

FROM VĀLMĪKI TO THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM:
THE EXAMPLE OF THE KHMER CLASSICAL RĀMAKERTI

I. Introduction

In the Khmer country *Rāmāyaṇa* bears only one name, *Rāmakerti*, nowadays pronounced /riamkee/, and meaning “The fame or glory of Rāma”. This unique name covers all forms of expressions (fine arts, literature and performance) (Pou, 1983b), and is known in different geographical areas which now belong to different countries (Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam). *Rāmakerti* (Rk.) has been investigated and studied by a few authors over half a century, with different interests and approaches. It ranges amongst the scores of minor *Rāmāyaṇa*-s ever produced in India and elsewhere, when compared with the phenomenal great works composed by Vālmīki, Tulsīdās, Bhaṭṭi and Kampan. In addition, it belongs to the S.E. Asian group of *Rāmāyaṇa*-s whereby it compares well in many respects (spiritual, ethical and literary) with the Indonesian *Kakawin*. And it is not outrageous, incidentally, to call them both the “leading *Rāmāyaṇa*-s” in S.E. Asia. Nevertheless it has always been overshadowed by its namesake, the Siamese *Rāmakien*¹, for several reasons, the two main of which I must briefly recall: a) Siamese *Rāmakien* enjoys a more privileged political position on account of royal authorship, hence

1. *Ramakien* represents the Sm. phonetic form of Khm. *Rāmakerti*, and ultimately Skt. *Rāmakīrti* (cf. *inf.*, II, 2).

more glamour; b) it is more accessible because it has been investigated by English-speaking authors, whilst most research works on *Rāmakerti* have been carried out in French and therefore more or less confined to the restricted French readership.

Rāmāyaṇa has been known to the Khmer since the sixth century, together with *Mahābhārata* and the *Pūrāṇa*, as evidenced by Cambodia's epigraphy². It has thus played a spiritual role in the ancient Khmer community. In addition, it greatly fostered artistic creation since the dawn of Cambodia's history, too, as shown on Pre-Angkorian reliefs. Now, in actual facts, the iconography of Khmer monuments has been studied by piecemeal, at random, while producing a few excellent monographic analysis. This lack of comprehensive survey is most unfortunate as it prevents us from reconstructing a corpus of iconographic materials which we badly need to complement the information we have been able to cull from epigraphy. This is, incidentally, another reason why *Rāmāyaṇa* in ancient Cambodia has not deserved much attention from scholars.

My paper deals with the oldest Khmer version of Rk. which I hereby call "classical", and to which I also gave the number "I" (Pou, 1977b:10). Dated 16th-17th century, it was thus born some ten centuries after the introduction of Vālmīki's epic in the country. When I published it (Pou, 1977-79, 3 vol.) after establishing the text, I put a claim that it had its roots in Vālmīki whilst it is clad with Khmer Theravādin philosophy. There was some casual objection to it which turned quite fragile because the contenders never explored Rk. thoroughly. Today I still claim that classical *Rāmakerti* partakes of both the Indian great epic and the Theravāda's spirit. To this effect, I now propose:

- a) to investigate the factors of evolution of Vālmīki's epic in ancient Cambodia,
- b) to find out how this evolution is reflected in *Rāmakerti* I.

2. See inscription K. 359, so often quoted by scholars, in BARTH, *Inscriptions sanscrites du Cambodge*, 1885: 28-31.

II. Factors of evolution of the ancient Indian epic

This is truly a tremendous subject of research. While it is nowadays quite possible to carry it out without much difficulty, it should not be dealt with lightly and would require a volume of dissertation rather than a few pages of a conference-paper. I shall thus concentrate on the most relevant cultural factors. I have also drawn a historic chart (Fig.1) to the effect of helping those who are not very familiar with S.E. Asian cultures, let alone the Khmer one.

