

MEDICINE AND CULTURE IN ANCIENT CAMBODIA

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Introduction

The practice of Medicine is determined by its cultural environment. The purpose of this article is to review the foundations of Medicine in Ancient Cambodia. The relationship between medicine and different components of the Khmer culture is a complex one. The elements of the Khmer culture include religion, language, scriptures, numerals and mathematics, mythologies, music and arts. The practice of medicine at the royal court of Angkor, in the Buddhist monasteries and in the Khmer villages was always related to aspects of Khmer culture.

Medicine, religions and mythology

The most striking feature of ancient Khmer religions is the harmonious syncretism between Hinduism, Buddhism and indigenous animism. Animism was the most widespread while Hinduism was prominent among the ruling elite. Theravada Buddhism penetrated Cambodia much later in the 14th century but was practised by all strata of the ancient Khmer society.

Hinduism was the essence of the Khmer kingship called Devaraja or God-King. Vedic sacrifices were carried out by the royal Brahmin scholars to protect the King and his subjects from natural catastrophes or epidemics. The priest doctors were in charge of the physical and spiritual health of the king, his family and members of the small ruling elite.

By the 14th century, Theravada Buddhism had brought a radical change in the religious practices of the Kingdom. It had influenced all strata of Khmer society - from the King to his most humble subject living in the most remote village of the kingdom. The concept of reincarnation and self-salvation was prevalent in Buddhism. Buddhist devotees were more oriented towards the accumulation of merit in order to reach a higher level of reincarnation in future lives, while animistic healers helped to alleviate pain and suffering in this worldly life.

Another aspect of the ancient concept of medicine is the role of preventive medicine. Whether he was a Buddhist or a Sivaite, the ancient Khmer was extremely aware of their health and all means were used to maintain it. They were part of the natural environment, in which they tried to live in harmony with the spirits who were present in each tree, lake, forest, rivers, and sea. The symbiosis between man and nature was taught to the population by using stories from local legends and from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well as from the Jataka or the stories of the previous lives of Buddha.

Medicine, languages and scriptures

The Khmer language, spoken by the Cambodians since ancient times, is a member of the Mon-Khmer linguistic family. Mon-Khmer languages were spoken by some other Asian groups, among them the Burmese. With the early cultural and trade contacts with India, Khmer language has evolved and developed by borrowing from Indian sacred languages like Sanskrit. Later, Pali was also an influence by the 13th century, when Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Cambodia from Sri Lanka, via Burma and Siam. Linguists have divided the Khmer language into three chronological types and named them old, mid and modern. Khmer,

otherwise called *kham*, was probably the most commonly spoken language in ancient Cambodia, while Sanskrit was used by a small elite and educated group living at the royal court around the Brahminist temples.

In the villages, Cambodian healers communicated with their patients through this language. During a trance, the healer also used Khmer to question the spirit via a medium, unless the medium was possessed by the spirit of a Brahman priest or a Hindu god, versed only in Sanskrit.

Because medical education in the villages was based only on oral transmission, typically from father to son, Khmer must have been the language used for this purpose. This was true for the teaching of technical skills such as fixing a fracture with a wooden-cast or selecting and preparing herbal medicine. Most healers used magical incantations and mantra in addition to natural remedies. Therefore, some of these healers may have acquired some skills in at least spoken sacred languages by rote learning. On the other hand, a few of them pretended that they had acquired the magical formulas by revelation. These facts may have obviated the need for reading and writing skills.

There are many pieces of evidence which indicate that the Brahman healers used Hindu medical treatises in their practice, and therefore they must have been able to read Sanskrit. Several technical medical texts, written on palm-leaf *satras* were still available to the healers in the 19th century. These texts must have been copied and recopied by generations of priests, Buddhist monks or laymen for whom copying sacred medical text was an act of religious merit.

Sacred scriptures, which included Sanskrit and Pali can also be found on talismans and amulets (Fig. 1). These magico-religious texts, in association with

some drawings were to protect the individual from disease and malevolent spirits. These artifacts have been found in archeological sites in Cambodia and Khmer archeological sites in contemporary Thailand and Vietnam.

A special form of sacred writing was in the tattoos, still in practice nowadays. As anywhere else in South East Asia, the writing on human skin was widespread. This technique was performed as a sacred art, using Pali or old Khmer words and geometric figures. A special ritual process was strictly respected to give the magic healing and protective power to these tattoos.

