with the various foreign emissaries and to study the rise of colonialism in the region. While the neighbouring countries of Burma and Cambodia were warring against their colonial masters, Mongkut preserved a semblance of diplomatic relations and a nominal independence for the Kingdom of Siam. The Bangkok elite took advantage this period to consolidate its centralized political authority on the newly emerging frontier areas and to begin to engineer a modern nation-state. We also see the blatant use of 'Theravada' Buddhism as a legitimizing force in the state formation process. This was not without its historical precedence.

Since the early thirteenth-century kingdom of Sukhothai, it was known that so-called 'Theravada' Buddhism played an important manipulative role in legitimizing political power and shaping the emerging "Thai" nation-state.¹¹ Sukhothai's founder, king Ram Khamhaeng, was also alleged to have left behind stone inscriptions praising himself, his Buddhist virtues and his close relations to the Buddhist monastic order. But interesting to note, these stone inscriptions have recently aroused much controversy with their authenticity coming under scrutiny.¹² All the same, the inscriptions stand as "an important piece of real or 'invented' history," and as such, remain an imperative early "document of state formation and state building which was legitimated by Buddhist concepts and by the Buddhist monastic community," writes Heikkilä-Horn.¹³ In the later Ayutthaya period (1350-1767) as well we know that the state provided protection to the established sangha against religious competition. In

¹¹ Heikkilä-Horn.

¹² Heikkilä-Horn.

¹³ Heikkilä-Horn.

return, the monks gave legitimacy to the state by ritually accepting material support and attending state ceremonies.¹⁴ This trend has continued into the 21st century.

5. The Thai Sangha Act of 1902

A characteristic element of modern Thai Buddhism, then, is that it is under virtual state control. With the passing of the Sangha Act in 1902 by Mongkut's son and heir to the throne, King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), the position of the sangha within the Thai state became legally defined for the first time. In fact this same legislation still stands today. It demonstrates clearly the totalizing state-centric position that the sangha is intended to hold, stating that 'the administration of religious affairs is just as important as the administration of the state,' and that 'if systematically administered, religious affairs shall be sure to attract more people to the study and practice of religion under the guidance of Buddhist doctrine, thereby leading them to the correct mode of living, in accordance with Buddha's teaching.'¹⁵ After that the state passed a host of other religious reforms "in order to consolidate state power over the whole kingdom" (Bunnag 1984).¹⁶

Beyond these purely legislative acts, the new reformist Dhammayut sect furnished extra and sustained guarantees to the "functioning sangha-state relationship, as members of the sect have ever since [occupied] leading positions in the state sangha hierarchy" (Council of Elders).¹⁷ It was also after the passing of the 1902 Sangha Act that the Siamese monarch fashioned a new Bangkok "court-style" Buddhism. Due largely to these changes the Buddhist faith in Thailand became more

¹⁴ Heikkilä-Horn.

¹⁵ My paraphrased translation. See Jane Bunnag, 1984.

¹⁶ Bunnag.

¹⁷ Bunnag. Brackets mine. See also Yoneo Ishii, 1986:116; and Somboon Suksamran: 1976, 34-43, and 1982: 37-51, both cited in Heikkilä-Horn.

deeply infused with the sentiment of royalty, and monks were turned into sacrosanct princes. This furthermore acted to increase the separation between the ascetic few and the masses of laity, as the stature of the latter was reduced to approximate the rank of social untouchability, and their pre-eminent life-duty was serve to the two highest "castes," vis-à-vis, rulers and priests. Now it ought to be noted that this new "state-centric" court-style Buddhism was actually based on the Royal Khmer precedent.

We may now begin to see how Brahmanical culture continues to exert tremendous influence at every level of Thai social life.

6. Conceptual Mandala-shift

It is amidst these freshly emerging details that we find ourselves presiding over a conceptual mandala-shift, as the traditional epicentre of tantric conventionalism – so vaguely construed in the popular mind – begins to re-emerge upon the Southeast Asian stage. After more than a century of hyper attention on the Indian and Tibetan archetypes, this natural progression ought to be welcomed.

It was in fact my guru who seeded my brain just a few weeks before his decorporealization. The present essay is therefore seen to have commenced upon a narrow trail of directives and clues that emerged from a private conversation with the Master while relaxing after lunch one glorious day. "In ancient times," the guru casually spoke, holding a cup of jasmine tea, "Cambodia was considered an extension of India." He then disclosed the meaning of his family name, Harshavarman, which is not at all Thai, but Royal Khmer. "It means the servant of Indra," he added with a smile. "Indra was the king of the gods..."

Accordingly Harshavarman is a Sanskrit name. Harsha means literally "that which causes the hairs on the back to stand up." It also signifies the Vedic god Indra, the king of the gods. Varman (lit. "coat of mail") is a suffix often attached to the names of Khmer kings implying "protector" or "protégé." The name debuts in Cambodian history with the ascendancy of the first Harshavarman king in the 9th century. This is proven by a terse stone inscription dated 834 that records the "donation of the king Harshavarman to Shiva." Nothing more is known of this early Khmer monarch beyond the fact that his posthumous name is Rudraloka, an epithet denoting "the abode of Shiva." There were later Harshavarman kings as well.

The Guru also told me of the priestly Brahmin families that actually still live in Thailand today, and whose community is centred at the well known Bot Phram or "Brahmin Chapel" in Bangkok. He explained its location near Sao Ching-Cha or "The Giant Swing," the famous city landmark where spectacular festivals in honour of the Vedic god Shiva once took place annually. "I went there many times and talked to the priests," he said. "But we found that our families were not related. We could tell by examining the names. They frankly admitted that they weren't Khmer at all, but had migrated up from the old southern kingdom around the beginning of the century."

7. Suvarnabhumi & the Early Khmer

Three hundred years before the Common Era, Indian kings already knew about the far-off region called Suvarnabhumi. This almost mythical "Land of Gold" was distinguished quite literally for its immense reserves of gold and other natural resources. In those days, Cambodia was an overseas Hindu colony called Kambujadesa.¹⁸ It seems to have achieved near-epical acclaim as an Indo-Chinese El Dorado.

¹⁸ My understanding owes much to R. C. Majumdar, 1944.

The highly fertile and well-watered region corresponded roughly to the broad geographical basin that stretches today from southern Burma eastward to the Mekong Delta. Indeed, there are ancient Sanskrit treatises that classify Cambodia as one of the great sixteen states of India.