The most striking feature thereof as emerging from the chart is definitely the co-existence of different forms of beliefs and practices throughout history. Since this has proved so far running with harmony, it has been termed "syncretic" by scholars. In the process, the system has undergone many alterations and also remarkable adjustments. There has been a constant interaction of all the elements within the whole structure. Consequently, Vālmiki's epic, known since the 6th century A.D. was bound to be remodelled by various spiritual trends and in the hands of the indigenous élite, as will be shown in three cogent cases included in mythology and literature.

1. Regarding the ancient Khmer pantheon, it was teeming with Indian gods and deities – presumably coeval with as many Khmer animistic entities³. The chief brahmanic gods were not, as one might expect, Brahmā and Indra, but rather Śiva and Viṣṇu. Let us recall briefly that they sometimes shared the same cult, since the dawn of history, under the figure of Hari-Hara.

1.1. The most popular god was undoubtedly Śiva. Omnipresent in time and space, he was worshipped under various names and forms. Khmer texts, which reflect the collectivity's mind more accurately than the "aristocratic" Sanskrit ones, contain more than a hundred names of the god wherein Śiva was rarely mentioned. The great majority of them instead consisted of compound-names ending with *-īśvara* (Pou, 1987-88: 344-45). The god was thus "the Lord or Ruler" *par excellence*, whether he was held "terrifying" (*rudra*, ...) or

3. On this score, see mainly my paper (1986) "Sarasvatī dans la culture khmère", BEI 4: 321-39.

“auspicious” (*śiva, śaṅkara, bhadra, śambhu, ...*). He was “the lord of *yogī-s*” (*yogīśvara*), and as such holder of magic might. This trait was reinforced during Angkor along with the success of *āgama*- texts of South Indian origin. He was also worshipped as “the dancing lord” (*nāṭarāja*), ruling over the performing arts. And most of all he was worshipped in his *liṅga* everywhere. If Khmer villages were owned, so to speak, and protected by animistic guardian-spirits, the kingdom together with the throne were placed under the patronage of Śiva’s *liṅga*. Called in Khmer “the lord/patron of the king/kingdom” (*kamrateñ jagat ta rāja/rājya*), the *liṅga* was held as the national palladium, put up in the city (*nagara*), and was offered a special divine service performed by families of learned Brahmans well versed in Tantric texts. Several main epigraphic texts⁴ bear witness to this paramount function of the *liṅga* and its cult which presumably lasted till the end of Angkor, with only a short mahāyānic interlude at the turn of the 12th century.

1.2. Viṣṇu was known to, and worshipped by, the Khmer under different names, too, preferably *Nārāyaṇa*, and *Hari*, and was sometimes associated with Śiva in a joint cult (*sup.*,1). He was alluded to or addressed as “the bearer of the disc” (*cakrī*) or the god “with lotus-eyes” (*puṣkarākṣa*), and in this respect he incarnated beauty and charm. He shared supremacy with Śiva in a particular way. Indeed, while Śiva ruled over the Universe (*sup.*), Viṣṇu was the ruler of the mundane world, the protector of the kingdom. Consequently, the Khmer king as a human ruler reflected his image in many respects. For instance, he was adorned with the beauty and grace of Viṣṇu and endowed with Rāma’s military ability.

An even more prevalent aspect of the god should be noted, in connection with the world-creation. The rich Angkorian iconography – mostly in reliefs – depicts him often as sleeping in the ocean and putting forth from his navel a lotus bearing Brahmā. The most awe-

4. The most famous of them is the Sdok Kak Thom inscription, K. 235. It has been studied by many scholars in different ways. The best reference, however, remains the joint paper G. COEDÈS et P. DUPONT (1946), “Les stèles ...”, BEFEO 43: 56-154.

