2019

Medieval Khmer Society: The Life and Times of Jayavarman VII (ca. 1120–1218)

Paul K. Nietupski
John Carroll University, pnietupski@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://collected.jcu.edu/fac_bib_2019

Part of the Buddhist Studies Commons, East Asian Languages and Societies Commons, and the Hindu Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://collected.jcu.edu/fac_bib_2019/34

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Bibliographies Community Homepage at Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2019 Faculty Bibliography by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.
Jayavarman VII (ca. 1120–1218) is one of the best known Cambodian “Angkor” leaders, in part because he was able to unite the numerous small, fragmented Khmer Cambodian and Cham kingdoms of the day. He ruled his consolidated Khmer kingdom from 1181–1218, bringing the decentralized Khmer and Cham states together through political and military alliances. Religion, especially India-derived Brahmanism, or “Hinduism,” Mahāyāna Buddhism, and local Cambodian religion, was a key component of Khmer society. Over time different Khmer rulers endorsed one or more of the religious systems to their own advantage. Jayavarman VII was especially committed to Mahāyāna Buddhism, evidenced by the remarkable extent of his support for Buddhist monuments, and attested in many hundreds of Sanskrit inscriptions. This essay tells the story of Jayavarman VII, a political and military leader who used Indian religious visions and prototypes as models to build a remarkable cultural edifice.

Keywords: Jayavarman VII; Khmer; Angkor; medieval Cambodia; Sanskrit inscriptions
Introduction

Jayavarman VII (ca. 1120/25-ca. 1218; r. ca. 1181–1218) was one of the most influential kings of "Angkorian" Cambodia; in his lifetime, through conquest and astute diplomacy, he brought a large number of small regional territories under his control. He reportedly lived a very long life and more certainly, was responsible for massive building projects in his Cambodian, ethnically Khmer kingdom. The Cambodian or Khmer civilization flourished between the early ninth and the mid-fifteenth century, with shifting boundaries between its Thai “Ayutthaya” and Vietnamese “Cham” neighbors, sometimes as allies and sometimes as enemies. For a brief but brilliant period, Jayavarman VII was able to assume control of a remarkably large empire, one constructed in the political climate of the day, of sometimes shifting alliances and disputes.

This essay includes a description of Jayavarman VII, and his rise to power through medieval Khmer political processes. It shows the important role of religion through analysis of inscriptions carved in stone. The goal is to show the complex and distinctively Khmer interface of politics, Buddhist and Hindu ("Brahmanical")

religions and cultures. The proliferation of Mahāyāna Buddhist images and epigraphs will be used to consider components of medieval Khmer identity, including their regard for monastic institutions and fundamental religious principles and practices.

Jayavarman VII was in a privileged class of his day. He was born into a lineage of wealthy rulers, and was exposed to political diplomacy and the politics of conquest at an early age. In a vibrant religious environment, he marked his success in politics and diplomacy with expressions of religious belief and practice; in his case, Buddhism. In his reign, as with those before and after him, religions (especially Indian Buddhism and Brahmanical or “Hindu” ideologies) were the central systems for validating royal authority.

Many of the medieval Angkor monuments were constructed as Buddhist or Brahmanical, and several served both religions over time.1 This essay focuses on Jayavarman VII (1181–1218), a major sponsor of Buddhist monuments, whose visions and achievements are commemorated in votive and donative inscriptions. The proliferation of Buddhist monuments and inscriptions, moreover, evidences broad community acceptance of Buddhist beliefs and practices, and along with these, political and economic support. This support is verified by the remarkable extent of existing Buddhist monuments and, notably, by very many inscriptions that serve as sources for this essay. As Sheldon Pollock argues, inscriptions were not only written “for the gods”; rather, “[i]nscriptional discourse in Cambodia had some other, political-cultural work to do.”2

---

1 Partial support for this project was from a 2007–2008 Council of American Overseas Research Centers’ Multi-Country Research Fellowship. All of the photos were taken by Sandar Aung, except where indicated. Thanks for the hospitality of the officers of National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh, and to Ed Mish for technical support. The general terms “Hindu” and “Brahmanical” are used interchangeably. Hindu deities including Śiva, Viṣṇu, and goddesses, references to the Mahābhārata, and even Pāṇini are mentioned in several places, see Georges Coedès. Inscriptions du Cambodge Vols. I–VIII, Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1952, Vol. IV: 232. (References to this collection below will read Coedès, Roman numeral, and page number.) Pollock’s observation that Indian Brahmins and Khmer scholars were literate in Sanskrit and Indian myth is surely correct, see Sheldon Pollock. The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007: 129–131, etc. See Chandler 2000: 72, who mentions a centuries-long Buddhist presence at Angkor.

