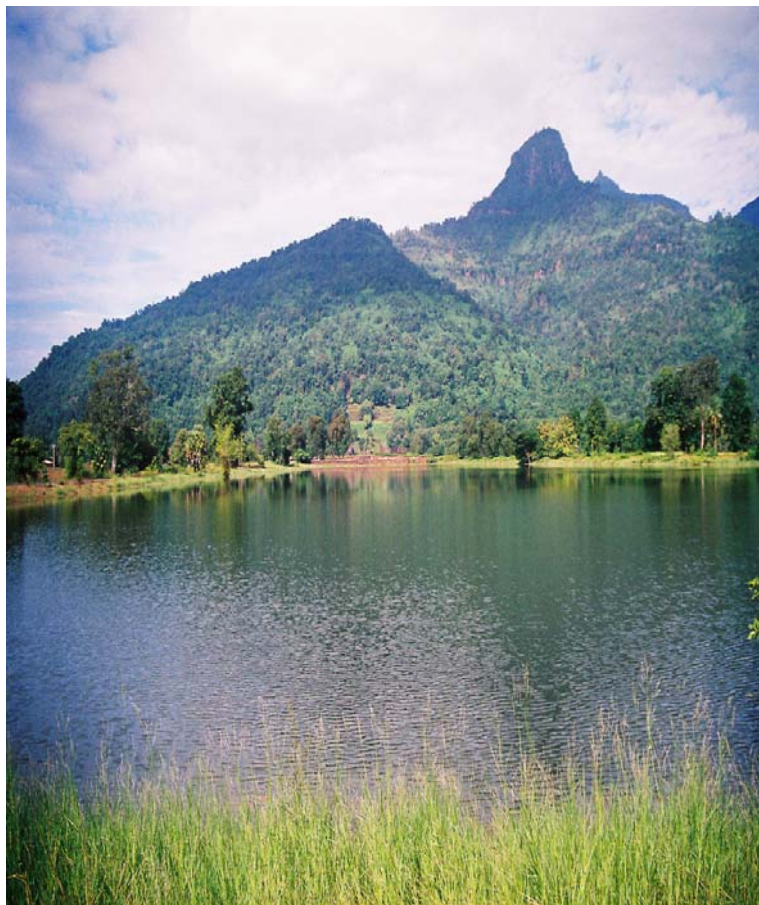


# **THE SOUTH EAST ASIAN REVIEW**

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*Edited by*  
**SACHCHIDNANDA SAHAI**



## **THE SOUTH EAST ASIAN REVIEW**

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# 1

## A Pilgrimage to Vat Phu - Lingaparvata

Willard Van De Bogart

### Section 1: The Holy Land of Kuruksetra

Casting its long golden rays through the diaphanous mist hanging over the tranquil emerald green water of the Mekong River, the sun slowly began to rise on the eastern horizon drenched in a red orange glow, as it anointed Siva on top of Lingaparvata with warm golden hues.

What was about to happen next is part dream, part myth and very much a part of real life. The sequence of events at the time of their occurrence would not fully reveal their hidden meanings to me for several months. How those deeper meanings would eventually surface into awareness is what this story is all about.

Embarking on any pilgrimage to a sacred site is going to provide the mind with a whole new set of meanings and interpretations. Some of those meanings may be quite obvious and others may have a profound effect on your way of thinking which you may be unprepared to understand. So, there is little one can do in preparing for a sacred journey other than finally committing oneself to going on one. This is a story of a pilgrimage to Vat Phu in S. Laos. A day came and I committed myself to making a pilgrimage. Little did I know I would end up at Mt. Kailasa in the Himalayas with Lord Shiva...well almost.

It was early morning and King Devanika, (celestial protection), who came from the Cham holy city of My-Son, was assembling his people to continue their westward journey in search of a sacred mountain which an old rishi named Vaktrashiva told him rose into the heavens and was topped with a crown of gold. The time was about 400AD and King Devanika had been traveling for many days. He had to leave his religious capital of My-Son, near the South China Sea, because warring tribes from the north had weakened and destroyed much of his beloved kingdom. The King brought his architect, King Kammatha, advisors and all his people to find the sacred mountain the old rishi had told him about.

The truth of the exact origins of King Devanika may never be known, but what we do know is that he erected a stone stele which was found at Vat Luong Kau on the western banks of the Mekong River and at the base of the sacred mountain which he was looking for. Lingaparvata (linga of the mountain) was consecrated and a Mahatirtha (very holy place of pilgrimage) was established at its base and named New Kuruksetra (holy land) in honor of the legendary battle fought by Krishna and Arjuna as told in the great Hindu epic the Mahabharata.

Chhom Kunthea's recent research on the 64 lines of Sanskrit inscriptions on the Devanika stele bring to life more fully the scope and detail of the significance of the holy land of New Kuruksetra. Kunthea compares New Kuruksetra at Vat Phu with the original

Kuruksetra in India and focuses on the meaning and background of the Mahatirtha. With the additional research done by Claude Jacques, an epigraphist from France, Kunthea has been able to show that the knowledge and understanding of the Mahabharata was fully understood by King Devanika and his court. Kunthea clearly shows that the influence of the arrival of Indian cosmology to Kambuja was much earlier than is generally accepted by Indo-Cambodian historians. Certainly it is safe to say that the epic story of the Mahabharata was known very well hundreds of years prior to King Devanikas consecrating his New Kuruksetra at the base of Lingaparvata when he erected his stele. We might even infer that the rishi Vkrashiva was the Indian poet guru who helped the new king to establish his Mahatirtha where he did. Vkrashiva was known to have lived in the area as a result of Sanskrit inscriptions found in a cave stating it was his home.

Vat Phu was the first Khmer temple that shows a direct influence of the Mahabharata on the establishment of the holy foundation that would influence all the future Kings of the empire. According to Kunthea the next time Kuruksetra is mentioned in a temple is 7 centuries later when King Suyavarman II created the southwest bas relief at Angkor Wat. Suyavarman's temple additions at Vat Phu and the construction of Angkor Wat, incorporating Kuruksetra, is testimony to the lasting influence Kuruksetra had on the Khmer Kings.

Kunthea's research further shows how many of the inscriptions on King Devanika's stele were taken directly from verses in the Mahabharata. The importance on focusing on these lines of Devanika's stele was to reveal the spiritual significance tirthas had in India which in turn lent understanding to the holy tirtha (water tank) dug by Devanika at Vat Phu and which can still be seen today.

The tirtha of King Devanika, remarks Kunthea, was as important as the tirtha in Kuruksetra in India. By bathing or dipping in the waters of this tirtha all sins would be washed away. Everyone would go to this watery tank and pray to the gods. Pilgrims only had to recite the mantra,

I'll go to Kurukseta

I'll stay in Kuruksetra,  
then one would become free from all suffering.

To demonstrate even further how the influence of the epic poems of the Mahabharata and Ramayana were honored at Vat Phu one need only visit the UNESCO Project holdings of found sculptures in and around the Vat Phu complex. Through the assistance of Tha Sirychantho, chief administrator for Vat Phu, I was able to see this most amazing collection of lingams, ante-fixes, an un-deciphered stele, and a pedestal for Nandin the bull, also found at Vat Luong Kau, showing a Sanskrit inscription. The inscription has been deciphered by Claude Jacques in an unpublished paper titled: "Mahendrarvarman's Campaigns in North-East Thailand".

But, by far the most exquisite of the stored sculptures is the one showing Hanuman, the Monkey God King, saving Sita from the evil King Ravana. This un-displayed piece of Khmer art shows the beauty of Sita with her long flowing dress as she is whisked away in flight from the evil king.

The story of Shiva and Sita is one of the most emotionally moving stories in the Ramayana and the sculpted image was placed somewhere in Vat Phu honoring the rescue of Sita.

Kuruksetra would attract spiritual pilgrimages by Khmer Kings for the next 1000 years. This was the beginning, the birth place, and the cradle of the greatest civilization on Earth; it would be known as the Khmer Empire. Over 400 years would pass before King Jayavarman II would inaugurate this wondrous empire on top on Mt. Mahendraparvata (Mt.Kulen) in 802AD.

In the meantime, however, Kuruksetra, had become a magical kingdom. King Kammatha, builder of temples, set upon the top of the mountain a golden linga which gleaned in the morning sunlight. The spring water which came forth from the base of the mountain was channeled into a sacred shrine and would be the holy water for all oblations to Shiva. King Devanika's kingdom flourished and word spread quickly of the holiest city in all the land. Following King Devanika a new Chenla capital city was named after the first King of the newly formed Khmer empire. King Shrestavarman was the son of Srutavarman who was in turn the 1<sup>st</sup> King of Kanbuja (Cambodia) and a direct descendant of the lunar race or soma line from India. Srutavarman claims to have been a direct descendant of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Kundinya lineage which formed the genealogy for the succeeding dynasties of the Khmer empire.

The new capital was named Shresthapura. The birth of the Khmer empire began in the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century in Kuruksetra, or what is today known as Champassak, in honor of the Cham King Devanika. The temple of Vat Phu would house the sacred linga of Shiva under the vocable of Bhadresvara, patron saint of the Chams, and act as the spiritual focal point for a long line of Khmer Kings who would develop the Khmer empire all the way through to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The implications of the significance for this lasting duration of Vat Phu as a spiritual center can not be underestimated for its influence and meaning when applied to the Khmer civilization. Vat Phu was in all respects a temple modeling the universe and the beliefs which were held secret by the future purohitas and hotars had a lot to do with the way the civilization evolved. Shiva had shown to the world that he was in fact the most respected of all the manifestations of Vishnu. Mt. Kailasa is a very sacred mountain in the Himalayas and mythologically considered to be the sacred abode of Shiva and his wife Parvati.

Mt. Phu Kao (chignon mountain) is another very sacred mountain and is located in S Laos in Champassak, and even though it is not in the Himalayas it is also considered to be the holy abode of Lord Shiva and known today as Lingaparvata. (linga of the mountain).

The knowledge of time and space was attributed to divine beings, gods, who created the manifest universe as we know it today. The ancient cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia alluded to knowledge of the heavens and ancient Vedic texts likewise tell the story of creation. These stories of long ago are referred to as the creation myths. However, to only read these ancient translations as myth misses the fact that they were real stories about real events taking place in the real universe.

The pilgrimage to Vat Phu afforded me the opportunity to learn about the architects of the universe known a Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. In order that their story of creation would never be forgotten the demigods of an age long forgotten fashioned the material world to mirror their knowledge of the universe. The teachings were passed down from millennium to millennium until today those stories have been preserved by countless carvings left on stone temples all over the world honoring the origin of the



gods, by encoding those stories in pictograms, hieroglyphs, and ancient texts with symbolic references to the heavens.

The Kings who came upon Lingaparvata in South Laos surely must have thought they were being communicated to by the heavenly hosts of creation as they witnessed that high atop the mountain, fashioned by nature's creative forces, a natural linga. Here was a symbol of Lord Shiva, and below his heavenly abode ran a cosmic river reflecting the stars of the Milky Way galaxy. The entire land was filled with the auspiciousness of Shiva. From the top of the mountain Shiva was holding the mighty Ganges River in his hair, and slowly he allowed it to trickle to earth so prosperity and well being could be enjoyed by all living things. Surely no other place could be more holy than Lingaparvata in S Laos except for Mt. Kailasa in the Himalayas or Mount Meru in mythical Shambhala.

While I stood still on the edge of an old motorized raft laden with food and animals to be taken to local markets I saw the western banks of the Mekong River slowly come into focus. As I approached the land I could see thatched houses lining the streets and high in the sky was the silhouette of Lingaparvata peaking through the morning haze. I knew at that moment I was about to relive one of the most important periods of SE Asian history as King Devanika had done over 1,500 years ago by establishing a holy land that would eventually become the birth place of the Khmer empire. The holy land of Kuruksetra was about to be entered. Once I set foot on the land of this ancient city I could not help notice how quiet every thing was. The cattle were grazing on the open roads and the mood was extremely peaceful. It felt as though time had intentionally forgotten the small town of Champassak, and a distinctive air of a long gone center of religious activity could still be felt. The evening approached and with it a warm dark velvet sky punctuated with a million sparkling stars. I had made it to the holy land of Kuruksetra.



Crossing the Mekong River to Champassak

As I adjusted to my surroundings I prepared myself for an early evening sleep as I knew I would need plenty of rest for the journey up the mountain to see the ancient temple of Vat Phu. As I was sleeping the dream came unannounced and from high in the night sky a tumbling cube came falling to earth. The cube became larger and larger until it seemed I was at the center of the cube. I was surrounded by white walls and noticed a door opening, and in walked what appeared to be people all dressed in long white robes. They talked to me and told me I was a two dimensional person and that they were multidimensional. They presented a small book for me to read but said everything in it was a secret. They then showed me a person being put into a golden colored box which seemed to contain a yellow liquid of some sort. When I looked into the box I saw things flying all around in a whirl pool of energy.

I asked if I could go outside of the room. They said I could but if I did the things I saw and read would not be known anymore. Only in this small room along with the golden liquid cube was I able to listen to everything they said. I can not recall all they told me. The dream was extremely clear as if I were actually in such a room.

I was awakened by a ringing sound and realized it was the sound of a Buddhist bell permeating the early morning solitude of Champassak. The bell was on Vat Thong's temple grounds which I passed upon first entering the holy land of Kuruksetra.

That morning, while I was walking down the dirt road to visit Vat Thong, the image of the tumbling cube was still in my mind. When I arrived at Vat Thong I saw the most beautifully decorated golden bell tower over looking Phu Kao Mountain.

It did not take much hesitation on my part to climb the steep inclined stair case that reached to the top of the bell tower. With my camera slung over my shoulder I was hoping to capture a better view of Lingaparvata. Once on top I had the most beautiful view of the surrounding holy land of Kuruksetra. Totally entranced with the view and walking in a circle around the top of the bell tower a most unfortunate accident took place. A dull gong like sound entered the air which was immediately followed by a sharp pain to my forehead, accompanied by warm red blood flowing down my face. I was stunned and my head was throbbing, dizziness set in and everything started spinning underneath me. In an instant serenity was turned into fear thinking that a sever cut to my head might require stitches. I had walked directly into the bell making everything start to turn and spin before my eyes as I descended the staircase which seemed extremely wobbly and very steep. Water was my first priority which I saw coming out of a hose next to a stupa on the temple grounds. Numb and bewildered the water felt cool and rejuvenating. Was this the end of my pilgrimage or an initiation to enter this most sacred ground? Was it necessary to spill blood before Vat Phu became a reality for me to explore? I had journeyed to far to stop now and kept my determination and resolve to continue with my pilgrimage.

I suppose a dream of a cube coming from space with white robed people talking to me and showing me a golden liquid whirlpool in another cube, followed by walking into a bell at Vat Thong could be looked upon as just a series of unconnected events and no more. Somehow I thought differently about these unusual events. I certainly felt very different from when I first got out of bed that morning.

I met my guide Bountham Penkham back at the Vong Paseud guest house and we immediately left for Vat Phu. The entrance to Vat Phu was about 10KM from the guest house. It was extremely hot and dry. The landscape appeared as if you were entering an alien world and the world you left behind never existed. Pockets of mud and algae made the landscape appear alien and surreal. The entire countryside looked as if nobody ever came here with the exception of the villagers who erected their thatched homes.

I realized I was in a very ancient land which had been the cradle of the Khmer civilization. I looked for as many indications of this former empire as I could based on what knowledge I had accumulated since November of 2003 when I was in Vientiane, Laos. From that time until now, April 2, 2005, pilgrimages were made to Preah Vihear and Beng Mealea in Cambodia. Everything I read of the Khmers always referred back to Vat Phu. Then out of the corner of my eye I noticed a sandstone pedestal which was used for a statue and was lying half buried in the ground. It was my first architectural sighting on the Kuruksetra plains. Further ahead of the pedestal was a small shrine in total ruins

pointing directly at the Lingaparvata and sitting solemnly underneath a large tree. Upon closer inspection it may have been a Neak Ta mound holding ancestral spirits. The condition of the shrine made it hard to determine exactly what was there, but it was a certainty that an effort had recently been made to provide some sort of protection from the weather. The use of the mound had long since been abandoned as was evidenced by the collapsed enclosure under the tree. However, to my amazement, when I returned to Vat Phu 6 months later a completely new enclosure had been built around this sacred spot. I was happy to see that since my first visit to this shrine, when it was in shambles, was now restored and the spirits were still being honored. I could not help but feel that my first visit had re-awakened the spirits that were already at the mound and their powers were now felt by the villagers encouraging them to once again honor the spirits with a proper shrine.

Surely the shrine was an active site for many hundreds of years, and it was a visible confirmation that far from the main sanctuary of Vat Phu a shrine was placed on the Kuruksetra plains to continually pay respect to Shiva on top of Lingaparvata. At this point I had no idea what to expect next as we continued on to Vat Phu.

Near the entrance we were greeted by Thongkhoun Boriboune, the current Director of Vat Phu. I had been introduced by letter to Thongkhoun Boriboune by Thongsa Sayavongkhamdy, Director General of the Department of Museums and Archaeology Ministry of Information and Culture, in Vientiane. Thongsa was the person responsible for getting Vat Phu to be put on the list of World Heritage Sites in 2003. Through meeting Thongsa, in Nov. 2003, I was then recommended to Thongkhoun to support me on my quest to understand Vat Phu. Once Bountham, my guide, arrived at the eastern most baray the atmosphere all around the base of the mountain was perfectly quiet. Frozen in time is an expression that comes to mind to describe what I was feeling. Very far ahead were the outlines of a temple, but from where I was standing only water lilies were reflecting the morning sun.

The approach to Vat Phu is solemn and dignified with a grand walkway lined with lotus carved columns exuding a different sense of time the closer you approach the main palace. It was so supremely quiet that it was as if an entirely different space had been entered. Somehow I felt I had passed into another dimension of time and could not help remember standing in the cube in my dream the night before. The cattle were grazing on the plains as they had for centuries completely oblivious to the strangers who were walking directly in front of them. Truly nothing had changed over the centuries.

When King Devanika saw this land over 1,500 years ago he too had to have been struck by the natural symmetry that lay stretched out before him. From the top of the Lingaparvata to the river of stars directly behind him he had to have thought he was in a magical kingdom. For over 1500 years this land acted as a spiritual focal point where Lord Shiva lived with his wife Parvati. Two ancient trees formed a natural gate into the palace grounds. On the north side of the causeway the northern palace stood majestically still and stately as if still occupied by kings studying their scriptures. These temple additions to the land come from a long line of Kings who started coming to Vat Phu to receive what can only be considered the most holy instructions to honor the living Shiva, understand his celestial abode and give guidance in governing their Empire. How fitting then that Devanika's name is translated to mean (celestial protection).



Vat Phu

What is known of the ancient city of Shresthapura is very little. The research done in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by scholars such as Louis Finot, Georges Coedes, Henri Parmentier and Etienne Aymonier provide valuable historical perspectives on Vat Phu gained from the inscriptions on the Devanika stele found in the surrounding area. The Devanika stele was found at Vat Luong Kua and translated by Coedes and Claude Jacques with further research done by Chhom Kunthea which led to more insights on the historical beginnings at Shresthapura. Charles Higham, from New Zealand, has provided excellent background research of the early civilizations before the Khmer Kings came to the Kuruksetra plains. Finally, the exhaustive work of Lawrence Palmer Briggs pulled all the Khmer research together in a book he published in 1949 titled “The Ancient Khmer Empire”.

After King Devanika’s reign there is epigraphic evidence showing a lineage of successors to the throne, albeit the details on the duration of their individual reigns is hard to identify. Shresthapura would act as a focal point to educate and establish the many ministerial decisions that would last for 400 years before King Jayavarman II established the Khmer Empire in 802AD. Eventually the seat of the Khmer Empire would be re-located to Angkor Wat where King Suyavarman I began the foundation of the most astounding temple mirroring the secrets of the universe. All the Khmer Kings, all the way up to King Suyavarman VIII, would pay tribute to Vat Phu by adding new additions to the temple and supporting the daily functioning of the temple with supplies and food. Unfortunately, the sacking of Angkor Wat, by Siam in 1471 AD, brought a slow abandonment of all temples in the empire as well as the wonton destruction and removal of the most important documents showing the significance of the empires operation.

But as in the beginning, Vat Phu made a peaceful transition to become a place for sacred pilgrimages even without the support it had received up until King Suyavarman. As a consequence Vat Phu is the only ancient city that still has intact its foundation walls from the early 5<sup>th</sup> century prompting it to be registered as a World Heritage Site in 2003, and an untrammled land from the ravages of war, but not the tempers of Mother Nature which has eroded and felled many of the stone structures.

So, passing through the ancient trees onto the temple grounds today can still capture the mood of what it was like 1,500 years ago. And of course the Lingaparvata, sacred mountain springs and the mighty Mekong River are unchanged with time.

## **Section 2: The Palace of the Kings**



View of the Northern Palace on the left and Southern Palace on the right.

Hundreds of years would pass before these great temple palaces would be erected. During this time a cosmic union took place which wedded the nature spirits of the Khmers with the ancient beliefs of India that were transmitted by the Brahmin priests. This combination of the natural lingam protruding from the top of the mountain combined with the symbolism associated with the Shiva lingam made a most unique divine environment for the development of the Khmer cosmology.

This pre-Ankorean center slowly became a training center for ushering in another kingdom devoted to the holy trinity of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. In fact the belief that Shiva's presence was actually on the mountain is totally understandable. The centuries before Suyavarman II are lost in history, but the presence of the palaces and sanctuary testifies to the importance this holy land held for the Khmer kings. The decision was made to create a temple devoted to Shiva by creating a long axial approach to the sacred spring on top of the hill from whence the holy waters flowed from Shiva's hair and gave life to all the inhabitants of earth.

Two identical and symmetrical palaces sit on the ground one north and one south as if some heavenly secret was trying to be conveyed by this architectural uniqueness. It was built by King Suyavarman II who gained experience and knowledge from building Angkor Wat. He knew how to incorporate the secrets of heaven into Vat Phu's construction. But what were those secrets? What sacred design was the King trying to convey? Are there other symmetries at Vat Phu that might lend a hint for the reason of their construction? The answer to these questions is that there are numerous symmetries at Vat Phu all of which mirror the heavens.

These two magnificent quadrangles sit on the ground defying interpretation. We can gain some understanding of those secrets by referring back to ancient Vedic texts where the understanding and significance of the movement of heavenly bodies was a subject of study and expertise known by the ancient Vedic astronomers. If we refer to the scholarly text "Hamlet's Mill" written by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend in 1969 we learn that the quadrangle was another name for the earth. The importance attributed to this concept by the temple builders lends understanding as to why the builders chose these two quadrangles at Vat Phu.

An excerpt from Hamlet's Mill (p.253) states that, "Earth" is the implied plane through the four points of the year marked by the equinoxes and solstices, in other words the ecliptic. And this is why this earth is very frequently said to be quadrangular. The four "corners" that is, the zodiacal constellations rising heliacally at both the equinoxes

and solstices, parts of the “frame” Skambha, are the points which determine the “earth”. The northern palace quadrangle represented the equinoxes and the southern palace represented the solstices.

Every world age has its own “earth”. A new “earth” arises, when another set of zodiacal constellations are brought in by the Precession which determines the year points. Skambha is the world axis.” This will not be the only astronomical reference used by the builders at Vat Phu. But as I had come to learn the whirl pool of energy I had in my dream was incorporated into the design of the upper most sanctuary along with the world axis known as Skambha mentioned in the hymns of the ancient Atharva Vedic texts. I strongly suspect Vat Phu housed an astronomical library and was a sacred temple for understanding the workings of the heavens. This knowledge was the foundation and spiritual force which was able to launch one of the greatest empires on earth. I will mention the astronomical significance in section 3.

I think what you have to do when encountering a new temple is try and imagine what it was like living in and among the temple grounds. If you slowly walk up and down the stately corridors between the massive laterite walls under the imagined pinnacled roof with the rooms and corridors all filled with rare incense then the beginnings of a mood overtakes the senses and you start to get lost in a world long gone from today. Beautiful balustrade windows lined the corridor facing the causeway casting decorative shadows on the long sandstone floor. The windows of both the north and south palaces face the axial causeway that goes all the way to the upper most sanctuary.

I entered the palace, however, from the eastern portal next to the false door. High above on the corner was a naga ante-fix staring out onto the grounds warding off any who would come too near. The two tiered triangular pediments form a truss like structure for the roof beams which originally enclosed the great corridors truly giving the impression of a vast temple pointing to the heavens. Directly above the eastern portal was none other than Lord Shiva and his wife Uma riding Nandin the bull in a northerly direction. This was surely Shiva’s earthly home.

Once inside the palace there is a large quadrangular court yard completely surrounded by a 62m by 42m rectangular corridor complex. I immediately recalled my dream the night before of standing in a cube which was inside a cube, and now here before me were both the outer corridors and the open inner sanctuary of the palace. I remembered that in my dream if I left the inner cube I would forget everything told to me by my celestial teachers. I could only surmise that in the evenings when the stars could be seen in the heavens, framed by the inner walls of the palace quadrangle, would the secrets of Vat Phu be revealed. Surely no roof could have spanned such a large open space. The coincidence of seeing this large open court yard for the first time, and recalling my dream seemed all too familiar to me.

It was if I were reliving an experience from a very long time ago. I became very suspect that I had been here before, but of course I knew that was a thought I dared not entertain. However, if this court yard was similar to the cube within a cube from my dream then where might the symbolism of the swirling vortex inside the liquid orange cube be found? What did the incident with the bell tower that left a large cut in the center of my forehead mean?