The first Cambodian realm began no later than the 1st century CE, coinciding with a prosperous Indianized state known by its Chinese name Funan. Most of what we know of this early kingdom comes from Chinese dynastic annals.¹⁹ From the second to the sixth century, this early Funanese dominion spread across what is today the southern part of Cambodia and the Mekong Delta. Its wealth came mainly from maritime trade. It was favourably positioned at the crossroads of the ancient world's major sea routes that linked the Mediterranean with the China Sea. Commercial exchanges with Rome are certain and by implication Egypt too. Roman coins of Antonius the Pious dated 152 and others representing Marcus Aurelius have been unearthed at excavation sites. Eight centuries after the founding of Funan the great Angkorian Empire emerged with its centre at Angkor Vat. The complete historical movement of the Khmer kings extended more than a thousand years until its eventual decline in the 13th century.

Still, in its heyday, Khmer Civilization spread throughout the Indo-Chinese peninsula from the Bay of Bengal to the China Sea and south to the Isthmus of Kra region. Its rulers bore Hindu, or Vedic names such as Harshavarman, Jayavarman, Yashovarman and Suryavarman. They learned the elements of classical Sanskrit and introduced many of its forms into their own High Khmer language. These facts reflect an intense assimilation of Brahmanical culture. Yet, the thoroughness in which this

¹⁹ William Shawcross, 1991. According to Shawcross, Funan was the seedbed for a fusion between Indian and local culture that produced the new civilization called "Khmer."

culture was imported and absorbed into the fields of literature, science, art and religion cannot be explained by Cambodia's intimate connection with Motherland India alone. Such marked propagation was also due to the flourishing numbers of cultural institutions, conservatories, and diverse ascetic hermitages or ashrams (ashramas) that were established all across the country. Cambodian rulers were themselves responsible for maintaining these citadels of Indian civilization.

Yashovarman ascended the throne in 889. He was a highly educated monarch with liberal religious views. Although a devotee of Shiva, he lavishly patronized Vaishnava sects, and various Hinayanic and Mahayanic Baudha cults as well. He is said to have founded one hundred ashrams throughout the realm where ascetics engaged in piety and study were provided with their daily necessities. Other things granted to these institutions were "pearls, gold, silver, cows, horses, buffaloes, elephants, men, women, and gardens."²⁰ All of these ascetics were free to live in accordance to their own particular custom.

8. Khmer Yoga

The favour that yoga and asceticism enjoyed in the ancient religious life of the Khmer is an area of its culture that deserves due notice.²¹ After all, Shiva, the national god of Cambodia, was considered the ascetic par excellence. According to Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, an authority in the field of Khmer epigraphy and religion,

²⁰ Majumdar, 110.

²¹ Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, "The Religions of Ancient Cambodia," 1997: 52.

...there is often mention of grottoes where asceticism was practiced. The temple of Vat Phu was also a special place for asceticism. Speculations on the syllable Om occupy a large place in the Sanskrit inscriptions of Cambodia.²²

Indeed, the practice of yoga is specifically documented. A Sanskrit inscription by Jayavarman V at Vat Sithor, dated 968, is a vivid illustration of the practices current among the tenth to thirteenth-century Vajrayanic Buddhist schools in Cambodia. In this very important record, the king bestows praise to the religious teacher Kirtipandita for practicing and propagating the teachings of yoga throughout the land.²³

In no other way is Khmer-yoga heritage more deeply expressed than through the famous image of the Buddha with Naga. It was clearly the background of Khmer yoga-tantra that imbued this image with its far-reaching esoteric significance. Nowhere in India or throughout the Indianized states of Southeast Asia did this quintessentially yogic icon become so widespread as among the Khmer. Yet as previously discussed (Harris, "Buddhism & Yoga," 2010), the symbolic importance of the Buddha with Naga lays not in its reference to the enchanted incident in the Hierophantic Buddha's burgeoning career, but rather in its esoteric association with the arousal of an inner primordial energy called kundalini shakti. Buddha with Naga became a main cult icon and was placed in the central Shrine of the Bayon temple; King Jayavarman VIII even identified himself with it.

Bayon temple is contained within the walls of the great Temple City of Angkor Thom, itself situated adjacently north of Angkor Vat. The Bayon was constructed at the end of the 12th century when Buddhism gained prominence under the rule of king

²² Bhattacharya.

²³ Wibke Lobo, "The Figure of Hevajra and Tantric Buddhism," 1997: 72-73.

Jayavarman VII. But it remains unknown if a Buddharaja notion ever displaced the "god-king" tradition of the Devaraja. There are other major unanswered questions as well. For example, what do the four gigantic faces on the Seventh Jayavarman's temple represent? The Bayon has been variously regarded as a temple to Shiva, Brahma, Avalokiteshvara and/or Buddha. It could very well be all of these, and even more. Yet be that as it may, the often mentioned 'break in the Vedic tradition' marked in the reign of the Seventh Jayavarman is likely more apparent than actual. And the Vickery (2004) study (to be mentioned again) of the 1308 inscription by the third reigning king after Jayavarman VII, zooms right in on this overlooked area. For even if a convert to Theravada Buddhism, king Shridravarman's inscription "shows no change in the structure of society, in spite of the new religion" (Vickery). In Bhattacharya's view, as well, the older forms of worship never subsided: "the local cults, whether Hindu or Buddhist, were reunited in the Bayon, a veritable pantheon that functioned both as the kingdom's centre and its image in small."²⁴

9. The Khmer Caste System

The Indian system of caste-division or Varnashrama-dharma was also introduced to Khmer society. Having touched on the subject of caste above, I will now give a more complete explanation. In its purely sociological sense, Varnashrama-dharma organizes society into four occupational and four spiritual divisions (i.e. varna and ashrama) that theoretically function in accordance with dharma or 'duty, natural law.' Ashrama literally means "stage" or "station" and refers to the recognized periods of life that affect Hindu males of the three higher castes. There are four such ashrama:

²⁴ Bhattacharya: 49.

Brahmacara-ashrama (student-stage), Grihastha-ashrama (householder-stage), Vanaprastha-ashrama (forest-dweller stage) and Sannyasa-ashrama (surrender-stage).

Varna means, among other things, "colour." It refers to the four-fold division of society along the lines of "caste" [from Portuguese, 'race,' 'breed,' from Latin castus, 'pure,' 'chaste']. These social classifications were traditionally laid down in the ancient Indian Laws of Manu. The concept of varna also accords with a four-fold typology of human "nature" or "quality."²⁵ The four Hindu varnas are Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra. Brahmins are the priests, intellectuals, doctors and artists; they are the figurative head of the social body. Kshatriyas are the rulers, politicians, corporate executives, administrators and military leaders. They are thought of as the arms of the social body. Vaishyas are businessmen, traders, artisans and agriculturists. Shudras constitute the masses of labourers. These last two divisions represent the belly and the legs of the social body respectively. According to tradition, each caste honours the caste above it, except the priestly Brahmins who honour the gods.

