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## Indigenization of Rāmāyana in Cambodia

### **Abstract**

Cambodian Rāmāyana versions, known as Rāmakerti, reveal a variety of instances of indigenization. Agni rides a rhinoceros instead of a ram, for example, and the portrayal of Rām's character and behavior is molded to fit the Theravāda ideal of a hero who is an image of the Buddha; also, the lives led by ṛṣi are those of saintly paragons of virtue. To deal with the problem for Cambodian sensibilities posed by the major role played in the Rāmāyana by monkeys, Khmer authors devised ways to portray also their unattractive, repugnant features. Rāmakerti interest in magic is the final example of indigenization to be discussed.

**Key words:** Rāmakerti — indigenization — Rām — Theravāda — monkeys — magic — Khmers

NOWADAYS it is a truism to speak of the “indigenization” of Rāmāyaṇa in countries outside India inhabited by non-Indian people. Since the early years of this century many scholars have made known to the public, and even edited, a goodly amount of textual and artistic documents that had grown from this epic on foreign soil, from Mongolia down to the Pacific islands. These documents speak for themselves, in the sense that each has a distinctive personality due to the ethnic and historical circumstances of its birth: no two stories are alike, no two iconographic representations are completely similar. In other words, Rāmāyaṇa has been processed by various hands in different places along with the ruling trends (religious, political, and social) in the host, or “indigenous,” countries. Many publications have been devoted, either directly or indirectly, to this indigenization of Rāmāyaṇa.

In Cambodia, Rāmāyaṇa versions, known under the unique name of Rāmakerti, are no exception to the rule. A few scholars involved in iconography pointed out, long ago, some striking, even strange, sculpted Rāmāyaṇa details that could not be found in Indian models (see section I below). Others, in focussing their attention on the Khmer protagonist Rām, noted the manner in which he had been made to merge into late Buddhism by Khmer people, whether Theravādin (Pou 1975) or followers of Yogācāra (Bizot 1983). And many an author mentioned the impact of Rāmāyaṇa on the everyday life of the Cambodians up and down the country.<sup>1</sup> However, no general survey has ever been carried out on the divergences from the Indian model(s) to be found in Rāmakerti, at least from the time of Vālmiki’s version. Whatever the case, no deep analysis has ever been attempted on various collected data in order to highlight the social implications, and nowhere has the word *indigenization* been used so far to characterize the historical processing of Rāmāyaṇa, or parts of it, by native Khmers.<sup>2</sup>

In taking up the subject now, I am aware of its magnitude; I do not propose, therefore, to cover it entirely in a quick survey. Instead, I shall choose a few typical instances of indigenization, each very dif-

ferent from the others, and shall endeavor to make a brief analysis of each of them, sufficient, I hope, to bring out the potential for further research. Unlike my colleagues in other geographic or ethnic fields, I am not much concerned with the comparison of Rāmakertian episodes with their Indian prototypes, because they have less significant social and cultural implications than some features connected with characterization or the religious background in the Khmer Rāmakerti.

First, though, I should recall, especially for those who are not familiar with the Khmer culture, a few important chronological points in connection with Rāmakertian works. These are:

- a) ancient Cambodia (6th–14th centuries): no written documents left; on the other hand, a considerable amount of epigraphic and iconographic materials, not properly studied so far;
- b) mediaeval Cambodia (15th–18th centuries): two main epics, Rāmakerti I and Rāmakerti II, some minor literary texts, performing art;
- c) modern Cambodia: Rāmakerti in oral texts, art, etc.

#### AGNI'S RHINOCEROS

In the 16th-to-17th-century Middle Khmer Rāmakerti, conventionally termed "Rāmakerti I," there is a most valuable account of Sītā's *svayamvara* (choice of a husband), whereby a large gathering of suitors is headed by the main gods from heaven. These hurried down towards the earth, travelling on their specific *vāhana* or "mounts," to wit: Brahma on a *haṃsa* (sacred goose); Indra on his elephant Airavat; Śiva or Īsūr on his bull Nandin; Candakumāra or Skanda on a peacock; the god of wind, Vāyu, on his horse; the god of rain, Varuṇa, on a *nāga*; Vaiśravaṇa or Baisrab on a celestial chariot (*vimāna*); Neṛrati on a *yaksa*; and, finally, the god of fire, Agni, on a rhinoceros (POU 1977a, 5–6, St. 46–56). This list of gods and their mounts apparently accords with the Indian tradition, except for Agni. In India the god of fire was riding a ram—an animal which did not belong to the Khmer environment and culture.<sup>3</sup> A substitute had to be found for it, and the rhinoceros, native in Cambodia, was *prima facie* the best fit for god Agni on account of its fierce and fiery temperament.

