

The Place of Animism within Popular Buddhism in Cambodia The Example of the Monastery¹

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At our stage of knowledge it is no more than a truism to state that popular Buddhism has adapted to local cults. And to say, on the other hand, that animistic practices were profoundly influenced by Buddhism would be equally a commonplace statement. In fact one finds always a phenomenon of syncretism, even of veritable symbiosis, within the rural or popular milieu. Cambodia is no exception to this general rule. We can now begin to learn to know, or at least glimpse, these interactions between animism and Buddhism. To describe them we must take under consideration all historical, religious, and cultural factors which contributed to this process over a period of time since ancient Cambodia. Though these considerations are not the actual subject of this article, I believe that it might be useful to mention them in a few words.

Inscriptions and ancient monuments constitute a considerable number of documents which are in any case sufficient to allow scholars to evaluate the scope of successive Indian religious contributions.² Mediated by Sanskrit, Hindu and Buddhist movements in all their forms were implanted in Cambodia through several waves of Indianization.³ At the end of the 12th and the beginning of the 13th century the country has known even a very distinct form of Mahāyāna Buddhism.⁴ Various forms of Tantrism were also present. They played a not negligible role, maybe even a decisive one, in the long process of religious syncretism.⁵ With the progressive implantation of Theravāda Buddhism from the 13th–14th centuries onwards, Sanskrit was replaced by Pali. Nevertheless, through the presence of a great number of Sanskrit words, the vocabulary concerning the supernatural bears witness in an obvious way

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to the adoption within the belief system, since ancient times, of Indian rites and concepts.⁶ For that reason we see that since the time of ancient Cambodia the main enduring characteristic in the elaboration of Khmer religious thought was the search for harmony between the local animistic foundation and Indian philosophico-spiritual contributions. With the adoption of Theravāda the system acquires its ultimate enrichment. While preserving the elements of its Brahmanic inheritance, Theravāda succeeded in inculcating a strong preoccupation with moral and spiritual matters even among the most common strata of the society.

This brings us to the main subject of this paper. To keep it short, I wish only to give a few illustrations of the phenomenon of syncretism and I take the Buddhist monastery as the most striking manifestation of this phenomenon. In doing this I am not concerned with any particular monastery. What I am concerned with is the phenomenon of syncretism unfolding right in the midst of the center of Buddhist activity, which is the monastery. Three essential points appear to me as pertinent.

I) *The Sacred Geography of the Monastery.*⁷ Very schematically the monastery is organized in relation to the temple (*vihār*) which is its center. From the ritual point of view it comprises two sacred perimeters, which are successive and concentric. The first, which delimits the temple, is defined by eight *sīmā* (Sanskrit and Pali for “limit” or “boundary”), on the eight cardinal and intercardinal points, often materially expressed by stone landmarks called “leaves.”⁸ It separates the sacred territory of the temple from the rest of the monastery which, though less tabooed than the first perimeter, nevertheless remains more or less ritually marked in comparison to the profane territory of the village. It is generally surrounded by an enclosure. Most often there is in the northeast corner a hut of the animistic spirit *anak tā*.⁹ Here we are not concerned with the *anak tā* who exercises his dominion over the whole village community. Indeed the village tutelary spirit has his own hut, in a place situated in relation to the whole built up area (often also in the northeast), and not in relation to the monastery. The spirit we are concerned with is called correctly *anak tā vatt*¹⁰ and indeed his authority does not seem to extend much outside the monastic space.¹¹ Yet this should in no case divert or attenuate our attention, because the presence of an *anak tā* spirit in a monastery is systematic. It means that this distinguished space regularly includes in its midst—materially expressed—the animistic spirit *anak tā* to ritually mark its space in a manner analogous to the way village space is organized. It goes without saying that this spirit publicly receives offerings from the faithful of

the monastery. Moreover he watches over the observance of good Buddhist practice. Thus he does not tolerate unsuitable conduct within the enclosure, for instance urinating, or uttering offensive words there.