Since remotely ancient times the system of caste has been the governing force in India society. It was jealously guarded down through the ages with an implicit adherence to strict social prohibitions regarding, in particular, inter-caste marriage and all other aspects of social mingling.²⁶ Naturally the system has left itself open to attack by modern social theorists who are prone to become indignant over its perceived stratification along lines of racial exclusiveness. Yet a Marxist appraisal may deserve more scrutiny as the system would appear to be founded on a "division of labour," not to mention the "Asiatic Mode of Production."

²⁵ Varna, as 'colour,' yields other shades of meaning by way of the offshoot Hindi bana, 'attire,' 'garment' and 'disguise.'

²⁶ Ananda Guruge, 1991: 124.

The Khmer, however, did not at all adhere to the classic Varnashrama-dharma caste system, but made significant adaptations. In India, for example, we know that the Brahmin or "priestly-caste" gained early domination over the other three castes. They did this largely through maintaining a monopoly on intellectual and spiritual knowledge, and by making themselves considered to be indispensable to the ruling Kshatriya-caste.²⁷ But this was not the case among the Ancient Khmer.

According to Coedès, the government of the Khmer

was in the hands of an aristocratic oligarchy, and the great offices were held by members of the royal family. [But] the offices of chaplain of the king, officiating priest of the Devaraja, and tutor of the young princes were reserved to members of the great priestly families, within which offices were transmitted in the female line.²⁸

Here we get a glimpse at the important roles that were played by Brahmin priests and gurus, as conductors of tantric rites and sacrifices, thaumaturgic advisors and royal teachers. It was the special intimacy of this Brahmin-Kshatriya caste alliance that ultimately fostered the new state religion called Devaraja at the beginning of the 9th century.

10. Khmer Religion – Shiva & Vishnu

The predominant religion among the ancient Khmer was clearly based on the worship of the Vedic god Shiva. Shiva was described as "a great ascetic with many names." Many Shaiva's epithets also identify him with The Sacred Mountain. He was thus worshipped variously as Girisha, "He who reclines on the mountain," Girisha,

²⁷ H.G. Quaritch Wales, 1931: 57-58.

²⁸ George Coedès, 1975: 120, brackets mine.

"Lord of the mountain," and Giritra, "Protector of the mountain."²⁹ The early importance of this yogic deity is amply demonstrated by Daweewarn: "So great was the influence of this god that in the early 7th century...the king renamed the capital of Kambuja as Ishanapura...City of Shiva."³⁰

But it needs to be mentioned that the religion of Vishnu and the closely allied Bhagavata School, or "devotees of Krishna," flourished from as early as the fourth-century pre-Khmer Funan period. Krishna was the favourite of certain Khmer queens and princesses as well. An inscription dated from the pre-Angkorian reign of Jayavarman I espouses the central Vaishnava doctrine that 'a man may progressively purify himself in the course of his various existences and thereby free himself from successive rebirths, either good or bad, resulting from action (karma).'³¹ Khmer dedication to the cult of Vishnu is most compellingly confirmed by the piety of king Suryavarman II, the monarch responsible for the construction of Angkor Vat during first half of 12th century. Angkor Vat is unreservedly the greatest Vaishnava temple ever known to the world. Unlike all other temples of the Greater Angkor complex, Angkor Vat faces west, the direction of the setting sun, the symbolical pole of the after-world. What is more, in the view of Daweewarn, the incarnation concept of the Devaraja is "a purely Vaishnavite belief."³²

Lord Vishnu most famously appears in Khmer iconography, as reposing on the primordial multi-headed serpent Anantashesha as depicted in a well-known style of temple lintel. This brilliant example of a distinctly Khmer stylistic mode is from the decorative eastern lintel of the mandapa (central shrine) of Phnom Rung Temple in

²⁹ Bhattacharya: 38.

³⁰ Dawee Daweewarn, 1982: 30.

³¹ Bhattacharya: 41.

³² Daweewarn, 34.

present-day northeast Thailand. As I have elsewhere mentioned, this extraordinary carving illustrates the Puranic creation myth of Vishnu reclining with the Anantashesha ("eternal one") in the primordial ocean of eternal bliss before the creation of the world. From Vishnu's navel stems a lotus blossom upon which the tiny Lord Brahma (world creator) sits in the posture of yoga. A uniquely Khmer innovation on the theme is seen by a dragon (in place of the serpent) that supports the whole ensemble.

Yet it must be stated and boldly underscored that the worship of Vishnu found far less acceptance than that of Shiva among the Khmer. Many stone inscriptions bear vivid testimony to the predominance of Shaivism, and to the great popularity of the shivalinga, the stone-sculpted phallic symbol through which the god was mainly worshipped. A stone-hewn bas-relief of two Brahmin ascetics worshipping Shiva bears further testament to Cambodia's affinity with Indian religious culture. The two bearded sadhus wear only loincloths. Their hair is tied in top-knot fashion. They sit on the ground in a casual manner and lean back to back against a low decorative pillar. Each of them holds in their two hands a chilum (ritual clay pipe) as they perform the quintessential Vedic rite of honouring Shiva through a sacramental offering of smoke. The pipes are filled with the herbal offering consisting largely of cannabis-derived substances.³³ The bas-relief is found at the hilltop fortress Prasat Phnom Rung, a Shaivite sanctuary built between the 10th and 13th centuries. It is situated in the present-day Buriram province, Thailand.

³³ Such baked clay pipes are filled with the offering, typically comprised of cannabis-derived substances.

11. Khmer Shaivite Philosophy

There were varied forms of Shiva-based worship and philosophical speculation among the Khmer. Shaivite Monism with its "multiple bodies" philosophy was especially influential there. This was doubly inspired by Adi Shankacacarya's Advaita Vedanta school and by the South-Indian Shaivite Agama ('tantric texts') school. In the 7th and late 9th centuries there were also appearances of the Pashupata school, the sectarian followers of Shiva in the name of Pashupati (pati, 'chief' of the pashu, 'beasts, or un-liberated soul within.'

In a remarkable epigraph dated 1100, Bhattacharya has identified the most characteristic aspect of Indian Agamic Shaivism, that being the feature of diksha or "initiation" mentioned often in Cambodian inscriptions.