The monuments and inscriptions studied here represent the multi-faceted Khmer political and religious vision, which focused on Buddhism in Jayavarman VII’s time. One caveat is that the extant data from conserved monuments, art objects, and inscriptions are only traces of complex religious institutions and sponsorship by literate classes of society. They can only provide inferential clues about long lost religious buildings made of perishable materials, and about beliefs and practices of communities at large. Nonetheless, this paper proceeds under the assumption that the inscriptions and objects under study did the work of kingship and religion in specific contexts, with recognizable expressions of religious affiliation and of devotion to deities, to Buddhist and Hindu principles and practices, and to monastic institutions.³

The Life of Jayavarman VII

The little available biodata about Jayavarman VII shows that he was the son of King Dharaṇīndravarman II (r. 1150–1160) and his wife Queen Śrī Jayarājacūḍāmaṇi. Jayavarman VII married Jayarājadēvi, and after her death he married her sister Indrādevi. Little else is known of Jayavarman VII’s childhood and youth, but it is clear that he was in a privileged class, relatively wealthy, with political connections likely through his clan, and with significant military skill. It appears that he grew up in the Khmer empire, but spent much time in neighboring Cham (Vietnam) lands. For their part, the Cham were at least as fragmented as the Khmer; Vickery has shown that like the Khmer there were several, if not many, small Cham kingdoms, some of which allied among themselves, with their Khmer neighbors, and evidently mercenary groups, in agreements made and broken over years for expected military, political, trade, and territorial advantages. This was the normal political process in medieval Cambodia. The scenario was one of running battles between different allied Khmer and Cham clan groups, who could and did shift alliances over time.

After Jayavarman VII’s father passed away in 1160 and his clan member Yasovarman claimed the throne, Jayavarman VII (then about forty years old) served in the court. But around 1166, Tribhuvanādityavarman, evidently a court official, took the throne. Jayavarman VII left the Khmer capital, possibly going to Preah Khan in Kompong Svay (about 100 km east of Angkor) or perhaps to a Cham kingdom. For the next decade, until about 1177, there were more alliances and more battles between groups of allied Khmer and Cham. It is often said that in 1177 there was

---


a unified Cham invasion of Khmer territory. Vickery and others refute this, and Vickery argues further that in this decade (1166–1176) the Khmer were in political turmoil and there was a series of raids and battles between the Cham and Khmer. He suggests that “... the real conquest of Angkor was by Jayavarman VII and his Cham allies—probably in the 1170s, at least before 1181—and that the subordination of central and southern Champa to him dated from that time.”

In 1181, Jayavarman VII took the throne of the Khmer empire. Again following the policy of fortuitous alliances against his enemies, he then expanded the empire to its greatest extent ever and built an unprecedented number of temples, religious buildings, and infrastructure projects. He was an innovator, and though tolerant and even supportive of Hinduism, he clearly adopted Mahāyāna Buddhism, Sanskrit language inscriptions, and Buddhist imagery. The expansive and explicit nature of his religious expressions supply good materials and some enigmas for the study of Buddhism in Khmer society of the day.

Jayavarman VII’s reign over the Khmer kingdom extended from about 1181 to 1218. He was likely in an extended family or as Vickery put it, a “conical clan,” in which all biologically and perhaps marital-related members shared considerable wealth and social status. Wolters describes “cognatic kinship,” in which prominent males and females are equally important, and there is individual distinction as a “man [or woman] of prowess.”

---

6 Michael Vickery, “Champa Revised,” 70.
8 Vickery remarked that “After nearly 300 years of the increasing use of Khmer language in the epigraphy, all of his important inscriptions are in Sanskrit, which could be seen as an international elite language serving both countries, and he adopted as his state religion Mahāyāna Buddhism, which had always been more important in Champa than in Cambodia. Perhaps it was his Champa associations rather than religion which sparked the so-called Hinduist reaction against his creations – allegedly in the thirteenth century, a date which is completely hypothetical.” See Michael Vickery, “Champa Revised,” 167, 170. See Ian Mabbett, “Buddhism in Champa,” 297–298, 300–302.
It appears that for much of Jayavarman VII’s youth and middle age—until he assumed control of the empire—Khmer clan-based society was stratified, with little continuity of administrative and bureaucratic structures, and no unity under a single leader. Social, political, and economic patterns were divided into villages, and likely into groups of bonded workers impressed by or under the control of classes of equal or higher status. These included court officials and corporate groups or small “kingdoms” made up of a number of regional estates. These larger clan-based groups could often rally militias and engage in running battles with neighboring forces. Battles, territories, property and populations, including communities of working people, were won and lost as alliances were made and broken.

Photo, Sandar Aung: Bayon, Khmer & Cham in battle.

---


See Vickery, “Some Remarks on Early State Formation”; for references on the difficulties of understanding early Khmer government, see the brief mention of *poii* (which term Vickery reports was not used after the eighth century, Vickery, “What to do?,” 399) other Khmer terms, and Khmer administrative divisions, see Vickery, “What to do,” 391–393, 395–396.
Photo, Sandar Aung: Bayon, Cham in doublet armor.

Cham (doublet armor).

Photos, Sandar Aung: Khmer (strap battle dress).
When large groups were consolidated, a group leader or king could be named until he was usurped by a neighboring king in a very loose model that could evolve over time, and was inconsistent.

This was Jayavarman VII’s background, one of internecine warfare with unstable and shifting political structures. However, even though unstable, the Khmer corporate regimes or kingdoms did manage to maintain some degree of control via warfare, interclan alliances, military force, economy, and diplomacy. This resulted in the establishment of city centers, where culture and economy flourished, as is evident in the Khmer dynastic histories and monuments, notably those associated with Jayavarman VII.