The importance of this example of indigenization will become clearer if we investigate other documents belonging to the periods before and after that time. At first, in the lavish iconography of ancient Cambodia, we find many bas-reliefs in different monuments depicting anthropomorphic *navagraha*, or "the nine planets," and also series of eight, nine, or ten *dikpāla*, or "deity guardians of the regions of the sky." This subject is obviously beyond the scope of this study, and it has

already been studied by a few historians of art (MALLERET 1960; BHATTACHARYA 1964). What I am presently concerned with is the god Agni in these iconographic representations. Sometimes he is seen to ride a ram, or else to be mounted on a parrot (BHATTACHARYA 1956, 187-89, 191-92). But in the famous Angkor Vat bas-reliefs of the twelfth century the god is seated on a rhinoceros (MARTINI 1938 and 1950; BHATTACHARYA 1956). So the substitution of this animal for the ram took place in Cambodia many centuries prior to the creation of Rāmakerti I.<sup>4</sup> We could then surmise that, if there were extant any written version of Rāmāyaṇa in Old Khmer, it would have had the same mention of god Agni as a suitor riding his rhinoceros, as he was depicted on stone at Angkor Vat.

Another evidence of this tradition is provided by a long-lasting custom found at the court of Cambodia. Any state ceremony required the presence of the sacred fire, which, as we well know, symbolized sacredness, purity, and sanctity, at the same time acting as intermediary between gods and human worshippers. If the ritual required that the fire be moved from one place to another over a certain distance, for instance in a pageant, it had to be mounted on a rhinoceros made of papier mâché (POU 1983, 3-9). This tradition lasted as long as the monarchy, and it is found recorded in many writings by foreign authors who visited Cambodia in the beginning of the twentieth century.

In sum, this tradition of Agni riding a rhinoceros has evidently spanned some ten centuries, if not more; and we can safely say that the Rāmakerti has contributed to fixing it in the Khmer collective memory.

#### THE KHMER RĀM

Let us have a closer look at the Middle Khmer epic with reference to its characters.

Mediaeval Cambodia was a Theravādin country, deeply steeped in "faith" in the Buddha's teaching, or *saddhā*. The new religious system did not wipe out the Brahmanic legacy, as some authors have misleadingly said (see POU 1988), nor did it rule out some beliefs and practices inherited from ancient Mahāyāna. The old heritage, as it were, stood firmly in the background of Khmer society, up and down the country. At its highest level, it was maintained in two places: a) at the court, where it supplied the ritual for ensuring the welfare and prosperity of the state, because Theravāda could not offer anything appropriate; and b) in literature, where, of all the main Sanskrit works of the past, Mediaeval Cambodia had preserved Rāmāyaṇa and turned it into a magnificent epic in Middle Khmer, which stood out conspicuously when

compared with other contemporary literary works produced in Cambodia and other Rāmāyaṇan works in neighboring countries.