Assuming two different aspects, Shiva's energy (shakti) first strengthens the bonds of the soul then frees the soul from them. The strengthening or 'maturing' of the bonds, which have existed for all eternity, is intended solely to help beings bring their intrinsic capabilities to full fruition. When the bonds are ripe, the Energy of Grace comes down to break them. Shiva himself takes on the form of a guru to perform the initiations (diksha), which induce different states in individuals, proportional to their capacities.³⁴

12. Syncretic Tendencies – Harihara

Syncretic tendencies are marked in Khmer culture. They may reflect a spirit of great religious tolerance. It was the compelling Indian notion of the "unity of self" that provided the theoretic underpinning for these stunning developments. Thus the

³⁴ Bhattacharya: 46.

syncretic image of Harihara, half-Vishnu half-Shiva, emerged as early as the pre-Angkorian period. Let us first look briefly at the basic criteria that distinguish the worship of Vishnu and Shiva.

Vaishnavas believe in various avatara or 'messiahs' of Vishnu who arrive (lit. "come down") to this world at critical junctures to restore the path of virtue. Shaivites, on the other hand, reveal the complexity of Shiva's nature through the invocation his 1,008 names and epithets. Vishnu represents not only the primordial emergence of being as expressed in the sleeping Mahavishnu icon, but also the axis mundi or cosmic axis that maintains world order. Therefore Vishnu is known as the "Preserver" and is always exalted as the Unexcelled God by the pantheon of lesser gods themselves. Conversely, Shiva has (or keeps) no "god-friends" and is actually worshiped as the archetypal lone-ascetic of utterly wild and contemptible nature. Shiva is therefore the "God of Destruction" who is often surrounded by a company of pashu or demons. But his ultimate aim is the destruction of the ego; and his fiendish friends represent the psychological barriers of fear. Shiva also represents the principle of time, as is deemed both endless and inescapable. He is therefore (and furthermore) the God of "Creation," as death is not the end of the theatre of life, but an ignorance-obliterating occasion of transmutation.

Shiva's shivalinga or phallic symbol is also to his worshipers what the shalagrama represents to the followers of Vishnu. In other words, the coil-configured fossilized shell of the shalagrama is the symbol of Vishnu's potency or semen; both are believed to possess miraculous properties and emanate the deity's boundless

presence.³⁵ Other correspondences are noted in the fact that the shivalinga and the shalagrama are both kept in temples and on people's private altars, and regularly ritually bathed, anointed and perfumed. The water used to bath these ritual icons is furthermore believed to possess a sin-dispelling quality and devotees drink it after the rite.³⁶

To return to the subject of Harihara, the syncretic half-Vishnu half-Shiva deity: the early importance of this Hindu god is clearly demonstrated in the naming of the royal pre-Angkorian town Hariharalaya or "Abode of Harihara" in the 7th century. It was founded by King Jayavarman I as the capital of his Aninitapura Kingdom. Hariharalaya was the Cambodian capital that immediately preceded Yashovarman's founding of the first Angkorian city of Yashodharapura. Today Hariharalaya is known as Roluos, a dusty hamlet situated a short distance southeast of Angkor Vat in Siem Reap province.

13. Shiva-Buddha Syncretism

Even before the seventh-century founding of Aninitapura by Jayavarman I, Khmer theological speculation revolved mainly around the worship of Shiva. It is also apparent that at a deeper level there existed among the ancient Khmer an intrinsic proclivity for mingling religious notions of the Supreme, as was just demonstrated by the syncretism of Harihara. Yet a far more compelling case in point is observed in the highly creative fusion and confusion of Shiva and Buddha.

³⁵ Shalagrama (shal="tree," grama="village"): the fossil of an extinct species of mollusks particularly found in the Kali Gandaki River and at Dvarka.

³⁶ See Margaret and James Stutley, 1977: 101-2.

In a Sanskrit inscription dated 104 at Phimai (present day Northeast Thailand), Shiva and Buddha are invoked in a way that reveals their concepts merging very close. In another inscription dated twenty-six years later, we witness an enlargement of the classic Hindu-trinity (trimurti) in order to incorporate the historical Buddha in an extraordinarily innovative Shaivite tetralogy called shaivi caturmurti, "Shiva in four-forms." The inscription relates the rising of a shivalinga together with the images of Vishnu, Brahma and Buddha.³⁷ But from the standpoint of Indian Monism – of which both Khmer Shaiva and Bauddha partook – such blending is as natural as it is inevitable. For at their highest metaphysical intensity, respectively, there is hardly any difference in the two religions.³⁸ Hence Shiva, who is absolute and "one in his essence," manifests as a multiplicity of forms; and yet in spite of being multiple, Shiva is "empty" of any discernible determination – as implicitly is Buddha, metaphysically construed, beyond the distinctions inherent in our thinking, and assumes four "bodies"; presumably Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, Nirmanakaya and Shivakaya.³⁹

It would thus be fitting here to mention (Woodward, 2004) that the central image of the great Phimai temple was "most likely" the Naga Protected Buddha named Lord vimaya, 'exempt from illusion,' as reflected in the place name, Phimai in Thai. Of additional interest, Woodward notes that this same Vimaya appears in a southern Indian text as an epithet of Shiva, but only from around the 14th century. He importantly infers from this a significant instance of a Southeast Asian religious development directly transferred to the subcontinent.⁴⁰ It should finally come then as

³⁷ Bhattacharya: 46-47.

³⁸ Bhattacharya

³⁹ Bhattacharya.

⁴⁰ Hiram Woodward, 2004.

no surprise that in a Phimai inscription dated 1129 a consummate fusion of Buddha and Shiva is conclusively achieved.⁴¹ And yet as Bhattacharya wisely remarks, one must always keep in mind that the Indian texts seem to never to grow weary of repeating the adage that "Truth is one," only worshipped by the followers of different religions under various names and forms.

Along this theoretical Shiva-Buddha syncretic vein it is further worth mentioning the royal Khmer inscription dated 1308 by the Khmer king Sirisirindavamma (the Pali form of Sanskrit Shri Shridravarman), the third reigning monarch after Jayavarman VII. It was apparently king Shridravarman who, during his reign (1295-1307), first instituted so-called Theravada Buddhism as the royal cult of Cambodia. Stylistically departing from an earlier Sanskrit epigraphic tradition, he begins his inscription (K.754) in the Pali language proclaiming an endowment to the Mahathera (senior monk) named Sirisirindamoli of 'an entire village, labourers, both men and women, and a Buddha statue.' The same information is repeated in Khmer but the names are in Sanskrit, not Pali. Yet the royal inscription's most remarkable disclosure is the actual name of the Buddha statue, Shri Shrinravamahadeva, considering the fact that "mahadeva" is a name for Shiva (Vickery, 2004).⁴²

14. Primordial Shakti & Human Sacrifice

Extreme, perhaps even excessive forms of Shiva worship were also known in Cambodia. Such tantric perspectives are best understood as the outgrowth of the worship of Shiva's consort Shakti, the personification of the divine primordial power. Her domain is specifically known as Shaktism. She is mainly associated with

⁴¹ The inscription speaks of a devotee of Shiva offering a gift to the "Buddha of the Bamboo Park" and specifies Buddha as identified with Shiva (Bhattacharya: 51.)