inspiring illustration however, is a huge bronze statue of the god (ca. 4m long originally) lying at the centre of West Baray Lake, itself measuring 8km x 2km, which represented the ocean⁵. The statue, of the Baphuon style, dated back to the 11th century and is ascribed to king Udayādityavarman II. Only the torso of it (1,4m long) was preserved from later loot and destruction (Fig.2); it is kept and displayed nowadays at the National Museum, Phnompenh. On the face of it, Brahmā was not the main protagonist in this cosmogonic myth. In people's mind, Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa was the "world-creator". The myth went on to relate that, when the young world was being disturbed by the mischievous carryings-on of demons, Nārāy was invited by *dharmik* people, i.e. *ṛṣi*-s, to come and rid it of all evil-doers, hence a second aspect of Nārāy, that of a "saviour", which is of a great consequence in the entire Khmer culture. Indeed, this second myth must have enjoyed the favour of ancient Khmer people. For, after Angkor, there appeared in literature a set of cosmogonic texts on the above mentioned theme, entitled *Traitāyug* or *Traibed-Traitāyug*⁶. Thus, entreated by the *ṛṣi*-s to come and submit the demons, god Nārāy graciously accepted to leave the ocean and be re-born in the womb of the chief queen of Dasarath of Ayodhyā under the name of Rām. At this juncture we get an even clearer image of Rām: a human who, on account of his divine descent, stood as a "deliverer" of the humans.

1.3. Besides Brahmanism proper, we must stress upon the no less important role played by mahāyānic Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the ancient Khmer community. On this score, it is worth recalling first a few important facts previously highlighted by two indologists: a) the affinity between Śaivism and Buddhism in ancient Cambodia (Filliozat, 1981); b) the success of Lokeśvara/Avalokiteśvara in Cambodia, chiefly in the 10th and 12th centuries (Finot, 1925). This needs no further elaboration. However, I propose to complement it herewith in stressing upon two more points of evidence culled from

5. The Chinese envoy Tcheou ta-Kouan visiting Cambodia at the end of the 13th c., mentioned it as "un Buddha couché en bronze, dont le nombril laisse continuellement couler de l'eau". See P. PELLIOU, *Mémoires sur les coutumes ...*, ed. Coedès et Demiéville, 1951: 12.

6. The first survey of Mss. has been carried out by S. POU (1989), "Portrait of Rāma in Cambodian (Khmer) Tradition".

both epigraphy and iconography. First, the ancient Khmer favoured the concept of salvation when viewing either the Buddha or the Bodhisattva. The best illustration I can think thereof is the impressive iconographic group depicting *Balāha*-horse, alias *Lokeśvara* (Fig.3) who compassionately rescued a group of humans and saved them from death in carrying them with him over the sea to the shore⁷. This huge statue (4m long x 2m high) was found around the now dried-up lake Veal Reachadak, formerly called *Jayataṭāka*, which was supposed to represent Anavatapta-Lake of the olden myth. This statue was a creation of the devout mahāyānic king Jayavarma VII; the horse-Bodhisattva is now standing in front of the Neak Pean temple and facing it as it did the shore of salvation. Secondly and in the same vein, one should call upon epigraphy to highlight the great humanitarian concern of the same king who had several hospitals and rest-houses built in different parts of the country in order to alleviate the pains and sufferings of his subjects. The epigraphy specifies that the king advantaged the cult of the Buddha *Bhaiṣajyaguru* (*vaidurya-prabhārājā*), lit. "the *guru* administering medicine", or the healing Buddha "who took care of all the suffering cratures".

The success of Mahāyāna under this reign seemed to entail a growing Tantric tendency as illustrated by the cult of *Hevajra* (Fig.4), a deity who at times was assimilated with Śiva, the former being consorted with *yoginī*-s and the latter being the lord of the *yogī*-s⁸. This assimilation reinforced the affinity between the two creeds and consequently fostered the part of magic therein, at least amongst popular practice. We could even further assume, fairly safely, that this swollen tantric trend fitted well into the everlasting magic of animism, and eventually increased the dimension and the potentiality of magic practice in the life of ancient Khmer.