As is known, Rāmakerti had a Vālmikian basis. If I may use a concrete metaphor, it was made of a Vālmikian warp into which Khmer authors wove a gamut of weft-yarns drawn from their Buddhist culture. The general layout of Rāmakerti was thus Indian, both in geography and in characterization: the mention of Ayodhyā and Mithilā, two kingdoms of the Indian sub-continent, for instance; or Dasarath, the ruler of Ayodhyā, having three chief queens (Kokalyā, Sumitrā, and Kaikeyī) and four sons (Rām, Laks, Bhirut, and Sutrut); or beyond the ocean the kingdom of Laṅkā ruled by Rāvaṇa, or Rāb, whose army was led by his brothers and his many sons, the most esteemed and beloved being Indrajit. Thus Khmer authors would have no problems about retaining this original geographical setting. On the contrary, the association with Indian culture, especially with Vālmiki, would add more flavor, prestige, and even exoticism to their epic. However, the question is bound to arise in regard to the whole body of *dramatis personae*. Could the main characters as conceived by Vālmiki fit into the Khmer intellectual and spiritual system? The answer is, this was not likely. Surely, after the introduction of Rāmāyaṇa to Cambodia (the fifth century), many characters could have been reshaped by the ancient Khmers through the sheer process of natural adjustment. Later on, Theravāda introduced to Khmer people, and taught them, a new system of moral values that brought about many changes in society, in attitudes, and in behavior. Therefore it was bound to remodel Rām and the other characters, too, along the lines of the Buddhist tenets, at least as they were understood by the Khmer folk. This subject has been lengthily dealt with by a few scholars, including myself, so I shall only recapitulate the main points here.

Most attention was focused on Rām, and naturally so. The main protagonist in the epic, the royal prince of Ayodhyā, was made to resemble Prince Siddharta. He was explicitly called a “bodhisattva,” a “bud of a Buddha” (*buddhaṅkūr*), the “omniscient” (*sārbejñ*), “he who possesses a supernatural knowledge” (*brahḥ draṅ’ nāṅ*) (POU 19. 5; 1977b, 51–96). These extolling phrases might be deemed mere rhetoric if they were not backed by the image of Rām as drawn by the poets. The hero was, thus, a lofty prince, reserved, very rarely perturbed by emotion, even dispassionate. On the other hand, he was gentle and loving vis-à-vis all his kin, indulgent, and generous, and the poets insisted that he was “compassionate to all creatures.” Wisdom and dignity on the one hand and sweetness and tenderness on the other made him equally attractive and awesome. It never occurred to any poet chanting his

story, or better his “glory” (*kerti*, from Skt *kīrti*), to elaborate on the sentimental side of his personality, although he was portrayed unanimously as a most loving and faithful husband. And none would dream of involving him in an amorous affair—as has occurred in other Southeast Asian versions—while he wandered about the forests in the throes of loneliness, for he was a replica of the Buddha. As a prince and warrior, he set his mind to fight in order to rescue his wife, to chastize all evildoers and preserve his “glory” and “renown.” But, again, he was never shown as a vindictive, aggressive, or fierce fighter. In dealing with his opponents he first used tactful arguments, even moral counsels. If this did not curb the stubborn, aggressive passions of the demons, he reluctantly accepted the battle in a kind of non-violent way, for the “fiery power” (*tejah*) of his glorious merits produced small miracles that neutralized fighting devices and undid other tricks performed by the demons. In short, he overcame obstacles in a smooth and skillful way. Or his brother Laks and the monkey-officers volunteered to take on the demons and fight in his place, because they held him, as they explicitly put it, to be a Buddha or a *cakravartin*-sovereign, as the case might be, who must remain far above battles and struggles.

If we add up these different aspects of Rām’s behavior, we find behind them a firm and steadfast motivation made up of *mettā* (friendship), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (altruistic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity), which together form the foremost and most sublime tenet of the Buddhists, called *brahmavihāra*, or blissful state of mind.

This analysis illustrates the most important and effective contribution of Theravāda, which taught an austere way to reach the ultimate goal of blissful arhatship. In practical terms, it took care of the epic characters held sacred and rid them of those passionate, disorderly, turbid, and violent features that are commonly found in human beings.

### *Ṛṣī*

Another illustration of the above can be found in the Khmer concept of seers and hermits (*ṛṣī*). In the Khmer mind, they are dedicated to absolute chastity. All of them males, they had no married life. Even more striking, they discarded any idea of communal existence and withdrew into austere solitude in the forest, where they practiced meditation (*samādhi*). They lived in huts or cells (*kuṭī*, *kuṭ*), and their subsistence was strictly frugal. Some of them had larger rest houses built nearby where they put up forest-travellers. Their hospitality could be extended to educating young male guests. They taught them the basics, the principles of the Buddha’s teaching (mainly ethics). On a more practical side, they ministered to, and healed, the sick. They taught

martial art (misnamed in Khmer *silpasāstr*, from Skt *śilpaśāstra*). This consisted in learning by heart specific *mantra* such as were needed by a man struggling for survival: collecting food and drink in deserted and forlorn places, self-defense in hazardous situations, and doing away with all evil.