In the SE corner of the northern palace is a small room and outside of this room, facing east, is a false door and the tympanum above the door shows Shiva and his wife

riding Nandin the bull. The ante-fixes are naga heads giving this corner of the palace a very important feeling. Perhaps this was the king's sleeping quarters. Fallen on the floor in the room is a perfectly cut triangular stone acting as the peak stone for one of the two tiered pediments which formed the roof. A small door sits up a few stairs and separates this corner room from the rest of the long east – west gallery. Directly north of the corner room you can cross through another doorway entering the long corridor going due north. Unfortunately parts of this corridor have almost completely collapsed. From this corner room the king could circumambulate all around the quadrangle (universe) before ending back in his room. The same was true for the southern palace.

The main entrance to the northern palace is in the center of the long corridor which is aligned east and west and facing the causeway. Extending from these central entrances are two foreparts with porches. Directly across the causeway from the northern palace's central entrance is the entrance to the southern palace. This is a perfect example of the symmetry executed by King Suyavarman's builders. Walking out of the northern palace's median forepart I turned around to see where I had just come from wondering if I would ever see this celestial home again. I happened to glance down at the bottom of the colonettes next to the door frame and there, almost eroded completely away, sat both Shiva and his wife in a very relaxed and endearing pose. I had no doubts this was a tribute to the palace being their home.

There has been speculation that the northern palace was for men and the southern palace for women. I would offer instead that the northern palace was for the King and his wife and the southern palace was for the priests, guides and other members of the king's court. The southern palace has a completely different feeling from the northern palace. Even though it is perfectly symmetrical with the northern palace it feels very distant and more removed. It is my speculation that the southern palace represents the vernal equinox. The southern court yard seems to exude a more open feeling as if more people gathered here. On the contrary the northern palace courtyard felt private and more sacred and represents the summer solstice. It has already been established that the placement of the two baray's have astronomical significance. The northern baray reflects the sun during the summer solstice and the baray aligned with the axial pathway leading to the main sanctuary reflects the sun during the vernal equinox.

High above the western end of the east-west corridor of the southern palace, with the Lingaparvata in the background, is a perfectly good example of the use of the pyramidal place stones forming the two tiered triangular roof. The corner room at the western end of the NE corner may have been the room where the head priest stayed.

The door way at the west end of the southern palace's NW corner that connects with the south corridor has to have two of the most beautiful sand stone carvings still in tact above the lintels. I had to climb to the top of the inner western wall of the southern corridor to position my camera in order to capture these carvings. One feature I found to be most interesting was a spiral carved on the stomach of one of the personages. I believe this is a scribe and his markings signify his knowledge of astronomy and the astronomical significance employed in the construction of Vat Phu. There is also a spiral carved on the Buddha's foot print on the rock faced cliff behind the main sanctuary.

The building directly behind the southern palace is called Nandi Hall because a statue of a bull (Shiva's mount Nandin) was found near the base of the building. I believe it was used as a hall of records, and was easily accessible from the southern palace for all

the scribes. Nandi Hall was also directly south of the lotus lined causeway which originally was covered by an arched roof and a gallery on both sides.

These three buildings at the base of the main sanctuary prepared the Kings and devotees for their ascension to the holy Shiva lingam. Climbing up the terraces and staircases were structures on either side reflecting the cosmology of the ancient Hindu astronomers.

Interestingly there are 36 lotus columns on each side of this causeway numbering 72 in all. It is this number 72 which is a strong indication on Vat Phu's encoding of astronomical events. The numbers which occur with great frequency in all the world myths are 12, 30, 72 and 360. But the most significant number encoded into the "myth-code", acting like a cipher for understanding all the other numbers, is 72.

It is an astronomical fact that it takes 71.6 years (72) for the equinoctial sun to move one degree on the path of the ecliptic. In 2160 years the sun would have moved 30 degrees or one New World Age. After the sun had traveled 360 degrees (360 x 72) 25,920 years would have passed equaling one complete processional cycle or a "Great Year". After the "Great Year" the next cycle would begin called the "Great Return". The "Great Return" signifies the return to the golden age when men were gods. This "Great Return" is now taking place in the heavens and our earth is about to fully enter another New World Age called the Aquarian Age in the tropical zodiac. In the sidereal zodiac using the Nakshastras of India Lord Shiva will be nearest this point of the "Great Return" in the year 2012. This is the time when the Nakshastra named Ardra is closest to Vishnunabhi, the eye of Brahma, Moola, or the galactic center during summer solstice of 2012AD. This most significant astronomical event was recognized by the temple builders at Vat Phu and was encoded into the oldest existing structure. The priests aligned the sandstone chapel located next to the sacred spring behind the main sanctuary with the summer solstice.

Thus the lotus pathway of 72 lotus columns attuned the spiritual seeker with the frequency necessary for their ultimate journey of becoming immortal gods. Once the pilgrims reached the end of the 72 lotus column lined causeway they began their long aromatic journey beginning with the first stairway leading to the main sanctuary. The stairways are lined with fragrant frangipani trees making the senses become overwhelmed with the scents of the white flowers filling the air.

At the top of the 1<sup>st</sup> stairway I experienced an awakening to a new reality that I had a great deal of difficulty accepting. It was a juxtaposition of images that I could not help be affected by. I immediately recalled the feeling I had at the Angkor Conservatoire in Siem Reap when I encountered the recovered statues of Shiva from Beng Mealea. Now, here before me were two fallen headless human statues lying on the ground with their feet adorned with toe rings affixed to the pedestal where they once stood.

Their sampots were facing the sky in all their intricate detail and I could not help but feel that these statues should still be standing. There was something more powerful at Vat Phu that defied that these fallen guardians to the upper sanctuary should be where they were. I wanted to lift them back up and bring their nobility back to them as it once was. The reality of how ancient and how neglected these mighty guardians had been treated left me with a very disconcerting feeling. These were the temple guardians watching over those who passed by to journey up to the next level before the upper sanctuary would be reached. Surely it would never have been considered that a time



would come when these powerful guardians would no longer stand firm before the world. Miraculously one guardian is still standing from the 9<sup>th</sup> century and is referred to as King Kammatha, the great temple builder from Champa, who accompanied King Devanika on his quest for a new kingdom and built the first temple at Vat Phu.

### **Section 3: The Churning of the Milky Ocean at Vat Phu**

The final approach to the main sanctuary on the upper most terrace at Vat Phu is reached by a very steep set of stairs comprised of 7 sets of eleven stairs each. Symbolically these stairs refer to passing through the 7 lokas (worlds) to reach final enlightenment. To reach the abode of the gods in heaven, filled with stars (nakshatras), the spiritual seeker must pass through these 7 worlds.

Bhur Loka – Earth

Bhuvar Loka – Space between the earth and the sun

Svar Loka – Heaven of the God Indra

Mahar Loka – The region above the pole star

Janar Loka – Inhabited by Brahma's son Sanat Kumara

Tapar Loka – The world free from worldly desires

Satya Loka– Abode of Brahma

It is the ascent through the Lokas that man leaves the earthly realm and climbs to the highest realm of the gods. Upon reaching the edge of the terrace I saw before me the side of the mountain coming down to meet the most exquisite temple which seemed to be untouched by time. The sunlight was being cast down into the center of the temple only to come forth from the main entrance with a shimmering golden orange glow.

I could not have been more transfixed as I was at that moment upon first seeing the sanctuary. There before me was the orange cube I had seen the night before in my dream. There was no doubt in my mind that this was the very image I had in my dream. I knew then that my dream was a premonition of what I was about to experience on my pilgrimage to Vat Phu.

As I approached the golden glow shining out of the sanctuary the one thought occupying my mind was whether the whirl pool of energy inside the sanctuary and the cut on my forehead had any significance. At this point I felt as if I was half awake and half in a dream. The coincidence to witness this golden image made me realize I had already been here. Somehow everything I was seeing was in some way connected and if I could only put all the pieces together I would know what was told to me the night before by those visitors inside the cube. If I had doubts earlier, when I was in the quadrangle of the northern palace concerning whether I had been here before, those doubts had all vanished and I was now entertaining the idea that maybe I was here before.

Standing directly in front of me, as if frozen in time, were the two most remarkable figures I had ever seen. Nothing what so ever indicated they could not come to life as the details of their personages were so very perfect in their artistic execution.

These two beautiful apsaras (celestial nymphs) were adorned profusely with jewelry and the finest of silks. I spent a long time admiring their countenance as if in some way they had something to say.

A closer look reveals the details of both the way their hair is styled and the jewelry which accents their presence. Their smiles are still alluring and they still exude a grace and sensitivity which I find most exceptional after all these centuries.

As I continued to study these Apsaras I became intrigued with the apsara on the north side of the central shrine. Specifically I was curious over how a knot had been designed into her long flowing hair. At first glance I paid little attention to this aspect of a knot in the hair but then I noticed how gracefully she was holding the hair in her hand.

Her hair was very long ending in the shape of a chord or rope. At this point I realized that carved into the stones of this central shrine there were probably many design elements which concerned themselves with messages about ritual practices the priests would perform for the kings. These messages could also be easily overlooked as they were incorporated very subtly into the overall design of the sanctuary.

I moved closer to the Apsara so I could photograph her hair knot. I was intrigued and drawn to this knot even though I had no idea why. Months would pass before I would finally be able to interpret a divine message not only with this design element of a knot, but with many other motifs incorporated into the Vat Phu complex.

The knot I come to learn was used in verses of hymns symbolizing the breath of life and the bridge to immortality. In the posthumous essays of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1887-1947) which were written in 1947 and finally published in 2004 in a book titled, "Guardians of the Sun Door", was I able to find a reference to the knot used in the sacred texts of the Aitareya Upanishads. After reading the Aitareya Upanishad I could see how the Khmer artisans could incorporate a knot as a sacred message into their art work. In the Aitareya Aranyaka, first Adhyaya, sixth Khanda the first two verses reads:

1. "Speech is his (the breath's) rope, the names the knots.  
Thus by his speech as by a rope, and by his name as by  
Knots, all this is bound. For all this are names indeed  
and with speech he calls everything."
2. "People carry him who knows this, as if they were bound by a rope."

There are eight Khandas (verses) in the Aitrareya Aranyaka describing how Brahma brought life into this earthly realm through his breath, and the austerities that must be performed and the lessons to be learned by us humans to re-enter the immortal realms of the gods. If my recognition of this knot truly is a sacred message, as I suspect it is, I can well imagine what purpose this shrine provided for establishing the spiritual ground work for this astounding empire that lasted nearly 1,000 years. After seeing how the knot was used as a sacred message I then looked upon the Apsara on the southern side of the central shrine with an entirely new perspective to again see another story carved in stone.

The celestial nymph facing south had the most unusual coffered hair style, as well as having unusually full breasts. In her right hand she is holding a lotus blossom while her left hand is facing downward to the earth. I then realized the hair ornamentations were symbolically representative of the lotus flower. I come to learn from the well known

Indologist, Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943), that this figure is the goddess Lotus-Shri-Lakshmi. The use of lotus flowers in her hair, as well as her large breasts signifying having abundant milk to give life to the universe, were the two elements that enabled me to see this celestial nymph in a much different light. The long lotus stalk passing up through her right hand is known as “lotus in hand” (padmahasta, padmapani) while the right hand faces downward bestowing gifts. This is none other than the Great Mother Goddess of the ancient civilizations and is referred to in the Rig Veda as prajanam bhavasi mata, “Thou art the mother of created beings”. Now, I realized that represented here, at the main sanctuary, was Lakshmi the consort to Vishnu. The use of this symbolism at Vat Phu is to show that this temple was the gate to the universe for the lotus is the first product of the creative principle and the Lotus-Shri-Lakshmi is personified as the Goddess Mother of the created world.

I did not enter the eastern entrance to the sanctuary which was between the two Drarapalas, Apsara and Great Mother Goddess, but instead went around to the southern entrance. It was here at the southern entrance of the sanctuary that the orange cube began to spin in my mind. Immediately I found myself entranced with what I knew to be the whirl pool going to the center of the universe. There on top of the doorway was the lintel with Vasuki the serpent king, the asuras and devas, Kurma (avatar of Lord Vishnu) the tortoise, and the head of a horse. The churning was taking place at the sanctuary, the milky ocean was being churned and the elixir of immortality was being sought after. This was the time when a new world age was about to take place and the gods were summoned to stabilize the universe.



The Churning of the Milky Ocean at Vat Phu

As time and the heavens move endlessly in Indra’s home of the universe there are apparently few people on earth today who realize that a large celestial occurrence is taking place between our solar system and the Milky Way galaxy. The ancient cultures were well aware of these celestial movements and discussed them for thousands of years until those stories of the secrets of the heavens became abandoned and neglected. Few today would consider that the center of our Milky Way galaxy could transform the way humans thought about themselves in the universe. Celestial mechanics is not something taught in any grade school and only in those universities that would be offering an astronomy course. But even if celestial mechanics were being taught any eschatological or cosmological significance which could be attributed to these heavenly movements would be non-existent. So where could one find the teachings of the spiritual dimensions to the workings of celestial mechanics in our galaxy? I doubt anywhere, but even if it did

exist it would probably be buried in some remote academic department and could never be found. The question needing to be answered is what does the spiritual significance mean to anyone when they associated that spirit with astronomical measurements of moving bodies in space?

The symbolism the astronomers from India were using long ago originated from ancient stories which became myths, but those myths carried within them the nature of humankind's exalted place in the universe. The churning of the milky ocean is one of those exalted myths that if understood would allowed humans to travel freely in the universe, and if those humans knew how to read the stars that moved in the heavens they could also achieve immortality. Vat Phu was a temple to the stars and Kings and priest traveled to Vat Phu for over 1,500 years to learn of those secrets to assure their immortality. It was from Vat Phu that the Devaraja cult was born where man and god were fused together and the divine relationship between the Kings and Gods would be preserved.

During the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were two humans who were able to unlock the secret of how the ancient cultures understood their relationship to the stars, planets, galaxy and the larger universe. I suppose we could call these people "mythical-code breakers". If it were not for Giorgio de Santillana from the history of science department at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts and Hertha von Dechend from the Frobenius-Institut in Frankfurt Germany the world may still be in the dark concerning the history of the ancient cultures going back over some 10,000 years or more. Their contribution was in deciphering all the world myths and how they related to astronomical events in our local galaxy. The myth that was persistently integrated into all the world myths was about an axis or pole or even a pillar that became unhinged or broke thus leading to a frantic quest to save the earth from falling into the abyss. The story most used in all these myths to describe the fall of man and the world was about a mill. The frantic quest to save the mill from not working or not being able to turn or churn became the myth of the Churning of the Milky Ocean. Their book, "Hamlet's Mill", published in 1969, was the beginning of modern man understanding the beliefs of ancient man.

This myth is prominently placed on the southern entrance to Vat Phu. King Suyavarman I and his purohita, Sivacarya, made certain that this myth was integrated into the temple design to preserve the ancient history of the human race and how men were once Gods. In the Vedic literature of the Rig Veda there are spiritual and philosophical hymns dedicated to this mill pole. Hymn (10.7) of 44 verses in the Atharva Veda is titled Skambha (pillar) "The Support of the Universe". It is dedicated to the eternal entity or Brahman which existed before the manifested universe. Everything is established from this pillar (Skambha).

*Verse 35:*

<i>skambha</i>	has	upheld	these	two-	Heaven	and	Earth-
<i>skambha</i>	has	upheld	the		wide		mid-air,
<i>skambha</i>	has	upheld	the	six	spacious		regions,

*skambha* pervades the whole world. (35)

Again, on top of Vat Phu the Skambha is shown on a scene from the churning of the milky ocean on a lintel above the southern entrance to the main sanctuary. As

humanity enters the beginning years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century hardly any attention is being devoted to the most significant celestial occurrence taking place currently in our solar system. The ancient cultures, however, were well aware of the significance of the precession of the equinoxes and integrated it into their cultures as a creation myth. The myth had existed for thousands of years but then became forgotten and abandoned as having no relevance to human evolution or personal growth.

But then, Joseph Campbell, a world renowned mythologist, resurrected myth from fantasy and falsehood in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and showed to the world how celestial events do hold great spiritual and psychological meaning for personal human growth. These celestial events have been, for the most part, relegated to the concept of myth or just stories completely invented by human imagination without any influences from celestial bodies. Campbell demonstrated that myths were metaphors for humankind's spiritual and psychological transformation and that the heavens were filled with a multitude of spiritual influences.

Near the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the code to understanding these ancient myths had finally been understood. As a consequence of these deeper insights into the ancient past a flurry of scholars worldwide recognized the wisdom revealed by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend and began publishing works related to the ancient myths. A number of publications provided the world with new understandings of the relationship between myth and astronomy. I would cite only two:

1996 – Angkor Wat – Time, Space, and Kingship – Eleanor Mannikka

and 2005 – Orion's Cosmic Wonders in Shiva's Chidambaram – Raja Deckshitar.

Not only had contemporary authors seen the significance to the "myth-code" being deciphered but ancient texts and ancient monuments were now seen in a totally new perspective by recognizing how these astronomical events were incorporated into architecture and a few surviving epic tales. Everywhere new insights and revelations were being discovered as well as new ancient temples being unearthed.

In the dense jungles of Johor, Malaysia the 7<sup>th</sup> century lost city of Kota Gelanggi has been located by Raimy Che-Ross claiming it may be the capital of the Sri Vijaya Malay Empire. And in the northwest Peten region of Guatemala the lost ancient royal center called La Corona was finally found by Ian Graham of Harvard's Peabody Museum. All these discoveries are pointing to the quest of a common myth which shows the spiritual significance these ancient cultures attributed to the precession of the equinoxes and their alignment to heavenly bodies.

Oliver L. Reiser, (1975) told the world how our galaxy has a profound influence on our lives. These were not just simple astrological musings but carefully researched insights which gave Reiser the wisdom that it's the heavens that make us become what we are as a result of celestial cycles and cosmic influences. Few today, however, would consider the influences the center of our Milky Way galaxy has on transforming the human psyche.

But as we return to the ancient Vedic scriptures we find in the Mahabharata the story of the churning of the milky ocean. Now that the precession of the equinoxes was determined to be one of the connecting threads for all the myths we can stand back and look at the churning of the milky ocean at Vat Phu and enter the most holy of sanctuaries where the Shiva lingam was anointed daily by the sacred waters from Lingaparvata thus honoring and preserving the World Age in which the Khmer Kings

would rule for over 1,500 years. The glory of the universe was understood by those Brahmin priests, and they left behind a legacy in stone so that the amnesia that besets our current civilization can end and a new world age of attunement to the heavens for our much heralded global humanity can be achieved.

So now Vat Phu takes on an even deeper meaning. Not only is Vat Phu the cradle of the Khmer empire, but it is also the center of deep spiritual awareness of humanity's place in the universe. Let us begin our journey into that whirl pool of orange light and see the wonders of heaven open up before us. The whirl pool was spinning and I could hear voices as I did in my dream. Somehow I knew what was told to me by those visitors that came through the door of that cube in my dream. They were the celestial teachers telling me the story of the creation of the universe. It was clear now these beings were Bhrama, Shiva, Vishnu and Sakti the four principle Hindu deities which Chhom Kuthea claims reside in Kuruksetra. I wondered how much of my dream I could recall.



Indra riding Airavata main sanctuary Vat Phu

Inside the sacred orange cube, of the main sanctuary, the lord of the Gods (Indra) watches over the eternal celestial cycles as he rides his great three headed white elephant Airavata. Indra is placed on two lintels in the center of the main sanctuary facing east. Once you pass through this star gate you enter the most holy of sanctuaries; the home of Lord Shiva. All the legends of the creation of the universe are here remembered and it's from this one central place in the temple where the kings would be closest to the gods.

But what else does the main sanctuary provide these Khmer kings? After all, Suyavarman I was considered to be the greatest temple builder in the entire empire. I have made reference earlier to the quest for immortality as it was told in the ancient literature from India. The southern entrance has several carvings which indicate that to obtain immortality an understanding of the abode of the gods was essential. In fact a manifestation of Shiva as an ascetic in deep meditation can be found on the lower most corner of a colonette holding up the lintel showing the churning of the milky ocean scene. To enter this sanctuary only the most enlightened pilgrim would be allowed to enter.

The first lintel above the colonette is the most instructive concerning this celestial knowledge. However, unlike the churning of the milky ocean scene at Angkor Wat, Vat Phu's is much smaller. What is so unique about this churning scene is the depiction of the head of a horse and the head of Vishnu on top of the back of Kurma; lord of the tortoises. Kurma is also another manifestation of Vishnu.

As the epic tale is told in the Mahabharata Kurma used his tortoise shell to support Mt. Mandhara which in turn was used as the churning pole to stabilize the world.

Vasuki, King of the serpents, used his long body to wrap around the mountain while the Devatas pulled on the tail and the Asuras pulled on the head.

Vishnu stabilized the churning pole high atop the lintel with only his lower legs now showing. These two celestial beings pulled back and forth churning the ocean of milk for a thousand years to bring forth the elixir of immortality. Directly beneath this scene is the most amazing face of Kirttimukha (divine guardian) supporting the entire churning effort. The Kirttimukha is a special representation of Shiva himself. If anyone neglected to worship this face they would not receive Shiva's grace. However, if the devotee greets Kirttimukha as Shiva himself as both a sign of his destructive powers and divine grace then Shiva will allow the seeker to receive the secret knowledge.

Another lintel was placed between the churning of the milky ocean and Kirttimukha providing a hint to the astronomical awareness the Brahmins incorporated into Vat Phu. Here was placed a small lintel with a series of concentric orbs symbolically included just before entering the holy sanctuary.

Interpreting the meaning of these small orbs around the lintel opens the seeker into the depths and secrets of the universe. Counting these small orbs one can discover that there are exactly 108 in each circuit. It is well known that the number 108 is the most sacred of all numbers in Hindu cosmology. There are many ways 108 can be interpreted for a deeper understanding of the cosmos. In the Sanskrit alphabet there are 54 letters. Each letter has a masculine and feminine aspect representing Shiva and Sakti. There are 12 constellations, and 9 arc segments called namshas or chandrakalas equaling 108. The diameter of the sun is 108 times the diameter of the earth and when 108 is incorporated into Hindu sacred literature we find that there are 108 Upanishads. These are all abstract symbols mirroring the myth of the ancient stories of the origins of the universe. So by having this lintel between the churning of the milky ocean and Kirttimukha indicates that there was a secret that was well guarded at Vat Phu which only the initiated could know about and learn how to use for the ultimate quest for immortality.

In the Rig Veda Samhita there is a passage which refers to the Ashvin Twins being replaced with the head of a horse. This verse refers to a girdle around the waist similarly to the one shown on the lintel behind the churning scene. To paraphrase the verse it reads..."the horse's head becomes the revealer of the secret knowledge of the elixir which acts like a girdle, \*(around the waist), to strengthen the understanding of the spiritual obligations necessary for Shiva". In the Nakshastras Shiva is represented as Ardra the god of destruction. When Shiva comes close to the galactic center in 2012 the destruction of the world will take place. It is at this time when that which has been made manifest will be destroyed in order to save grace for the future. This is the time of the dark night of the soul in preparation for a new dawn or a new beginning. If we look at the next Nakshastra it is Punarvasa or the "return of the light". The presiding deity is Aditi, the mother of the gods, and the reigning stars are Castor and Pollux the Gemini twins, the two who give back the good. Another set of twins which can be woven into spiritual form and a reminder of the operation of the heavens at Vat Phu.

After the "myth-code" was finally deciphered by Giorgio de Santilana and Hertha von Dechend in 1969, much like the Rosetta Stone which was deciphered by the French scholar Jean François Champollion in 1822 unlocking the mystery of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the churning of the milky ocean could then be read as a specific astronomical event. That event was the precession of the equinoxes. In 400 BC the sun

would rise during the spring solstice in the asterism (constellation) of the Horse's Head indicated by the Nakshastra (Hindu star positions) of the Ashwin Twins.

This celestial event is where the sun is near the intersection of the Milky Way and the ecliptic. These Ashwin Twins announced the day, and from the center of the Horse's Head brow a bright flame came forth cleansing the world. After I became aware of the horse's head story in the Mahabharata the cut of my forehead took on a new significance. Again, it's necessary to go into the Mahabharata and read the story of how Vishnu put on the horse's head with a flame coming out of his forehead to reclaim the elixir of immortality to fully appreciate the symbolism.

It became an overwhelming personal revelation to now be able to integrate all the elements of my dream which happened the night before with the events unfolding as my journey to the main sanctuary was becoming more understood. It would take five months, however, of questioning and research to finally understand the significance of what the lintels could mean to the Khmer kings and priests.

After the milky ocean scene the last lintel before entering the main part of the sanctuary was a most curious depiction of a scene from the Vedic literature. Two identical beings were emerging from the womb of another deity. I could not help but see this scene as the Ashwin twins themselves. The current interpretation offered for this carving is the story of Krishnavatara in which Krishna kills uncle Kamsa. The same image can also be found at the temples Muang Khaek and Phanom Rung in Thailand. What is certain is Vat Phu's influence spread widely in the Khmer kingdom with a very close connection with Preah Vihear.

The epic tale of the Head of the Horse in the Mahabharata is much too extensive to include in this writing. However, Ucchaishravaa, the gem among horses did emerge from the milky ocean. For out of the churning of the milky ocean many things emerged before the elixir of immortality finally came forth as is written in the Puranas. The Ashwin Twins cleared the path of any debris that would hinder the journey through the stars and beyond through the gates of heaven or the sun door as A. K. Coomaraswamy refers to them. Passing under the Ashwins the seeker of the secret knowledge would then be in the center of the sanctuary and joined with the gods.