II) *Arrogation of the Supernatural Power of the Buddha by an Animistic Spirit.* To describe this second point of reflection I must add a few words about a type of animistic spirits connected with violent death.¹² These are the *brāy*, spirits of women who died in childbirth, or spirits of virgins. These are by far the most dangerous spirits, because they are the most malicious in the whole Khmer animistic pantheon. Because of their tragic death, they are the bearers of extreme impurity. Impurity is the source of great danger, but at the same time it generates formidable magical energy. This is what explains the seemingly contradictory character of attitudes observed in regard to the *brāy*. Indeed people repel them—naturally—either by individual exorcism or by a collective chase. Yet at the same time, in a direct or indirect way, the villagers appeal for their cooperation whenever they perform a magical rite, whatever its nature and extent may be. Naturally, in a Buddhist monastery, it is their aspect of “providers of magic virtue” that is retained by the faithful. And the *brāy* are present there in many forms:

1) A monastery often possesses a racing pirogue carefully lodged in a shed. Once a year this boat is taken down and floated on water to compete with other such craft which belong to other monasteries of the region. These annual races are among the most important events in the year. One employs all possible means to win, as the prestige of the monastery is at stake, and so also that of all its parishioners.¹³ Among these means magic appears as determinant, indeed all competitors appeal to it, at least in the traditional milieu. And as the *brāy* can dispense magical power, people naturally turn to her. The *brāy* resides in the boat itself, being assigned the function of a guardian, and she is “nourished” regularly by the monks, often even by the abbot. This “socialization” of the *brāy* is nevertheless only relative. This spirit may reveal her original nature—which is fundamentally malicious—by causing for instance a miscarriage in a pregnant woman who passed by chance in front of her,¹⁴ that is in front of the pirogue. Therefore one should always take every precaution with respect to her.

2) If the above example shows how a *brāy* may be in a way adopted by a monastery, the following example goes even further in this direction. Here we see how a female spirit of inauspicious death arrogates, so to say, Buddha’s supernatural powers to herself. Indeed this time it is the *vihār* itself which shelters a *brāy* and accepts her as a guardian. She dwells generally in the pedestal of the main statue of the temple.

Nobody may profane the sacred edifice in any way whatsoever under the penalty of being immediately punished by its guardian. Thus the *brāy* changes from an eminently malevolent spirit into a guardian of correct Buddhist cult. Thus occurs a formidable act of syncretism between ancestral animism of the Khmers and Buddhism. To merit and assume this respectable function as a protectress of the sanctuary, the *brāy* must totally change her behavior. She is no more motivated by wickedness. Henceforth her actions are dictated by a steadfast obsession to enforce respect for Buddha's religion. All the same, her original personality is not completely effaced. This is what justifies, in my sense, the word "syncretism"—because she preserves at least two specific qualities. First of all there are her physical characteristics, as if to remind us of her origin. Indeed, on certain nights, for example on "holy days," one may glimpse lights momentarily flashing from the *vihār*. Now in her wild state the non-buddhicized malevolent *brāy* wanders in nature or roams in the village in the shape of a ball of fire emitting sparks. The second characteristic concerns her great supernatural power which is essential for the function of a guardian which is ascribed to her. As if to conform to her entry into the religious world, she bears several names which all tend to identify her with the supernatural power of the Buddha, making her in a way the personification of this power. She is called, indeed, *brāy pallànk* ("brāy residing in the pedestal"), or *brāy brah pāramī*, or simply and more frequently *pāramī* ("perfection"). The word *pāramī* here refers directly to the "Ten Perfections" realized by the Buddha, but the people retain from it chiefly the meaning of superhuman power. The villagers place the Buddha, as it should be, on the highest level. His dimension is essentially of a spiritual and moral order. He is there to guide them, to help them accumulate merit through pious works, to shape their future whether for this life or for the next. He is there to insure the transfer of merits to relatives sojourning in another world. In short he is there to aid them both to see and to aim far ahead.

But our existence comprises also immediate, more mundane, problems which require solutions based on an equally immediate effectiveness. When people need to realize a wish, individual or collective, or to avert a calamity, it seems that they turn more readily to *pāramī*, in other words to the *brāy* who converted to Buddhism.

III) *The Practice of Monks*. Finally, the third element of reflection on the interweaving of Buddhism and animism concerns the practices of monks themselves. Here, again, I shall confine myself to a very brief indication. Indeed, the monks devote themselves, apart from their

purely religious and spiritual activities, also to other activities which nevertheless form part of their duties. Some of these make a more or less direct appeal to magic. For instance, when practicing their traditional medicine, they do not hesitate to utilize means relevant to magic to exorcise a victim of witchcraft, to consecrate an amulet, to produce a *kansaen yāntr*, and so forth.

Monks often keep in touch with spirits, if not regularly, then at least occasionally. It is known that some of them, for the sake of villagers, devote themselves to nocturnal meditation in the forest, close to the residence of a spirit, in order to receive from the latter the next winning lottery numbers.