⁴² Vickery, 2004: 9.

fecundity and with the life-giving energies of earth. As Shiva's bride, Shakti is also strongly connected to The Sacred Mountain and is variously worshipped as Parvati, "She of the mountains," Uma Haimavati, "The Golden Goddess" and Shikharasini, "She who lives on the summits. "Therefore, Shaktism is mainly distinguished by its symbolical adoration of the female energy of the godhead known as Devi, the Goddess or the Divine Mother. Other main features of Shaktism are its use of mantras (formulas), sorcery, and the propitiation of the Goddess Herself with ritual blood and wine offerings.

With her consort, Shiva, they represent the paradigmatic divine family. The Goddess is eternally at Shiva's side. She gazes on admiringly whether he is dancing the dance of cosmic bliss or decimating his foes. Their love is deep and abiding. In one illustration we observe their family serenely engaged in religious activity. Parvati holds their son, the little Kartikeya in her lap while their second son, the elephant-headed Ganapati, helps his father string together garlands of severed human heads.

But only in the most excessive forms of Shaktism do we see the incorporation of human sacrifice. Where did such practices originate?

In India, the cults of human sacrifice have left an indelible mark on its history. They are thought to have begun around the 7th century in Kamarupa (present day Assam), a marginal border-zone between Vedic and primordial (savage) cultures. Actually, some regard Kamarupa as having been the "Tantric country par excellence."⁴³ Gorakhnath, the twelfth-century tantric yogi-saint and legendary inventor of Hatha-yoga, is believed to have come from Kamarupa. So is the sect of

⁴³ Mircea Eliade, 1964.

Aghori Yogis famous for its "outrageous cruelties and licentiousness."⁴⁴ It was due to the terrifying lives of such ascetics that the appellation "yogi" came to insinuate the most fearsome and extreme of tantric practitioners.⁴⁵

In A History of Assam,⁴⁶ author E.A. Gait tells of the infamous Tantric temple called Kamakhya (or Kamakshya) near present-day Guwahati in Assam.⁴⁷ The temple is situated on a hill called Kamagiri. It is worshipped by sacrifice and eroticism, and considered a great pitha or centre of pilgrimage in honour of the Great Goddess and sexual Tantra. Its enormous sanctity is explained by a legend. It is the place where Shiva and his consort Parvati met for their eon-long erotic encounters. After her death, Shiva went mad and carried her sacred corpse on his shoulder as he wandered through the universe dancing obsessively. To cure Shiva's madness, the god Vishnu cut the Goddess's body into 50 pieces with his discus. These pieces represent the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. The places where her body parts fell became her pithas or sacred pilgrimage sites. The Devi's yoni (vulva) fell at Kamakhya making it the most sacred site of all.⁴⁸ In a shrine within the temple premises there is a rock with a natural cleft resembling a yoni and which is kept permanently moist by a natural spring which runs red with iron oxide once a year, at the onset of the monsoon.

⁴⁴ The name Aghori is usually translated as a-ghora, "not-terrified," "fearless." They are homeless ascetics (anagarika). They frequent cemeteries and eat from human skulls. They once practiced cannibalism. There are reports of their members eating corpses at cremations sites. Aghori Yogis believe that all of man's conditioned tastes and aversions, all of his notions of good and bad, should be destroyed. Apart from God in the form of Shiva (or his consort Devi/Kali, etc.), they respect only their guru. They seem to be descendants of a much older and widespread ascetic order called the Kapalikas, lit., "wearers of skulls."

⁴⁵ Bhattacharya: 51.

⁴⁶ E. A. Gait, 1926.

⁴⁷ Guwahati is the anglicized version of gau-hati ("cow-market"). The direct relation of Sanskrit gau, go and gava to German kuh and English "cow" is evident.

⁴⁸ Michael Magee,, 1995, 7, n.

Kamakhya Temple was also renowned for its performances of human sacrifice. The cult interpreted the Vedic injunction *svarga kamo yajeta* – "the heaven-desiring must sacrifice") – to its most distressing end. In 1565, 140 victims were decapitated during a single sacrificial ceremony. Eliade offers gripping details of the human sacrifices performed in Assam. "Those who volunteered were called *bhogis* ("enjoyers"), and from the moment they announced their intention of allowing themselves to be sacrificed they became almost sacred and everything was put at their disposal; in particular, they were allowed as many women as they wished."⁴⁹ The "voluntary" victims were offered to the Goddess on huge copper trays. According to some sources and archaeological evidence, these sacrifices were only performed by kings.⁵⁰ The last human sacrifices at Kamakhya temple occurred in 1832, then the British government put an end to all the fun.

The worship of the Earth Goddess Teri among the Indian Kondh people is a case worth mentioning. As derived from their early creation myth, the Kondh believe that "there can be no fertility for their community without human blood falling on the ground." Here the role of sacrifice seems to imply two things: 1) that the deity, though considered both impersonal and amorphous, could be made tangible; and 2) that communication was obtainable between the abstract god and its surrounding community.⁵¹ Over time, this cult of the Goddess Teri evolved the notion that human

⁴⁹ See Eliade, 305-6.

⁵⁰ Magee, 7.