Further, the Khmer type of *ṛṣī* drew from their contemplative life a formidable supernatural power (*riddhī*). They could perform divination (see below, page 98); they could create inanimate and animate objects by performing a kind of *homa*, which included worship of the sacred fire and incantation (*jap*, from Skt *japati*).<sup>5</sup> In this activity they invoked their “great teacher” (*paramagrū*), who was none but Śiva, alias Īsūr, the dispenser of *mantra* par excellence.

It is fair to note that in iconography they took after Īsūr physically, too. But they were first of all the image of Khmer forest-dwelling monks, who have always divided their activities between a strict observance of the Buddha’s ethic code (*śiladharm*) and the practice of introspection (*vipassanādhura*), in order to acquire both the ability to foresee (*vipassanāñān*) and serenity (*sānti*).

#### MONKEYS

Monkeys deserve more serious attention because so far they have been viewed merely in connection with their pranks and antics—a very superficial view, indeed, and one that has not done justice at all to Khmer literature and culture.

They were all soldiers in Rām’s army and were led by famous officers of their own species. Now, how could Khmer people in the first instance welcome monkeys of the Indian model as servants of Rām, i.e., as good and deserving creatures, standing on the side of divine princes, and serving a good cause? This question is not a rhetorical or facetious one. For Khmer people of Mon-Khmer origin have always shared with their kinsmen in Southeast Asia strong feelings against monkeys. They find them ugly to start with; they blame them for being too noisy, restless, inquisitive, mischievous, and sly, if not vicious—in brief, prone to troublemaking. They do not wish monkeys any harm, though; as a rule, they maintain an attitude of indifference to them and tolerate them, mentally relegating them to where they belong, i.e., to “the forest” in a bad sense. Finally, they despise them for trying to ape humans. The evidence thereof can be found in every nook and cranny of Khmer culture: in the language, literature, and folklore. Any present-day Cambodian, when asked about monkeys, would either answer casually that he has no feelings whatsoever for them, or answer more emotionally that he loathes them!

So, long ago, the ancient Khmers must have been in a predicament when they learned about monkeys in the Indian epic, portrayed in a way totally alien to their thinking. Should they wipe them out of the story and find some substitute for them, as they did away with the ram of god Agni? The answer was no—despite their instinctive reluctance—because of a) the great number of monkeys in the epic they would have to deal with, and b) the true habitat of monkeys in the forests of Cambodia itself. To make matters worse, two leading monkey-officers were semi-divine creatures: Hanumān was born from the god of wind, Vāyu, and Sugrīb from the sun. They were thus demi-gods, while monkeys in the Cambodian context are just base-born creatures! Obviously, it was a difficult task for Khmer forefathers to reconcile their instinctive feelings and ancestral legacy with their reverence for the great Indian epic. How they came to terms with this, we can surmise by scrutinizing Middle Khmer Rāmakerti and its impact on the culture.

Monkeys were given therein two faces. The first one, foreign to Khmer culture, was a composite of high moral values, a capability to see right and wrong and then to choose the good cause, an unquestioning loyalty and devotion to their masters, a martial skill tinged with magic, and, to crown all this, a physical attraction and beauty! The second one derived from all the traits, physical and moral, that Khmer people had always attributed to them since time immemorial, which I described above and which represented the reverse of the first face. Khmer authors put these two faces together very skillfully, and this device is present in all the existing forms of Rāmakerti: written literary texts, oral storytelling, and dramatic performance.