Medicine, mathematics and science

In ancient Cambodia, the Khmer scholars borrowed heavily from Indian science to develop the conception of their cosmology. Indian astronomy was used to create the lunar-solar calendar system and to predict eclipses. Days and months were named using Sanskrit terminology.

Geometry was developed, not for the sake of knowledge but to build Vedic altars for the many temples throughout the kingdom. Evidence from inscriptions on stone support the introduction of Indian mathematics to the Kingdom as early as the 7th century. With the development of the calendar, religious sacrifices were carried out to pay tribute to their gods, in order to ask for protection from diseases or epidemics.

If astronomy was the science accessible to a few Brahmin scholars of the Angkor court, astrology was much more popular beyond the royal temples. Down in the villages, some healers or Buddhist monks were trained in this "science" which allowed them to detect disease and predict their severity and outcome. These popular superstitions were reinforced by local customs and animistic beliefs. The

extension of an epidemic or the gravity of a disease would depend on the day it broke out or erupted. In ancient Cambodian beliefs, the number seven was an auspicious number. Many legendary facts were linked to this number: number of rituals, number of fruits offered to the Hindu pantheon or animistic spirits, number of doctors to take care of a sick King, etc.

Medicine and arts

All types of performing arts and music in Ancient Cambodia were sacred. Ancient medicine and religions were intimately related. The healers used dances to perform the rituals for the worship of the king-gods. The dancers became the medium through which the gods spoke to the audience. Several musical instruments were used in royal or popular plays. *Arak* music was performed to support many healing rituals in the village. *Arak* music dates from the prehistoric period of Cambodia, long before the cultural influences of Hindu and Buddhist religions. This music, using string, wind and percussion instruments, was played to appease and worship the spirits.

Court and popular theatre performances were used as an educational medium to teach the way of life, respect for Hindu gods, Buddha and indigenous spirits. The plays were based on Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* (*Reamker* in Khmer) and the *Mahabharata* as well as from the Buddhist *Jataka* and local mythology. Ancient Khmer of all ages were therefore taught to worship gods from Hindu pantheon, the Buddha and the local *Neak Ta* spirit.

The study of ceramics sheds light on the social and religious life of ancient Khmer people as these wares were made for either utilitarian or ritualistic purposes. Small ceramic pieces were used as talismans to protect their owners from disease. Pots, incense and candle containers

and pedestal urns were used on religious altars. Some of these pieces were used by healers in their ritual to draw malevolent spirits from the body of the sick person. Jars and other containers were used to store sacred water or medicinal herbs, or as a betel set.

Bas-reliefs are one of the main artistic features of many Angkor archeological sites. The Bayon, a main temple dedicated to Mahayana Buddhism, contains a series of bas-reliefs carved on the wall that show multiple scenes of everyday life during the Angkor period, which include several "medical scenes" such as a sick person being treated by his healers (Fig. 2). The *Neak Poan* temple and its surrounding pond, were built to store sacred water with healing power.

Medical practices in Ancient Cambodia

Medicine at the Royal court was practised by highly-educated doctors trained in Ayurvedic medicine. Beyond medical knowledge, these healers were also well-versed in other ancient arts and science, like astronomy, mathematics, literature, grammar, rhetoric and philosophy. Medical students were selected among children of the ruling elite. They acquired their knowledge from their gurus, who were court doctors, priest or astrologers. There was no school of medicine but a small select group of students learned through a long fellowship/apprenticeship with the teachers. Sanskrit was the medium of instruction which allowed the students to learn from sacred and technical books such as the *Susruta Samhita*, one of the leading Hindu medical compendium, as mentioned in the Khmer epigraphy.

During the reign of the Buddhist King Jayavarman VII (12th century AD), the practice of medicine at the royal court was extended to all strata of the population of the Kingdom. This was done according

to Mahayana Buddhist doctrine so as to gain merit for future life. More than 100 hospitals were built across the entire kingdom and were opened to all castes. The famous Say Fong inscription gives detailed lists of doctors, pharmacists, astrologists and other allied health professionals as well as lists of medicine and food used in these institutions.