**Khmer Politics**

Jayavarman VII (r. 1181–1218) unified the Khmer empire by consolidating power over individualized “segmented” provinces. His visions of conquest and kingship over these provinces were likely rooted in Indian models for religion and governance, at least rhetorically. Kulke and others suggest a three-stage model for the emergence of Jayavarman’s empire: first, local units led by native chieftains; second, consolidation into larger regional units, with petty “kings” (rājā), but “not yet Aryan” (anaryya); and third, coalescence into larger states under one central authority. Jayavarman VII was this third type of leader.13

As the process went through its stages, there was also a gradual process of royal divinization, the transformation or apotheosis of a human political and military leader into a religiously-endowed leader, from a chieftain, to a king, to a divine king. The use of Indian titles, political structures, and religions was a process many scholars call “Indianization,” which Kulke and others minimize, and Pollock and others describe as vital.14


14 Pollock discusses and problematizes the phenomenon of “Indianization” in great detail, and most usefully for understanding Khmer and Jayavarman VII’s understanding of Buddhism. See Pollock 2007: 531–533.
The Khmer assimilated outside influences in politics and in the construction of distinctive Khmer art, but they made it their own. This is made clear in the representations of divinities and royalty with Khmer facial features, including rounder faces, broader brows, and other features. The collections of sculpture in Phnom Penh’s National Museum and in the Musée Guimet give ample evidence of the beauty and precision of Khmer sculpture.

Evidence for “Indianization” is in the Khmer’s extensive and literate use of Sanskrit and Indian languages for official inscriptions and religious discourse, the subject matter of the exquisite Khmer sculpture, and the evident presence of and high regard for Brahmanical authority and ongoing contacts between India and Cambodia. Taking this into account, Angkor was an “Indianized” state in which Sanskrit and notably, Indian religions, were adopted by local people.\textsuperscript{16}

Further, in medieval Cambodia a key Indian political structure was a process called “maṇḍalification” or “sāmantization,” a phenomenon known in small Indian Pāla kingdoms and a likely model for the Khmer kings.\textsuperscript{17} This was arguably a key component of the Indian influence on the Khmer. The root of this key belief was that if a king was properly consecrated he could transform himself and his environments into a sacred realm (manḍala) under his control. Consecrated kings became the central Buddhas of these manḍala realms; their retinues became attendant bodhisattvas, protectors and so on. Their kingdoms became perfected Buddha heavens, their edicts and rule became enlightened speech or mantras, and their motives and inspiration led to Buddhist enlightenment. It may well be that ideologically, the Buddhism adopted by the court was favored precisely because it flattered the imperial self image. “Que

\textsuperscript{16} For the language of the Cambodian inscriptions, see Kamaleswar Bhattacharya. Récherches sur le Vocabulaire des Inscriptions Sanskrites du Cambodge. Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1991. Pollock makes a strong case for high Sanskrit literacy in Angkor, evidenced by the accuracy of Sanskrit in epigraphic materials. One interesting variation is in the Phimānakas inscription written by Jayavarman VII’s second wife, Indradевī, on the occasion of the death of her sister, Jayarājavēdi, the king’s first wife. The two sisters were known adherents of Buddhism, particularly Indradевī. The text is in Sanskrit and in correct meter, but it is not as heavily laden with Brahmanical praśasti imagery and language as are the typical inscriptions, and is rather more narrative. Its language has been described as vernacular: For example, it uses what has been described as a Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit verbal device, the particle sma with a present tense verb that renders the verb in past tense. See Coedès II, pp. 161–163 for introductory data; for sma see verse VII, XCV, pp. 164, 172. See also much of the same data in Majumdar 1953: 515–528.

Jayavarman se soit considéré comme un Bouddha vivant.”¹⁸ The kings' adoption of Buddhism was "... wholesale conversion, the fundamental transformation, of a human domain into a Buddha-realm, an empire governed by superhuman insight, power, and law."¹⁹

¹⁸ Coedès 1935: 27.
The emphasis on kingship and dominion over one's newly formulated world came on a foundation of conquest and subsequent sacralization of space, an extension of a deity's dominion, and a place where a vastupuṣa divine body, "comme un Bouddha vivant" became synonymous with the sacred site of a temple and, by extension, the entire universe, the totality of one's experience. Accordingly, the central religious practice of the time was "... the individual assuming kingship and exercising dominion... the person metaphorically becom[ing] the overlord (nājādhiṇāja) or universal ruler (cakravartin)" or divine king (devanāja) of the new vision of a perfected realm, whether individual layman, monk, or king.

Jayavarman VII and other Angkor Buddhist kings had the status of divine kings (devanāja) and functioned as universal monarchs (cakravartin). Thus, in the course of (and after) consolidating the kingdom, Jayavarman VII utilized established systems of Indian Buddhist mantras, mūdras, and ritual practices. More emphatically, in an epigraph at Angkor Thom, Jayavarman VII "recites mantras to lead the world to the highest religious goal by destroying obscurity and by following all of the rules."
Khmer Religions

Buddhism, not to the exclusion of Hinduism, was one of the major forces in Khmer history. Jayavarman V (968–1001)'s tenth century inscription at Vat Sithor in Kompong Cham tells us:

\[
\text{eśā śrī jayavarmnājñā buddhadharmmānucārīni}
\text{vauddhīnāṁ anukarttavyā mokṣābhyaadasiddhaye}^{25}
\]

“This observance of the Buddhist teachings was ordered by the glorious Jayavarman and must be followed by Buddhists for success in the process (abhyudaya) to freedom.”

And again, by Jayavarman VII (r. 1181–1218), in his typical opening dedication of the widely distributed “hospices,” here showing the extent of his empire, from Vientien, in Laos:

\[
\text{namo vuddhiya nirmāṇadharmanasambhogamūrtaye}
\text{bhāvābhāvadvayātīto dvayātīṁ yo ninātmakah}^{26}
\]
“I bow to the Buddha, in his emanation, reality, and beatific aspects, who is beyond both being and non-being, whose self is non-dual (advayātmā), who is selfless.”