To see how they went about this problem I propose to call one face formal and the other one informal. The formal, a foreign importation, has little relevance to our subject, and I shall not elaborate on it further. The informal, on the contrary, must be stressed, for its effectiveness is not easily perceived by foreign observers. It is linked with indigenous culture, therefore very close to reality. This is where Khmer authors felt at home, so to say, and indulged in free speech. Their view of monkeys was aired through two channels. In the first instance, and circumstances permitting (e.g., when the princes were not present), they made personal comment on monkeys, always disparagingly. The second way was to put their views into the mouths of demons—and this is the more frequent case.

The epic demons, especially their leader Rāb, harbored a deep contempt and aversion for monkeys, the more so as they belonged to the enemy's army. In the mouth of Rāb and some of his relatives, the word "monkey" had a very bad connotation, particularly in a moral



sense. Even worse is the term "wild monkey" as opposed to "domestic monkey," because the latter at least had the good fortune of learning something from civilized beings, i.e., men. Monkeys, they would add, were creatures "of base birth," "savages," "forest dwellers"; they had no idea of independence and were perpetually clinging to each other; they had no other dwellings than forest trees;<sup>6</sup> they ate nothing but fruits because they were not up to appreciating other food. Therefore, if they were chased out of forests and woods and confined, for instance, to grassland or sandy grounds, they would never find a way to escape starvation because of their "innate stupidity."

Their leaders received even fiercer criticism. They claimed a divine paternity and wore princely apparel enhanced by many jewels topped by coronets; they put on airs and minced about to look like gentlemen. But scratch all this off, the demons would say, and you will find only monkeys, that is to say, baseborn creatures. They were the more despicable as they hankered after humanity in all respects. Consequently, the Khmer phrase "a crowned monkey" was heavily loaded with abusive connotation, and it could be extended to humans as well in common parlance to mean "parvenu," "*nouveau riche*."

And yet the theme of monkeys has, amazingly, had a long life in Khmer culture. Khmer poets of old, in giving vent to their true feelings, satisfied both themselves and the public. Thus, once again we can say that Rāmakerti has helped to perpetuate an Indian import by means of very clever makeup, and to fix it in Cambodia.

Final evidence of this is the tremendous success of the monkey motif in late narrative literature, learned or popular. Every princely protagonist was given a retinue, or even an army, of monkeys of the Khmer type—boisterous and noisy, continuously bantering and making faces. These tricks and antics satisfied the longing for fun of the common people, and they have provided endless delight to generations of readers and listeners.

A last word, not the least important, should be said about Rāmakerti in performance. I have already noted (POU 1977a, 1977b, 1979) that written versions of Rāmakerti in Middle Khmer were essentially libretti for a dramatic representation of a specific sort that has been very famous in Cambodia, even until now. The actors mime the story, which is beautifully recited by a quasi-professional narrator accompanied by a traditional orchestra. Either some particularly meaningful sections of Rāmakerti can be staged, or the entire story. Here I want to examine the second type of performance, as it is more relevant to our subject.

Tradition had it that funerals of eminent abbots of monasteries should entail at least a week of ceremonies and include nightly per-

performances of Rāmakerti. The dramatic side of the ritual had a terrific impact on the community. This facet has not been properly assessed so far. The audience at such performances consisted of people living in the village(s), i.e., the local grassroots. They came with their families not only for the obvious purpose of paying homage to the defunct abbot but also to have an entertaining and relaxing time—which, as we all know, is very rare in country life. These villagers would surely appreciate the moral message of Rāmakerti, but in the Khmer context they missed out on the intellectual and spiritual one. What they were looking for was twofold: pathos and a good laugh. Who could better furnish mirth than monkeys on the stage? All producers of Rāmakerti were perfectly aware of this. They were genuinely keen to provide many merry interludes to meet the no less genuine longing for merriment of their fellowmen. In this respect, the narrator joined efforts with them by providing excellent and appropriate cues mimed by monkeys. These, in their comical acting, were supposed to have a witty, lusty, and sometimes obscene language, such as is expected by any populace in the world in search of entertainment.