The devas and the asuras churn the sea of milk (the Milky Way Galaxy) back and forth. They are trying to stabilize the Skambha (the world pillar) as the slow movement of the equinoxes begins to shift and the Skambha no longer points in the same direction. The whirl pool inside the orange cube is filled with many elements which all refer to stars in the heavens. And the apsaras it is said, over six hundred million, came from the churning dazzling everyone who saw them. The firmament became a chandelier of lights and the great sea of stars stretched across the sky. And behold the brightest star of all the jewels in the universe, called the Kaustubha, came forth from the churning and became the center gem on Shiva's breast plate and the center of the galaxy itself. When the elixir finally appeared from the churning of the milky ocean the one who held the secret to the stars could then pass through the gates of heaven and drink of immortality. These gates were guarded by Drarapalas and lions facing the east where the Ashwin Twins, being the leaders of all the nakshastras, would rise in the morning clearing the way to the gates of heaven, the sun door, where millions of dazzling lights (Apsaras) filled the heavens and the quest for immortality was attained.



It is no surprise then that the large court yards were built the way they were. The axial path way to the stars was the ultimate design of Vat Phu, and once the center of the main sanctuary was reached all the knowledge acquired from each station on the way to Shiva's abode prepared the soul to enter the eternal life of the gods.

I do not see this design at Vat Phu in any other way. Vat Phu has one of the longest axial path ways of any of the Khmer temples. It took me a long time to understand the significance of Lord Shiva. He saved the world by drinking the poison emitted from the mouth of the King of the serpents while the churning of the milky ocean was taking place.

Once inside the main sanctuary a whole different ambience can be felt. It was here in this central chamber the devotees prepared for their journey through the gates of heaven and immortality would be the most sought after gift from the gods. Deep within the main sanctuary and behind the statue of the Buddha there is an entrance to the oldest part of the temple where the sacred lingam was anointed daily from the waters of the sacred spring. But before entering the most holy of holies there sits Shiva high above the doorway manifested as the ascetic praying with his Rudraksha beads. Rudraksha translated from the Sanskrit stands for the "eyes of Lord Shiva". The actual beads come from the Rudraksha tree (*Elaeocarpus Ganitrus*). As the legend goes the tree came forth from the tears of Lord Shiva's eyes. Twelve varieties of the tree symbolizing the sun came from his right eye, and sixteen varieties symbolizing the moon came from his left eye. The beads have been worn by devotees for thousands of years to maintain a spiritual path to enlightenment and liberation. On either side of Shiva are shown devotees offering prayers. The beads are also shown in Shiva's right hand on the Trimuti behind the main sanctuary.

Indra happily rules over all the worlds and can be seen through out the temple complexes at Vat Phu. And in a special devotion to Vishnu the temple Thao Tao (lord of the tortoise) was constructed at the base of the Lingaparvata on the ancient road leading to Nandi Hall. Before arriving at Vat Phu the traveler would pay the deepest respects to Vishnu, who along with Shiva, helped save the world. Continuing on the ancient road after Thao Tao came the temple Nang Sida which only has elements of the shrine still standing but is still a testimony to the beauty and majesty of this temple. It's only a short distance from Nang Sida before you finally arrive at Nandi Hall.

Perhaps the carving of the holy trinity (trimurti – having three forms) is the best example of a scene from the Vedic scriptures exemplifying the reign of the Hindu gods at Vat Phu. The scene sits quietly behind the main sanctuary and shows Brahma (creative force) sitting to the right of Shiva (destructive force) and Vishnu (preservation) sitting on Shiva's left.

Shiva is also shown as half man and half woman (ardhanarisvara). Shiva's wife, Durga, is shown with her ten arms. Shiva and Durga portray the ultimate wedding of the destructive and creative powers of the universe which are the two greatest antagonistic forces to be balanced. The Trimurti sits quietly and unassumingly behind the main sanctuary.

Looking closely at the five faces of Shiva it is readily recognizable that there is a feminine quality to his expression. The five faces of Shiva are symbolic of his five manifestations: The Beneficent, The Destructive, The Vagrant Mendicant, The Lord of Dances, and the Great Lord (mahesamurti). Thus the trinity represents the embodiment of

Shiva as Brahma the creator, Vishnu the maintainer, and Shiva as the destroyer. These three forces of the universe reside permanently in the Shiva linga representing Shiva the supreme lord of the universe.

The long ear ornamentation is another affectation showing the combination of Shiva and his wife that has been integrated into Vat Phu. In fact every year during the full moon of February there is a ceremony (Shivaratri Festival) celebrating the wedding of these two forces where thousands of pilgrims come to worship and pay tribute to Lord Shiva. During the day the devotees chant “Om Namaha Shivaya” and at midnight the inner light of divine consciousness is obtained and a state of spiritual knowledge is acquired.

Considering that this festival is still celebrated annually testifies to the high esteem and respect still paid to Lord Shiva at Vat Phu and a further testimony of the latent spiritual powers that still reside in this holy land.

Vat Phu is the one temple that encapsulated the divine message which all the Khmer kings paid respect to through out the entire 1,500 year reign of the empire. Vat Phu was a temple to the stars and the knowledge of the stars was expanded even further with the construction of Angkor Wat which became the ultimate temple mirroring the secrets of the universe as well as the new capital of the Khmer empire. But the Kings still supported Vat Phu all through the duration of the empire. King Yasovarman I even took a stone from this holy city and used it as a corner stone for the construction of Preah Vihear. The holy land of Kuruksetra is still an active pilgrimage site and a site that can direct the mind into the ethereal realm of the gods.

#### **Section 4: The Adoration of Silence**

To be removed from the cacophony of sounds which fill the urban landscape could cause a deprivation psychosis since urban cacophony has been integrated or accepted as a normal way of life. The sanctity of experiencing one’s own thoughts without a foreign intrusion may soon be lost forever. For the most part silence is becoming more difficult to find in the world and soon I fear the concept of silence will never be appreciated.

Vat Phu and the surrounding temples offer an environment free from the intrusions of manufactured sounds. If we were to go back in time some 1,500 years ago the Vat Phu area had to be enshrouded in only the natural inclusions of all the nature spirits. It was then that the wind moving in the trees, or the rain falling on the land, or the thunder in the heavens signified the arrival of the gods or spirits.

With that in mind it becomes easier to understand the placement of these four temples around the main sanctuary at Lingaparvata. Those temples are, Vat Oubmong, Thao Tao, Nang Sida, and H. Tomo. Of the four H. Tomo and Vat Oubmong are the most difficult to reach. Thao Tao, and Nang Sida are on the royal road to Angkor Wat and just a short distance before you arrive at Vat Phu. Nang Sida is the most accessible of all four temples being only a short walk from Vat Phu’s palaces, but Thao Tao has no access route from Vat Phu to visit it. All four of these temples have been carefully placed on the surrounding landscape as devotional monuments to Lord Shiva. With each temple there comes a story of a passage back in time to spaces devoted to the gods. What follows are the stories of those four passages.

### **Passage one: H. Tomo**

The first passage was to follow the river of stars to temple H. Tomo which is set in a deep jungle enclave on the eastern banks down the Mekong River. The mighty Mekong River that passes Vat Phu is none other than the river of stars forming the Milky Way galaxy. Vat Phu was the perfect mirror image of the universe. High atop Mt Kailasa lived Shiva with his bride and all around him were the sparkling stars of the heavenly apsaras. The great waters flowed from the Ganges out of Shiva's hair and filled the land with eternal life. Kuruksetra was as auspicious a site as any of the other locations for building temples devoted to Shiva. The Mekong River is compared to the great Ganges River of India. Once you began to travel on the river you knew that this same journey took place over 1000 years ago.

The driver of our small boat, Xiang, balanced himself nimbly on the bow leading the way south on the Mekong to temple H. Tomo.

Sitting quietly in the small boat I sensed nothing had changed for centuries. Lingaparvata was still reaching to the heavens and the villagers were still fishing off their narrow long boats.

Xiang set a course early that morning retracing an ancient route to one of the farthest temples aligned with the Lingaparvata. H. Tomo was devoted to Rudrani, consort to Rudra, a manifestation of Shiva known as The Howler and Rudrani was known as Kali the goddess of destruction. But now we know the symbolism embedded into Vat Phu where Rudra and Rudrani were cleansing the world in preparation for the return and new beginning of a New World Age.

The white sandy banks were reflecting the morning sunlight with a parade of water buffalo going to the river to drink the cool water of the Mekong. Surrounded by the emerald green water of the Mekong the Lingaparvata receded in the distance as Xiang, Bountham and I headed south.

I could only imagine what it must have been like to float the stones from the quarry behind Mt Phu Kao to this remote temple all the way down the Mekong. After successfully transporting the large stones the builders would then have to carry them through the dense forest and finally set them in place creating a temple surrounded by towering trees. Standing alone on the temple grounds was a single upright lotus column announcing the presence of a temple placed within the canopy of trees.

The name for the temple comes from the name of a small tributary, the Huei Thamo, which empties into the Mekong. H. Tomo was a testimony to the dedication the Kings had for Vat Phu. Over the centuries the temple has been totally abandon, but by walking very slowly and looking through the trees or on the ground there are carvings which bring to life the beauty of this secluded temple. Floral details on lintel stones, Shiva riding Nandin the bull, and a remarkable Mukhalinga (four faced linga) depicting the four directions which Shiva oversees. This is the only Mukhalinga still in situ in SE Asia.

We will never know why this linga was carved the way it was but by looking at all the evidence surrounding the creation of the Devaraja in Kambuja we can infer with some degree of confidence that this was as close a reason as any for the creation of the Mukhalinga.

Guarding the temple it's possible to find carved on the lower door frame of the western entrance of this small laterite temple a half horse half lion figure protecting the temple from intruders. Maybe this is Shiva manifested as The Howler. It is still possible

to enter this small temple and get the impression of what this enclosure must have been like so long ago.

### **Passage two: Thao Tao**

It wasn't until 1987 that the small temple Thao Tao was discovered lying on the distant plains south of Lingaparvata. There are no roads leading to Thao Tao (Lord of the Tortoise) except for remnants of the ancient road that leads to Angkor Wat going south, and to Nandi Hall going north to Vat Phu. The temple sits in a field surrounded by trees, small shrubs and tall grass.

Thao Tao is very small and in complete ruins with the exception of large sections of the wall that surrounds the two structures inside. In haste one of the small temples was reconstructed without much attention to the proper location of the stones. Inside in fact is a naga ante-fix lying horizontally under several rows of stones which is now used as a small altar. The shape and size of the temple is similar to the small hospital temples King Suyavarman built along roads connecting the empire dating the temple after the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Nobody pays much attention to Thao Tao because for one thing it's totally inaccessible and not in very good condition. But what it does have, which is the reason I believe it was placed here in the first place, is a clear view of Lingaparvata.

At this point in my story I have to say that the entire Vat Phu complex has to be understood as a truly holy land, a land touched by the gods, and a land that nurtured the growth and development of the Khmer empire. Through out the holy land there are many caves which acted as meditation cells for ascetics, and likewise small temples, such at Thao Tao, which also acted as meditation temples or small shrines to concentrate on the spirits that presided in the land as well as the gods in the heavens. The ancient Khmers and Chams both believed in land spirits so it was a natural fusion of beliefs when the Brahmins saw the natural outcropping of stones from the very top of the mountain to be a sign of Shiva's presence. A powerful union of beliefs from three separate cultures came together in a most unique way.

While I was following my guide through the land to reach Thao Tao I had the odd feeling I was being watched. There was nothing I could see or hear that gave me any insight to my feelings. After visiting Beng Mealea I was convinced more than ever that the Neak Ta could be present and could take on any form. Maybe because I was familiar with how farmers would put an anthropomorphic image on their land (scarecrow) to frighten away the birds who would eat their crops was I prepared to witness what was about to greet me. Arms outstretched and looking directly at the mountain there stood what I knew to be a Neak Ta (land spirit). Cambodians call their land spirits Neak Ta or Anak Ta and the Laotians call them Chaothaen. At first I thought it was just a coincidence of the way the dirt and grass were naturally put together. But when I went closer the arms were formed by a clump of grass, the leaves were used as eyes, and the body was a termite mound. Someone had tended to this outcropping and honored it as a Neak Ta. This time I was able to take a picture of the Neak Ta in broad daylight, unlike the one at Beng Mealea, which to my surprise appeared as an apparition at the end of a long gallery buried under the temple.

The field and everything surrounding me was extremely quiet, and directly in the Neak Ta's line of sight was Lingaparvata. Thao Tao was directly in the Neak Ta's line of sight acting like a guardian protecting the sanctuary that lay unforgotten for centuries. It

was not my imagination either. Having studied the work of Ang Choulean from Cambodia I could easily recognize how the people of the land could honor their spirits. So now I had two spirit signs before me. One was the top of Lingaparvata and the other the earthen mound of the Neak Ta.

The day was extremely hot. Rain had not fallen for months and everything was scorched. The leaves crackled under your feet and the tall grass stalks snapped when you stepped on them. Once inside the temple grounds of Thao Tao the sky started to turn black and coming over the top of the Lingaparvata were large rolling black clouds. Surely, I thought, this was going to be one of the first great rainfalls of the season. Hurriedly we got inside the small temple enclosure with the small altar made from stones piled on one another. No sooner had we got inside the temple thunder began to rumble and create a great disturbance in the entire area that only a few minutes ago was perfectly quiet. I was ready for the sky to open up and drench everything.

But the rain did not come as I expected. It was dark and quiet until a few small rain drops fell on the dry leaves making the sound of a very light tapping of a drum being hit with a small stick. Then hundreds of tapping and ticking sounds filled the air as the small rain drops hit the dry leaves and the thunder would interrupt like a big kettle drum of a symphony orchestra. I stood still and listened and at that moment I had the strangest feeling of a language being spoken by the nature spirits. I recognized that the entire land began to crackle and snap with a million different rain drops, but never a down pouring on the land. On one hand it could be said it was only a light shower with a little thunder. For those of us who wouldn't think otherwise that would be the best explanation for what was happening.

### **Passage three: Nang Sida**

Walking south on a small dirt road from Nandi Hall, parallel to the ancient road going south to Angkor Wat, you come upon Temple Nang Sida. Entering from the east there is a long wide approach to Nang Sida, which used to be lined with lotus columns but are now scattered all over the temple grounds. It is truly a grand entrance to the temple with the mountains in the back ground and groves of trees encircling the temple grounds.

After walking over the stone platform you come upon the most impressive stone doorway with one large roof stone still in place connecting the two up right columns. With the majestic columns in the foreground while slowly walking around the central court yard looking toward Lingaparvata the importance of Nang Sida becomes readily evident. There is also a north entrance to the temple with the door columns leaning precariously on the temple wall. The spire like effect achieved by these tall decorated columns indicates that this was more than just an entrance but a holy reception area before you entered the main sanctuary which unfortunately has completely collapsed forming the most impressive rubble of beautifully hewn massive stones.

It is not possible to access any part of the central shrine. The only deity I could find was a portion of the top of a head showing the chignon hair style with an incense offering placed in front serving as a small altar. The only way to access any part of the central shrine is by carefully climbing up and over massive mounds of perfectly shaped stones which have apparently just collapsed on top of one another. On the northern side of the central shrine and buried behind the collapsed stones it is possible to see a false door with carefully carved lotus blossoms featured on the central vertical section of the

door. However, at the west end of the central shrine there is another false door with the same identically carved lotus blossoms on the central section. On closer inspection of the lotus blossoms I was amazed to see them in near perfect condition after 1,200 years of weathering. It took considerable effort to get my tripod wedged on the stones to capture the details of this perfect example of Khmer craftsmanship. There is also a false door on the southern side but the collapsed stones have completely blocked its view.

The decorative carvings and perfectly hewn stones indicate that Nang Sida was a very significant temple. The temple still holds many secrets which will be uncovered once the stones are moved and placed on the ground ready for cataloging and final restoration. But what remains for us to see today are several visible clues to the use of the temple. First and foremost is the temple's location. It is only a short distance from Vat Phu and is the last temple on the ancient road before reaching Nandi Hall. Secondly, with the addition of a library and two other smaller structures on the temple grounds it could have easily served as the priests' living quarters and school. Lastly, the decorative motifs and majestic columns, which form an impressive entrance to the central shrine, indicate a very high devotional tribute was made to either Shiva or Vishnu. My guess is it was a shrine to Vishnu and Lakshmi giving the high use of lotus blossoms on all the false doors. The lotus flower is also found on the false doors of the main palaces at Vat Phu.

Not too long ago two farmers in Champassak had dug up a silver covered head of Vishnu on the Kuruksetra plains. At one time the royal family of Laos had acquired this badly damaged head of Vishnu but then it was lost and its whereabouts is unknown. The farmers tried to break the sculpture in half with a machete as is evident by the many knife marks on the front. It was found in a field close to Vat Phu and is dated between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> century. I can easily attribute this beautiful work of art with others surrounding Nang Sida and am certain more will be found near this temple when a serious excavation takes place. Emma C. Bunker and Douglas Latchford, two Cambodian researchers, included this photo of Vishnu in their monumental tribute to Khmer sculptures in a book titled, "Adoration and Glory: The Golden Age of Khmer Art".

#### **Passage four: Vat Oubmong**

Waking up on this particular morning I knew I was going to take a long walk some 2km to the temple called Vat Oubmong. I learned that in 1973 Pierre Lintengre found a Sanskrit inscription referring to King Jayavarman II at Vat Oubmong. This in itself was very important to me because in 802AD this very same King inaugurated the Khmer empire. Having an inscription about this King at Vat Phu was further confirmation on the influence Lingaparvata had on the formative stages of fashioning the Khmer empire.

What I didn't know was how far the temple was from Vat Phu or where it was located. I only knew it was north of Vat Phu. My guides, Chansavang and Bountham, and I got an early morning start. Chansavang was the security guard for the main sanctuary at Vat Phu and was an expert in using a machete to cut a clear path for our journey. I was over taken by how green everything had become since I was here 6 months earlier. The entire landscape was almost too silent to describe.

It was a wonderland of multi-colored greens and I felt I was part of each blade of grass as I followed behind my two guides. Gentle Laotian music was drifting in the air serenading the villagers as they cut the rice in the cool of the morning while we made our way along the base of the mountain. The walk was magical as millions of tiny white

flowers were spread profusely in every direction forming a flowery carpet leading to long shady tunnels of under brush. We disappeared under these trees only to find another path that would wind in every direction leading to one mountain stream after another.

The land gave an eerie sense of walking in a place occupied by beings who designed mystical spaces purposely to walk through. And after walking under the trees the path would open into a rice field and we would zigzag through the rice stalks and disappear again under more trees.

We must have repeated this pattern for over 1km until the path, or what there was of it, stopped and we found ourselves climbing loose shale straight up the side of the mountain. Surely Vat Oubmong was not a temple that was visited frequently.

Once we climbed a considerable distance up the rocky mountain side we entered a partially flat area on the side of the mountain and Chansavang pointed with his machete and said, "Vat Oubmong is straight ahead". I couldn't see anything that looked like a temple. But what I did see, straight through the tree tops, was the most perfect view of the very top of Lingaparvata. Even though I couldn't see Vat Oubmong I knew exactly why it was placed here.

No matter how hard I looked into the trees I could not see Vat Oubmong. The forest had completely swallowed the temple. The trees had grown all around the temple concealing it from view. There were no access points either that could be found to even approach the temple. The small machete Chansavang brought with him was pulled out from his waist sash. The bright morning sun hit the metal blade of his machete and reflected it in every direction as he miraculously began to clear the trees around the temple.

After several hours of cutting small trees the brick enclosure to Vat Oubmong with its sand stone door columns and truss stone could be seen towering into the sky. From the girth of the trees I estimated at least 6 years of growth had taken root around the temple.

Here then stood Vat Oubmong 2 km north of Vat Phu high on the side of Lingaparvata. Here was placed the sacred linga to Shiva and directly behind the temple above the trees way in the distance was the top of Lingaparvata. Vat Oubmong and Lingaparvata were aligned perfectly with one another creating a union of the natural rock out cropping of the mountain with the top of the linga inside the temple. If ever there was a shrine perfectly fused with the spirits of the land Vat Oubmong was a perfect example of that marriage.

The linga that stood inside the brick enclosure would have to have been a massively carved stone judging by the size of the pedestal it sat on. Two such pedestals exist at the temple. One pedestal is directly inside the temple with a large gapping hole dug directly underneath it where surely holy objects have long since been removed. The second is about 10 yards in front of the temple. This pedestal has also sunk and also has a large opening directly underneath it. Imagining how these sandstone columns were carried up the mountain side as well as the linga pedestals and Shiva's lingams conjures up feats of super human strength and devotion to Lord Shiva.

### **Section 5: Lingaparvata**

Long before King Divanika erected his stele in 456CE proclaiming Kuruksetra to be a holy place (tirtha) tribal people had gathered in the shadows of Lingaparvata looking in

awe upon its lofty pinnacle reaching into the sky. But before Lingaparvata ever became known as Linga Mountain in praise of Lord Shiva this natural outcropping reaching 4645 feet into the sky was held in the minds of all indigenous people of the area as a great earth spirit where fire rituals and human sacrifices were a common practice.

Likewise in ancient India the greatest stories of mountains and gods were repeated orally for countless millennia until finally they were put in verse and the Book of Manu, Upanishads, Puranas, Rig Veda, Mahabharata, Ramayana and many more were all recorded for posterity. Today when we read these stories they seem like impossible accounts of how the gods of long ago traveled freely between earth's mountain tops and the heavens. And in a wholly desecralized cosmos where societies and nations have become predominantly secularized in their approach to existence, these ancient stories of gods and mountains are looked upon as fanciful myths without having any relationship to events taking place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The gods of olden times have passed down to our civilizations of today their myths and legends by which to base our moral judgments and heroic deeds upon. If council and an audience with the gods were to be had it most likely would have taken place on a mountain top. These mountain abodes of the gods are well known and today they still hold special significance for cultures all around the world. In India and Tibet there are two mountains that are so revered for their acting as the home to Lord Shiva that sacred ceremonies are still conducted in their presence. One of the most sacred mountains in the world is Mt Kailash in Tibet and in southern India it is the sacred hill of Arunachela. Arunachela is regarded as a manifestation of Shiva himself and Mt Kailash is Shiva's actual abode.

In Laos, Lingaparvata became a focal point for austerities to Shiva in the fifth century under the vocable of Bhadresvara, the god of the Chams at My Hon-Son on the Champa (Vietnam) coast. The city of Kuruksetra and then later called Sreshthapura was the holiest ancient city for kings to make pilgrimage (tirtha yatra). In fact a 250 mile royal road runs from Angkor Wat directly to Vat Phu indicating there was a direct link to Vat Phu from the new Ankorean center.

There is a haunting living quality to Lingaparvata as it protrudes so uniquely into the sky almost as if some giant were pushing upward deep from within its rocky interior. From a distance Lingaparvata appears as a linga or even a small temple set on the summit where rituals to the gods would be performed. There is a Chinese document from the Sui dynasty (589-616CE) that mentions a temple on the summit of a mountain named Ling-kia-po-p'o, which is guarded by a thousand soldiers and consecrated to a spirit named Po-to-li. It was Georges Coedes, the famous French epigraphists, who transliterated Ling-po-p'o into Lingaparvata.

It is by all accounts a magical mystifying experience to witness this singular protuberance setting itself alone amongst the mountain tops behind Vat Phu and forever capturing the fascination and wonder of anyone who sets eyes on it.

Mt. Phu Kao immediately focuses your attention to the summit as no other small mountain can do. It's as if in its own way the mountain is trying to announce something profound or waiting to direct the eyes of the beholder to look at something very special. The mountain commands one to look in its direction because none of the other hills are as unique. It is unique and different and holds its own as a singular presence like none of the other hills. Surely such a mountain would be thought of having supernatural powers and



perhaps in order to even address those powers rites and rituals would have had to be conducted long before any consideration would be given to scale its summit.

Here was a mountain top that was so singular in its appearance that innately one sensed there was something being conducted on its rocky protrusion that only the mountain itself knew about. The absolute profundity and sanctity that the mountain has held over the millennia has finally reached its symbolic identity as the linga of Lord Shiva himself.

This was Shiva's pillar of fire that endlessly went into the heavens and endlessly passed down through the earth. Here was the penultimate axis of the world and once the Brahmins from India saw this outcropping they could do none other than name this mountain Lingaparvata. This one linga would be impossible to move, and would provide the devotee with a substantive feeling of awe simply by recognizing the latent power of this mountain made it possible to communicate with the gods. It was on this mountain that the priests had developed the Cakravartin cosmology that in 400 years would establish the consecration of the Khmer Empire where Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma would be the gods that would establish divine kingship for another 500 years.

If Mt Kailash in Tibet is considered the home of Shiva and Arunachela is considered an actual manifestation of Shiva then I would offer that Lingaparvata could be thought of as the temple of Shiva whereby divine communication with all the gods would take place. My justification for making such a statement and associating Lingaparvata with a temple gateway to meet the gods is by recognizing that the Khmer Empire got its spiritual guidance from the environs of Kuruksetra. The combination of Vat Phu, Lingaparvata, the sacred spring and King Jayavarman II's inscription at Vat Oubmong indicate an auspicious focal point that merits calling Lingaparvata a temple gate way to the gods. It was in 802CE that King Jayavarman II consecrated the Khmer Empire and he became the "Cakravatin" and established the union between god and king and the beginning of the "Devaraja" cult worship.

Such auspicious and sanctified acts I believe originated at Lingaparvata (Shiva's holy temple to speak to the gods). Coincidentally on the same night of Shivarati when Shiva married Parvati is also the same night Shiva swallowed the poison brought forth from the churning of the milky ocean and thus saved the world. Shiva stabilized the earth on this night as a result of his communicating with the gods who asked him to save the world. Consequently we can also think of the holy mountain of Lingaparvata as the symbolic representation of Shiva saving the world from oblivion. The world axis (Skamba) held the universe in place and Lingaparvata acted like Mt Mandara; the mythical mountain used to churn the heavens and save the earth so it would not fall into the nether world.

On my two previous pilgrimages to Vat Phu, Lingaparvata could always be seen in the distance either hidden behind billowing clouds, or illuminated by the morning sunlight. Whatever time of day it was Lingaparvata commanded ones attention and was the symbolic center of focus for the Vat Phu complex.