If the proliferation of icons, ambulatories, meeting halls, stūpas and other architectural features were used as they were and are in other Buddhist cultures, devotion (bhakti) was likely a central practice in medieval Angkor.27

There is evidence of this type of practice in medieval Angkor. In her Phimānakas inscription (ca. 1194–1200), Queen Indrādevi uses language and mechanisms typical of religious practice. The epigraph is incomplete and the context mundane—and perhaps typical of a devoted wife praying for her husband’s safe return— but the language and literary devices use mechanisms reminiscent of, if not taken from, devotional meditation. Fragments of verses (#59–64) are suggestive of religious sentiments:

Photo, Sandar Aung: Phimānakas.
59.

“Her (Queen Jayarāja Devī’s) primary teacher was Indradevī; she focused (aveksamāṇa) on the Buddha as her best goal. She followed the path to the peace of the Sugata, the middle path between the sea of [suffering] and the fire of sorrow.”

60.

“... First, she invoked (vavande) the Buddha, imagined (cintā) in the form of an elephant, then manifested over her twisted locks of hair. Then with intense effort ... she guided him (nayantam) along her own path.”

61.

“... like seeing a blazing flame in a fire chapel she succeeded in her meditation. (viganyamānām)”

62.

“... like a beauty greater than Bhiṣma’s, in her mind able to directly realize suffering as happiness.”

63.

“... she had a vision (sparddham) of her husband returning home, like the light of a deity (kṣitidevatā) that manifests itself (sandarśīttātmā).”

64.

“... by the merit of her extreme devotion (bhaktiṇī) to her husband ... by the power of her vow she invoked (yajñice) continuously.”

These are fragments of verses, but they show well the piety of Queen Jayarājadevī. They also show the function of Buddhist devotional meditation. In verse 60 the Queen invokes the presence of the actual Buddha, succeeds, and engages him. In

28 These verse fragments are from Coedès II: 169.
61 she has a powerful vision of light. Verse 62 brings a level of realization consistent with Buddhist trance states. In 63 there is a deity manifesting itself to a devotee, and the use of the verb *dṛśi* in a typical Buddhist devotional practice. And finally in verse 64 the Queen carries on with continuous devotional practice, fueled by the force of her vow. These can be understood as examples of Buddhist devotional meditation, likely well known and widely practiced in Angkor’s temples and lay communities.

Similarly, the mechanism of devotion appears in Jayavarman VII’s (ca. 1186) Ta Prohm inscription,

5.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{muni} & \text{nindradharma} \text{grasari} \text{m gunādhya} \text{m} \\
\text{dhīmadhir adhyātmadrśānirīkṣyām} \\
\text{nirastanīṣeṣavikalpajālām} \\
\text{bhaktyā jīnānīm jananīm namadhva}m \end{align*}
\]

“I bow (namadhvam) with devotion to the genetrix of the Conquerors Whose magnificent qualities are foremost of the excellent marks (*indradharma*) of the Sage, whom the wise know as the manifestation of inner being, to who has completely eradicated the net of conceptual constructions.”

And emphatically, from very late in Jayavarman VII’s reign, the Angkor Thom Prasat Chrun (the southwest “Corner Temple,” one of the four, in each corner of Angkor Thom) epigraph describes how “by devotion the depths of the king’s heart were filled by the waters from the object of his devotion.” And again, from Prasat Chrun,

---

29 George Coedès 1906: 50, v. 5.
31 Coedès IV, p. 219, CI, #15–16, alpavastvamvunā bhaktimato pi pūJaymah.
22.

sakaustubhe vaksi karkase shri duhkham vasantii dhruvam acyutasya yasyapi ratnatrayabhakticitre snigdhe sukhan niiscalam eva reme\textsuperscript{12}

“The [goddess] Śrī was always miserable in the hard, kaustubha-jeweled heart of Viṣṇu, but in gentle, clear devotion to the Three Jewels she enjoyed only unceasing happiness.”

The Buddhist and Hindu practices alluded to in these verses were likely formalized and structured when practiced in Angkor’s temples; the temple architecture is designed for circumambulation, icon worship, recognition, worship to and invocation of deity bodies. In Indian Brahmanical—and Buddhist—temples, the elaborate pūja worship of the time was, in Hopkins’ words, “full-blown theism.”\textsuperscript{33}

The Angkor kings, notably Jayavarman VII, recorded their expressions of devotion in their construction of temples and hospices, and offerings to their teachers and to their parents and families, likewise sanctified. In his 1186 Ta Prohm inscription the king is credited with erecting statues of his teacher, and many others, and performing “daily pūja rituals” on an enormous scale.\textsuperscript{34} Bhūpendra III’s 1189 Prasat Tor, clearly a Hindu inscription, is a good example:
“The [Lord of] Seven Fires [Agni], constantly invoked by rituals in the house of fire is pleased by mantra recitations by [Jayavarman VII], whose manifold offerings are pure and unprecedented. This is similar to Mandapāla’s mantras, because of which [Agni] suddenly presented (āśuprahita) with an unprecedented offering by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, did not thus consume everything good and excellent in Khāndava.”

