

《Session 1》

**The Human-Nature Relationship Seen through  
Animistic Belief and Ritual in Cambodia**

ANG Choulean  
*Cambodia, APSARA Authority*

**Foreword**

*This article is a highly condensed version of an oral commentary of the same title, which accompanied the projection of a series of images. I have refrained from rewriting the commentary into a full-fledged theoretical study, for this would have meant completely modifying its initial form and abandoning the principle of the “proceedings” of a conference. On the other hand, had I reproduced the original commentary here without modification, the result would have been exceedingly abstract, and required the publication of all the images projected during the presentation. I have therefore opted for an intermediary solution.*

**The Forest / Village Dichotomy**

It is not an exaggeration to say that the forest/village dichotomy, which is, as we know, of universal relevance, enjoys a particularly rich development within Khmer language and thought.

*Prei*, “forest,” connotes a broad range of ideas such as “wild, dangerous, hostile, non-cultivated, illegitimate...”.

*Srok*, “village,” signifies all that is “human, humanized, domesticated, cultivated, socially recognized...”.

The path of human life is constantly oscillating between the poles of this dichotomy.

**I . Prolung, “souls”**

The notion of *prolung*, a Khmer term imperfectly translated as “soul,”

reflects and participates in this dichotomy within which our life is inscribed. Each individual possesses nineteen *prolung*. The state of good health is explained by the presence of the *prolung* within the body. The problem is that some of these *prolung* can escape or be lost when an unexpected event occurs: a sudden fright due to a minor accident, for example, a change in social status due to the passage from one social status to another (puberty, marriage, motherhood...). When the *prolung* become separated from their rightful owner, it is systematically understood that they have become lost or trapped in the forest. Indeed, they are often captured by spirits that haunt the woods. On such occasions, it is necessary to bring back the *prolung* of the person in question, by means of a ritual known as the “*Hau Prolung*,” the “Calling of the Souls,” which can take various different forms.

## II . Rituals Concerning the *Prolung*

Since there are many situations in which the *prolung* can be lost, there are many rituals serving to call them back, and in the first place the healing ceremony. The *prolung* are reflected in a number of ritual objects made for such ceremonies; these objects serve to represent, and indeed to bring about the collective presence of all the *prolung* in the person’s body.

### (1) *Bay Prolung* (fig. 1)

This object symbolizes the full presence of all a person’s *prolung*. It presents the latter as elements of nature - but a nature that has been domesticated, high-



fig. 1

ly humanized. The *Bay Prolung* consists in a bowl of cooked rice topped with a vertical cone made of banana leaf, which is surrounded by bananas and slices of sugar cane. In this context, the banana and sugar cane plants incarnate domesticity and gentleness. Inside the cone, a banana is placed vertically into the mound of the rice. The ensemble evokes the union of male and female principles. Figure 2 shows a woman in the process of calling back the lost *prolung* of a sick woman. With the aid of a ladle, she is collecting the *prolung* in a bowl. A young girl following close behind her carries a *Bay Prolung* in order to bring about the reunion of the lost *prolung*. Once the call is finished, the reassembled *prolung* are given back to their owner, the sick woman (figure 3; this woman's head had previously been shaved).

### (2) *Baysei Doem*

In certain rites of passage, next to the *Bay Prolung*, we see another representation of the *prolung*: the *Baysei Doem*. This is an object of phallic form made from a section of banana tree trunk to which a large number of sweets and other treats have been attached (figure 4, left-hand image). The ensemble is wrapped in banana leaves and then, as an outer layer, a piece of cloth. The right-hand image in figure 4 shows these two ritual objects side by side, symbolizing the presence of the *prolung*, during a Buddhist ordination ceremony.

### (3) *Angkar Snang*

Figure 5 comes from a ceremony to “prolong the life” of an aged woman. This ceremony, aimed at extending the life of an older person, is based on a symbolic enactment of the death-rebirth cycle. The individuality of the person in question is transferred into a substitute body, after which it is symbolically destroyed. This process makes the rebirth of the person possible. The substitute body consists in a package of husked rice with a coconut representing the head, pieces of sugar cane representing the skeleton, and bananas as the ribs. In other words, the human being is composed with natural elements, although once again, the nature in question has been domesticated.

## III. Tutelary Spirits of Individuals

In theory, every individual has a sort of guardian spirit. In practice, only a certain percentage of women in rural areas have a concrete experience of these spirits. These women are known as *Memot*; they are mediums in whom certain



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4



fig. 5

types of spirits become incarnated in order to communicate with the living during possession rituals. Each medium possesses a *Kru Kammoet*, a “birth master.” It is difficult to get a clear idea of these “masters,” because the mediums themselves do not seem to conceive of them in an anthropomorphic manner. These “masters” would be perfectly abstract if they were not materialized in a specific or personal manner (at least in the Angkor region) by an object called *Kachom*. This object, which is also an idol, is placed on a special shelf constructed in an appropriate place in the medium’s house. The medium brings it out only for her possession ceremonies. The trance depends on many factors: the general ritual ambiance, the appropriate music and song, several types of offerings... But the presence of the *Kachom* is absolutely indispensable. The medium stares at it for a long time and, with the help of the music and ambiance, generally manages to enter into the state of trance. She begins to dance in order to entertain her “master” (the *Kachom*),

which she holds in her hand (figure 6, showing two mediums in trance).