I wondered if any of the villagers who lived near the mountain had ever heard of any unusual stories relating to Lingaparvata. Subsequently, I had the occasion to meet, Saenthavisouk, an 85 year old blind Laotian farmer from the village of Nong Duen in Champassak. This meeting came about as a result of participating in the first public group expedition to the top of Lingaparvata on February 9-10, 2006. The village of Nong Duen

is close to a path that leads directly up to the top of the mountain. Thirty years ago, Saenthavisouk, and a monk named Narong, did a boon to Lingaparvata by carrying a 24kg candle to the very top. Saenthavisouk said they used to call the top of the mountain “Nguou-sou-palath” the name given to the water buffalo which has a close identity to a bull, referring to Nandi the bull, which is Shiva’s mount. He had mentioned he had seen unusual looking stones near the top of the mountain which I am certain were linga stones seeing as very recently 24 members of the Vat Phu museum carried a large linga down from the top of the mountain and placed it in the Vat Phu Museum.

On the morning of February 9<sup>th</sup>, thirty five people assembled in the village of Nong Duen in preparation to climb to the top of Mt. Phu Kao. The climb was organized by Mr. Khamphang, director of the Champassak National Tourism Administration. This was the fourth time a group had climbed to the top of the mountain. The first was in 1993 by an Italian archaeology team, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> climbs were in 1997 and 1998 by a UNESCO team, and then after the area had been researched carefully it was decided by the Champassak authorities to take a small group of interested people to the very top in 2006. This was the first organized climb open to people not affiliated with archaeological research. For me it was an opportunity to experience the spiritual aspects of this very ancient mountain. The mayor of Champassak joined the group as well as Oudomsy Keosaksith, the deputy director of the Vat Phu museum. It was Oudomsy’s knowledge and guidance that afforded me a deeper understanding of the mountain and the surrounding area. It was Oudomsy’s fourth climb up the mountain having been on the previous three climbs.

Before I begin the story of the climb to the summit I want to say that I was aware of the fact that one does not climb a sacred mountain, but instead does a circumambulation (pradaksina). However, it did not appear that this group was going to do a circumambulation but instead a direct climb to the top. Well before the climb I could find no references to a pradaksina on Lingaparvata. I had even written to Francis Englemann who has researched ancient sites in Laos for twenty years and has written extensively on Vat Phu. I asked him if he knew of a sacred path around the mountain and he replied back with this answer.

“I have no idea of a path for a pilgrimage around the mountain. You know that there has been a break in religious uses after the collapsing of the Khmer Empire, and a loss of the Siva cult by the local Lao-Tai population who reinterpreted the remains of the temple as an unfinished palace. If there has been such a sacred path it has been probably lost for centuries.”

Perhaps any secrets about Lingaparvata are too powerful to be made known to the profane world. Perhaps the secret to a path around the mountain can only be revealed by slowly realizing how truly sacred this power point of sacredness really is. The nurturing of the cosmology of the Khmer Empire resided in this area and the power the indigenous people received from the land spirits (Chaothaen), ancestor spirits or ghosts (Phithaen) and Thaen who is the highest celestial being in heaven, can only be a subject of wonder. I could only hope that my climb to the summit would reveal a few of the secrets from these spirits.

At first I thought it would be very disturbing to have so many people going on a climb up this sacred mountain. But I soon learned that it took at least thirteen Laotian men to carry all the necessities to camp out on the mountain for one night. Not only were there carriers of the necessary supplies but at least six Laotian men who carried M16 and AK47 rifles acting as the advance guard who left a day early to clear the path of any wild animals and protect all of us in the evening. It took walking about 2km through open rice fields before we disappeared under the canopy of trees leading to the top of the mountain. At this point I was totally unprepared for what was about to follow. I clearly remembered climbing to Vat Oubmong and Tham Lek cave with Bountham and Chansavang on my 2<sup>nd</sup> visit to Vat Phu so I thought I was somewhat prepared for the difficulty of the climb up Lingaparvata. I wasn't. Slowly the climb up Lingaparvata became an ordeal of physical determination which taxed every amount of energy I possessed. The Laotian men, however, carrying what seemed to me to be impossible loads nimbly picked their way over stone after stone with only thongs for foot wear.

Slowly, hour after hour passed by and it seemed it would take an eternity to surmount the rocky ledges leading to the top. Small arrows were scratched onto the face of stones by the guides to help direct each step you took otherwise it would be impossible to know which stone to step on that would lead to the next stone and hundreds more to follow. The tree line on the lower part of the mountain was slowly being replaced by the most unbelievable bamboo forest the likes of which I have never seen before. Finding ones own way through this primordial labyrinth of nature would be impossible without guides.

And then the most unexpected experience happened to me. I stepped on an unstable stone, lost my balance and fell directly down the side of a steep rocky surface. My eye wear flew off my face and I lost the grip I had on my tri-pod and camera. I was immediately lifted out of the rocks feet first as I frantically motioned to the guides that I had lost my glasses. The camera and tri-pod survived, the glasses were found in one piece and I survived with only a few scratches on my legs and arms. I was lucky. The incident, however, caused me to reflect about climbing any further. I thought about this for some time as I regained my composure by taking a necessary break in the climb. I knew deep inside myself that I had come too far to abandon the climb.

I readily admitted to myself that I did not have the strength I thought I had but knew I had to continue. Both my tri-pod and camera along with my backpack were taken over by Venh Xay, one of the Laotian climbers, who also became an invaluable aid to both my ascent and decent on Lingaparvata. I could not imagine how he could carry so much on his body with only wearing a simple pair of flimsy shower thongs. The sheer determination to continue climbing made everything else around me transform into some phantasmagorical landscape. The bird calls had a deep echoing tone which sounded like "a-tok-a-lok", "a-tok-a-lok" repeating endlessly and fading into the distant tree tops. The trees became so incredibly enormous both in height and width that I really did not believe I was on the same mountain. Caves appeared to recede endlessly into the mountains and rocky protrusions jutting out from the cliffs defied all sense of gravity. Serpentine vines of unbelievable thickness were hanging from tree in contorted spirals cork screwing themselves between every imaginable crevice and mountain stone.

The bamboo forest became a dark green landscape of endless masts reaching to the sky. And all through this amazing visual and aural odyssey I was still groping up the

mountain thinking I had reached the limits my legs could carry me any further, but nevertheless I continued climbing until we finally reached the campsite.

I assumed we were going to camp until morning and then climb to the top of Lingaparvata. Mr. Khamphang, however, put an end to that thought and made the decision to continue climbing. At that point I did not think I could find the energy to climb another hour or more but again I had no choice if I wanted to experience what I had planned so long for. Slowly I began to realize this second part of the climb was even more rugged than the climb to the base camp. Very thick forest growth with long hanging vines, bamboo trees in tight clusters and wild grass were all intertwined creating a seemingly impossible maze to find ones way through. I could see that the sun was slowly setting behind the top of the mountain and I knew it would be dark soon and couldn't help but think the morning would have been a better time to have gone to the top. But step by step I found myself pulling on long thin vines conveniently placed by nature so I could hoist myself up through narrow rock ravines, before I finally turned for one last switch back and found myself standing next to the massive towering rock out cropping named Lingaparvata; assuredly the ultimate natural linga in the world.

The rays of the setting sun were streaming through the clouds like so many golden shafts of light creating a curtain of luminescence as far as the eye could see. It was like standing on top of the world. Vanh Xay made sure my footing did not go though the holes underneath the thick mountain grass and it was all too obvious that nobody had been here for a very long time judging by the growth of all the plants and trees.

The mayor of Champassak was being interviewed by two reporters from Pakse and everyone was taking pictures. I was so thoroughly exhausted I wasn't quite sure what to think about. Oudomsy Keosaksith guided me around to the north face of Lingaparvata showing me a natural altar on the side of the rock face where the UNESCO team had found a Shiva linga in 1997; the same linga that is now on display in the Vat Phu Museum. Incense was burning and candles were lit and placed on the flat stone as other members of the group were paying their respects. Yuji Iwatsuki, and engineer living in Champassak, offered me a candle whereupon I concentrated on offering my own austerities to Shiva and Lingaparvata.

I broke pieces of bread and set them on the stone altar along with pouring water on the face of the stone as if I were in some holy sanctuary. I had no other strength other than what it took to kneel down in front of this massive stone. My legs were burning from the inside out as every muscle in my body was stressed after such a long climb. When I pressed my forehead against the cool stone I had the thought that someone had opened a large hidden door on the face of the stone and I entered the mountain experiencing a momentary sense of quiet that engulfed me completely. I was in deep meditation partly due to a moment of relaxation and partly due to loosing my concentration in solemn respect for the opportunity to be where I was. I could feel the enormity of this stone outcropping, and if ever I was going to be at the threshold of the gods it was then at that singular moment. I felt very small and insignificant next to this pillar of stone and as I slowly opened my eyes and leaned back I looked straight up at the towering stone Lingaparvata.

The commanding presence of the stone sent cold shivers down my spine and a sense of being able to enter the realm of the gods once again entered my mind. I reached the door way to immortality, the place where for over a millennium Kings would come to

pay their respects. It was a moment of rare sanctified bliss to be immersed in such an ancient setting.

Slowly my eyes left the top of the mountain and as I slowly lowered my gaze I could see many small caves which were naturally hewn into the stone providing shelter for birds, animals and anything else that crawled.

I rose to my feet and walked back to witness the vast expanses of land which stretched south where the Mekong River could be seen winding its way ultimately into Cambodia.

The setting sun was reflecting on the river like some giant shimmering serpent slithering across the earth. For that moment as I stood next to this massive mound of stone I was conscious of a larger presence next to me, a presence composed of stone but not any ordinary stone. This stone had a distinctive identity as a sentinel sent from the heavens to protect the holy land of Kuruksetra. This tone touched the clouds and I sensed in some very unfamiliar way that Lingaparvata had a sentience or recognition of the other. Partaking in this pilgrimage put into perspective for me the brief encounter we humans can have with the eternal presence wrought from nature. From this one particular natural protuberance pointing to the heavens was a sacred stone that had been venerated for countless millennia by people who have revered the mountain as a sacred temple in the heavens as well as fearing its presence. The Chinese annals testify that over 1000 men guarded the top of this mountain.

Should I have gone to the top of Lingaparvata? Did I violate the integrity of this sacred stone by my own lack of preparedness or not performing enough rituals to honor its presence before I climbed up to the top? Was I forewarned during my ascent to reconsider my entering this holy realm of the gods, and if perchance I have entered where one is not allowed will I incur the wrath of Lord Shiva himself? I believe I was given a warning during my climb to the top of Lingaparvata which forced me to scrutinize my decision to continue the journey up this most holy of mountains. But then all those concerns and doubts dissolved in my mind and the vast expanse of land that stretched out before me overcame my awareness and for a brief moment I really felt I was in the realm of the gods.

It was impossible to do a circumambulation around the top of this massive stone outcropping. The enormity of being directly next to the outcropping demanded that you heed the dangerously steep ledges which drop precipitously down the side of the mountain. It was then that I realized Lingaparvata commands its own distinctive presence protruding the way it does into the clouds.

All the effort of climbing up the mountain for nearly nine hours culminated in a simple act of standing and peering out over the vast plains laid out before me as far as the eye could see.

As a group we were few in number to be the first to come to this venerated mountain top where countless secrets and sacrifices were held deep within the stones memory. How many offerings had been made to this sacred stone over the millenniums nobody will ever know. Directly below Mt Phu Kao the smaller Hong (bird) mountain symbolizing Vishnu's mount Garuda, and below Hong Mt. rested the even smaller Nak (snake) mountain symbolizing the nagas protecting the land. These three mountains reaching to the heavens acted as sentinels over the holy land of Kuruksetra.

And far to the south the setting sun was reflecting off the Ban That baray near the village of Ban That in the Sukhuma district of Champassak province where King Suryavarman II erected three stupas and a stele in honor of King Dharanindravarman I.

Today these three stupas are referred to as That Sampang. This furthestmost southern gate leading to Lingaparvata was a way to recognize the spirit Lingaparvata has even over 30km to the north of the village of Ban That. Suryavarman's temple is further testimony to how important it was to pay respects to this sacred mountain and the land around it. I could not help but think, as I was standing high on top Mt Phu Kao, that I was reliving a moment in history when the Brahmin priests offered austerities to Shiva in much the same way as I had done in my own small way that day. Surely nothing of the mountain had changed over the millennia as the eternal presence of Shiva was forever symbolized by Lingaparvata. The holy trinity (trimurti) was infused into the sacred stone outcropping looming over the land of Kuruksetra as a reminder to all humans that the gods had fashioned a part of their kingdom in the heavens by making Lingaparvata on earth.

No sooner had we arrived at the top it was time to struggle back to our campsite. The Mekong River was winding its way south reflecting the golden rays of the sun and for all those brief moments I experienced the lofty pinnacle of Lingaparvata. The sky slowly turned black and had it not been for a small travel light I brought I would have never been able to see where to put my feet to get down from the top. The moon was now shining through the trees and the haunting hooting of an owl resounded in the cool mountain air. Venh Xay was directly behind me along with Oudomsey and Khamphang from the tourist office who took my hand in front and guided me each step of the way down to the campsite. With unfounded determination coupled with the need to find the strength to grab hold of vines and climb down rocky ledges I finally made it back to the campsite.

The Laotian men were busy preparing campfires and setting up tents for the evening. After eating sticky rice, chicken and fish paste (pla) I retired to my tent. It was getting colder on the mountain and a chill overtook my body. Somehow I rolled myself up in the few coverings I could find and finally fell asleep. In the very early hours of the morning I was awakened by a very strong howling wind which forced its way through the trees making everything sway furiously creating loud sounds like ocean waves crashing on the shore. I could hear the owl calling out with its distinctive hooting and got out of the tent and just stood there looking at the clouds speeding across the face of the moon while listening to the sound of the strong wind blowing in the trees. I found myself in a world like no other I had ever been in before. Everyone was asleep and the amber coals from the campfires could still be seen glowing in the dark.

The moon could be seen through the tops of the trees as it was traveling on its ecliptic path passing by the Gemini twins Pollux and Castor (Rahu and Ketu in Vedic astronomy) heading toward Regulus one of the four guardians of the heavens who guarded the north. The other three sentinels ruling the heavens were Aldebaran watching the East, Antares watching the West, and Fomalhaut watching the South. These were the four stars that marked the two equinoxes and two solstices. Regulus, the royal star, when in 3000BCE marked the summer solstice. And among the lunar mansions in Vedic astronomy Regulus was in the nakshatra that bore the name Magha, "the mighty". These

were a few of the celestial coordinates I was trying to put together to understand my place in the universe that evening.

I immediately recalled my entrance into the central sanctuary at Vat Phu when I passed under Kirttimukha and the twins guarding the central shrine. Now I found myself directly under the twins in the heavens who have played such an important role in all the creation myths on earth especially the one concerning the churning of the milky ocean. It was Rahu and Shiva who were about to go into battle because Rahu took a taste of the elixir of immortality. I felt I was about to encounter something profound that evening? There was no mistake that Rudra was howling furiously in his lofty temple. What was he trying to say howling through the tress that evening? If even there was going to be an opportunity to be in Shiva's presence it was then standing under the moon on top of Lingaparvata. This is why I came to Lingaparvata and unfounded as it may seem I was completely absorbed by the spirits of the mountain.

Then as if by some unknown force I was transported by the wind and found myself riding on the back of Lakshmi's beautiful white owl Ulooka as it announced its way up through the tree tops and into a temple floating over Lingapavata. Rudra appeared with the most grimacing look which was enough to frighten anyone beyond hopes of living to see another day. This horrible face of Kirttimukha was to experience unimaginable terror, but having no reason to fear Shiva's wrath his horrific face of glory slowly transformed before my eyes as all the elements in and around Kuruksetra slowly came forth and changed his menacing gaze into the celestial image of Lord Shiva.

The very top of Lingaparvata itself transformed into a chignon on top of Shiva's head, the long spiraling vines draping from the trees became his long flowing hair with the moon becoming a crescent diadem of iridescent white light adding to his godly presence. The Mekong River appeared as a giant serpent wrapping itself around his body and its hooded head appeared over his shoulder. The deers in the forest shed their skins which then draped over his body and the base of Lingaparvata turned into his heavenly vehicle; Nandi the bull.

All the stars radiated down from the heavens casting shafts of starlight next to his left side forming his heavenly consort Parvati. The most ancient of trees that reached to the heavens became his trident, and the sacred spring waters flowed from his hair. It was the most resplendent sight to behold. Then from between Shiva's forehead (his ajnacakra) there slowly appeared a light which grew in intensity blinding my eyes and forcing me to cover them with my hands. I took one hand away hoping to see his celestial presence only to find the moon directly above me peering through the tree tops while a few cool rain drops fell on my head. Transfixed and stunned all I could do was look around the campsite wanting to wake everyone up and tell them of my vision. I knew it would have sounded much too unbelievable. What I do know for sure is I was standing on the top of Lingaparvata in those early morning hours of February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006, and only by trying to recall standing under those wind blown trees in the early hours of the morning did the vision of all those nature spirits appear in my mind. I knew then that morning was a very different moment in my life so I waited for two weeks to pass when the night of Shivarati came on February 26<sup>th</sup> before I would write down my experience of seeing Shiva and Parvati in their celestial temple.

As a result of recording my visions I have learned how to translate what appears to be just a normal everyday occurrence into vivid other worldly images. I have

discovered that behind the surface of our world that we experience with our five senses there is much more to be seen. There exists another world that is not comprised of an orderly progression of events but a multi-dimensional world that can be perceived in many different ways.

I suppose you could say it was only my imagination that portrayed events the way I wanted to see them and in reality these imaginings were nothing more than personal illusions and fantasies.

In that case Vat Phu has to be one of the most spectacular examples of how fantasy became a reality as men carved onto stone some of the most splendid images of a kingdom ruled by gods who were in touch with the immortal realms where Lord Vishnu could be found sleeping on the waters of the universe waiting to begin another age silently joined by all the gods in a holding room at the museum.



Vishnu asleep in the universe with all the gods

But now, all I could think of was how to find the strength to walk down over these mountain stones that were at one time fashioned into the most beautiful temple adornments reflecting the order of the universe. I am sure I was briefly given a glimpse of Shiva's radiance before his wisdom blinded me and once again was joined with mortal men. It wasn't yet the time for me to leave my "self" at the threshold of Coomaraswamy's "sun doors" so my soul could reunite with eternity.

When the rays of the morning sun broke through the trees everyone was up and about eating some food and preparing for the five hour descent to the village of Nong Duen. My legs felt like pieces of stiff rubber without bones to hold me upright, but instead they gave way to a wobbling sensation when I tried to walk. I thought for sure I could never walk back down those steep cliffs, winding ravines, and stone path ways formed by the rushing waters from the mountain top. But an instinctual reflex took over keeping me from falling enabling me to slowly climb down the mountain lifting my legs over fallen tree trunks, and always getting a helping hand from Venh Xay. It was the last 2km where I felt part robot and part human as my knees could hardly bend and only by some swaying waddle of my whole body could I keep going. I must have looked quite humorous to anyone looking at me, but being the last to arrive at the village I experienced those final miles of the rice fields by myself.

When I finally reached the village I think I provided a spectacle for the villagers by being the only white foreigner. But without the slightest embarrassment I slowly walked up the short stairs into the village hall as everyone was cheering as I sat down to join in the festivities. The sound of music and voices seemed to be coming further away than right in front of me. I had left the immediate control of my senses and let something else carry me along to come down the mountain. I know this all must sound so



exaggerated but its how I really felt at the time. I literally did not have the strength to climb this mountain yet by some inner determination I over came obstacles even with insurmountable difficulties. I have heard the same sense of over coming obstacles from countless stories on human triumph and now I had a direct experience that I could use in understanding how we humans possess an inner strength to do something if we really put our minds to it.

Slowly the cheering and music came into focus and with a few drinks of Lao's favorite rice alcohol called "Lao Lao" I reconnected with my body only to discover I was in the middle of a very large ceremony. The ceremony I came to learn follows an ancient Lao tradition of healing. Dr. Wajuppa Tossa has compiled a chapter on Lao Folk Medicine and Remedy in his Lao Folk Literature book on the "Baa sii suu Khwan" ceremony. He states,

" It is believed that each person's well-being depends on their khwan or spirit. Each person has 32 khwan dwelling within his/her person. If any of the khwan is frightened, the person may fall ill. To help comfort a person to feel that the khwan is contained with his/her body a ceremony is organized. This ceremony is called "baa sii suu khwan" or "suu khwan baa sii" (the ceremony of calling back the spirit). This ceremony is commonly practiced among the ethnic Tai people in Southeast Asia including the Thai/Lao people in the north, the northeast, and Laos. Baa sii suu khwan is a ceremony held to bless a person with health and happiness both physically and spiritually".

After learning this I was extremely grateful that I participated in this ceremony having been frightened with seeing the face of Kirttimukha in my vision. For the first time a special certificate was presented to all those invited to make the climb. Khamphang was the master of ceremonies and in the center of the village pavilion a ceremonial tray (phaa khwan) was prepared which held a many level beautifully designed cone made from banana leaves which held flowers, incense sticks, candles and cotton strings.

A person versed in the ancient Brahman chants would then call out "ma yoe khwan oye (Come spirit, Please Come)" and every one echoed the refrain together. A special flower branch would then be dipped in Lao whiskey and sprinkled on everyone in the ceremony. At the end of the chanting everyone picks a cotton string from the cone and ties it to a person's wrist to keep the spirit within the body of the person and leaves it on for three days. This was a most memorable occasion for me to experience the warm feelings of all the villagers of Nong Duen. After the ceremony all the villagers prepared many different Lao food dishes and it was truly a time of healing and rejuvenation.

As far as experiences go the opportunity to scale Lingaparvata seemed like I had visited a lost world more ancient than all the temples built by the Khmers, and in truth Lingaparvata will still be on this earth long after the civilizations of today vanish. Partaking in this pilgrimage put into perspective the brief encounter we humans can have with the eternal edifices of nature. Lingaparvata has been venerated for countless millennia by people who have revered this temple of nature reaching to the heavens as the most feared and most respected place to pay tribute to other worldly spirits.

I am not so sure that our imaginations of things that are other worldly are based on fantasy but are in fact the faintest vestiges of a world where humans were in direct

contact with godly realms. Perhaps now as the human race enters the next “great year” (manvantara) with a new world age occurring in the constellation Aquarius will more of these dormant insights into the realms of the gods be reawakened, and what now appears to us as fantasy and illusion will be made manifest through a new transformative vision of spiritual awakening. It will require a recognition that we humans are in fact mutating and shedding our conceptions of reality based on gross materialism into one based on etheric realms where the illusiveness of consciousness is based on light and illumination enabling a new interpretation of our “beingness” in the universe. Stated in another way we are leaving the cycle of the kali yuga and once again, after 26,000 years, entering the golden age of the satya yuga.

But, now that I have entered this most holy of mountains I can not be justified in saying to others not to seek the temple of the gods. But what I can say is that reverence of this mountain should be carried with you when you do decide to enter Shiva’s realm. Perhaps then Shiva will be forgiving. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) the philosopher who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 had a motto which I have always cherished. It reads “veneratio vitae” (reverence for life). I believe this should always be kept in mind when entering Shiva’s realm.

The following day the opening ceremony of the Vat Phu festival was taking place and one of the visiting dignitaries was Dr. Patrizia Zolese a world renowned archaeologist who has been instrumental in restoring the ancient ceremonial road leading to Vat Phu. Through the Italian Archaeological Mission the lotus columns and sandstone causeway are being restored to their original grandeur. I had the opportunity to speak at great length with Dr. Zolese about the history of the Khmer empire, her future plans of restoration at Vat Phu, and the attraction of tourism to Vat Phu.

I mentioned to Patrizia that I had climbed to the top of Lingaparvata the previous day and she immediately exclaimed, “Its forbidden to climb Lingaparvata”. You can imagine how I felt hearing her say that. I felt I had stolen something as well as a sense of guilt for violating the sanctity of the mountain which she definitely felt to be too sacred to step foot on.

Her feelings were that Mt Phu Kao is a very sacred mountain and to introduce tourists to the mountain will only bring trash, ruined flora and fauna, and worst of all the tourists will be taking stones as souvenirs or carving their names in the sacred outcropping of Lingaparvata.

Mr Khamphang has said he has made every effort to educate his team, the climbers and the tourists to these concerns. These are legitimate concerns that are plaguing all spiritual sites the world over. Luang Prabang, once a quiet peaceful Buddhist Village is now filled with western style pizza shops and the catering to tourists has forever changed this quiet village.

Vat Phu is the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Heritage Site in Laos and from what I could tell the leaders of Champassak will maintain that special quality that makes this a very spiritual place to visit. However, with the increase in tourists and the number of activities that are planned this strict adherence to keeping the mountain free from trash and damage will become increasingly more difficult. I hope that my own participation in the first organized tourist climb to the top of Lingaparvata does not bring disrespect to the sanctity of the mountain but adds to its importance as a sacred center deserving respect and care not only for the Lao people to enjoy but for all people to experience the special quality

the mountain offers. This one was of the most memorable events of my life and I wouldn't want the memory of that purity of nature to be altered by disrespect for the holy land which Lingaparvata and Vat Phu are a part of.

Perhaps it's best if a viewing platform were built where tourists could look at Lingaparvata and leave this sacred temple to the domain of the gods. Considering all the initiations and knowledge one had to acquire to enter the holy sanctuary of Vat Phu during the reign of the Khmer kings this would be in keeping with the spirit of Vat Phu. However, the profane world seems to be losing this quality of respect for sacred sites. Let Lingaparvata exist in peace and give to it the respect it deserves and recognize it as Lord Shiva's temple to the gods.