As for the individual practice of solitary asceticism called *dhutaṅg* ("means of purification," thirteen in number), this may sometimes assume a frankly animistic form. Secluded in the forest the monk hopes to encounter a spirit with a view to acquiring from it some superhuman power.¹⁵ If the meeting takes place, the spirit will not fail to subject him to a series of more or less unendurable trials in the form of apparitions and all sorts of manifestations. Only when the monk's resistance has been proven will he be taught magic formulas, healing arts, and so forth.

Lastly it happens that monks who are not versed in magic themselves may seek help from lay magicians if need be. For example, before giving an exceptionally important sermon when his eloquence—or more exactly the illusion of his eloquence exercised on a pious audience—is at stake, a monk may take recourse to a magician to provide himself with a magic charm. The efficacy of this philter, which is nothing else than the love philter called *sneh*,¹⁶ lasts through the sermon during which even the most miserable preacher easily beguiles the faithful.

I have purposely drawn my examples exclusively from the monastery to illustrate the phenomenon of acculturation between Buddhism and animism. Since the monastery is the most visible and elaborate expression of village culture, I believe that the facts taken from its fold are among the most representative.

NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the XXXIIInd ICANAS held in Hamburg in summer 1986 and was prepared specially for this occasion. I prefer to basically retain its original form and tenor. Nevertheless I have augmented the text with notes on some elements of supplementary ideas and with essential bibliographic references in view of its publication.

The English translation was done by Ms. Milada Kalab (University of Durham, England) to whom I express my sincere thanks.

2. Among the Old Khmer inscriptions so far collected, the related ancient epigraphs date from the 5th to the 14th centuries.

3. Cf. G. Coedès (1964).

4. The latest and most important work concerning this question is by B. P. Groslier (1973).

5. Future research on modes of the phenomenon of acculturation should strongly rely on a more extensive and more accurate knowledge of such forms of Tantrism. At present we still lack such knowledge. Fortunately, for the purpose of gaining protection and magical power, there still exist a certain number of facts, traces, and clues, such as the *kansaeñ yāntr* (squares of cloth inscribed with *maṅḍalas*, formulas and sacred syllables), formulas and esoteric treatises which Au Chhieng defines as "Tantric" in his *Catalogue du Fonds khmer de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (1953, for instance manuscripts Nos. 89, 140, 294, etc.). A study based on these documents would surely shed new light which would form a counterpart to the result of epigraphic research in this domain. For the latter I wish to refer the reader to K. Bhattacharya (1961).

6. Having made an inventory of these terms and compiled a lexicon, Madame Saveros Pou and myself have communicated our observations and general considerations about this vocabulary to the Société Asiatique in Paris in May 1986.

7. Or, if one prefers, the organization of monastic space, of a symbolic microcosm.

8. The main sacralizing landmark called *simā kīl* is situated in the center of the sanctuary. On the subject of these boundary stones of consecration, cf. M. Giteau (1969).

9. Pierre Paris (1941) maintains that the spirit hut is always situated outside the enclosure. But according to my personal enquiries the hut may be found also, even if in a slightly smaller proportion, within this enclosure.

10. Namely "*anak tā* of the monastery."

11. In the plain of Viangchan in Laos, monasteries contain a spirit house of the same kind, the *phi khoun vatt* or "patron spirit of the monastery." Cf. G. Condominas (1968).

12. For a more detailed description of animistic spirits, especially the *anak tā* and the *brāy*, cf. Ang Chouléan (1986), especially chapters VI and XII.

13. The boat races take place annually in the month of *kattik* (November-December), after the three months' retreat of the monks has ended. At the time of the competition one places on both sides of the prow of the craft removable eyes which must be taken off as soon as the race is finished. This indicates how much the pirogue is "animated," and consequently alive.

14. It is believed that in the supernatural world the malevolent spirits by preference attack "similar beings." It is thus that the *brāy*, the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth, has for her principal target pregnant women and women in labor, those very beings whose situation she experienced just before she suddenly died in the midst of an unfinished cycle. On this subject see Ang Chouléan (1982).

15. This type of monk is sometimes regarded by the villagers as a quasi-supernatural being. While he practices ascetic mortifications more than other monks, with a view to achieving purification, he is admired, feared, and solicited by all because of his formidable power to work miracles, which is the sought after fruit of his effort.

16. Concerning love charms, cf. Ang. Chouléan (1980).

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