The rise of Buddhist monasteries was due to the influence of Thevarada Buddhism which penetrated Cambodia by the 14th century. These monasteries became the center of learning and teaching of basic knowledge like writing, reading and counting. Sanskrit was replaced by another sacred Hindu language, the Pali. In addition, Buddhist monks taught professional skills to laymen from neighboring villages. Finally, these monasteries became the centre for advanced learning of medicine, astronomy, religion, literature and philosophy for the most gifted students, functioning almost as universities.

Buddhist monks were able to merge Hindu with indigenous medical practice. Patients from neighbouring villages were also seen and treated. Both natural and magical medicine were taught and practised in the monasteries. Divination and magical rituals were used to diagnose disease. A medium was used as the intermediary person to communicate with the local malevolent or ancestral spirits as well as with the many gods of the Hindu pantheon. A ritual was then performed to appease all these divinities. Specialisation was also a characteristic of Buddhist medicine. Some monks were considered experts in fracture or snake bite treatment, while others specialised in making amulets to protect their clients/patients from malevolent spirits.

Another notable feature of medicine in monasteries was the practice of hygiene among monks as taught by the Vinaya

Pitaka, one of the three compendia of the Tripitaka, the Buddhist canon.

Each Khmer village had its own healer. Some of them were previous monks, or laymen who had learned their medical craft from the monasteries. Others learned medicine from their fathers or from ascetic forest monks. Some could read but others were totally illiterate. The latter had learned by observing their local guru. This oral transmission characterized the teaching of medicine in Khmer villages. Here again, animistic medicine was made of naturalistic and magical practice. The healers treated their patients using herbal medicine, more often in conjunction with the recitation of mantras. Similar to what has been described for monastery medicine, specialization was also the main characteristic of animistic medicine.

Finally, this typology of medicine practice in Cambodia is an arbitrary division made for a descriptive analysis of ancient Khmer medicine. In reality, just as what has been described for religions, there was a certain degree of syncretism among these medical practices.

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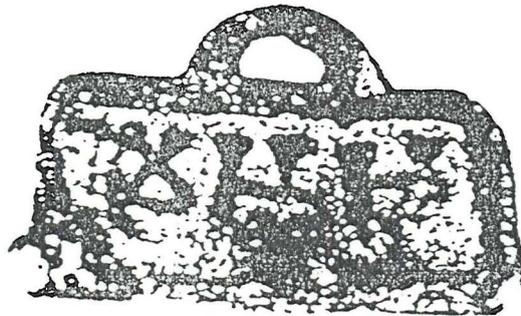


Figure 1: Sanskrit scriptures carved on tin amulet from the Funan Kingdom, predecessor of the Khmer Empire (3-6 century AD) found in the port of Oc-éo, in the delta of Mekong (From Malleret, Paris, 1960).

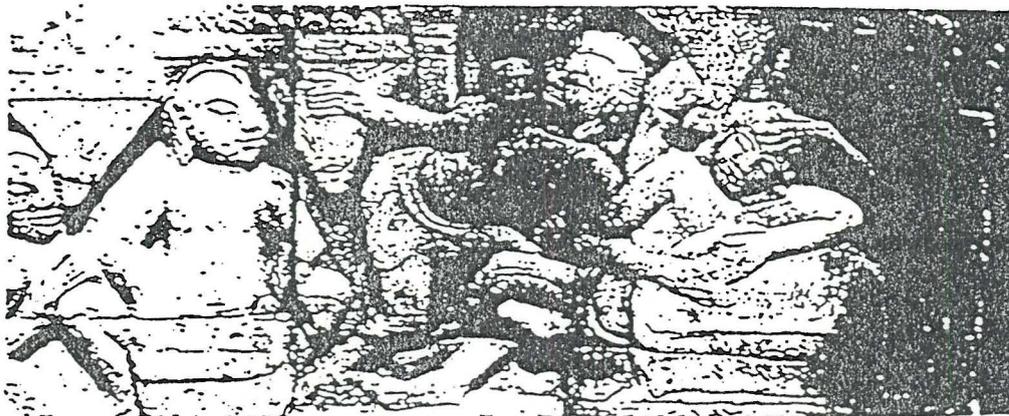


Figure 2: Bas-reliefs from the Bayon buddhist temple (late 12th century AD) showing a sick man and his healer.