For every person considering entering Lingaparvata it is up to their own conscious to be their guide. Today Lingaparvata is in a pristine state, but it can not possibly remain that way if thousands of tourists trample the ground that supports the life around the sacred mountain. Careful decisions must be made to protect Lingaparvata and not extinguish the spirits which live on this mountain. Perhaps this is why Rudra was howling in those early morning hours, and why I was returned to the earthly realms to tell every one of Rudra's concerns. It was a howling to keep away this onslaught of tourism that will change forever the days and nights on this holy mountain. The gods did speak to me after all.

### **Section 6: The Caves at Vat Phu**

Mt Phu Kao was not only respected as a visible manifestation of Shiva's presence, but was also a mountain that provided the deepest caves for ascetics to retreat to and meditate in.

Directly behind the main sanctuary at Vat Phu is the oldest of all the temples. It was the cave of the sacred waters which flowed directly out of the cave and through a small sacred shrine before it entered the main sanctuary where the sacred linga would be anointed daily.



Sacred water shrine and inside cave looking east from Vat Phu

Many of the caves at Vat Phu can be found containing devotional spirit objects and small statues of the Buddha. The cave throughout history has been known as an entry way into the earth and has been regarded since the beginning of recorded history as the original dwelling place of the first humans, animals, birds and just about anything that could crawl. Caves are dark and mysterious places and are entry ways or portals to other worlds. It's deep within caves that ascetics would retreat for years on end gaining the deepest of spiritual knowledge before re-entering the world. The folk lore surrounding

caves abounds in all cultures of the world. SE Asia is noted for its many caves and Laos has some of the most holy caves filled with all types of sacred relics.

One of the most renowned caves is located at Mt Phu Kao where an ascetic by the name of Vaktrashiva had lived over 1,500 years ago. Inside the cave Sanskrit inscriptions can be clearly seen carved on the face of a flat stone which forms a wall inside the cave naming the cave Vakraguha. Today the cave is called Tham Lek (cave of inscriptions).

The path to Vakraguha (Tham Lek) is perhaps the most arduous journey an ascetic could make. I found this out as I began to follow Chansavang cutting his way through the dense bamboo shoots along a very rocky cliff which wound its way up the mountain to Tham Lek. This pilgrimage proved to be much more difficult than getting to Vat Oubmong. There was no path to Tham Lek, but only a general direction of going up along the side of the mountain. What I began to notice is that we were following the rocky path of a mountain stream. The water was running past our feet, as we jumped from stone to stone grabbing on to hanging bamboo trees to help pull ourselves to get to the next stone. On and on we climbed and the journey created an impression that an entirely other world had again been entered. There seemed to be no end to the enchantment which filled the holy land. Without Chansavang cutting a path up the mountain our passage to Tham Lek would have been impossible. Dark green moss covered the rocks giving a green velvet look to everything. The further you ascend up the mountain the denser the bamboo would become.

Truly nature had cast a spell over me. Large banana leaves curled over large stones, water was running under my feet making every stone slippery, and it was necessary to concentrate on each step to be sure I had secure footing otherwise what was pure enchantment could equally be a catastrophe especially if I slipped and fell over all the rocks. There was no question that timelessness had once again set in as never before.

This was Vaktrashiva's path, or at least one of many, which led to his home. I was extremely mystified as to what his cave must look like. This path is not a path that can be readily seen. It's more like you need an inner knowing on how to sense direction to a specific spot on the slopes of the mountain. It was a path invented out of going in a general direction knowing that high on the mountain side, next to the watery path of the mountain waters, Vaktrashiva's home was to be found. Then the announcement came as it did when we reached Vat Oubmong, "we are here" exclaimed Chansavang, "the cave is just ahead". Chansavang was ahead of me so I looked around looking for some large gapping dark entrance into the mountain but that is not what I saw. What I saw nestled next to the rocks was a small space directly above the stream that was flowing down the mountain. I was surprised a cave could be so small. It was only large enough for one person to fit in and very difficult at that as I tried to get inside of it.

Chansavang cut three large banana leaves to use as a mat which made sitting in the cave more comfortable. Once inside my head was touching the large flat rock above my head and the large flatten stone with the Sanskrit inscriptions was on my left.

I slowly got out of the cave to get my camera when the thought came to me that if this was Vakraguha's home what then what would he see outside of his cave while he was meditating. To my complete astonishment I knew why this was the ascetic's home. Directly ahead of the cave was the rock face of the mountain going straight up into the sky with water running down the face of it. Directly in the middle of the rocky face was a

perfect pyramid created by the crevices in the stone. Here was a perfect meditation visual to focus the mind on.

When I went back in the cave I could see that the pyramid shape on the rock face was aligned perfectly with my line of sight. It was here I placed myself in the ascetic's mental space and could feel a union of nature and consciousness as I sat in complete silence. Sitting in the cave in the lotus posture with legs crossed and back erect I stared out upon the enormous rock faced cliff directly in front of me and at eye level was the peak of a pyramidal shape on the face of the cliff created by nature. Vaktrashiva found himself a small home fashioned by nature to attune himself to the solitude which surrounded this totally secluded retreat. The Sanskrit inscription on the cave wall identified the name of the cave as Vakraguha, the resident of the cave as Vaktrashiva, and its location was on Bhadresvara, the ancient name of Lingaparvata. There was also a request that the cave be preserved and not used as a place to live in.

Vaktrashiva's request has been honored and if you ever get the opportunity to visit Vakraguha you will see forever set in stone the upward pointing triangle representing the lingam.

In Hindu cosmology this triangle is called the fire (Vahni). The Vahni-triangle symbolizes the essence of the male god energy. Vahni is also equated with the fiery heat within the ascetic (tapas). Here on the slopes of the rocky cliff resided one ascetics home who saw how to fuse his mind with the energy of Lord Shiva and enter the absolute realm where one goes beyond the cycle of life and death.

Visiting Vakraguha is much more than an afternoon mountain trek which the burgeoning adventure tourism market would like to promote. Vakraguha is a place where nature provides the pilgrim, the spiritual seeker, with a pristine locality where the attainment of the absolute permeates every crevice and moss covered stone. The roots coming from the trees standing high above the cliff's roof top plummeted down to drink the pure waters in front of Vaktrashiva's home. The image of the pyramid will always stay in my mind knowing that a small rocky shelter was all that was needed to become one with the supreme lord. To quote another Dutchman named Klaasen, who also searched for caves in SE Asia in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century stated, "To attain quiet equanimity is the highest good that we can achieve in this life".

If Lingaparvata is the most visible outcropping of Shiva's manifestation at Vat Phu then it was here on these steep rocky slopes that the most hidden symbol of achieving spiritual enlightenment was to be found. At Vakraguha you could prepare yourself to greet Lord Shiva. Here, at Vakraguha, a single point of focus was available to help center the mind in order to cast away all vestiges of Maya in the material world. If there were any place to communicate with the gods on this earth then this humble home of Vaktrashiva's could certainly provide the pilgrim with such an experience.

Vat Phu is much more than a temple complex. Vat Phu is in Kuruksetra (holy land) and the holy land has nature spirits (Neak Ta's) which are far more instructive to the understanding of the way in which gods and men can communicate with one another. Jayavarman II most certainly received his lessons well at Vat Phu where the Devaraja, the wedding of gods and men, created the Cakravatin (God King) and Jayavarman II then inaugurated the beginning of the Khmer empire on top of Mt Mahendraparvata in 802AD. After 500 years and a lineage of over twelve kings the influence of Vat Phu was finally concretized into a spiritual empire unequalled in the annals of human history. Only

a few more hundred years would pass and then the largest religious monument ever built by man would rise above the Cambodian country side and be known as Angkor Wat. The ultimate spiritual expression of the Khmer empire reflecting the design of the universe and inspired by the holy trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva would stand as an eternal symbol of the highest aspirations of the human spirit.

**Conclusion:**

Can it be that the world no longer finds such spiritual pursuits such as those found at Vat Phu of any value anymore? Has the need to promote markets become the only driving force left for humans to participate in?

The quest to understand spiritual pursuits seems to be becoming ever more distant or available to anyone who may want to seek this path in life. In the introduction to the 20<sup>th</sup> century the majority of the world's populations live in urban centers where it now has become impossible to see the stars due to the polluted air and all the artificial light reflected in the sky. Being able to see moving bodies in space which connects human life with the very roots of its own history is ending. The silence which is necessary to hear your own deepest thoughts that are being constantly spawn by nature's forces deep within our souls is becoming impossible to experience. What was once common place in the world such as seeing a star filled sky without any noise or other interruptions is becoming very rare. We could say it is the time of "soul extinction".

The readily perceived world of things, and all the values placed on things, is driving human endeavors to leave those worlds that can not be seen or heard by the five senses. The seeing into the universe is slowly being replaced with seeing images of our universe created by digital display technologies. The dependency to know the world only by digital imagery and controlled and processed sounds is removing from the human imagination its own ability to grow with nature's own forces.

What can be received by nature's forces is an attunement to the formative elements, or building blocks, to a much vaster realm than can ever be provided by commercial dependencies currently forming our new global culture. There must always be kept alive the physical opportunity (spaces on earth) to experience personal growth free from the by products of commercial intervention. The investment of energy in providing these "earth spaces" is not useless just because these spaces can not readily be related or equated to financial rewards. Offering humans free "earth spaces" is a way of recognizing the wonder that is implicit in being human on this earth and the acknowledgement that learning does not come from man alone. There must always be "earth spaces" that are permanently left alone both on the earth and in the air above those spaces. These "earth spaces" are more than just wilderness spaces too, but spaces that also contain a clear opening to communicate with the deepest reaches of the heavens without the slightest interruption by humankind's inventions or the by-products created by humans. If temples to the stars are no longer going to be built by stones hewn from the earth the least we can do as a global civilization, is to honor the earth and recognize it as a temple placed here by divine intervention. By setting aside sacred "earth spaces" on this planet, in specified places, sanctioned by all nations, will be our gift to all future generations. If we as a world body don't honor the creation of these "earth spaces" then there will be no available space left on the earth for pure attunement to the heavens. How large a space do we need, and how many? Given the rate of the growth of the human

population and the use of earth's land masses a 100 square mile space, at minimum, would assure that a human could get in touch with the creative forces of the universe without any interruptions from his fellow man. We should have at least one or two on every continent. These "earth spaces" could be called "earth portals" or openings to the dynamic creative forces of the universe.

Vat Phu demonstrates to the world that fashioned out of the sublime beauty of the natural environment came an empire devoted to the wisdom of ancient stories of how the universe was brought forth by the gods. That space still exists for the pilgrim who wants to walk out of the material world and into the spiritual world. Kuruksetra, the holy land, is still exuding its sacred energy. The message is one filled with tranquility and a quiet sense of knowing that we are here on this earth to witness the cycles of heaven. This message of attaining enlightenment comes from being an active participant in the creation story and making a pilgrimage to a place that is connected to worlds beyond worlds. Kuruksetra is one of those places. Kuruksetra is a door way to eternity.



Kuruksetra plains and Lingaparvata

## Section 7: Contact – References

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## 2

### MOUNT *MAYENTHIRAM* ('*MAHENDRA*')

SINGARAVELU SACHITHANANTHAM\*

1.0. According to the Chinese Annals entitled *Nan-Ch'i Shu* (58, 10b-11a) of the fifth century A.D., relating to the second year (484 A.D.) of the *Yung-ming* period of the *Southern Ch'i* dynasty, an emissary sent by the king of B'iu-nam, or Funan in ancient Kampuchea, to the Chinese royal court reported to the Chinese ruler that the vegetation of the kingdom of Funan never withered and auspicious trees flourished in great abundance, because it was the tradition of the kingdom to adore the great God Maheshvara (Shiva), who manifested Himself on the scared mountain known as *Mayenthiram*, and that, because of Lord Maheshvara's all-pervasive grace and potency (*tsun-ling*), the ruler and the princes of the realm enjoyed divine protection and the subjects of the kingdom remained loyal to the royal authority (Wheatley 1974: 97-98 and 105-107; 1980: 1-2).

1.1. The great significance of the above information is that the ancient Tamil cult of Lord Shiva had been established as religious-political cult of statehood in the ancient kingdom of Funan in Kampuchea in the lower Mekong valley of Southeast Asia towards the end of the fifth century A.D., and that the name *Mayenthiram*, which was recorded in the Chinese Annals as the name of the sacred cosmic mountain, was a Tamil expression for the Sanskrit name *Mahendra*, and it was entirely in accordance with the fact that the concept of the cosmic mountain of *Mayenthiram* being the sacred abode of Lord Shiva has been a Tamil tradition since the ancient times.

1.2. Thus, in some of the earliest surviving Tamil poems belonging to the anthologies of the *Sangam Period* (200 B.C. – 200 A.D.), both the king of men and the King of gods are said to have the mountain as their abode: For example, the chieftains Aay Antiran and Valvilori are described as *malaikkilavan* ('*the lord of the mountain*') in the poems (129:4 and 152:11, respectively) of the *Puranaanuuru* anthology. Lord Shiva as the King of gods is also described as *malai-kilavon* ('*the Lord of the Mountain*') in the *Perumpaanaarruppatai* (line 500) and in the *Thirumurukaarruppatai* (line 317), and as *malai-araiyan* ('*the King of the Mountain*') in the Tamil epic *Cilappatikaaram* (*vaalththukkaathai*, 14:1).

1.2.3. It is therefore quite likely that the Tamil Shaivite saint Maanikkavaacakar (who is generally ascribed to the ninth century A.D.) followed the earlier Tamil cultural tradition in describing Lord Shiva in the scared hymns of the *Kiirthithith-thiruvakaval* (lines 8-10 and 146) of the *Thiruvaacakam*, not only as *kilai-uyar-kilavon* ('*the Lord of the Kailaasa-mountain*') but also as *One who graciously granted the Shaiva Agama tradition while abiding on the great immortal mountain of Mayenthiram* ('*mannu maamalai mayenthiram athanir, sonna aakamam thoorruviththu-aruli*'). In line 100 of

the *Kiirththith-thiruvakaval*, Lord Shiva is also described as *mayenthira-verpan* ('the Lord of Mayenthiram-mountain'); and in a hymn of the *Thiruvaarththai* (9: 2), belonging to the *Thiruvaacakam*, Lord Shiva is described as *mayenthira-naathan* ('the Lord of Mayenthiram'). There is also a reference in the *Thiruvaarththai* (4: 1-2) to Lord Shiva manifesting Himself as the Divine Hunter on the Mayenthiram-mountain ("vetu uruvaaki mayenthiraththu mikukurai vaanavar vanthu thannaiththeta *iruntha civaperumaan*').

1.3. It would seem that the legend of Lord Shiva manifesting Himself as the Divine Hunter was also known in the kingdom of Funan in Kampuchea: According to epigraphic evidence, the capital of the kingdom of Funan was known as **Vyaadhapura** ('the City of the Divine Hunter'), apparently in deference to Lord Shiva's manifestation as the Divine Hunter on the mountain of *Mayenthiram* (Coedès 1968: 36; Wheatley 1974: 106).

There is a reference in the *kairaataparvan* of *vanaparvan* of the *Mahaabhaarata* (pp. 89-94, *vanaparva* section, Vol.2 of P.C. Roy's English translation of the *Mahaabhaarata*) to Lord Shiva manifesting Himself as the Divine Hunter in order to vanquish the demon Mukaasura (who in the form of a wild boar had tried to disturb Arjuna's penance) and bestowing the powerful missile of *paashupataastra* to Arjuna in appreciation of his ardent penance. It may be inferred from this episode that Lord Shiva manifests Himself as the Divine Hunter to vanquish evil elements.

1.4. The rather close correspondence of the information regarding the *Mayenthiram*-mountain as the sacred abode of Lord Shiva in the ancient kingdom of Funan in Kampuchea (as preserved in the Chinese Annals of the fifth century A.D.) with the particulars found in devotional hymns of the Tamil Shaivite saint Maanikkavaacakar would seem to suggest the strong possibility that the ancient Tamil tradition relating to the cult of Lord Shiva could very well have belonged to an earlier period (say, the fourth or the fifth century A.D.), that is, at least 400 years prior to the ninth century A.D., which is generally the date assigned to the Tamil saint Maanikkavaacakar, who is the author of the sacred Shaivite hymns belonging to the *Thiruvaacakam*.

1.5. In this connection, we may recall the view of the historians of southern India (e.g. Nilakanta Sastri 1958: 138-140) that the period between the third century A.D. and the fifth or the sixth century A.D. was a 'dark' period in the history of the Tamils in southern India because of the dominance of foreign dynastic reign of the *Kalabhras* – the *Kalabhra-interregnum* – when the influence of Hindu cults was somewhat overshadowed by the influence of Jainism and Buddhism. However, it would seem that the same period was a 'golden' age for some of the Southeast Asian kingdoms, because it was during the period that several Shaivite priests and scholars would seem to have found their way to the kingdoms of Southeast Asia to serve the royal courts there. Even if there was any obstacle to the Hindu priests to sail across the seas for religious duties (as claimed by some scholars), it would seem that the Tamil priests and scholars chose to ignore such obstruction in order to serve the cause of Shaivism when their services were required by the Southeast Asian rulers (Coedès 1968: 19 and 269, n.27: a passage of the *Mrigendraagama* considers sea voyages permissible).

1.6. It is also of some interest to note in this connection that the Tamil Shaivite saint Manikkavaacakar in his sacred hymns of the Kirthhith-thiruvakaval (line 118) has referred to the city of Madurai in the kingdom of the Paandiya rulers as ‘the ancient abode of Lord Shiva’. One may therefore venture to suggest that, just as the Tamil title *maara* had been adopted as the prestigious royal title of *Shrii Maara* by the ancient Kampuchean ruler of the kingdom of Funan, as indicated by the Vō-canĥ inscription of the third century A.D. (Filliozat 1969: 106-107), the ancient Tamil tradition concerning the Mountain of *Mayenthiram* being Lord Shiva’s sacred abode could have also reached the Mekong valley around the same time or during the ensuing period before the fifth century A.D.

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## 3

Studies in Cambodian Epigraphy  
I - VII

Sachchidanand Sahai

## I

THE STELA OF CRUOY AMPIL

K 116= CORPUS LXII

The fragment of a sandstone stela (0,35 x 0,43 x 0,15) was discovered in 1902 on a hillock called Phnom Sampar Kalei, four kilometers from the right bank of the Mekong in the province of Stung Treng. Since it was deposited for sometime at the monastery called Vat Cruoy Ampil, it is known by that name.<sup>1</sup>



Location of K 116 after Aymonier (*Le Cambodge*)

On the basis of an **estampage** taken by Adh. Leclère in 1904, Louis Finot considers this text as an incomplete replica of rock inscription of Tham Kre.<sup>2</sup>

The inscription consists of three Sanskrit lines in beautiful script of seventh century, corresponding to the three first pāda of inscriptions of Citrasena at Tham Kre and Th'am Pet T'ong.<sup>3</sup>

“Though it is quite probable, it is impossible to assert in good method,” observes Cœdès, “that the fourth pāda also was identical to that of these two inscriptions, and that it related to the installation of a linga.”<sup>4</sup>

## TEXT

- 1 bhaktyā bhagvataś sambho(2)r  
 2 mmātāpitror anujñayā  
 3 s[th]āpitañ citrasenena  
 4 -----

Established by Citrasena, with devotions towards the Blessed Sambhu and with the authorization of his parents....



K 116

II  
 Socle of Tu'k Co

Aymonier stamped the inscription K.217 in the province of Battambang on a socle that he found “near the northern extremity of village of Toeuk Chou, on a small artificial mound called Kouk Kantout.”<sup>5</sup> The inscribed piece was not found by Lunet de Lajonquière who visited the site after Aymonier and described it as Kuk Kantout.<sup>6</sup> Cédès draws our attention to the one **estampage** a la chinoise in the collection of EFEO (no. 706) which



offers much better reading than the **estampage** of Aymonier (Bibliothèque Nationale no. 27).

“But this does not mean”, observes Cœdès, “that its decipherment is easier. Aymonier found it very badly written, nearly unreadable, except the name of the King Indravarman.” In reality, it is written in a late cursive script. It relates to the king Śrīndravarman who ruled in thirteenth century. If some letters have the form used at the Angkor period, others have altogether a rare (insolite) aspect. I have not been able to identify all. The object of the inscription is the same as that of many other ordnances engraved on the stone; that is, handing over a domain or foundation to the king so that henceforth it might be considered as royal foundation (*rājadharmā*) and *ipso facto* be exempted from the taxes imposed on the private foundations. In the present case the nature of the foundation placed at the disposal of King Śrīndravarman by the clergy (*paṃnvas*) on the orders (*tras*) of a superior is not clear.”<sup>7</sup>

“If my reading is correct, which I dare not affirm,” notes Cœdès, “the ending of his name by the nominative “o” denotes a Theravadin priest.”<sup>8</sup>

#### TEXT

(A) vraḥ *vidyākaro*<sup>9</sup> nārado traṣṣ pa[ṃ]nvas *sruk-ñ*<sup>10</sup> thvāy-jā vraḥ rājadharmma (B)  
ta sruk-oñ<sup>11</sup> vṛk ta vraḥ pāda[karma]teñ añ śrīśrīndrāvarmma/

#### TRANSLATION

Vraḥ Vidyākara Nārado enjoins the clergy of the village of ... to offer – to be the royal foundation of the village of – to His Majesty Śrīndravarman.

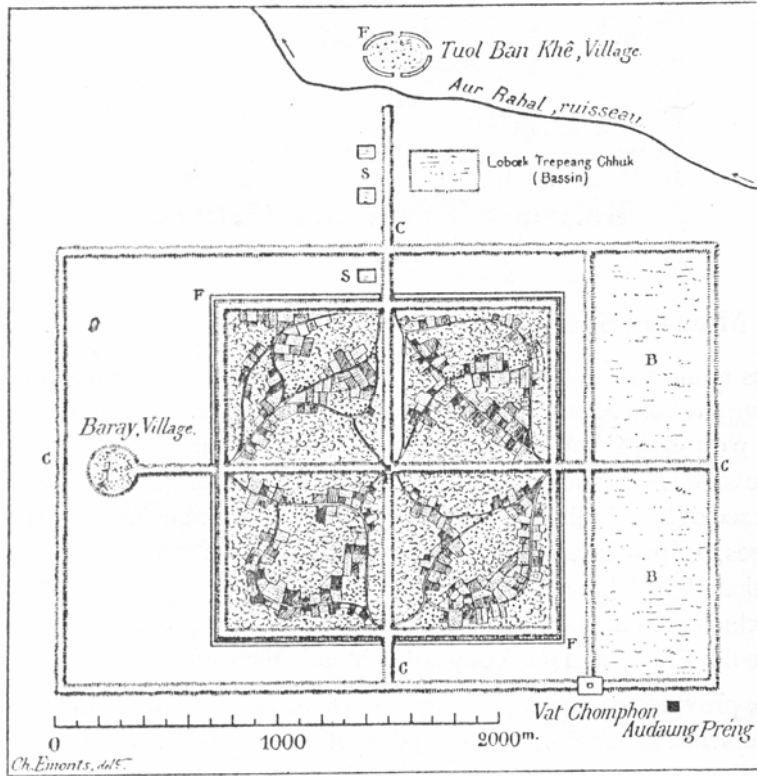
### III

#### INSCRIPTION OF SURIN

#### K 377

Aymonier noticed this inscription at Vat C’ump’on at the city of Surin in Thailand, “which was in all likelihood an important centre at the time of the ancient Cambodians. It is surrounded first by an earthen, rectangular levee that measures close to three kilometers in the east-west direction by two kilometers in the other direction. Several exterior water basins announce this levee: a big one and small basins towards the north [S] and, in the south-east, a small, very deep basin called Andaung Préng, ‘the ancient well’ or ‘the wells of destiny.’ Not far from this well and on the levee itself stands Vat Chomphon, a pagoda in which, previously, there was an ancient inscription... The mœuong in the strict sense is surrounded by a second enclosure—this one square—and measuring fifteen to sixteen hundred meters on each side. It comprises a deep moat [F], some ten meters wide, of which the water serves as drinking water for the inhabitants, who cross it over four bridges in the middle of the sides and a second earthen levee.”

“The ancient stela, which is at present at Vat Chomphon of Souren” notes Aymonier, “was formerly used, they say, as the central pole of the city. It has been broken and worn by knives for which it was used to sharpen, and its inscriptions are limited to two incomplete lines at the bottom. The text is Sanskrit and the shape of the letters indicates that this text goes back to the seventh century of our era.”<sup>12</sup>



Lunet de Lajonquière found this inscription missing.<sup>13</sup>

The incomplete inscription could be partially completed by the inscription engraved on the altar of Tham Prasat (K 509) near the confluence of the Mun and the Mekong.<sup>14</sup>

These two ślokas relate that Citrasena, bearing the consecration name of Mahendravarman, installed a stone image of the bull (Nandin) after having conquered “all the countries.”

A similar formula, mentioning only the conquest of ‘all this country’ was employed by Mahendravarman in connection with the erection of the linga Giriśa at Can Nakon (K 363)<sup>15</sup>, at Khan T’evada (K 496, 497)<sup>16</sup> and at Tham Prasat (K 508)<sup>17</sup>, equally at the mouth of the Mun. In his *Expansion of Indo-Aryan Culture during Pallava Rule*, B. Ch. Chhabra has rightly remarked that the inscriptions mentioning the conquest of “this country” in the singular must have been engraved in course of the conquest<sup>18</sup>, while those which refer to the conquest of the ‘all the countries’ in the plural must have been engraved later.<sup>19</sup>

George Cœdès deciphered, completed and published this inscription in the volume five of his *Inscriptions du Cambodge* (Paris: E. dew Boccard, 1953, 3-4).