Further, and even more emphatically, in the earlier but arguably continuously present Buddhist environment at Angkor and here at Vat Sïthor (in the reign of Rājendravarman, 944–968) in Kampong Cham province, there is extensive mention of Indian Buddhist ritual:

36.  

he is expert in the sciences of essential gestures and invocations, and in fire ceremonies, a skilful priest who knows the secrets of the vajra and bell.”

70.  

“he knows the secrets of vajra and bell.”

---


36 Bajraghaṇṭārahasayajñō, “who knows the secrets of vajra and bell.”
“The priest should bathe [and worship] the Sage at the phases of the moon, with the best words of wisdom (vedasūkta), the sacred prayers, and the eye-opening consecration.”

71.

buddhasnādibhīr ilokīs sukhitā dharmavarddhanāḥ
antarbhūtā hi sarvajñākāye satvaś ca niśćetāḥ

“The world is happy and the teachings grow by bathing the Buddha, and so on, because active and inactive living beings are inside the body of the omniscient one.”

72.

pratītyotpādanāṃ vrahmaghoṣas saddharmma ārṣabhaḥ
sūktaś śāntyavadhāraś ca gāthāveda iti śṛṣṭaḥ

“It is explained that verses of wisdom (gāthāveda) are known as dependent origination, sacred prayers, the best true teachings, well spoken, and tranquil.”

73.

Vrahmaghoṣdayo vidyā yadoknā [sic] mama mastake
tan miśrddhitīva mangalya iti sarvajñāśīsanam

“When [sacred] knowledge (vidyā), the sacred prayers, etc, are recited over my head, it is like a blessing on the crown of my head and so on; this is the teaching of the omniscient one.”

Queen Indradevi’s verse 62 cited above tells us that the Jayarājadevi was “… in her mind able to directly realize suffering as happiness (sāksāt duḥkhaṁ sukhiyamānaṁ)

---

37 Coedès VI: 209 n. 6 corrects yadoknā (p. 200) to yadoktā (yadū akta), and suggests yenoktā as the proper reading.
38 These verses are in Coedès VI: 200.
smaraṇe prāpeḍe)."  

And below, in the Ta Prohm inscription, it is said of the king that "He seeks to know (jīghṛkṣur) substance from the insubstantial body with its impure sense fields, … " (sīraṇ jīghṛkṣur aśubhāyatanād asīnāt)  

Again, here below, "… materials are a virulent poison … for their invocations are changed into poison, (dravyavisādhikāṃ viṣaṃ hi pratikurvvanti) …". The implication is that mundane material donations are changed into non-poisonous substance. And finally, "… the residences constructed around the monastery are just like manifested deity heavens made constantly present … by continuous rituals." The point is that there is a transmutation or a transubstantiation of gross, worldly matter into divine substance by means of devotional meditation.

**Buddhists and Non-Buddhists**

The 1189 Prasat Tor inscription attributed to Bhūpendra III was sponsored by a prominent Brahmanical family with strong religious sensibilities well before and during Jayavarman VII’s reign.

---

39 Coedès I, 239, v. XXXVI. See full text below.
The inscription is clearly Hindu. It describes Jayavarman VII as an embodiment of Śiva, not of a Buddha or of a bodhisattva, and it invokes Hindu deities, myths and doctrines. However, it also includes reference to Buddhist monasteries. The co-existence and overlapping of architecture, iconography, ritual, and language most probably reflected a degree of accommodation, cross fertilization, and even competition. However, it appears that at Angkor there was not a fully developed Hindu-Buddhist syncretism. Each religion maintained its separate identity.

Hindu and Buddhist religions were separate Khmer institutions in medieval Angkor. Rituals and practices were adopted and re-interpreted in historical sequences or in different regions. Coedès has remarked on this point, of a typical passage in the ca. 1186 Ta Prohm inscription (but relevant to the entire religious environment) that “... le caractère bouddhique n’exclut pas certaines expressions trahissant un tréfonds brahmanique ...” The inconsistencies between Khmer Hinduism and Buddhism were the results of redefinitions and revaluations of their respective rituals. While orthodox doctrines of both religions were applied to heterodox rituals the faithful were likely clear about their religious affiliations.

Buddhism and Hinduism co-existed in this environment, and to a certain extent shared ritual mechanics and ritual spaces. There is also much evidence of religious conflict: for example, in the post-Jayavarman VII period, when all depictions and statues of the Buddha were systematically and very nearly entirely destroyed or chipped away from major Angkor temples, including the Bayon, Preah Khan, Banteay Kdei, Ta Som, Ta Prohm and others.

---

45 See for example Coedès and Senart quoted in George Coedès, Inscriptions VI, 195–196.
47 See the description of the process of redefinition of icons and attendant rituals across religious, political, ethnic, and historical boundaries in Davis, Lives of Indian Images, 6–26. See Coedès, “La Stèle de Ta-Prohm,” 44–86, where Buddhist divinities (XVIII–XXVII), rituals, and doctrines appear alongside Brahmanical, but in a definite Buddhist context. See the even more emphatic inscription at Preah Khan in George Coedès, Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient XLI (1942): 255 ff., which includes similar Buddhist dedications, information about events with the Cham, much Hindu language, myth, and ritual, and information about the construction of Preah Khan temple. Also in R.C. Majumdar, Inscriptions of Kambuja (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1953), 475–492.
Many twelfth- to thirteenth-century monuments at Angkor were constructed as either Hindu or Buddhist, but over time several alternated between both religions.\footnote{The structures that house the obvious Buddhist icons at Preah Khan, Ta Prohm, Bayon, Angkor Thom, Banteay Chmar and elsewhere have basic architectural configurations nearly indistinguishable from}
At Ta Prohm, the temple dedicated to Jayavarman VII’s mother, the king inscribed his recognition of Buddhism as the dominant religion:

17.