As a result—and I want to stress this as much as possible—this light side of Rāmakerti performances, comical and crude at times, “stole the show” in the public’s consciousness. Villagers, young and old, in their simplicity, were satisfied that they had attended and appreciated “a play of monkeys” (in Khmer, *khon khol*), hence the widespread popularity of this name in the entire Cambodian community and even beyond Cambodia’s border (it occurs in Siamese: *khon/khoon*).<sup>7</sup>

At this juncture we can confidently conclude that Vālmīki’s Rāmāyaṇa as indigenized in Cambodia had a good grip on the popular mind and took on a quasi-magical aura that then swelled and increased in size and power to reach into other parts of Khmer everyday life.

#### THE MAGIC OF RĀMAKERTI

The word *magic* should be taken here in both its proper sense and a figurative sense. The figurative sense, hinted at in all the preceding discussion, hardly needs elaboration. Rām, despite his human nature, was held to be sacred and became an object of veneration not unlike the Buddha. His magnificent epic, injected with Theravādin spirituality, took on a glorious and awe-inspiring aura. It was, as it were, reserved on a high shelf for weighty occasions. Besides the above-mentioned ritual use of Rāmakerti in performance, we must note that the texts themselves have sometimes been stored for safekeeping in monasteries as part of the ancestral legacy. The texts have been used in the past as reading books and copied on palm leaves—an excellent and

meritorious engraving practice—by many hands of anonymous novices. Hence their partial preservation until the present day, as I have already noted in a previous paper (POU 1989).

But magic in the proper sense is an even more important, and very fascinating, aspect of Rāmakerti on account of its social implications, which are not very well known to people outside the Cambodian community. The ingredients of magic can be traced back in the oldest available text, Rāmakerti I. The epic as such involves superhuman beings backed up by gods and other deities, and prodigious feats performed by characters of all classes (princes, demons, monkey-officers) as a result of their “supernatural power.” The poets, righteous and unconsciously biased, praised the fiery energy and efficacy of the divine princes and ultimately their meritorious deeds. But when they described demons in action, they would not bother to use hyperbolic or euphemistic phrases; they just spoke of “magic” (*āgam*, *mantr*). All battle stratagems concocted by Rāb were explicitly attributed to “magic.” Even the most valorous and respected demon, Indrajit, was said to use “unfair magical tricks” (*māyā*) when meeting with Laks on the battlefield. In the course of centuries the atmosphere of the supernatural and magical created by the narrative built up a fiery energy within, then without, the epic, so that it gradually acquired a sacred status similar to that of all the Buddhist texts, whether canonical or paracanonical.

This magico-sacred nature of Rāmakerti will account for two quasi-vital customs in the Khmer community.

When seasonal rain fails to fill ponds, lakes, and streams and to soak the farmland deeply, so that the prospect of a drought looms disturbingly up, villagers get together to have parts of Rāmakerti performed. The most popular selection is the so-called “release of waters” that occurs in the following episode. During the great battle of Laṅkā, Kumbhakār was commissioned by his brother Rāb to cut off the water supply to the host of monkeys on Rām’s side. He magically assumed his most gigantic shape, then lay down across the river. The monkeys became terribly upset, reported to Rām, and pressed him for urgent help. Hanumān and Aṅgad were sent by the prince to sort out the danger. They performed magical tricks to rouse the giant from the riverbed and consequently succeeded in “releasing” the bountiful water and rescuing all creatures.<sup>8</sup>

The second custom concerns communities as well as individuals. When individuals or groups of individuals face a serious problem that absolutely requires a solution, when they are confused to the point of despair, they can go to a monastery and ask to “consult sacred texts”

or *kambī*. These consist of all Buddhist texts and the Rāmakerti. A ritual divination then usually takes place, as follows. The monk brings out of safekeeping a palm-leaf copy of the sacred texts. He performs a short invocatory and auspicious ceremony, then hands the individual or the group leader a stick, which he or she slips between any two pages of the texts. The monk opens the book to that place, reads out the passage of text, and interprets it to the audience. In the case of the Rāmakerti text, there are several portentous episodes, of which the following are some examples:

- the success of young Rām at the *svayamvara* (portends success)
- the abduction of Sītā by Rāb (portends bad luck)
- the episode of Jatāyus (portends hope)
- the episode of Bibhek joining Rām's camp (portends hope)
- the death of any demon on the battlefield, especially if it is Indrajit (portends good luck).