#### TEXT

I (1) [yaśbh c[it]ra[s]e[na]...	bhūt kṛtarājyābh[i]ṣecanah
sa[ś]r[īmanendravarmmeti]	-----
II (2) vijitya nikhilān deśān	asmin deśe śilāmayam
vṛṣabhaṃ sthāpa[yām āsa]	-----

## TRANSLATION

I He, who (known earlier under the name of) Citrasena, was known after his consecration as Mahendravarman...

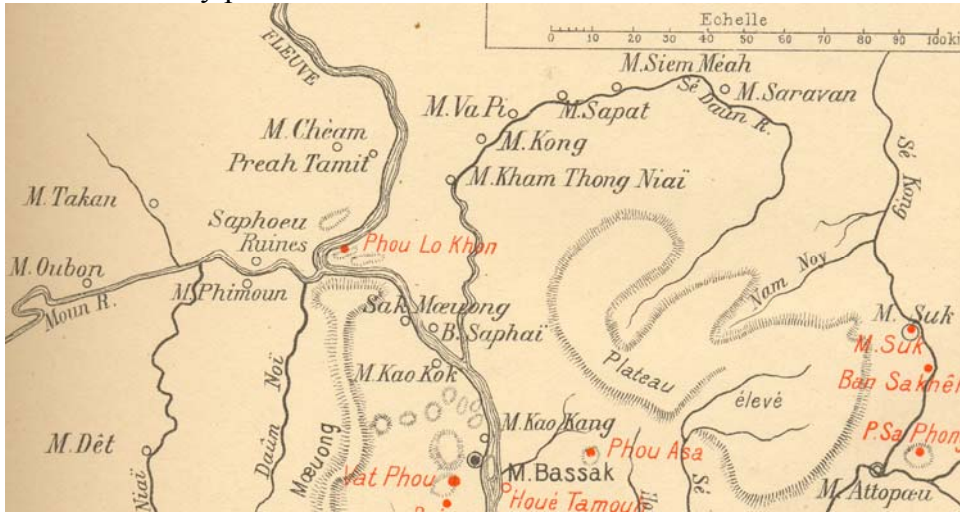
II Having conquered all the countries, he has installed in this country a bull of stone...<sup>20</sup>

## IV

## THE STELA OF PHOU LOKHON

Phou Lokhon, 'the Mountain of the Kingdom' is a hillock of sandstone, close to the left bank of the Mekong, and at five kilometers upriver from the confluence of the Mun river.<sup>21</sup>

"At its top, the rock was dug out forming small round well sixty centimeters in diameter and eighty centimeters deep," observes Aymonier, "no doubt ton better set off a linga of thirty centimeters diameters which rises in the middle and which is one meter and fifty centimeters high. In addition, at two meters and fifty centimeters to the south of this on a square, sandstone pillar, one meter high at the most and sixty centimeters wide was planted in the same manner in the rocks. It displayed the particular characteristic of not being oriented to the four points of the compass but to the intermediary points."<sup>22</sup>

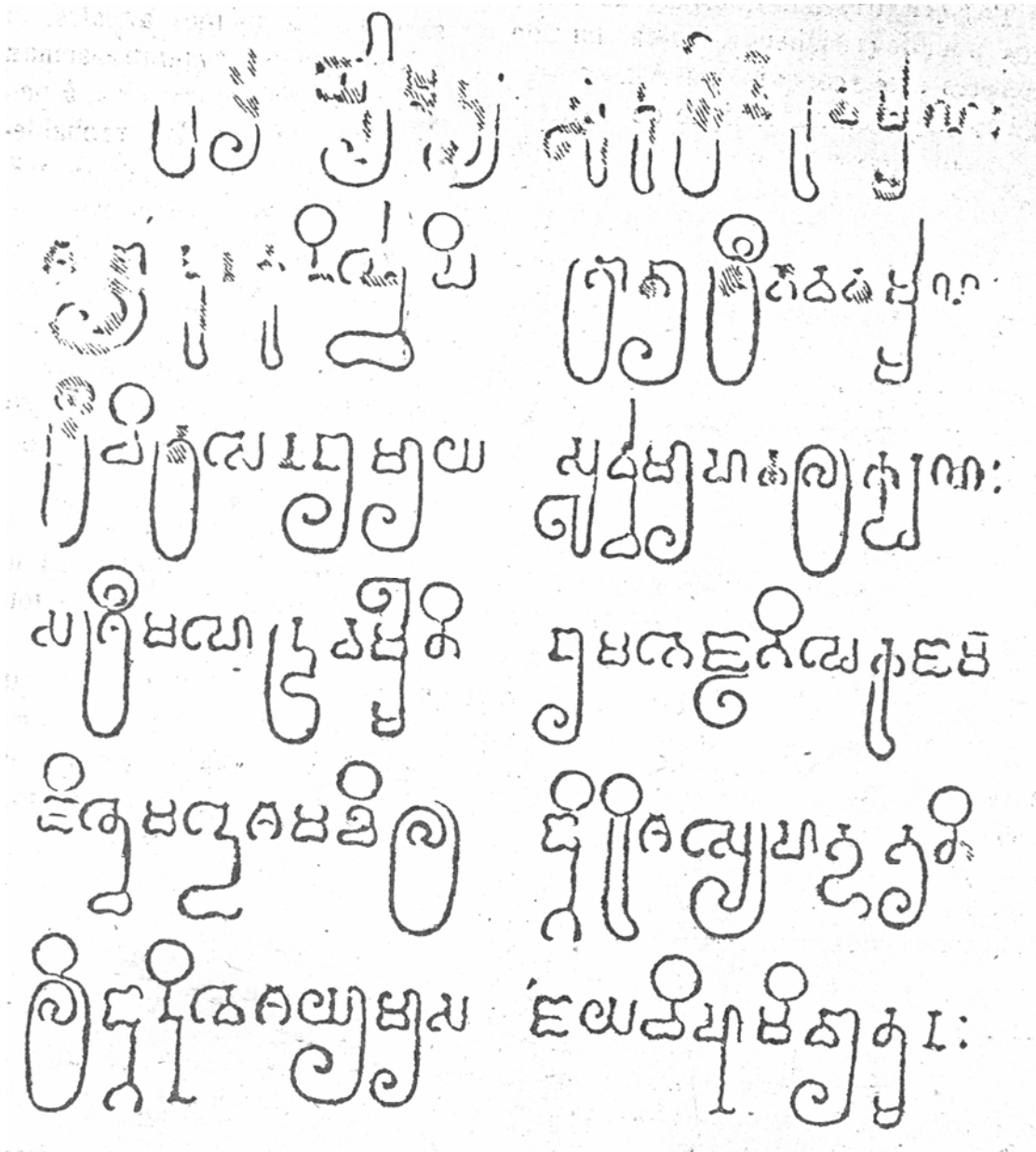


Location of Phou Lokhon after Aymonier (*Le Cambodge*)

A Sanskrit text is engraved on the northeast side of the pillar. The inscription consists of three *śloka anuṣṭubha*, each occupying two lines on the surface of the stone, the separated padas forming two columns. It relates that King Mahendravarman installed a linga of Śiva-Giriśa on the hillock Phou Lokhon as the trophy of his victory after the conquest of the country. Perhaps it is the same linga which is still found on the top of the hillock.

While deciphering the inscription, Auguste Barth made following interesting remarks on this document: "By a later inscription of Ang Chumnik, we knew simply that Mahendravarman was the successor of Bhavarman. By the inscription of Han Chey, we knew in addition that Bhavarmna had a son who survived him, but his name, for one reason or the other, was not transmitted...Now we learn that this son was not Mahendravarman who, according to our document, was a younger brother of Bhavarman."

In all likelihood the nephew was dead too young to have effectively ruled. On the other hand , the inscription of Veal kantel had given us the name of the father of Bhavarman, Viravarman; but there remained a doubt about the identity of this Bhavarman with the great victorious king of the other documents. This doubt is now removed, since the name of Viravarman figures, and quite probably, as the common father of Bhavarman and Mahendravarman, in the indistinct traces , it is true, of the first line of our inscription.



Unfortunately, this text does not offer us any addition information on this Viravarman, who does not seem to have ruled, since he does not figure in the list of kings of Ang Chumnik., where the predecessor of Bhavarman is Rudravarman. The relation of this last one with Bhavarman and his brother remains thus unknown.”

“On the other hand, our inscription offers us a very interesting fact that Mahendravarman carried this name only after his coronation and that, earlier, he was called Citrasena. In this last name, it is admissible to recognize Tche-to-sseu-na of the Chinese annals, of the Kśatriya race, the conqueror of Fou-nan, kingdom whose vassal Kambuja was earlier. Similarly, in his son and successor Yi-cho-na-sien (Īśānasena) of the same annals, it is permitted to recognize Īśānavarman, the successor of Mahendravarman (Citrasena) according to the inscription of Ang Chumnik (Our inscriptions have not so far given any details about the kinship relation between these two princes). The Chinese source, nearly contemporary, places these events between 589 and 618 A.D., probably little earlier than 616, which correlates well with the date of 600 A.D., which, on the palaeographic grounds, when nothing or nearly nothing was known about the ancient Cambodia, Kern had assigned roughly to Bhavarman, and with the details of our inscriptions. of which one, of the reign of Īśānavarman that of Vat Chakret is dated of the year 548 = 626 A.D. By fixing this name of Citrasena, till now floating, our inscription gives a solid base to these synchronisms; decidedly in its six mutilated lines, it offers us more information than many of the long texts.”

“The composition is sober and the language is perfectly correct: the mistake of the fifth line is certainly due to the carelessness of the *lapicide*. The script is the most beautiful type of this epoch: at a time robust and elegant, it reminds us of the inscription of Bhavarman at Phnom Banteai Neang.”<sup>23</sup>

#### TEXT

. . . . ā . ryyā. ya-	<i>s sūnuś śrīVīravarmmaṇaḥ</i>
<i>śaktyānūna</i> x <sup>24</sup> <i>kaniṣṭho</i> pi	<i>bhrātā śrīBhavavarmmaṇaḥ</i>
śrīCitrasenanāmā ya-	<i>s sarvvamāhatalakṣaṇaḥ</i>
sa śrīmahendravarmmeti	<i>nāma bheje bhiṣekajam</i>
jītvemaṇ ṭeśam akhila-	<i>ñ Giriśasyeha bhūbhṛti</i>
liṅgan niveśayām āsa	<i>jayacihnam ivātmaṇaḥ</i>

#### TRANSLATION

1. One who... son of śrī Vīravarman (and) in no way inferior in power; though the youngest brother of śrī Bhavarman;
2. He, śrī Citrasena, who possesses all the marks of majesty, has taken the name of śrī Mahendravarman on the occasion of his consecration.
3. Having conquered all the country, he has, on this mount, established this linga of Giriśa as the sign of his victory.

#### V

### Rudramahālaya

I propose to examine a pre-Angkor epigraphic context in which the establishment of a Rudramahālaya in Cambodia is recorded. It relates to a site called Prasat Preah Theat that Aymonier visited at the close of nineteenth century. He locates it to the east of Lake of

Preah Pit and two thousand meters to the north of the village of Phouthea. He mentions only two brick-towers built on an artificial mound preceded by a sacred tank to the east.<sup>25</sup>

At the beginning of twentieth century, L. de Lajonquière places this site (IK 118) two kilometers to the south of Chrul. Based on the information provided by his Cambodian assistant, Ich, he describes the monument as a complex of four towers – a group of three towers and a fourth one, placed behind the alignment of the group, not forming part of the original plan. All these sanctuaries are in brick, square in plan, open to the east. Inside, they measure two meters at each side. The upper part of the southern tower is demolished at the height of four meters. Its door-frames are still standing with colonnettes and decorative lintels of type I (*makara*). Only the walls of the central sanctuary upto a height of two meters survived and a fragment of decorative lintel of the same type. The northern sanctuary and the fourth sanctuary are in complete ruins.

Lajonquière also mentions two well-preserved inscriptions on the either sides of the door of southern towers.<sup>26</sup> The Prasat Preah Theat is about twenty-eight kilometers from the ancient city now known as Banteay Prei Nokor in Kompong Cham Province.<sup>27</sup> In 1911, George Cœdès deciphered and translated the Sanskrit inscription engraved on the southern jamb of the temple's door.<sup>28</sup> In 1953, he published inscriptions on the door-jamb of both sides (K 109).<sup>29</sup>

The inscriptions engraved on the southern jamb of the temple's door offers six lines in Sanskrit, consisting of three *ślokas*. It narrates the gift of the manuscript of *Sambhavaparvan*, a chapter of the *Mahābhārata* by a certain Bhavajñāna. The date of the text is partially ruined. The word corresponding to the numeral of hundred, 5 is certain. That of ten (*dizaine*), though incomplete, is certainly seven. The number representing the last figure is completely lost. The date could be between 570 and 579 Śaka era ( 648 and 657 A.D.).

The inscription of north doorjamb consists of twenty-five lines: ten lines in Sanskrit ( five *ślokas*) and fifteen lines Khmer. The Sanskrit text relates that in 577 Śaka (655 A.D) , a certain Vibhu, chief of Vyādhapura , and younger brother of Chief of Dhruvapura, installed at the site of Prasat Preah Theat a *linga* which received the name of Rudramahālaya to which slaves, beasts, land and ornaments were offered. The Khmer text gives the list of these slaves.

#### Southern Door-Jamb Text

I	(1) ___ dṛiśaraiś śāke (2) prajñāvaddharmasthitaye <sup>30</sup>	dine __ caturdāśe dattaṃ
saṃbhavapustakam		
II	(3) bhavajñānena nihitaṃ (4) yo nāśayati durvuddhiḥ <sup>31</sup>	vyāśasatranivandhanaṃ niraye sa ciraṃ vaset
III	(5) santānam eva vañcan yaḥ <sup>32</sup> (6) yāvat sūryyaś ca candraç ca	vyāśasatravinaśakṛt sa vaset narakeṣu vai

#### Translation

“I. [In the year of] Śāka [marked] by (5) arrows<sup>33</sup> ... the fourteenth day ...<sup>34</sup>  
a manuscript of Sambhava[parvan] was given in order to maintain the  
moral order committed to wisdom.

- II. That the fool, who would destroy what was invested by Bhavajñāna as obligatory for the ritual recitation of Vyāsa<sup>35</sup>; may stay for longtime in the hell.
- III. That the one, who deceiving his descendants<sup>36</sup>, will destroy the ritual recitation of Vyāsa, may stay in the hells as long as the Sun and the Moon last.

## VI

### Veal Kantel Temple Inscription

In the seventh century, a centre of worship of Śiva as Tribhuvaneśvara (the Lord of Three Worlds) was founded around Veal Kantel (the Plain of Mats), facing the mouth of Se Kong River which joins the Mekong River in northern Cambodia. The site is not far from the present-day border between Cambodia and Laos. This Mekong site could be approached from Stung Treng in northern Cambodia.

In 1884, Etienne Aymonier describes Veal Kantel as “nothing but a village of some forty huts.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>37</sup> He stamped a Sanskrit inscription, engraved on one side of a square stone piece, which was lying in an abandoned pagoda of this village. The stone piece, similar to the square base of a statue, measures eighty centimeters on the sides and twenty in height. But this monolith is cut in two super-imposed steps and it does not have the mortise which is usually present on the stones which have served as the base of a statue or of a linga. The Sanskrit inscription of seven lines, subdivided in four columns by spaces of four to six meters, was engraved on one of the sides of the lower step of this stela. A little erased, the inscription is half lost at the bottom, but it unfolds the history of the present-day tiny village as the site of a temple where important Sanskrit sacred texts were preserved and recited in the seventh century.

According to the testimony of local villagers the stone piece bearing the inscription came from a neighboring temple Prasat Baan, or Preah An, or Prasan, at a kilometer to the northwest of the village of Veal Kantel. This small temple consisted of a terrace surrounded by an enclosing wall. This terrace in turn held up the sanctuary constructed of pretty red bricks. The fifteen meters high walls of the temple were still intact when Aymonier visited this temple in 1884. “This tower is in the usual shape,” observes Aymonier, “but it is preceded by a very elongated ante-room which offers the particular characteristic that it has two storeys and is formed by two superimposed corridors. This entrance hall appears to have been added after the construction of the edifice. Indeed, its bricks, often original and decorated, are very different in appearance from those of the body of the tower”.

Some twelve meters in front of the sanctuary, Aymonier noticed a stone bull, kneeling rather lying down and larger than natural size.

Prasat Baan is one of the three isolated brick towers located to the west of the village of Veal Kantel. The two others are called Sala Prambei Loveng, and Preah Khtop.

Of the three small temples the Prasat Baan is most impressive and appears to be the structure which housed the image of Tribhuvaneśvara mentioned in the inscription.

By 1906 when Lunet de Lajonquière wrote his second volume of *Inventaire descriptive des monuments du Cambodge* the Siamese province of Tonle Repou from which the inscription came was a French territory constituted by Thala Borivat, denoting

at a time name of a province and its headquarter. The name Thala Borivat itself appears to be a Laotian deformation of Pali expression *dharāparivatta*, meaning *tourbillon*. The name denotes a locality situated on the right bank of the Mekong. There, in fact, the currents of the Mekong hurt against the pointed rocks and join the volume of water descending from the Annamite chains in form of numerous tourbillons. Lajonquière lists five monuments in the province of Thala Borivat, four of which (321-324) are in close proximity of the bank of the Mekong:

321 Prasat Bohan

322 Central Prasat of Thala Borivat

323 Prasat Khtop

324 Sala Prambei Loveng

325 Prasat Pram Loveng

After describing Prasat Bohan (321), Lajonquière says that the stone piece bearing the inscription of Veal Kantel was stored at the pagoda when he visited the site in 1899. But by the time of his second visit the inscription was no longer there and he did not know its whereabouts.

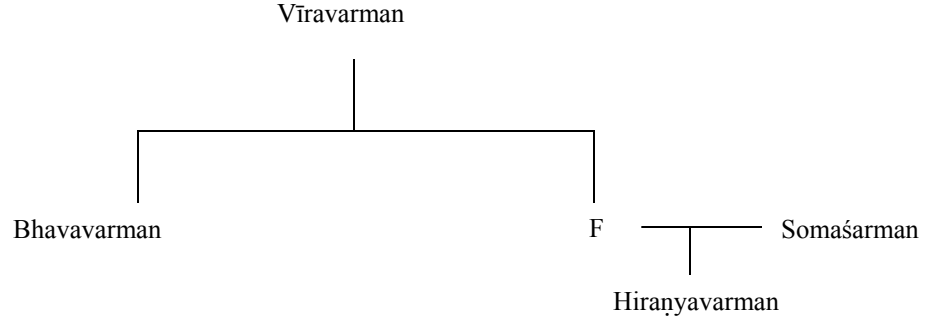
The monument which Aymonier describes as Prasat Baan or Ba An, one kilometer to the west of Veal Kantel does not figure in the inventory of Lajonquière who describes Prasat Khtop (323) in terms of Aymonier's description of Prasat Baan: "According to Aymonier who visited the monument in 1884, the sanctuary was then preceded by a two storied extended ante-chamber consisting of two tiers, forming two superimposed corridors, a later addition to the body of the monument."<sup>38</sup>

Prasat Bohan of Lajonquière is closer to Prasat Baan of Aymonier, at least phonetically. It is located close to the bank of the Mekong, separated only by a wooded swamp.

One of these modest small brick towers was the site where the Brāhmaṇa Somaśarman founded the image of Tribhuvaneśvara along with an image of the Sun god. He must have been a handsome man, since the inscription calls him *ākṛitīsvāmin*, possessor of form. He was a noble Brahmin termed as the moon of the *dvijas*. Above all he was a specialist of Sāmaveda. Politically he was an influential person. He was married to a princess, the daughter of a certain Vīravarman and the sister of King Bhavavarman. He had a son named Hiraṇyavarman from this marriage. It is obvious that he was deeply involved in the *varman* milieu of the Cambodian royalty. Though he was a Brahmin, his son born of a Kṣatriya wife was not a Brahmin, but a Kṣatriya, holding the title of varman instead of śarman. This was an exception to the Indian varṇa rules according to which the father or the seed (*vīja*) decides the varṇa of the son. It is not the mother, simply a Kṣatriya, who is the decisive factor in this respect.

The learned Brāhmaṇa founded the image of Tribhuvaneśvara (Śiva) and the Sun god preceded by a great ritual performance (*mahāpūjā*) and followed by liberal honorarium to the officiating priests (*puskaladakṣiṇām*). He provided a complete set of the Rāmāyaṇa, the Purāṇa and the Mahābhārata and instituted their daily uninterrupted recitation at the temple where the gods were installed. The inscription does not mention the temple or its foundation. Did Somasarman institut the recitation in an already established temple? It is difficult to speculate. The similar recitations were held in ancient





India and the practice continues to the present-day. Bāṇa, an Indian author almost contemporary to this Cambodian text and Hemacandra a twelfth century Jain author refers to such practices in India.<sup>39</sup>

Chapter 91 of Devīpurāṇa is devoted to the merit of donating or giving knowledge (*vidyā*) in general and books (*grantha* or *pustaka*) in particular. Whoever reads religious texts narrating the *avatāras* myths of the Goddess, Śiva and Viṣṇu, will obtain whatever he desires (91.8). Donation of books to the temple of Devī is especially recommended (91.9). The texts list the books that should be given (91.12-15). One's religious merit is increased if one gives *mokṣasāstra*, canonical and scientific works (*siddhāntasāstra*), *veda*, vedāṅga and history (*itihāsa*). If one reads and gives Tantric texts, then the Mothers are generous with their blessings. One recovers from illness and becomes a *gandharva* (a demi-god) if one gives books about astrology ( *jyotiṣa*), medicine (*vaidya*), art books (*kalāsāstra*), poetic literature (*kāvya*) and revealed texts (*āgamasāstra*).

Elaborate rituals are prescribed for the worship of the book before it is given to a Brahmin or a temple. Books should be given to the temples of Śiva as well as to the shrine of the Mothers. Although nothing is said about donating books to Vaiṣṇāva temples, it is stipulated that one should worship both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava ascetics, provided they are learned (91.63). It is further recommended that along with other books, one should donate a manuscript of Yogaśāstra whereby one lives eternally in Viṣṇu's heaven. ( Devīpurāṇa 91.40-65).

The two words used in the text to denote a book or a manuscript are *grantha* and *pustaka*. *Grantha* is an old Indian word known to Paṇini in fourth century B.C., signifying basically “tying, binding or stringing together”. The books must have been written on palm leaves (*tāḍapatra*) or barks of the birch (*bhurjapatra*). The basic text of the Devīpurāṇa might have been composed not later than A.D. 600. However the chapter 91 is supposed to be composed around A.D. 1050, because the entire chapter was cited

by later authors such as Hemādri and Lakṣmīdhara.<sup>40</sup> This chapter might have been written after the sixth century for the text uses the word *pustak* which is believed to be a loan word from Persian and was not familiar to the lexicographer Amarasimha (6<sup>th</sup> century). None of the early Purāṇas discuss the subject of giving books with as much of detail as the Devīpurāṇa does, although they do mention incidentally that giving Purāṇas or having them read constitute an act of piety.

The list of Indic manuscripts recovered from central Asia or included in the Tibetan canonical texts indicate how common it was in those days to donate manuscripts concerning the sciences, medicine and literature, especially poetry, to Buddhist monasteries. The diffusion of manuscripts helped the dissemination of Indian scientific and spiritual knowledge and accelerated the process of Indianization in the southeast and east Asia.<sup>41</sup>

Before the discovery of this inscription, the German orientalist Weber labored hard to list the evidences of granted antiquity to date the Indian epic Rāmāyaṇa.<sup>42</sup> The inscription of Veal Kantel which certainly belongs to the first years of the Christian era clearly suggests that the epic was held sacred in distant land at the borders of the present day Laos and Cambodia. The complete set was available in the shape of a written text (*pustakam*). The founder assures that everyone who will participate in this recitation will be entitled to a part of the religious merit (*dharmāṃśa*). These written texts or *pustakam* were valuable, liable to be stolen. So the insensible persons— attempting to lift even a single volume —*ekam api putakam*—are threatened with dire consequences unknown to us due to the lacunae in the inscription.<sup>43</sup>

South East Asian classical temples were the houses of gods and goddesses of Indic origin or of the divinities of indigenous origin as naturalized inhabitants in their new abode. These divinities were worshipped through set rituals contained in Sanskrit texts.

When the local languages sufficiently developed in contact with Sanskrit, the Khmer in Cambodia, the Cham in South Vietnam, the Old Javanese or Kavi on the island of Java and the Balinese on the island of Bali were partially used to propitiate the divine beings. The first inscriptions in the vernacular languages, however, appear in the region quite late, not before the beginning of the seventh century and suggest a comparatively late use of the local languages for the ritual purposes.

The temples gathered not only the basic texts of rituals, but all the major sacred texts in Sanskrit, fundamental to the understanding of the cultural milieu to which these gods belonged.

### The Inscription of Veal Kantel

Text

śrīvīravarmmāduhitā svasā śrībhavavarmanāḥ  
pativratā dharmmaratā dvitiyārundhatia ya (1)

hiranyavarmanjananīm yas tam patnim upabahat<sup>44</sup>  
dvijendur ākṛitīsvāmi sāmavedavidagraṇiḥ (2)

śrīsomaśarmmmārkayutam sa śrītribhuvaneśvaram  
atiṣṭhipan mahāpujām atipuṣkaladaḥṣiṇām(3)

rāmāyaṇapurāṇābhyām<sup>45</sup> aśeṣam bhārata dadat  
akṛitanvvaḥ acchedyam sa ca tadvācanasthitim(4)

yāvat tribhuvaneśasya vibhūtiravatiṣṭhate  
yo ya e.....(5)

dharmmansa tasya syan mahāsukṛitakāriṇaḥ  
.....(6)

itas tu harttā durbud(dh)ir yya ekam api pusta(kam)  
.....(7)

### TRANSLATION

[There was a princess] daughter of śrī Vīravarman, sister of śrī Bhavarman, who, devoted to her husband and absorbed in her duty was like a second Arundhati<sup>46</sup>.(1)

The one who took for his wife this mother of Hiranyavarman, a moon among the Brāhmaṇas, possessing the beauty of form and who is at the forefront of the knowers of the Sāmaveda, (2)

Śrī Somaśarman installed [this] Tribhuvaneśvara along with [an image] of Sun with great ritual worship and liberal honorarium [to the officiating priests] (3).