śākyenduśānasudhājanitmatṛptir
bhikṣudvārthiṇaśātkṛtabhūtisārah
sārān jighrksur asubhāyatanād asānīt
kāyād ajasrajināpādakṛṭānātir yah

“His self-contentment comes from the moon of the Śākyas and the nectar of the teachings, He extends his respected (sātkṛt) influence to monks, the twice-born, and worthy persons,
He seeks to know (jighṛkṣur) substance from the insubstantial body with its impure sense fields, [and]
He constantly bows in homage to the Conqueror.”

Still, Buddhism and Brahmanism co-existed in this environment, and to a certain extent shared ritual mechanics. Even at times of powerful political sponsorship of one religion over the other, both persisted.

**Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and their Friends**

The Buddha, stūpas and other Buddhist imagery are common, and Jayavarman VII was clearly influenced by the iconography and symbolism of Mahāyāna Buddhist bodhisattvas, especially a triad known elsewhere in Asia that included various combinations of three; Lokeśvara (Avalokiteśvara), Vajrapāṇi, Mañjuśrī, Śākyamuni, and/or the goddess Prajñāpāramitā.

---


49 Coedes 1906: 52, v. XVII.

The invocation and rituals surrounding these deities were carried out as described above, and their specific attributes worked to generate different Buddhist qualities. The main principles embodied by those mentioned here are compassion and wisdom, which together yield enlightenment. Accordingly, Jayavarman VII dedicated Ta Prohm (1186) to his mother as Prajñāpāramitā, and Preah Khan (1191) to his father as Lokeśvara. Lokeśvara appears very frequently at Buddhist Angkor. In her Phimānakas inscription (ca. 1194–1200), Indrādevī, his second wife, opens her long poem with praise to the Buddha, dharma, saṅgha, and Lokeśvara, who promote the good of the world (lokeśvaro lokaḥtiṇālomo), as Jayavarman VII himself strives to further the ends of the world (lokārthaviddhānādīpta ...).

---


52 Coedès II: 164, v. VII.
There are extensive and dominant bas-reliefs of Lokeśvara at Banteay Chmar that remain to the present day and there is explicit mention at Prasat Chrung of the "compassionate one" (the epithet of Avalokiteśvara), who on the support of the Buddha-fields, solidifies the dharma.\textsuperscript{53}

Again, from Vat Sithor, in the tenth century:

\textsuperscript{53} See mahākāruṇiko yas tu ... pratiṣṭho vuddhabhūdharāḥ; in Coedès IV p. 232, I, tr. 235: "ce grand compatissant ... se tenant ferme sur la règle ayant pour support la terre des Buddha, son dharma (obtint) la fermeté ... comme ... les montagnes."
44.

tatsthēṇe sthāpitā sthityai sarvavadvāpañśabhāsvataḥ
prajñāpāramitā tārī janaṇī yena tāyinām

“To maintain the light of the lineage of omniscient ones he built there a Prajñāpāramitā Tāra, who protects beings.”

45.

Śrīsatyavarmanmaṇā bājrilokesārcaḥ daśādhikāḥ
sthāpītaḥ prīg girau bhagnāsanā yo tiṣṭhipat punah

“The Lord Satyavarman rebuilt statues of Vajrapāṇi, Avalokiteśvara, and ten others on a mountain where their foundations had collapsed.”

These two verses show the veneration, active construction and reconstruction of central deities in the Buddhist pantheon. It is not surprising then that Harris wrote that “[a] preoccupation with Mahayanist pantheons, then, is a distinct feature of this period.”

There is also a presence of Hevajra and other tantric deities at Angkor. These have been the subject of much speculation, and art historians in particular have

---

54 Coedès VI, p. 199, XLIV–XLV.
done much to locate these deities in Angkor’s religious world. There continue to be many different hypotheses, but none, as far as I can tell, present an explanation of the extent of tantric practice. Perhaps these deities were understood much as bodhisattvas mentioned above, powerful and wise deities to be invoked for merit, material benefit, and (for some) to be internalized as components of consciousness.

McGovern, Crosby, and others have shown the range of esoteric practices that depart from canonical models in later Thai and Cambodian Buddhism; versions of such practices were very likely known at Angkor in years previous. These, however, seem to be more consistent with the kinds of rituals described above, rather than the fully developed transgressive tantra found in India. See for example at Vat Sithor:

\[\text{vih\text{\v{y}am gu\text{\'a}h\text{\v{y}a\'h} ca s\text{\'a}d\text{\d{o}}}h\text{\'a\'m sth\text{\'a}\text{\'i}p\text{\'a}yi\text{\'t}v\text{\i} ca\text{\'a}\text{\'i}ra ya\'h} \]

\[\text{pi\text{\'i}j\text{\'i}r\text{\'h}\text{\'a}n t\text{\'a}\text{\'a}ya s\text{\'a}m\text{\'a}gh\text{\'a}\text{\d{o}}\text{\'i}t\text{\'h}e\text{\s{c}}ca pr\text{\'a}h\text{\'a\'s}r\text{\'a}\text{\'m}\text{\'a}n} \]

“He set up the true dharma, exoteric and esoteric, and then he made places (\text{\d{a}\text{\s{s}r}a\text{\d{a}\text{\s{m}}}}) of worship for the ordained community and lay practitioners.”