⁵¹ According to Stephen Hodge, the Kondh inhabit the entire highland region of Phulbani, most of the highlands in western Ganjam and much of Koraput and Kalahandi in Orissa. Until the middle of the 19th century, human sacrifice was practiced in all this area except the highlands of Ganja where female infanticide was endorsed instead. But the Kondh tradition of human sacrifice is probably not of great antiquity, perhaps post-medieval. Present-day Kondhs continue to practice sacrifice, at least those not converted to Christianity. But since the suppression of human sacrifice by the British in the 1850's, bulls and other animals are used instead. See Hodge, ".dombii as scavenger woman," (24 Apr 2000). For details of the Meriah sacrifices, see Barbara Boal, 1997.

sacrifice was indispensable not only for maintaining the well-being of the surrounding community – but the entire world. This gave rise to the Meriah sacrifices, the victims of which were usually children. Similar to the bhogis, the meriah victims were believed to incarnate the divinity. They were strangled and cut into pieces. The pieces were then buried in the fields for the sake of agricultural fertility.⁵² But here one needs to understand that these sacrificial victims were never "served" to the god as food, as the god was not a cannibal. More accurately stated, each sacrificial victim became for the duration of the ceremony, the actual incarnation of the divinity. In addition, one presumes that the community gained communication with their worshipped god; but only through the go-between agency of the leader, who was also the priest.⁵³ Perhaps this explains why in India and Cambodia where sacrifice was made to the terrible form of the Goddess – as Kali, Durga, Bhairavi, Bhadrakali, et. al. – the sacrifice had to be performed by the king. Brahmins had no right to perform human sacrifice.⁵⁴

Now it needs to be noted that on a comparative time scale, the practice of offering human sacrifice was known among the Khmer as early as the 6th century CE. This is well before its recorded appearance in Indian. In referring to a time before 589 CE, the Chinese History of the Sui gives record of a Khmer Tantric temple that, in fact, still survives.

Near the Capital is a mountain called Ling-kia-po-p'o, at the summit of which is a temple always guarded by a thousand soldiers and consecrated to a spirit named P'o-to-li, to which they sacrifice men. Each year the king himself goes into the temple to make a human sacrifice during the night.

⁵² Bhattacharya: 39.

⁵³ Paul Mus, "L'Inde vue de l'Est: cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa," 1934: 8-11, as cited in Bhattacharya: 39.

⁵⁴ Bhattacharya: 40.

Today this temple is known as Vat Phu. It is located at the summit of Lingaparvata (Ling-kai-po-p'o), a sacred mountain. According to British writer H.G. Quaritch Wales, "Vat Phu always remained a holy place of the utmost sanctity and received the constant gifts and homage of kings."⁵⁵

15. Mountain, Menhir, Linga & Sacrifice

If examined together, the rite of human sacrifice, the worship of the mountain, and the worship of the linga can all be traced to primordial cults that were prevalent throughout the whole of ancient "monsoon Asia."⁵⁶

Initially, these 'proto-tantric' forms of supplication were performed for the promotion of agricultural and feminine fecundity. In this regard, the culturally sophisticated shivalinga as the symbol of the fertilizing energy of Shiva, was originally a primitive phallic symbol "descended from the uncarved stones of earth cults."⁵⁷ And indeed, the rite of setting up large long stones in the soil (vis-à-vis the menhir), and then conducting human sacrifice before them, was a widespread feature of primordial cultures throughout the Neolithic world.⁵⁸

According to Wales, the earliest stage of "simple animism" was founded on the notion of the sacredness of the earth. Later this evolved into a "religion of sacrifice" where a people were compelled to spill human blood before their vastly amorphous divinity-as-nature. Next came the need to establish sacred sites where the sacrifice secured a means of transmission with divinities living in alternate cosmic zones; and

⁵⁵ H.G. Quaritch Wales, 1953: 168-70.

⁵⁶ Bhattacharya: 39.

⁵⁷ Mus: 8-11.

⁵⁸ Menhir ("standing stone") is French as derived from Breton, men, "stone" (from Middle Breton) + hir, "long" (from Middle Breton).

one would choose a certain place to raise a mound of earth in which to concentrate all the latent energies of the periphery.⁵⁹

As for the linga itself, there are varied opinions regarding its meaning and function, particularly as it pertains to Khmer religion and the cult of the Devaraja. Laterally, the linga signifies the Cosmic Axis. Horizontally it serves as the "spatial locus" or hub of the periphery. The linga thus determines the "primal locus" or essential centre of a specific locale. Once it is plotted and formally set, the linga functions as the cardinal point-of-reference to which each subsequent centre is aligned. As a menhir (lit. "long-stone") the linga is also connected to the primitive "substitute body" concept, and to the chief's recognition of "the consubstantial presence in the stone as in himself of the sacred forces of the soil, and therefore, the domain."⁶⁰

The character of the cult is further indicated by the soul's special propensity for human sacrifices.... The custom of offering human sacrifices, or rather severed heads, in the case of head-hunting tribes, probably comes from the magical belief that the soul force of enemies can thus be used to strengthen the accumulation of fertility-producing energy of the local god, for the benefit of the community.⁶¹

The underpinning primordial notion here, according to Wales, is that every territorial unit has its own particular earth divinity corresponding to the group of people living there. Originally, a naturally occurring stone outcrop (Sanskrit, svayambhu-linga).⁶² was chosen as the site to represent the great earth divinity, and

⁵⁹ Wales, 1953: 43-45.

⁶⁰ F.M. Schnitger, 1939: 78-84, as cited in Wales, 1953: 43-45.

⁶¹ Schnitger: 78-84.

⁶² Svayambhu means "naturally occurring" or "self born."

around this, the town grew up. Not only a mound, but a tree as well was required to represent the spirit of the soil, as animistic people believe that the place where a well-grown tree has survived is the point where the fecundating energies of the earth are well concentrated.⁶³

But sacred mounds symbolize more than just the concentrations of nature's mysterious potencies. They are also looked upon as magical centres or "macrocosmic focal points" symbolic of the axis mundi or Cosmic Pillar. They are therefore the means by which a people's sacrifice is ably transmitted to divinities abiding in alternate cosmic zones. Such mounds are deemed to be prototypical mandalas which function simultaneously as manifestations of the divinity and mirrors of the universe.

16. The Cult of the Devaraja

During the ninth-century Khmer reign of Jayavarman II, the religion based mainly on fecundity and the life-giving energy of nature was modified anew. It was replaced by a politicized form of Shaivism founded on rites of the Devaraja (lit. "divine rule"). Through the rites of Devaraja, the king sought empowerment as a cakravartin, or Lord of the World. This implied nothing less than a king's personal deification by merging his soul with the essence of Shiva's subtle being. From this time forward, the rites of Devaraja and the consecration of the king's royal linga became the chief sources of royal legitimacy.⁶⁴ Popular worship of the royal linga also became supreme.

⁶³ Wales, 1953: 43-45.