With the Rāmāyaṇa and the Purāṇa he gave the complete Bhārata and instituted their daily recitation without interruption(4).

As long as will persist the majesty of Tribhuvaneśvara, whosoever [shall participate in this recitation] (5)

To that author of this excellent action may accrue one part [of the fruit] of this meritorious act.....(6)

But the insensible person who will lift even one volume<sup>47</sup> ..(7).

## VII

## From Nāṭya to Khon and Lakhon

CHHOM Kunthea

There is no exaggeration at all if I say that Mother India has nourished the Southeast Asian states in all fields of arts. Much ink has flowed to outline the Indian influence in Southeast Asian religion, architecture and so forth. However, no serious study has been done so far on the Indian contribution to the formation of theatres in Southeast Asia, though Siva in form of Lord of dance (*naṭarāja*) is very famous in their epigraphy, iconography, etc. This article, nevertheless, attempts to give an insight of how the *nāṭya* or Indian drama is transformed into the *khon* or Thai masked-theatre and *lakhon* or Thai dance-drama.

### ***nāṭya* and *nṛtta***

The term *nṛtta* is essential in order to understand *nāṭya*. The concept of *nṛtta* is obscure. Even in the famous work on Indian dramaturgy Nāṭyaśāstra, Bharata Muni does not define *nṛtta* at length. But it is implied that it does not convey the meaning of a song nor any other specific message. It is defined as a movement of limbs without role-acting or without the gestural rendering of a story. But one has to bear in mind that *nṛtta* is certainly not meaningless or futile (Bharat Gupta: 1994, 80). *nṛtta* is that part of dancing which conveys a sense of pure joy of movement and rhythm. A tenth-century Hindu dramatist namely Dhana&jaya defines *nṛtta* as graceful movements of the limbs residing in the musical rhythm (*tālalayāśrayam*). It is not to be expressive neither of emotions (*bhāva*) nor sentiments (*rasa*).

In performance terminology, the words for acting (*nāṭya*) and dancing (*nṛtta* or *nṛtya*) often overlap. *nṛtta* has been defined as mere movement of the body and *nāṭya* as movement with meaning. *nāṭya*, according to Dhana&jaya,

is the imitation of events or episodes (*avasthā'nukṛtiḥ*). Thus, the what-we-call 'drama' is mostly *nāṭya*. And the great mythical sage Bharata uses this term to title his work, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* or treatise of dramaturgy. It is our earliest Indian authority on drama, music and dancing. In thirty-six chapters, Bharatamuni treats all possible subjects connected with *nāṭya* – its origin, worship of deities of the stage, construction of play-house, postures, movements, gestures, songs, musical instruments, styles of expression and aesthetic relish (*rasa*). In brief, we can say that *nṛtta* is a mere graceful movement of the limbs in harmony with music whereas *nāṭya* is drama or the acting out of the episodes of the epics or of the *purāṇa*. *nāṭya* is the larger scale of *nṛtta*. It is generally believed that the first Indian drama is “*amṛta manthana*” written by the Sage Bharata.

### ***khon and rabam***

In the Thai context, the relation of these two terms *rabam* (dance) and *khon* (royal masked theatre) is very much similar to that of *nṛtta* and *nāṭya*. In other terms, it is the relation between a dance and an elaborate piece of theatre. *khon* cannot exist without a dance (*rabam*), and a mere dance without acting out any story cannot be called *khon*.

There are three kinds of royal Thai classical theatres, namely *khon*, *rabam* and *lakhon nai*. The first two terms have been mentioned above. The third one, *lakhon nai*, is composed of two words – viz. *lakhon* and *nai*. *lakhon* can be merely defined as ballet-theatre and *nai* literally means interior. Thus, *lakhon nai* means the theatre performed exclusively inside the royal palace. It is supposed to differ from another type of Thai theatre *lakhon nok* which is to be played outside the royal palace for common people.

The etymology of these three terms is to be studied without fail for it may throw some light on the origin of Thai performing art.

***Rabam*** – It is very certain that this term is of Khmer origin, which means a dance. It appears several

times in the first pre-Angkorian inscription (611A.D.) in Khmer language. However, we have absolutely no idea of how the dancers of the old day danced in praise of gods in the Hindu temples of Cambodia.

***Khon, lakhon*** – these terms are mysterious. They are not mentioned in all the earliest texts regarding Thai performing art. The inscriptions of King Ramakamhaeng (thirteenth century of our era) mention a musical performance but no reference is made to *khon*, nor *lakhon*. In the Palatine Law of King Boroma Trailokanath written in fifteenth century, neither *khon* nor *lakhon* is referred to. According to an authority on Thai dramaturgy, Prince Dhanivat, the dance-drama or *lakhon* and the masked-play, *khon*, are not mentioned earlier than the late seventeenth century though they might have existed prior to that (Prince Dhanivat: 1975, 117).

Etymologically, the term *khon*, in this rapid research, does not show us any trace, but the word *lakhon* does. We know that in Java, ‘theatre’ is also called *lakhon* and this term is derived from another Javanese word *laku* meaning ‘walking and acting.’ Like the Greek term ‘drama,’ our *lakhon* seems to have double sense – walking and acting. It is not impossible that the Siam word is borrowed from the Javanese *laku* or is derived from a same but non-identified source (René Nicolas: 1975, 44). We should also notice that *lakhon* is an episode from the Javanised Rāmāyaṇa or Mahābhārata, serving as the plot for a single night’s *wayang* performance or shadow-play.

### **Sacredness of *rabam* and *khon***

In ancient time, *rabam* was exclusively performed in the temples’ premises. This reminds us of the dance of *devadāsī* or girl-dancers in the Hindu tradition. Dancing in praise of gods is their only duty. In Thailand, like in many other parts of Southeast Asia, all the dancers of *rabam* are female, regardless their roles in the dance.

*khon* and *rabam* are of religious motif. They are nothing but the instructive and meritorious performance from which the audience procures their merits (*puṇya*)

especially for their next life. The plays are inspired from the stories of gods. Thus, they are sacred; they are to be performed elaborately. No movement should be neglected. *khon* and *rabam* are reserved for the royal entertainment. Their actors are mostly the descendants of the king or of the princes.

This idea of divine dance is taught by India. In proper India, dancing is regarded as a kind of ritual act. And the drama in India, as well as in ancient Greece, is one essential ceremony in the chain of many ceremonies.

Like all other Indian sciences, *nāṭya* claims a divine origin and is regarded as the fifth Veda, the Nāṭyaveda which means the knowledge concretely presented and experienced through the senses. It is created by God Brahmā from the quest of goods as an object of diversion (*krīḍanīyaka*). This Veda is open to all, irrespective of their caste and creed.

Bharata Muni clearly explains the purposes of the creation of this fifth Veda in the first chapter of Nāṭyaśāstra. Brahmā has created this Veda with the hope that *nāṭya* would be a source of pleasure and diversion of the minds already troubled with strains and miseries of daily life.

ḍuḥkhārtānaṃ śramartānām śokartānām tapasvinām/  
viśrāntijanaṃ kale nāṭyametadbhaviṣyati// NS: 1.114.

A man does a ritual worship to seek benediction, but in drama the purpose of enactment changes from demand to pleasure. The ancient drama sought to please both gods and men at the same time. This is the very nature of festival.

Bharata Muni also adds that another purpose of *nāṭya* is to guide, to counsel and to conduce people to duty. dharmyaṃ yaśasyamāyuṣyaṃ hitaṃ buddhivivardhanam/  
lokopadeśajanaṃ nāṭyametaḍ bhaviṣyati// NS: 1. 115.

*Nāṭya* is not only to please people but also to instruct them.

On the Thai side, although there is no definite recorded materials on dramaturgy like Nāṭyaśāstra, we can claim without hesitation the divine nature of the Thai *rabam* and *khon*. It is generally attested that Thai theatre is of Brahmanical origin. It has gradually become the royal theatre guarding all its sacred characters. In Thailand, we



play only the episodes of Rāmāyaṇa or the stories from Viṣṇupurāṇa. The main purpose of Thai drama is to please and to instruct. The audience expects some merits from attending the drama.

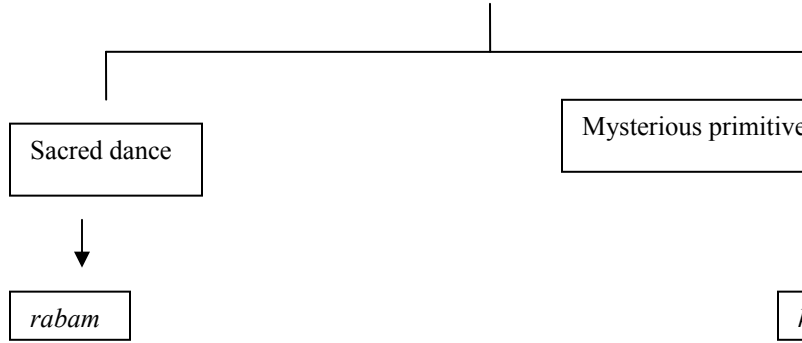
Since the heroes of the epics and of the *purāṇa* are mostly gods, the imitation of them on the stage requires an elaborate arrangement. Performance becomes in fact incarnation. The true meaning of a drama is the incarnation of the character to be performed; not portrayal but becoming. The gods in deed descend into the world of mortals (martyalokagataḥ/ NS: 1. 124.S.C. Kersenboom: 1989-90, 192). Consequently, every facet of the performance starting from the stage to the mental preparation of the performer must be meticulously arranged and protected. All are charged with divinity. In order to assure the success for the performance 'the gods of the stage (*ra^gadevatā*)' must be worshipped without fail. This tradition is also found in the indianized Thailand. At the beginning of every drama, there is an invocation to members of the Hindu Pantheon without forgetting the Indian master of drama, Bharata Muni. They are called the Masters of theatre. In Indian drama, the preliminary salutation to the gods of the stage has much significance. Bharata Muni sacrifices one whole chapter (chapter III) for the worship of the deities connected with the stage. According to him, the act of worshipping these gods equals the prestigious Vedic sacrifice (yaj&ena sammitam hyetat ra^gadaivatapūjanam/ NS. 3. 97.S.C. Kersenboom: 1989-90, 193).

### **Origin of *rabam* and *khon***

We have mentioned above that the word *rabam* is of Cambodian origin. It is thus most probably that the sacred dance of India has traveled to pre-Angkorian Cambodia before reaching the kingdom of Ayudhya.

An authority of the Siamese theatre, René Nicolas, makes a valuable hypothesis that at the dawn of the Thai performing art, there were already two kinds of performance which were very different from each other, but both of them had religious motif.

## Beginning of the Thai theatrical art



The first type was the sacred dance from India which has been performed in the Hindu temples following the tradition transmitted by Cambodia. The first inscription in Khmer language of the seventh century attests the usage of this term. Moreover, the epigraphical records, the sculpture of bas-relief of the temples and the iconography of pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods affirm the worship to Lord Śiva in the form of *naṭarāja* (king of dance).

Of the second type, *khon*, we do not have a clear-cut picture. It was a mysterious primitive type of theatre. René Nicolas describes it as some sort of a dialogue recitation which imitated more or less the heroic-religious Epic Rāmāyaṇa and others, and which was mixed with poetry and simple dances. And this primitive type, under influence of many different factors and by borrowing from *rabam*, has given rise to *khon* and *lakhon*. This primitive sort of drama has not completely disappeared. The tradition is still maintained in Java, Burma, and in the provinces of southern Thailand in the region of Nakhon Sri Thammarat (René Nicolas: 1975, 43ff).

It is universally accepted that the human theatre is originated from puppet theatre. And India is its original home. The tradition of puppet plays goes back to pre-Christian era and reference are found in various Indian writings. *Sūtradhāra* or holder of the thread which comes from the field of puppetry shows that the puppet theatre in India preceded human theatre and was well established

when the human theatre borrowed this important term from its vocabulary (Awasthi: 1974, 112).

According to a Javanese source, the theatres (masked or non-masked) take their origin from shadow-play. The dance-dramas are derived from plays with puppets silhouetted against the screen called *wayang purva* or *wayang kulit*. This original form of drama is further shown not only by the mask-like lack of expression in the dancers' faces but also by their poses, for they always try to imitate the carved leather puppets of the shadow-play. The masked-play was performed in old days without any other stage accessory than is used in the shadow-play (Prince Dhaninivat: 1975, 118).

It is possible that the evolution of Thai drama is from *nang* (shadow-play) to *khon*, and from *khon* to *lakhon*. The very classical *nang* was originally in the time of King Nārai of Ayudhyā based upon the theme of the Samudaghos though in all probability on the story of Rāma as well (Dhani Niwat: 1969, 190). It is generally believed that Thailand has received her shadow-play from India via Java. In all the indianized states of Southeast Asia, the shadow-play is found in Bali (*wayang purva*), Malaysia (*wayang kukit*), Laos and Thailand (*nang talung*) and in Cambodia (*nang kalung*) (Michael Smithies and Euayporn Kerdchouay: 1975, 129).

In India, the existence of shadow theatre can be dated as early as the beginning of the Christian era. In the Buddhist text called Theri-Gāthā, we find *rupparūpaka* which literally means theatre of image. And in the Epic Mahābhārata, it is said that the gestures of kings, ministers etc. were represented by figures made of leather. Moreover, in his astronomic treatise of sixth century A.D., the astrologer Varāha Mihira mentioned a sort of theatre called *chāyā nāṭaka* meaning shadow-play. It is believed that the shadow puppet theatre originated in South India around the epic period and from there spread to the other countries in the Far East. The Dravidians were certainly the first to introduce this art in the countries of the Far East where they established Indian commercial centers. There are two types of puppets –

1. the leather puppets projecting shadows,

2. and the wooden puppets manipulated by strings (Shivaligappa: 1975, 11, 18).

However, we must bear in mind that theatrical masks have not been employed in Indian drama for facial expression, movement of eyes etc. play significant role. Unlike Greek drama, the theatre-house of Indian *nāṭya* was usually made small so that the audience could appreciate more the facial performance of the dancers.

In conclusion, the Thai royal theatres *khon* and *lakhon nai*, like in other fields of art, are inspired from India. Few hypotheses have been made regarding the origin of Thai theatre. One among them states that in the first stage it came in the form of sacred dance or *rabam*. This dance, under certain circumstances, was transformed into *khon* and *lakhon*, still we cannot figure out the nature of the evolution. We do not know how and when the theatrical evolution in question took place. It requires further study and researches.

# 5

## Retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*

Sachchidanand Sahai

I consider it a great honour and privilege to address this national seminar on the “Retelling the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Sanskrit and Other Languages.” I am fully aware of the vastness of the theme and limitations of my own knowledge. I feel particularly humbled in presence of a galaxy of eminent scholars whose writings have guided me in understanding the retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Southeast Asia. I wish, however, to share with you my own experience of retelling process of the epic without any pretension to mastery over the subject.

For over two thousand years of recorded history the story of Rāma has been retold in different languages and dialects of the world. Times without number the story has been re-written, recited, sculpted and performed in foreign lands from Burma to Bali. In his pioneering work on the *Rāmakathā* published soon after the independence of India, Father Camille Bulcke took into consideration over 350 versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in India and abroad and traced out the origin and evolution of the story.<sup>48</sup> Some twenty years later in 1971, the first international *Rāmāyaṇa* seminar and festival were held on the island of Java as a result of the initiatives of Republic of Indonesia. At that time I was working as a visiting scholar of Asian civilization in Laos where I had initiated a project on the Laotian versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Traveling through Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore in the mainland Southeast Asia and crossing the ocean I reached the island of Java, to

discover to my great amazement a vast Islamic world whose ethos were shaped by the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Over thousands of retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* enliven the lives of people on numerous islands of Indonesia. This international event brought the epic sharing nations of Asia on a single platform. For the first time it was realized that concerted scholarly efforts were needed to understand the innumerable variations and perennial power of the Rāma story. Following the Indonesian initiatives, the Sahitya Akademi in New Delhi convened the second international conference in 1975 in order to promote the study of Asian variations of the *Rāmāyaṇa* with an ultimate goal of preparing an encyclopedia of the motifs of the epic story.

In course of time, the enthusiasm generated in 1970s subsided, though the *Rāmāyaṇa* continued to capture the popular imagination on a global scale. Punjabi University, Patiala with its Chair in honor of the great poet Vālmīki offers us the hope that the abandoned project of an encyclopedia of *Rāmāyaṇa* retellings will be resumed in near future, this seminar simply marking the beginning of that venture of prime importance.

Both the oral and written versions of the Rāma story have co-existed for over two thousand years of recorded history. They continue to co-exist in the present-times as well. Vālmīki wrote his own poetic narrative after making careful selections from the floating mass of motifs and legends. It is hard to determine the shape and content of that floating mass. However, what Vālmīki discarded and what was added later to the existing mass constituted the non- Vālmīkian versions of the epic tale. Both Vālmīkian and non- Vālmīkian versions in their written and oral forms have inspired and sustained the perennial course of the epic story.

*The Rāmāyaṇa*, or one of its many variants, reached Southeast Asia around the beginning of the Christian era and had enjoyed a long life among the Mon and Khmer. The Thai entered the region around twelfth century and absorbed the *Rāmāyaṇa* tradition from the pre-existing Mon-Khmer civilization. Whether they had any exposure with the epic before their contacts with the Mon-Khmer remains debatable. With some confidence it can be

assumed that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was current in the Thai court from the thirteenth century, as one of the most famous of the early kings was entitled Ram Kamheng—Rāma the Valiant. Its later popularity can be measured from the fact that the name chosen for the capital of Thai kingdom was Ayuthia, which still exists in its archaeological remains to the north of the present-day Bangkok. Unfortunately the early written versions of the Thai *Rāmāyaṇa*—the *Ramkien* were lost when Ayodhya in Thailand was destroyed by the Burmese in 1767. As it is, the earliest known written rendering (*ca.* 1775) is that of King Taksin of Thonburi, while the version now accepted as classic in Thailand is that of his successor, the founder of the dynasty now ruling, King Rāma I.

Vālmīki remains at the roots of the Southeast Asian versions prevalent in Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. The poet's personality and his work in its original began to influence Cambodia and Champa (South Vietnam) from the early centuries of the Christian era. In fact, the Sanskrit epigraphic records have been found all over Southeast Asia. Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia—all these countries are studded with Sanskrit texts written on stone pieces or walls of ancient temples. These texts clearly amplify the influence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in these countries. In the middle of the fifth century A.D., a brāhmaṇa named Somaśarman lived at Bhavapura in Cambodia. He was a *Sāmavedin*, well-versed in the recitation of the texts. To the temple of Tribhuvaneśvara he offered copies (*pustakam*) of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the whole *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas* for the daily unbroken recitation.<sup>49</sup>

Vālmīki, the sage, the first poet and the incarnation of Viṣṇu seem to mark the three successive stages in the evolution of the personality of the poet. Let me recall that Vālmīki gained the status of the first poet (*ādi kavi*) soon after he pronounced his *śloka* poetry. His accession to this unprecedented glory is not simply an end-product of a long tradition of literary criticism and evaluation in Sanskrit language and literature. Nor it is solely based on the judgment of Sanskrit literary critics. It is obviously an outcome of spontaneous acceptance of his poetic work by

the contemporary public. In the *phalaśruti* of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, Vālmīki is described as the author of the first poem (*ādikāvya*):<sup>50</sup>

*dhanyaṃ yaśasyaṃ āyuṣyaṃ rājñaṃ ca vijayāvaham  
ādikāvyaṃ idaṃ tv ārṣaṃ purā vālmīkinā kṛtam  
yaḥ śṛṇoti sadā loke naraḥ pāpāt pramucyate  
putrakāmaśca putrānvai dhanakāmo dhanāni ca  
labhate manujo loke śrutvā rāmābhiṣecanam*

The reference in the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is obviously a later addition. However, the authenticity of the tradition claiming Vālmīki as the first poet cannot be doubted. Kālidāsa acknowledges Vālmīki as the first poet whose style was a norm in the literary tradition (*kaver ādyasya śāsanāt*).<sup>51</sup> By the time various *parvas* of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Bālakāṇḍa* of the *Rāmāyaṇa* took their final shape, the first poet and the sage Vālmīki were considered to be identical.<sup>52</sup>

In the beginning of the *Bālakāṇḍa* (*sarga II*), the genesis of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the circumstances which led to the composition of the first poem are described. Vālmīki heard the resumé of Rāma's life from Nārada, went to the bank of Tamasā, near the Ganges to take bath and saw the male of *krau&ca* pair struck down by a Niṣāda hunter. Overwhelmed with compassion and hearing the *krau&ca* hen wailing, Vālmīki uttered this curse: "Since, Niṣāda, you killed one of this pair of *krau&ca*, distracted at the height of the passion, you shall not live for long" (1.2.14).

"Fixed in metrical quarters, each with a like number of syllables, and fit for the accompaniment of stringed and percussion instruments, the utterance that I produced in this access of *śoka*, grief shall be called *śloka*, poetry and nothing else" (1.2.17).

"The *śoka*, grief that the great seer sang out in metrical quarters, all equal in syllables, has by virtue of its being repeated after him, became *śloka*, poetry" (1.2.39).

Consequently Brahmā visits Vālmīki and commissions him to compose the poem:



“It was by my will alone that you produced this elegant speech” (1.2.30). “You must tell the world the story of the righteous, virtuous, wise and steadfast Rāma, just as you heard it from Nārada ...” (1.2.31-33).

“No utterance of yours in this poem shall be false. Now compose the holy story of Rāma fashioned into *śloka* to delight the heart” (1.2.34).

“As long as the mountains and rivers shall endure upon the earth, so long will the story of *Rāmāyaṇa* will be told among men” (1.2.35).

By the fifth century A.D., when the *Viṣṇudharmottara* was composed, Vālmīki was already considered as an incarnation of Viṣṇu. In a prophetic manner the text says that Viṣṇu will reincarnate as Vālmīki and compose the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the end of *Tretā Yuga* (1.74.38). In the thirteenth century *Vṛhaddharma Purāṇa*, Satī, the wife of Śiva bestows a boon upon Viṣṇu to enable him to compose the epic poem, incarnating himself as Vālmīki.

The *Viṣṇudharmottara* prescribes the worship of Vālmīki:

*vidyākāmo atha vālmīki vyāsaṃ vāpyatha pūjayet*

The *Pratimālakṣaṇa* (III.85.64) offers prescriptions for fashioning an image of Vālmīki:

*gauras tu kāryo vālmikir jaṭāmaṇḍaladudarśaḥ  
tapasyābhirataḥ sānto na kṛśo na ca pīvaraḥ*

Vālmīki, the author of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was well-known in the countries of Southeast Asia. A Sanskrit inscription of King Prakāśadharmā (A.D. 653-679), discovered from a site called Tra Kieu in the coastal region of South Vietnam, suggests that Vālmīki was well-known in the ancient Vietnamese kingdom of Champa in his triple aspects as the sage, the first poet and the incarnation of Viṣṇu. His temple was rebuilt by the king at Tra Kieu which marks the site of Siṃhapura, the ancient capital of Champa. The inscription, though incomplete, reads as follows:

*yasya śokāt samutpannaṃ ślokaṃ brahmābhipuj[ati]  
viṣṇoḥ puṃsaḥ purāṇasya mānuṣasyātmarūpiṇaḥ*

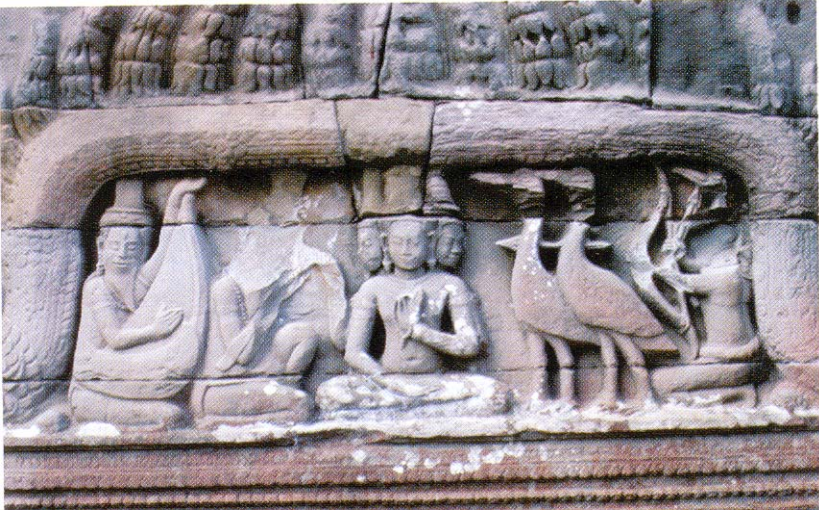
*x x x ritam kṛtyam kṛtam yenābhiṣecanam  
 kaver ādyasya maharṣer v-vālmīkeḥ śru ~- r ih  
 pujāsthānam punas tasya kṛta x x y ~~-  
 prakāśadharmā nṛpatīs sarvāriḅaṅasūdanah  
 vidyāśaktiṣamālakṣmīkīrtti dhairya [guṇānivṛtaḥ]  
 x x ty eṣa jagatkāntas sārade' ntarite [r]i[pau]*

“Exterminator of hosts of enemies in the winter expedition(?), endowed with science, power, patience, fortune, glory and firmness, beloved of the world, the king Prakāśadharmā...had performed ...the meritorious work, the consecration [of the image] of the first poet, of the great ṛṣi Vālmīki...whose sorrow(*śoka*) generated the *śloka* honored by Brahmā, and who is the human form of antique Male, Viṣṇu.....his place of worship[=temple].....[having been ] constructed again.”