The role and practice of tantra at Angkor remains unclear and is another of the many areas for detailed research.

**Monasticism**

Religious specialists, monks, and tantric practitioners alike often worked in service of political authorities. Monasteries...

... interact[ed] with warlords and princes, the military generals and their emerging tribal leaders. [They] arose wherever esoteric Buddhism was practiced. [They were] the domain of monks, who wrote and preached in a hermeneutical method that emphasized the development and integration of

---


57 Coedès VI, p. 199, XLII.
esoteric ideas and models into institutional requirements…. Laymen from disparate backgrounds became members of a culture unified by monastic rule, ritual, cosmology, and doctrine.\textsuperscript{58}

Archeological data for monasticism from medieval Angkor, even from the reign of Jayavarman VII, is minimal. Compared to the more than one hundred remaining temples, there is little evidence of large-scale monasteries.\textsuperscript{59} This lack of archeological evidence may, however, be a function of the choice of perishable building materials for monastic and other complexes. The excavation of what is evidently a small monastery in the NW quadrant of Preah Khan is an exception.

However, the presence of educated monks in Angkor is signaled by the mention of monastic activity in inscriptions. This, and the actual level of literacy found in inscriptions, supports the hypothesis that monastic experts were present as authorities, teachers, doctors and medical experts in the more than one hundred medical clinics. These matters were the provenance of Buddhist monks. Further archeological excavations at Preah Khan and elsewhere may reveal evidence of wooden monastic dwellings, which are noted in Zhou Daguan’s 1296–1297 CE account.\textsuperscript{60}

There are explicit references to monastic activity in inscriptions, even if not yet fully corroborated by archeological data. From the reign of Jayavarman V (968–1001), at Vat Sithor, there is mention (see above) of the establishment of monasteries for esoteric and exoteric groups, and separate residences for ordained and lay persons. The Vat Sithor inscription also contains a long list of rules for monasteries.

\textsuperscript{58} Davidson, \textit{Indian Esoteric Buddhism}, 2002, 114.


\textsuperscript{60} Chou Ta-Kuan (tr. Paul Pelliot). \textit{The Customs of Cambodia}. 3rd Edition. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1993: 11–12. Zhou mentions here that there were no nuns, which contradicts inscriptive evidence. Zhou however also mentions that he was unable to investigate any of these matters in detail.
58.

\[ \text{vihāraṃ kārayitvā yas triṣu ratneṣu kalpayan} \]
\[ \text{pareṣāṃ hitasiddhyarthaṃ sa mahāpuṇyam āpnyāt} \]

“One who constructs a monastery for the Three Jewels, and for the sake of accomplishing goodness for others, obtains great merit.”

59.

\[ \text{tribhūgas sarvvasaṃbhogo ratnārājkalpitaḥ} \]
\[ \text{sthāpatiṣyaḥ praktvena mā hiṃśas syāt paraparam} \]

“All of the donations in three parts must be allotted to the Three Jewels, set up separately without mixing with each other.”

60.

\[ \text{na jñapti ced vihāraṃ bhikṣubhir vvidhivat kṛta} \]
\[ \text{avihāra iti jñeyaḥ kośṭhāgṛas sa eva tu} \]

“If it is not designated as a monastery by the monks' rules, it will be known as a non-monastic place, and just a storehouse.”

61.

\[ \text{jīvīkārthe kṛtas so ya[m] na parārthe na śāntaye} \]
\[ \text{vrahmapuṇyam na tatrāsti yena sarvajñatā[m] vrajet} \]

“A place for this life that is not for anything else, not for tranquility, has no divine merit (brahmapuṇya) that leads one to omniscience.”

62.

\[ \text{vihāraṃ yadā jñaptis śādhunā vidhīnā kṛtā} \]
\[ \text{tataḥ puṇyam ivākāśāṃ sarvatra gatam akṣayam} \]

“When a place is designated as a monastery according to the good rule, its merit spreads everywhere, indestructible, like space.”
Thus too, those wretches who destroy this kind of merit experience unending misery in dreadful hell.

The community’s materials are a virulent poison for householders who do not donate, for their invocations are changed into poison, but not for those of the community.

An intelligent person with devotion in his mind, who acts according to the words of the omniscient one, who builds a monastery according to the rules, will live for a long time.

Those with good qualities, who are ethical, intelligent, the best among their peers, wish to make merit for a variety of good causes.

---

61. Coedès VI, p. 200, LVIII–LXVII.
“Obligatory rituals at dawn and so on taught by the Sage are to be performed by the entire community, especially the ritual [master] (yījaka).”

82.

\[
tasmātyaṭṭīnyakartavyavo vihārastho vicakṣaṇah
dsaddharmmaṇaṁ parighṛṇāti sarvada lekhanādinā
\]

“Therefore, a wise monastery resident has abandoned other behavior, always following the true dharma, writing, and so on.”

83.

\[
samyagīcārībhūṣeṇa vihārādhikrtādīnā
guravo bhīṣagātāṁ sarvve satkartaṃvāyā yathāvalam⁶²
\]

“Teachers endowed with perfect conduct, with the monastery rules and so on, go out to meet all of the worthy, as they come forward (yathāvalam).”