As we can see, this kind of divination is like a child's game. But this is not the point: what are significant here are the so-called hand of destiny that guides the applicant to those pages of the book that are connected with his future, and—need we stress it?—the belief of people in the supernatural power of “sacred texts” that represent practically an object of last appeal and a moral support for humans in distress. This type of divination does not specify the outcome of an affair. It only foreshadows success or failure, and, in the first case, it injects hope into people's hearts and sustains their energies, determination, and faith. Whatever the reality of life, this moral and spiritual support devolves from Rāmakerti through its magic.

This brief study has barely scratched the surface of the topic. However, the few themes I chose to analyze certainly combine to highlight the main pattern of indigenization of Rāmāyaṇa in Cambodia. In olden times Vālmiki's epic was made to fit the spiritual trends current in the Khmer community, which were themselves based on Brahmanic tradition and Buddhist beliefs (Mahāyānist and Hīnayānist). Then along came Theravāda, in mediaeval Cambodia, to impregnate the epic with an austere and pragmatic spirit. The Indian importations, processed all through the centuries, merged into the everlasting animistic Khmer system<sup>9</sup> that has stood firm in the background and provided many magical notions and practices. The term “syncretism,” applied by historians and sociologists to the Khmer spiritual system, of ancient times or today, needs no additional demonstration. Our task is to

bring to light more illustrations of it collected from different social facts and cultural fields, including that of Rāmakerti.

## NOTES

1. See a short account by E. PORÉE-MASPERO (1983, 19–24). Students should, however, be warned of some incidental erroneous etymologies in this paper.

2. Another aspect of this processing is to be found in Rāmakertian onomastics. See the survey by S. POU (1980).

3. However, sheep were known to southeast Asian people in prehistoric times, as evidenced by some bronze bowls excavated in Thailand, depicting scenes of men, plants, and animals, among which the ram. Why this animal went out of historic scenes for so many centuries is another question we cannot answer at the moment.

4. It must be noted incidentally that the group of gods depicted at Angkor Vat has nothing to do with the *svayaṃvara* of Sītā (see page 91) despite the physical similarity with our Rāmakertian episode, for two reasons. First, the theme of procession of suitors did not occur in Vālmiki's Rāmāyaṇa. If Khmer poets had used it in our Middle Khmer Rāmakerti, it should rather be attributed to the *svayaṃvara* of Draupadī in Mahābhārata. Secondly, in the Cambodian context proper, it has been asserted by archaeologists that the stone-depicted gods at Angkor are not related to the Sanskrit epics at all. They belong in fact to another Indo-Khmer myth connected with world creation. The story had it that these gods came—riding their respective *vāhana*—to meet god Viṣṇu, better known as Nārāy in Cambodia, and ask him to rid the young earth of mischievous demons, with the establishment of law and order to follow. As everyone knows, Nārāy graciously responded to their request and came down to be reborn as the righteous prince of Ayodhyā. But what many people are not aware of, probably, is the fact that this myth has survived the twelfth-century temple of Angkor for a long time, until the Middle Period of Cambodia's history. This is evidenced by a cosmogony text entitled *Traibed*, datable to the seventeenth century, recently “unearthed” from the MSS Collection of the École Française d'Extrême-Orient in Paris. See my survey (POU 1989).

5. As a result, *jaṃ* now means in Khmer “to create magically.”

6. Credit should be given, though, to female monkeys regarding their maternal love. As we know, these habitually carry their young tightly against their breasts. In Rāmakerti, the author set them to jeer at Sītā, who carelessly left her baby in safekeeping with her guardian hermit when she went to fetch water at the river. See POU 1982, St. 292–307.

7. Any final /-r/ or /-l/ in Khmer loanwords became /-n/ in Siamese. It must be further noted that the initial sense of “monkey” was not perceived by the Siamese, or was lost when they borrowed the word, whilst Khmer people keep using *khol* /*khaol*/ (a type of tall, black monkey), and deriving therefrom the sense of “to be frivolous, to burlesque.”

8. The best article ever written on this score remains that of SEM (1967).

9. Regarding modern Cambodia, see mainly ANG (1986).

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