⁶⁴ Again we observe the integral connection that Cambodia maintained with mainland India and her ever-evolving tantric trends. In his panel address, "Tantrism and the State: Initiating the Monarch," Alexis Sanderson has shown that from the 7th century onwards there was an "emergence and growth of a tradition, beginning in India and spreading to Southeast Asia and the Far East, of giving the monarch Tantric initiation, either Shaiva or

Such sculpted stone phallic representations of Shiva were placed throughout the Khmer Empire. They were normally installed at the summits of pyramidal temple-mountains representing Mount Kailasa, the navel of the universe. Shiva's association with "The Sacred Mountain" has already been mentioned. But now we have Shiva in the symbolic form of a linga placed in the central shrine of a temple, which itself is symbolic of the "sacred mountain." The compound effect can do nothing but swell the ramifications of the primordial concept. As the Cosmic Pillar, or axis mundi, the royal temple that enshrined the linga symbolized the sacred mountain Kailasa, "the abode of the gods." In this way, the linga also plotted the "essential centre" or the primal locus of the Royal Dominion (cakratirtha).

Cambodian monarchs made exacting calculations to determine the kingdom's essential power-point, and there they erected the royal temple. This mysterious "point-zero" furthermore functioned as the fundamental reference point to which all-subsequent centres were aligned. Thus, the linga of the king became the primal locus not only of the immediate geographic locale, but also by extension the entire universe. By erecting temple-mountains to enshrine the royal linga, each succeeding king was essentially constructing a personal quincunx or "four-cornered force-field" in the form of a religio-architectural mandala of universal alignment, power and protection. But mandalas, we should note, are more than just "microcosmic mirrors of the universe." Indeed, mandalas are "receptacles" of the gods. And as Eliade reminds us, in Vedic India the gods "descended into the altar." This conception was, in fact, extremely widespread, and existed beyond the frontiers of India and even of Asia.

Buddhist, the latter by derivation from the former." He further argues that "this practice is central to the character of Tantric religion in its mature form" and that "the centrality of royal initiation has been overlooked because its practice conflicts in awkward ways with key doctrines that sustain the propagation of Tantric observance outside this special and pragmatically crucial case." See Sanderson, 2001.

...[T]he symbolism of royal cities, temples, towns, and, by extension, every human habitation was based upon such a valorization of the sacred place as the center of the world and hence the site of communication with heaven and hell.⁶⁵

Finally, by way of personal observation, one can hardly help reflecting when visiting the ruins of the Greater Angkor Archaeological Complex, that while thieves and archaeologists have deprived the place of nearly every linga that ever stood, there remain an abundance of abandoned yonis.

17. The Sdok Kak Thom Inscription

It was Cambodian king Jayavarman II (770-850) who vowed that the Royal Chaplain would be chosen solely and matrilineally from the family of his guru Shivakaivalya. Thanks to the history-yielding Sdok Kak Thom stone inscription dated 1052 (from the temple of the same name in Prachinburi province, Thailand), we know that the king led an extremely nomadic court life. During his approximately fifty-year rule, he moved the capital no less than five times. The arguable reasons for his peripatetic reign are due in part to pressures exerted by a rival southern empire. But to our interest here, the royal inscription also illustrates the intimate relations that existed between the ruling Kshatriya and priestly Brahmin castes. It states: "Whenever His Majesty King Jayavarman II and his family settled, so did his esteemed guru Shivakaivalya and his family settle."

Next, a character of novelty and colour is vividly introduced into the stone-hewn text. He is Hiranyadama, a Brahmin priest of "presumed Indian birth." At the king's request, in the year 802, Hiranyadama accompanies His Majesty, and His Majesty's guru, into the depths of the moss-laden forests of Mahendraparvata

⁶⁵ Eliade, *Yoga*: 220.

(present-day Mt. Kulen). And there the Brahmin satisfies the king by performing the rites of the Devaraja "so the king may become the cakravartin, or universal ruler." Afterwards he turns to the king's own guru and reveals the secrets of the tantric rites, even teaching him the pertinent Tantric texts.

In 1929 P.C. Bagchi tried to establish that these above alluded to Shaivite texts were four in number and named them as Vinashaika, Sammoha, Nayottara and Shirascheda. These texts, known in India in the 7th and 8th centuries, have also been described as "The Four Faces of Tumburu" – Tumburu here identified as an emanation of Shiva himself, who, again as mentioned above, was depicted as Shaivi caturmurti or "Shiva in four-forms."⁶⁶

Summing up, the Sdok Kak Thom Inscription records the debut of the Khmer Devaraja and verifies the intimate relations that persisted between the priestly Brahmin and ruling Kshatriya castes for two and a half centuries. It lastly ascribes its very own authorship to a blue-blooded Brahmin named Sadashiva, a direct descendant of Shivakaivalya, exactly 250 years after the great political event.

⁶⁶ Shiva is often referred to as caturanana and caturmukha, etc, in Khmer inscriptions. See P.C. Bagchi, "On Some Tantrik Texts Studied in Ancient Kambuja" (in 2 parts), 5, 4 (December 1929): 754-769 and 5, 1 (March 1930): 97-107. The origin of Tumburu is obscure; its conjectured meaning is highly enigmatic. The name also appears in Central Asian Tocharian literature (Dimbure) and in Old Turkic (Dimburi), as recorded in their respective versions of the Sanskrit Maitreyasamtri-nataka wherein Tumburu is mentioned as a Gandharva together with Pancashikha and Citrasena. These three Gandharvas are followers of Dhrtarastra a lokapala, i.e. one of the "Four World-Guardians," specifically of the East. Tumburu is also the name of a yaksha and the brother of the Four Kumari, the four "girl" deities or Mahayaksinyah also referred to as Bhaginis. The four Kumari are portrayed as standing on ships and living in the ocean. Their names appear repeatedly as Jaya, Vijaya, Ajita, and Aparajita. They have a brother called Kumara (though apparently not Kartikeya). His real name seems to have been Tumburu.

18. Emigré Brahmins in Siam

The 13th century saw the rapid decline of the greatly expanded Cambodian Empire. Overseas this corresponded to the Mogul invasions of Motherland India and the severed connections with her distant offspring. Regionally, waning Khmer supremacy invited incursions from its western neighbours. This was also the time that Ram Khamhaeng began the consolidation of his Sukhothai kingdom and the early construction of a Tai national identity. To emphasize their recent liberation from Cambodia, the Sukhothai rulers gave a new definition to their ethnic appellation, and in one fell swoop the Tai became Thai, which was said to mean, "free."⁶⁷ Along with the Siamese-Thai invasions, a new religion also took root in Cambodia. This was Theravada Buddhism, which, in Bhattacharya's view, "made Cambodia what it is today."⁶⁸

With the steady decline of Cambodian court life, many Brahmin families shifted their allegiance to the upstart courts of neighbouring Siam. For, despite the instalment of the popular Buddha-cult and turning that faith into a state decreed religion, the pomp-thirsty rulers of Siam strove hard to surround themselves with all the appurtenances of Hindu culture. And to bolster the façade of theocratic eminence, the Siamese recruited court Brahmins from Cambodia.⁶⁹ But these émigré priests must have suffered greatly as grossly over-qualified foreign relics in a land deficient in Vedic culture.