Further, there is more evidence of royal sponsorship of monasteries in the twelfth century. In her inscription at Phimānakas, Jayavarman VII’s second wife, Indrādevī, a devout and well educated Buddhist, sponsored the construction of numerous statues around the kingdom, took in orphaned girls, sponsored their ordination and sustenance as nuns, and was in general known for her ethical behavior. She was a teacher in three named Buddhist nunneries (jinīlāye). These typical Buddhist merit-making activities are proof that there were monastic institutions at Angkor, including those for women.⁶³

The 1189 Prasat Tor inscription attributed to Bhūpendra III⁶⁴ includes reference to Buddhist monasteries, which in this strong Brahmanical context is good evidence of actual monastic presence.⁶⁵

---

⁶² Coedès VI, p. 201, LXXXI–LXXXIII. Coedès edits bhīṣagātāṁ to bhīṣudgātāṁ.
⁶³ Coedès II, pp. 171, LXXX–LXX, tr. 178. The vocabulary is typical of Buddhist monastic ordination, prīvīrjayaat ... sasmasam.pidita ... LXXX, jinīlāye, etc., XCIII, XCIX, p. 172.
⁶⁴ Coedès I: 227, 249 n. 2, 229.
“Because of the attendants’ constant and repeated invocations the residences constructed around the monastery are just like manifested deity heavens made constantly present (ciraṃ sthitaye) by spirits pleased with unbroken, continuous rituals (makha)."

**Jātaka Stories**

The ancient Buddhist Jātaka stories tell stories of the Buddha’s past and future lives as a human or animal. He may be a king, an ascetic, a god, an elephant, or other animal. In all cases the story carries a Buddhist teaching from the Buddhist tradition. The literary and pedagogical traditions are usually associated with relatively early Buddhist roots, for example in Thailand, Śrī Lanka, and India. The Jātakas are however known and taught in later Buddhist environments, for example, in Pagan, Myanmar, in Tibet, and in Angkor.

The reliefs and epigraphs at Angkor include episodes from Jātaka stories, intended to convey Buddhist messages. For example, the bas-relief from Angkor Wat on display at the Phnom Penh National Museum represents four episodes from the Vessantarajātaka, even though Angkor Wat was a known Vaiṣṇavite temple in this period. The panels depict episodes from different non-sequential chapters, but the Buddhist message of generosity is clear.

Temple steles and mural episodes from Jātakas were used to tell Buddhist stories. “Everything in these pictures means something; nothing is merely decorative.”

---

merely ornamental.” Queen Indradevi sponsored performances of *Jātaka* stories, likely for their instructive qualities. *Jātaka* stories were used as pedagogical devices; they were not mere decoration.

This pedagogical motive may well have been intended in the carved steles of a number of *Jātaka*-related murals at Jayavarman VII’s Bayon. The *Jātakas* in the outer ambulatory include several episodes from the *Mahāpiṇḍa*, the last ten of the canonical collections, said to exemplify key Buddhist virtues. Dagens points out that the Bayon *Jātakas* also include episodes from other *Jātakas* and sometimes highlight non-*Jātaka* figures like Lokeśvara and Prajñāpāramitā. The Bayon *Jātakas* include episodes from the *Sīmājātaka*, representing loving kindness, from the *Vessantarajātaka*, representing generosity, and from the *Vidhurapāṇḍitajātaka*, representing honesty. Thus, in addition to the powerful religious and social messages of the entire complex the Bayon carvings taught viewers compassion, kindness, and generosity, basic Buddhist principles.

**Concluding Remarks**

Khmer religion does not fit any convenient category. It had beliefs and practices shared with Mahāyāna Buddhism built on Buddhist monastic foundations, and with tantric elements, all synthesized or assimilated into inherited local Khmer religious sensibilities. Brahmanical religions, “Hinduisms,” were widely represented and supported at different times and places in Khmer history, not always clearly divided from their Buddhist neighbors. In the end, Khmer religions are perhaps best understood in a category of their own, a special type of Khmer synthesis. This eclecticism, however, did not at all detract from the authenticity of Khmer Buddhism, or Brahmanism, or local religions: much as in other cultures, it instead represents the diversity of the medieval

---


69 See the reference to the *Jātaka, svanarttakir jātakasārāntyoiḥ, Coedès II: 170, tr. p. 178, "representations tirées des Jātakas"; for other mention of the Jātakas, see Coedès III: 198.


Asian religious world. What is important is that the Khmer religious traditions were fully authentic in all of their manifestations, with periods of shifting political and social emphasis and support. In the case of this project, the remarkable proliferation of Buddhist monuments and inscriptions in the reign of Jayavarman VII, displays a full commitment to Buddhism, but in a larger historical and ethnographic context both informed and tolerated by other Indian and local Khmer traditions.

The story of Jayavarman VII’s life includes the depth of his Buddhist religious sentiments and at the same time his skill as a military tactician and political leader. These different roles worked with his religious sensibilities to his advantage; there was no contradiction between his apocalyptic Mahāyāna and likely tantric apotheosis and his vision of imperial rule. Cambodian and regional politics of the day were locally segmented under individual rulers who engaged in shifting alliances with their neighbors. Jayavarman VII was thus able to form a critical mass of alliances with his neighbors, Khmer and Cham, to his advantage. The governance of medieval Southeast Asia, and especially the Khmer, was decentralized. Jayavarman VII’s astute political sensibilities, fueled by his Buddhist religious vision and authenticated by Indian-derived expertise enabled his construction of a Khmer empire.
Competing Interests
The author has no competing interests to declare.

References