Figure 7 shows three *Kachom*, each being the materialization of a master who is the official guardian of a particular medium. The *Kachom* on the left consists of a coconut to which rolled betel leaves, areca nuts and dried palm leaves engraved with decorative floral and animal motifs have been attached (naga-serpent heads can be seen at the base). In addition, a number of birds, also made of palm leaves, are attached to pliable stalks such that they move in the air. Basing ourselves on an examination of such objects as these, we can affirm that while the *Kachom* speak the language of humans through the mouth of the medium during possession, they are constituted in a fundamental sense of animal and vegetable elements. The *Kachom* of the middle image obeys the same principle, although the coconut is replaced in this case by a wooden cylinder. However there is a significant detail worth noting here: the conical red hat suggests a first step towards anthropomorphism. The right-hand image goes even further in this direction because, in addition to the hat, the master is adorned with a large red belt. It is interesting to note that in every case, the entity with which, at least in theory, each human being is attached from birth consists of domesticated and humanized elements of nature. The floral motifs cut into the palm leaves are highly stylized, and the naga are purely mythological snakes. In other words, rather than a realistic representation of nature, we have what are known as *kbach*: schematized nature-based motifs in which human intervention leaves a profound mark. At the same time, the “master” is not fully anthropomorphized. It retains its roots as “flora and fauna,” as if to remind us of the irreducible bond that ties us to nature.

#### IV. The Village Community and its Land

The village of Lovea is one of a number of round villages situated in the Angkor region and in the Northeastern provinces of Thailand (figure 8). At its center there is a wooden post called the “navel of the village” (*phcet phum*), or simply “the august village” (*preah phum*). This latter appellation is particularly interesting insofar as it allows us to deduce that the post stands in for the village itself. And indeed, a study of ritual practices in these villages confirms that all the energies of the land belonging to the village are concentrated in this navel. Ablutions performed on the post - for example, during ceremonies aimed at bringing rain during a drought - have an effect upon the entire space of the village community. The relation between the post and the village is thus one of microcosm to

macrocosm: the symbolic rain on the post will bring real rain to the whole village.

Throughout Cambodia, a rough stone or a termite hill (figure 9) can be worshipped as a part representing the whole. This is a very ancient belief. In Brahmanic times (roughly from the 6th to the 13th centuries CE), the cult of the linga came to overlay this belief seamlessly. The linga, this symbolic representation of the god Shiva as a stylized phallus, was not worshipped only in the familiar sculpted form corresponding to Indian iconographic norms, but also in the form of



fig. 6



fig. 7



fig. 8



fig. 9

a natural rock whose shape evoked a phallus in one way or another. Figure 10 shows a brick sanctuary in a cave, probably dating to the 6th century CE, and which was erected to shelter a stalagmite seen to be a linga.

It is also interesting to note the existence of certain idols whose anthropomorphism is literally imprisoned, if you will, within the initial phallic concept: in figure 11 on the left, we see a statue whose arms are represented schematically without being separated from the body. Once again, we can suggest a correspondence between this form and an element of traditional Brahmanic iconography: the *mukhalinga* (figure 11, right-hand image).

It would be an error to think that these references to the linga or to phallic symbolism are compatible only with a single, irreducible signification: the male sexual organ. The central post, the megalith, the termite hill, the linga... are always intimately associated with the land from which they arise (or into which they are planted). The land is essentially feminine: it is conceived by all of humanity as the nourishing mother. What we have here is thus a binary male-female ensemble, which only functions as such. The land concentrated in the central post is thus valorized here because it is integrally sexualized, capable of producing riches for the community.

## V. Cultural Mineral Water

Water, as an element of nature, can also be valorized insofar as it is marked by human intervention. A prime example of this phenomenon can be found in the Kbal Spean river north of Siem Reap. The water flows over sculptures carved directly into the stone riverbed. These sculptures represent Brahmanic mythological scenes, and comprise in particular a great number of linga-yoni pairs (male and female principles). The water is consecrated as it flows over these sacred sculptures before reaching the rice fields downstream (figure 12). A similar procedure serves to consecrate the water at the Western Baray, the largest artificial reservoir constructed during the Angkorian period. In the middle of the Baray lies an artificial island, the Mebon, at the center of which there is a large stone-walled well which is thought to have represented a hollow linga. As this linga is effectively immersed in the Baray, the water is sanctified and made fertile before irrigating the fields (figure 13).

The rapid overview we have provided here of a number of Cambodian examples suggests a preliminary understanding of the way in which humanity, whether the individual or the social body, is situated in an intimate, filial relation-

ship to nature - but a nature that has been deeply marked by the demands of culture, in the broadest sense of the word. This is what we might call, according new meaning to an over-worn expression, human nature.



fig. 10



fig. 11

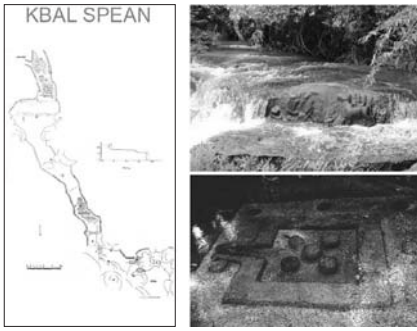


fig. 12

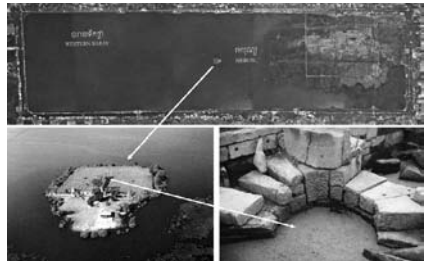


fig. 13