This description from the land of Champa in South Vietnam corresponds to what Indian sources tell us about Vālmīki. He is the first poet and the sage (*kasverādyasya maharṣer vālmīkeḥ*). He is the incarnation of Viṣṇu, the antique male.

The second *sarga* of *Bālakāṇḁa*, establishing causal relationship between grief (*śoka*) and poetry (*śloka*) and describing the praise that Brahmā bestowed upon Vālmīki’s future poetical composition, was master-minded and powerfully summarized by the author of Champa (South Vietnam) in only six Sanskrit words which could be translated as “the *śloka*, poetry generated by *śoka*, grief and praised by Brahmā”—*yasya śokat samutpannam ślokaṃ bahmābhipuj[ati]*.

It is also obvious from the above epigraphic record that a temple was dedicated to Vālmīki and his image was installed therein after performing prescribed rituals.<sup>53</sup>



Pediment of Banteay Chhmar, representing the genesis of the  
*Rāmāyaṇa*

(Photograph by Vittorio Roveda, April 2002).

Vittorio Roveda, an Italian scholar, has recently brought to notice an interesting sculptural representation of the genesis of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as described in the *Bālakāṇḍa* from a thirteenth century Cambodian temple. This temple was built by the great Buddhist King Jayavarman VII at Banteay Chhmar in northwestern Cambodia. The scene is carved as a bas-relief on a low pediment over the eastern entrance door of the ‘Hall of dancers’. “Reading it from right to left, we see a man who has shot one arrow through the neck of two cranes. He wears a hat that has the mimetic hood in the shape of a crane, as tribal hunters used to wear. At the centre of the relief is Brahma with four heads and four arms, seated in the yoga position. In old photographs it seems that he is offering with his upper right hand a stylus/pen to a bearded man, while the lower rests on his lap; his lower left arm is raised to his chest holding a rosary, but his upper arm is hidden. The bearded man to the left of Brahma seems to hold palm leaf sheets in his right arm.” Roveda rightly identifies this figure with that of



Photograph by Claudes Jacque (1997).

Valmiki, ‘holding a page of his poem! His head has been defaced by time or vandals, but old photographs show his manly face respectfully turned towards Brahma. Further to the left there is a harp player, probably playing a piece of music to celebrate the event or to accompany the narration of the story.’<sup>54</sup> I would add that the above relief is a powerful verbatim representation of the chapter two of the *Bālakāṇḍa*. The representation of the harpist corresponds to the express statement of Valmiki that he had produced the *śloka* to be sung in accompaniment of the stringed and percussion instruments.

It is difficult to determine the state of Rāma legend in pre-Vālmikian era. It seems highly probable that from the oral versions of the story Vālmiki selected material for his epic poem. In course of his choice, he must have rejected the variants of the story which did not suit the ethos to which he belonged. The Buddhist and the Jain versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and a number of versions prevalent in Southeast Asia offer all together a different account of some important episodes of the epic. In spite of the basic unity of the story, the retellings are terribly divergent, capable to upset a beginner in comparative literature. In fact, after listening to the *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa*, a fifteenth century narration from the mouth of Rāmadāsa,

his disciple said in utter dismay: “What you have narrated is quite different from the original *Rāmāyaṇa* supposed to be much extensive. Only you can remove this doubt which has arisen in my mind.” The narrator then assured: “Rāma’s reincarnation differs from one Kalpa to the other. So does the narration of his life from one *Rāmāyaṇa* to the other. Even in the work of Vālmīki there are deviations. You should not, therefore, be tormented by doubts. Take it as truth, what I have narrated to you.”<sup>55</sup> *The Bhusundī Rāmāyaṇa* also points to the endless retellings of the epic—*rāmāyaṇam anantakam*.

The Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, the post-Vālmīkian literary creations in so many languages of India and Southeast Asia and a large number of oral traditions with a wide range of variations bring us to a powerful mechanism of retelling which could be understood only through a socio-cultural and linguistic approach with relation to time and space.

**Linguistically** speaking the task is impossible unless international dialogues and collaborations are established on a global scale to clearly bring out the cultural particularity of each version. It is true that the *Rāmāyaṇa* stands for some universal values, cherished by drastically different groups of humanity. Nevertheless, each version champions its own cultural universe. In brief, each retelling of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a compendium of universals and particulars. Only a language specialist can bring out the cultural universe hidden in his language version of the story. It requires unbelievable amount of time and energy. In my own case, I had to learn the Laotian to be fluent in this foreign language and spend at least twenty-four years to decipher, edit, translate and critically evaluate one palm-leaf version of the story—*The Phra Lak Phra Lam* (some four thousand recto-verso palm-leaves). Happily there is a native language scholarship on the *Rāmāyaṇa* in each country of Southeast Asia, though the number of people in the field is quite limited. Most of the versions are known to international scholarship only through the summaries of their plot and content in English or Hindi languages. Authentic translations of the major retellings of *Rāmāyaṇa* are needed in order to evaluate the significance of the epic as an important treasure of the world heritage.

The re-telling of Rāma story resorts to the **localization** of the events and creation of a new or modified sacred geography. The deeds of a prince of Ikṣvāku dynasty of Kośala in northern India gained currency in the popular imagination, forming the nucleus of an epic tale. As the story spread to eastern, central and southern India, there was a corresponding expansion of the geography of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Consequently one can find more than one Lanka in different parts of India, besides the traditional Lanka of Siṃhaladvīpa. When the story spread beyond the physical boundaries of India, the story was localized in its new homeland. Thus one Ayodhya in Thailand or another Ayodhya on the island of Java is a natural consequence of localization of the story.

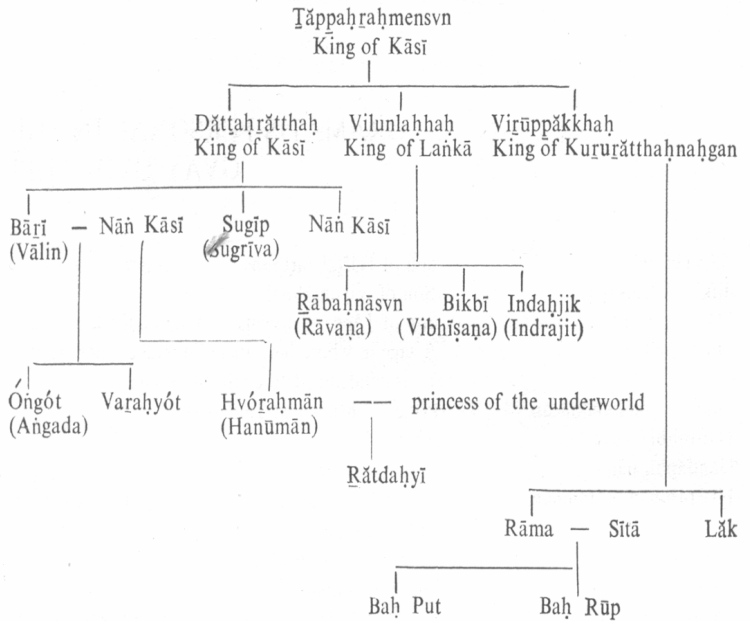
One of the most interesting cases of localization is available in the Laotian retelling of the story in which the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been transformed into a veritable epic of the Mekong valley, narrating the war between two rival kingdoms of the region. *The Phra Lak Phra Lam*, the Laotian retelling of the epic locates all the events of the epic in the Mekong valley, spread over the present-day states of Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. The Mekong forms the exact axis of the story. At the southern extremity of this axis lies Indraprasthanagara in the present day Cambodia, the capital city of Rāvaṇa's grand-father Tapa Parameśvara. At the northern end of this axis stands the city of Candrapuri Sri Sattanak (Vientiane) in modern Laos, founded by the father of Rāma who is the elder uncle of Rāvaṇa. The story revolves along the Mekong axis between these two points and between these two princely families. The fathers of Rāma and Rāvaṇa are brothers. Their father Tapa Parameśvara gives his throne of Indraprasthanagara to Rāvana's father. Rāma's father who is the elder son feels aggrieved due to this paternal injustice, leaves his native city of Indraprasthanagara and settles the new kingdom of Candrapuri Sri Sattanak (Vientiane) on the left bank of the Mekong. In this Laotian kingdom of Vientiane, on an island in the Mekong River, Rāma (Phra Lam) and his younger brother Lakṣmaṇa (Phra Lak) are born. Śāntā (pronounced as Candā in the Laotian retelling), the elder sister of Rāma is then introduced.

Rāvaṇa abducts her from Vientiane and takes her as his wife to his kingdom of Indraprastaha. The southward journey of Rāma and Lakṣamaṇa from Vientiane to Indraprastha in order to rescue their elder abducted sister then forms the major theme of the retelling. The two brothers take the land route along the eastern side of the Mekong on their flying horse, providing the story teller to entrench his audience in the local geography. The abduction of Sītā, the wife of Rāma forms the second part of the narrative, shifting the scene of the story to the island of Lanka.<sup>56</sup>

The retelling involves ***choice, selection, re-arranging and reuse*** of the story elements for specific purpose. In the Laotian retelling of the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, the legend of the elder sister of Rāma has been selected from the Gauḍīya version of *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* and turned into a major theme to describe the nuances of sibling rivalry so endemic to Indochinese civilizations. In this process, the same motif is doubled and described twice. In the Laotian version, the theme of abduction is doubled. The first part of the story relates to the abduction of Rāma's elder sister Śāntā and the second part Rāma's wife Sītā.

In the Laotian versions the **genealogy** of the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been exhaustively reworked to suit the socio-cultural and political fabric of Indochina. To correspond to the Theravāda Buddhist cosmology, Daśaratha, the father of Rāma has been equated with one of the Lokapālas, Datarṭṭha, and the father of Rāvaṇa has been equated with another Lokapāla Virulahak.

GENEALOGICAL TABLE BASED ON THE *GVĀY DVÓRAHBI*



A number of Indian and extra-Indian retellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* reject the Vālmīkian account of the birth of Sītā. According to Vālmīki she is supposed to have sprung from the furrow (*sītā*) made by King Janaka while ploughing the ground to prepare it for a sacrifice instituted to obtain progeny (*Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, I.65). The Laotian version of the story joins a number of Indian and Southeast Asian versions to declare Sītā as the daughter of Rāvaṇa. In the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* she is the daughter of Candā, the elder sister of Rāma, who was married to Rāvaṇa. In other words, Rāma marries the daughter of his own elder sister, confirming the tradition of marrying the maternal uncle.<sup>57</sup>

The Laotian versions and some other Southeast Asian versions of the story discard the Vālmīkian account of the episode: criticism of Rāma's subjects as the cause of Sītā's banishment after the victory of Lanka. It follows another Indian version according to which drawing of a portrait of Rāvaṇa leads to her exile.



The following narrative in the *Gvāy Dvoraḥbī* outlines the circumstances leading to the banishment of Sītā:

“One day Sītā draws the portrait of Rāvaṇa on the request of palace maidens. As Rāma returns from his tour of the capital, the portrait is concealed under the royal seat. When Rāma takes his seat, the portrait speaks: ‘Both of us belong to the royal lineage. Why are you sitting on my head?’ Having discovered Rāvaṇa’s portrait from under his seat, and having learned that Sītā had herself drawn it, Rāma suspects her in love with Rāvaṇa. Lakṣmaṇa takes the responsibility of executing her in the forest, but he renounces to do so as she is pregnant. Intervening in the matter, Indra turns himself into a dead dog. Lakṣmaṇa slashes the dead dog and carries his sword stained with blood to convince Rāma of Sītā’s execution.”<sup>58</sup>

While Vālmīki chose an idealized explanation for the banishment of Sītā after her return from Lanka, a host of retellings opted for a very humane explanation –the natural jealousy from which Rāma suffers.

Besides universal values, the retelling weaves into the story the *culture specific issues*. The bride-price and taboo of marrying the elder cousin are two basics of the Laotian culture. While abducting the elder sister of Rāma, Rāvaṇa does not offer bride-rice and thus violates the established social norm of the Laotian society. Rāma’s elder sister is Rāvaṇa’s elder cousin. Marrying her, Rāvaṇa does not respect social taboo. On the other hand Rāma is the defender of the established social ethos (*maryyāda puruṣottama*). In the pluralistic world view of Indic universe, the social ethos is not unique and unitary. It changes according to the time and space. Through Rāma as the main protagonist of the story, the story teller upholds the social ethos to which he subscribes, denouncing its infraction through the character of Rāvaṇa.

The retelling of the Rāma story by King Rāma I of the present Chakri dynasty of Thailand has yet to be thoroughly studied. It is not easy to estimate the extent to which Rama I drew on vernacular versions of the story handed down through the courts of the Mon and Khmer to Ayudhya and Bangkok, and to what extent he was

obliged to return to contemporary Indian sources. In the essentials—the ending excepted—this *Ramakien* closely follows the main lines of Vālmīki's original, but the differences in detail are considerable and these differences—of incidents added or omitted, of names, customs, dress, character, location, flora, etc., changed – have imparted to the work an atmosphere and feeling that owes nothing to its source and every thing to its Thai regensis.

The change from Hindu milieu to the more easy going Thai ambience led to the relaxation of moral exigencies. In the *Ramakien*, for example, the main events of the original are reduplicated as far as the denouement, but whereas the *Rāmāyaṇa* ends tragically with Sītā parting from her husband, the *Ramakien* closes with a reconciliation arbitrated by the gods. In characterization, furthermore, while Ram is recognizably Rāma, as Lak is Lakṣmaṇa, Seeda is Sītā and Ongkot is Angada, the Thai Hanumān plays an altogether fuller and more important role than his Indian counter part. Not for him the chastity of the Hindu Hanumān; his amorous adventures provide one of the recurrent themes of the Thai narrative, while his tricks and exploits dominate the central episode to the extent that he replaces Phra Ram there as the most prominent character. But the greatest change between the two works is wrought below the primary and secondary levels of plot and characterization, for in the incorporation of incidents extraneous to the Indian epic the Thai imagination has worked freely, and it is the narration of episodes like the night at Bohkoranee, the meeting with the hermit Nart, the attempts to kill Hanumān, Benyagai's transmogrification and the building of the causeway that most sharply distinguishes the *Ramakien* from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and lends it its particular Thai atmosphere. For so successfully indeed has Rama I transmuted the epic with these additions that the majority of Thai know nothing of its Indian origin, looking upon the *Ramakien* less as a work of art than a history of their royal house.<sup>59</sup>

Besides the well-known Malaya written version of the *Hikayat Seri Rama*, as a popular theme of the Malay shadow play, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has been retold by the

puppeteers (*dalang*) for the Muslim audience of Malaysia. The traditional way of holding a *wayang* (shadow-play) performance for entertainment purposes was that one man, a family or even a village would shoulder the expense on some important social occasion such as a marriage or circumcision. Amin Sweeney demonstrated the greatest concentration of *dalang* on the padi-growing coastal plain of Kelantan. The *wayang* season of the *Rāmāyaṇa* performance began in earnest only after the padi harvest, and extended to the beginning of the rainy season. But far the vast majority of performances are organized today as a business enterprise.<sup>60</sup>

In retelling of the epic theme, each narrator has begun the story in his own way and at his chosen moment. The *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, the Javanese *Rāmāyaṇa Kakawin* and the Cambodian *Reamker* commence with the reign of Daśaratha's father, prior to the birth of his four sons. The bas-reliefs of the temple of Prambanan around eighth century begin their story with the circumstances leading to the birth of Rāma and his brothers, tracing it back to the invitation of the gods extended to Viṣṇu to reincarnate in the world to exterminate the evil race of demons. The murals in the galleries of the Royal Chapel of the Emerald Buddha commence with the discovery of Sītā from the earth.<sup>61</sup> The *Rāmopākhyāna* in the *Mahābhārata* opens the narrative with the story of Rāvaṇa, as do a number of retellings of Southeast Asia.<sup>62</sup>

In a pioneering research on the Malay versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Zieseniss drew, for the first time, the scholarly attention to the fact that the *Hikayat Seri Rama* reached Indonesia from various parts of India in three streams of oral tradition, and was there fused into a more or less complete whole. These three streams were from the east, from the west and from the south-west of the Indian sub-continent.<sup>63</sup> In fact, the role of oral texts, in addition to the numerous written retellings, can never be over emphasized in the diffusion and dissemination of the Rāma saga world-wide.

The Rāma repertoire in the performing arts and the plastic representations in sculptures and paintings offer effective and lasting mediums of retelling. The retellings of the story as found in fresco and mural paintings or in bas-reliefs of Prambanan (Indonesia) and Agkor Wat (Cambodia) suggest another vast field of investigation into the relationship of written or spoken words and its transformation into a visual art form.

The sheer variety and proliferation of retellings testify to the intrinsic strength of the theme and its growing popularity amongst diversified cultural communities. A systematic and in-depth study of the retelling process, as planned by this national seminar, would certainly throw new light on the diffusion of the epic as a unifying force for the mankind, while highlighting the particularity of each cultural community.

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<sup>1</sup> BEFEO 4: 739.

<sup>2</sup> K 122, BEFEO 3:212.

<sup>3</sup> K. 514 BEFEO 22: 92.

<sup>4</sup> IC 2:134.

<sup>5</sup> Etienne Aymonier. *Le Cambodge*, vol.2, p.325.

<sup>6</sup> Lunet de Lajonquière. *Inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge*, vol. 3, p.420.

<sup>7</sup> IC 7: 43.

<sup>8</sup> IC 7: 43, n. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Cœdès places the passages of uncertain reading in italic.

<sup>10</sup> A conjectural reading of the of the final letter of the word suggested by Cœdès. The term *sruk* is surmounted by a “boucle” which could be an “I” or a letter added after thought.

<sup>11</sup> Cœdès notes that the letter with voyel “o” is a composite letter. The main body with its three legs (jambages) resembles very much to the letter “K” of the Angkorian writing, but in this inscription, the “K” consists only of two legs as in the Siamese writing. As to the subscript, it resembles to the “foot” of “j” or “ph” of the modern writing.

- <sup>12</sup> Etienne Aymonier. *Khmer Heritage in Thailand*. Bangkok: White Lotus. 1999, p 217-220. *Idem.*, *Le Cambodge*, II, p. 184.
- <sup>13</sup> Lunet de Lajonquière, *Inventaire*. II. p. 141.
- <sup>14</sup> BEFEO 22 (1922), p. 58.
- <sup>15</sup> BEFEO 3, p. 442.
- <sup>16</sup> BEFEO 22, p. 57.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.
- <sup>18</sup> JASB (Letters), I, 1935, p. 54.
- <sup>19</sup> BEFEO 35, p. 383.
- <sup>20</sup> Cœdès rightly suggests that the expression *jayacihnam ivātmanah*, “as the sign of his victory” should be restituted as it occurs in other inscriptions. Cf. George Cœdès. *Inscriptions du Cambodge* (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1953, p.4, n. 1).
- <sup>21</sup> Phou =mountain, Lokohon = Nakon=Nagara= kingdom, city.
- <sup>22</sup> Etienne Aymonier, *Khmer Heritage in Thailand*, Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999, 204.
- <sup>23</sup> M. Barth. “Inscription Sanscrite du Phou Lokhon (Laos)”, BEFEO 3 (1903): 442-46.
- <sup>24</sup> Barth distinguishes the traces of *ū* and of *jihvāmūlīya*, *ibid.*, 445.
- <sup>25</sup> Etienne Aymonier. *Le Cambodge*. Vol. I, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900, 285.
- <sup>26</sup> E.L. de Lajonquière. *Inventaire Descriptif des Monuments du Cambodge*. Vol, I, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1902, 157.
- <sup>27</sup> Michael Vickeray. Society, Economics and Politics in Pre-Angkor Cambodia. Tokyo: the Toyo Bunko, 1998, 344, n.71.
- <sup>28</sup> BEFEO 11 (1911), 393.
- <sup>29</sup> IC: 5, 41.
- <sup>30</sup> The first two characters are doubtful.
- <sup>31</sup> Cœdès points out incorrect *sandhi*, and proposes to read “\_vuddhir.”
- <sup>32</sup> The reading is doubtful. According to Cœdès it is possible to read ‘*vācānyah.*’ The *sandhi* is incorrect. It should be read ‘*vācānyo.*’
- <sup>33</sup> Cœdès proposes to read ‘\_dri’ as ‘*adri*’ mountain = 7. IC: 2, 42, n.3.
- <sup>34</sup> Cœdès found the name of the month completely effaced. IC: 5, 42, n.4.
- <sup>35</sup> I propose to explain the term *vyāsa satra* as meaning the continued sessions of reading of Vyāsa’s text. *Nivandhan* signifies the obligatory donations on a permanent basis for these sessions. Cœdès takes this expression in a limited sense of donation ‘fixation of donation offered to Vyāsa’, ‘foundation in favour of Vyāsa.’
- <sup>36</sup> Based on a conjectural translation of an uncertain text, as offered by Cœdès. IC: 5, 42, n. 6.
- <sup>37</sup> Aymonier, Etienne 1999. *Khmer Heritage in Thailand*, Bangkok: White Lotus, pp 212-214.
- <sup>38</sup> E Lunet de Lajonquiere. *Inventaire Descriptive des Monuments du cambodge*
- <sup>39</sup> For Bana cf *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Bombay Branch*, X, 87; for Hemachandra, *Indian Antiquary* IV 110 cited by A. Barth, *Inscriptions Sanscrites du Cambodge*, Paris, 1885.

- <sup>40</sup> R.C.Hazra. *The Studies in Upapuranas II* (Calcutta, 1963), pp. 78-79.
- <sup>41</sup> Pratāpaditya Pal. “The gift of Books According to the Devīpurāṇa” in M. S. Nagaraj Rao, *Kusumāñjai. New Interpretation of Indian Art and Culture. Sh C. Sivaramamurti Commemoration Volume*. Delhi: Agama Kala Prakashan, 1987. vo. I p. 49 ff.
- <sup>42</sup> Webber, *Ueber das Ramayana*, p. 345.
- <sup>43</sup> A. Barth. *Inscriptions Sanscrites du Cambodge*, Paris, 1885, pp 28-31.
- <sup>44</sup> Read *upavahat*.
- <sup>45</sup> Read *ramayana*
- <sup>46</sup> The wife of Vasistha was the model of a wife.
- <sup>47</sup> An inscription of eleventh century at the temple of Prea Kev in the province of Siem Reap mentions that a Saiva priest devoted to the study of scriptures (*śāstras*) donated a volume (*pustakam*) for the temple (*vimāna*) housing the Lord Bhadreśvara A. Barth. *Inscriptions Sanscrites du Cambodge*, Paris, 1885, pp 107,116, st 23.
- <sup>48</sup> Camille Bulcke. *Rāmākathā: Utapatti aura Vikāsa*, Allahabad: Hindi Parisad Prakanan, 1971(1950,1st edition).
- <sup>49</sup> Sachchidanand Sahai. “Vālmīki : His Authorship, Date and Personality as Gleaned from Indochinese Sources”, Proceedings of the Ninth International *Rāmāyana* Conference, Torino, April 13th-17th, 1992, *Indologica Taurinensia* (Official Organ of the International Association of Sanskrit Studies), volume XIX-XX, 1993-94.
- <sup>50</sup> *The Rāmāyana, Yuddhakāṇḍa*, Critical Edition, vol. VI, ed. by P.L. Vaidya, 1971, additional passage no. 3703, p. 878.
- <sup>51</sup> *The Raghuvamśam* 15.41.
- <sup>52</sup> Camille Bulcke, *op.cit.*, (1971), p. 33.
- <sup>53</sup> Paul Mus. “Études Indiennes et Indochinoises: 1. L’inscription à Vālmīki de Prakāśadharmā (Tra-Kieu)”, *BEFEO*, 28(1928), p. 147-152.
- <sup>54</sup> Vittoria Roveda. “The Rāmāyana and Khmer Reliefs”, *Udaya* 4, 2003: 53.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ānanda Rāmāyana*. Varanasi: Pandita Pustakalaya, 1977, p. 783.
- <sup>56</sup> Sachchidanand Sahai, *The Rāma Jātaka in Laos: A Study in the Phra Lak Phra Lam*, vol 1, p. 23, New Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1996.
- <sup>57</sup> Sachchidanand Sahai. *The Rāmāyana in Laos A Study in the Gvāy Dovṛaḥbī*, New Delhi: BR Publsihing Corporation, 1976, p. 9.
- <sup>58</sup> Sachchidanand Sahai, *ibid.*, p. 29. For the Indian sources of the motif see *Kṛttivāsa Rāmāyana*, VII. 44-45; Camille Bulcke, *op.cit.*, p. 697. In the Jain sources, the co-wives persuade Sītā to draw the feet of Rāvaṇa out of jealousy, and then accuse her of unfaithfulness. V.M. Kulkarni. “The Rāmāyana of Bhadreśvara as found in his *Kahāvalī*”, *Journal of Oriental Rsearch*, vol II, p. 336.
- <sup>59</sup> J.M. Cadet. *The Ramakien. The Thai Epic Illustrated with the bas-reliefs of Wat Phra Jetubon*, Bangkok, Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1971.

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- <sup>60</sup> P.L. Amin Sweeney. *The Ramayana and the Malay Shadow-Play*, Kuala Lumpur: The National University of Malaysia press, 1972, p. 26.
- <sup>61</sup> Prince Dhanivat. *The Ramakien*, Bangkok: Bangkok Dolls, 2511(B.E.).
- <sup>62</sup> V. Raghavan (ed.). *The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1980, p. 3.
- <sup>63</sup> Alexander Zieseniss. *The Rāma Saga in Malaysia. Its Origin and Development*. Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute Ltd, 1963, p. 185-86.