The unrestrained adoption of Hindu customs was a well-established rule by the 14th century in Siam. In 1350, the new Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya was founded. It

⁶⁷ "Thai" itself is a loosely used word, both in Thai and in foreign languages. See Smalley, 1994.

⁶⁸ Bhattacharya: 50.

⁶⁹ Wales, 1931: 60.

was named after the ancient Indian city of Ayodhya, the legendary birthplace of the Hindu god Rama as narrated in the great Indian epic poem Ramayana, so popular among Southeast Asia courts. In a royal inscription dated 1361, the Ayutthayan King Boromaraja I proclaimed that it was "most essential for kings to possess a knowledge of the Vedas and astronomy."⁷⁰

From the very inception of this new Thai kingdom, its rulers demonstrated two clear ambitions: the comprehensive absorption of Hindu culture and the military conquest of neighbouring Cambodia. Ayutthayan troops moved steadily east and annexed province after province. According to some, but certainly not all of the four divergent Ayutthayan chronicle traditions, Cambodia suffered unremitting attacks from the Siamese forces and in 1431 Angkor Vat was finally sacked. Distrustful, perhaps, of its intricate waterways, they had them destroyed and for additional unknown reasons chose not to occupy the city.⁷¹ The Great Temple City was thus abandoned and Cambodia became a vassal of Siam "unnoticed and almost unmentioned" in history.⁷²

The devastation of Angkor Vat saw the mass recruitment of Khmer Brahmin families by the Ayutthayan court as political advisors, scientists, astrologers, artists, doctors, and conductors of sacred Hindu rites.⁷³ Yet the highest prized gurus and Brahmin priests must have been surely the offspring of Shivakaivalya. For legends

⁷⁰ Desai, 2-3, n. Note also the interesting linguist shift in the Thai name Borommaracha/Boromaraja from the original Khmer-Sanskrit parama-raja-adhi-pati, "supreme-king-original-leader." See Vickery, 2004: 25.

⁷¹ Obviously Shawcross (1991: 41) accepts the tradition that the Ayutthaya actually attacked and sacked the Ankorian capital. Vickery (2004: 22-3), however, contests this view and cites new studies such as Geoff Wade (2000: 265) who describes the various Ayutthayan annals as "hugely dislocated accounts." Vickery favours the "growing consensus that Ayutthaya arose from Hsien [Chinese, Siam] as a coastal power."

⁷² Shawcross.

⁷³ Tragically, most of the historical data pertaining to the migration of Khmer Brahmin communities to Siam were destroyed with the Burmese sack of Ayutthaya in 1767.

still told of the famed tantric family that alone held the keys to the rites of consecration for the awesome cult of the Devaraja that could elevate a king to the stature of a god.

19. Ayutthaya

Khmer influence on the early-Thai sense of kingship is clearly observed from the fourteenth-century Ayutthaya period onward. For one thing, there is a marked departure from the earlier patriarchal tribal leader concept prevalent in thirteenth-century Sukhothai. The Ayutthayan kings were more attracted to the Khmer conception of kingly divinity explicit in the rites of the Devaraja. These later Thai kings did not, however, enshrine the royal linga. Divinity was rather imparted to the kings through their occupancy of the sacred palace and through undergoing abhisheka (ritual bathing) and the rites of coronation, both of which were conducted by Cambodian Brahmin priests. This thereby notes a clear example of the crucial role played by Brahmins in conferring state legitimacy in early Thailand. Yet still to this day, the kings of Thailand are officially identified with the two Hindu deities Shiva and Vishnu through the rites of coronation. In turn, the two deities are believed to transfer their celestial power or shakti to the king.⁷⁴

Naturally the sangha, or Buddhist monkhood, also underwent important changes through the long four-hundred-year Ayutthaya period. Heikkilä-Horn⁷⁵ explains that it was during the Ayutthaya period that the Thai Buddhist sangha were officially divided into two separate groups, the arannavasi and the gamavasi. The arannavasi or "forests-dwelling" monks practiced tapas and other forms of yogic-asceticism. The

⁷⁴ Desai, 46-48.

⁷⁵ Heikkilä-Horn: 93-111.

gamavasi monks rather stayed in the urban monasteries where "they studied, taught the laity and took on social and administrative duties." These city monasteries "were under state control in a profitable symbiosis with the state hierarchy," she writes.⁷⁶

Four centuries after the founding of Ayutthaya a new dynastic line was established in Bangkok. It assumed the Sanskrit name of Chakri, pertaining to a magical disk-like instrument of war (cakra) as used by the Vedic god Harsha, king of the gods. Yet not to depart from established custom, the great House of Chakri acquiesced to precedence and sought to resuscitate Khmer Majesté. Interestingly enough this largely accounts for the present day survival of a vast Sanskritic nomenclature pertaining to all things regal in Thailand. The imperative Thai language usage raja-sap (lit. "royal sound")⁷⁷ is to a very large degree derived from the Sanskritic court language of the Royal Khmer.

With time, however, the great prestige enjoyed by Cambodian Brahmin priests showed marked depreciation and their courtly status grew increasingly subservient. Then around the turn of the 20th century a certain outstanding Cambodian family left the royal service altogether. They carried off with them sacred manuscripts with instructions for conducting important state ceremonies. In attempt to recover these sacred texts, the head of the priestly family's mother was imprisoned by the government. To secure her release some of the manuscripts were handed over. According to Wales, the government actually feared the commotion that a forceful

⁷⁶ Ibid. See also Suksamran (1982), 12-37; and Ishii, 34-55, as cited in Heikkilä-Horn.

⁷⁷ Thai sap from Sanskrit shabda, 'sound, voice, tone.'

attempt to obtain the remaining documents might have caused, and pursued the matter no further.⁷⁸

Finally, with the heightened sophistication of Siamese society accompanying the enlightened rule of King Chulalongkorn, Cambodian Brahmins were once again called on to fill expanding governmental posts. It was a Brahmin family much like this to which the guru was born on the Sagittarian full-moon night of 1900. The family bears the ancient name Harshavarman in its span of a millennia-long line of kings, a royal chaplain named Shivakaivalya, and a wandering ascetic Hiranyadama.

⁷⁸ Wales, 1931, 55.

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