1.4. At the turn of the 13th century there emerged a new form of buddhism, i.e. *Theravāda* which took over the country without destroying pre-existing culture and creeds, and which has ruled over it

7. See for instance V. GOLOUBEV (1927), "Le cheval Balāha", BEFEO 27: 223-37; B.-P. GROSLIER (1968), *Angkor ...*: 57; M. GITEAU (1976), *Angkor ...*: 146-7; ANG CH. (1992), "Apports indiens ...".

8. The latest iconographic study has been presented in a conference by W. LOBO, "Hevajra in Khmer Iconography" (forthcoming).

up to now. Theravāda introduced to Khmer buddhism a new dimension which was itself brought about by the concept of the historicity and the oneness of the Buddha Gautama. There was a shift from mahāyānic devotion toward a profound and rational worship of the Buddha. Indeed, he was now praised as “the Teacher” (*sāstā*), praised for the ethic lesson in his “teaching” (*sāsanā*), for the “fiery power” (*tejaḥ*) of his extreme compassion and his “perfection” (*pāramī*) which had led him to perform miracles at times. This ethic note in Theravāda has ever since pervaded all forms of creativity in Cambodia, hence an austere mood prevalent in art and literature in modern times. One illustration of it is the century-long success of the literary genre *Cpāp*’ consisting of gnomic didactic poems extolling endlessly the peerless *dharma* of the Buddha which was regarded as the fountain of ethic standards in human existence⁹.

2. When I earlier alluded to Sanskrit texts in ancient Cambodia as being “aristocratic” (*sup.*, 1.1) I gave the term a very broad sense (actual and rhetoric). Indeed, Sanskrit texts were connected with the upper class of society, chiefly the kings themselves. Moreover they belong to the category of *belles-lettres*, since they consist of poems of the *kāvya*-type which, incidentally, are held by all indologists as the most beautiful *kāvya*-s ever produced in Sanskrit literature.

They relate the virtues of royalty, naturally, and consequently their many glorious achievements, in politics as in religion, hence the name *praśasti* aptly applied to them by scholars.

Praśasti-texts are admittedly biased in nature; they also tend to show monotony and to contain many commonplace figures (in thought and expression). But on the other hand they are associated with local people and events, therefore they would to some extent reflect reality, mainly in the intellectual and spiritual field.

In Cambodia’s *praśasti*, the Khmer king is praised for his political supremacy over lesser rulers and his strict adherence to *dharma*. He “holds” and “upholds” it, i.e.: a) he is the chief guarantor for law and order, b) he is endowed with religious and moral virtues.

9. See S. Pou (1981), “La littérature didactique ...”, JA 269: 453-66; (1988) *Guirlande de Cpāp*’, mainly the Introduction in I: 20.

Moreover, within the brahmanic system of education, this *dharma* belongs to *trivarga* meaning “the triple objective” in life pursued by individuals, mostly the members of the upper class, and consisting of: a) *dharma* itself, or “moral and intellectual virtues”, b) *artha*, “advantage and success in society” and c) *kāma*, “desire (in both physical and spiritual sense)”. In other words *trivarga* represents the three facets of the king’s mind and behaviour¹⁰.

The king is further likened to many glorious and sacred entities whom he overrides sometimes. There are for instance the moon, the main gods and heroes in the Indian culture, namely the handsome god Viṣṇu and the illustrious Rāma, prince and king of Ayodhyā.

In any case, the king, or his kin, must perform all their duties (in politics and religion) with great care and concern in order to avoid any blemish and blame, for he must aim finally at protecting his name and his lineage, and at building up his “fame”, or *kīrti* (Pou, 1982, 1983b). This word occurs plentifully in Sanskrit *kāvya*-s and is tantamount to a leitmotiv. It is also dealt with in a flourishing manner and appears as the back-bone of the whole genre.

Some time ago I availed from these thought-provoking observations to posit that the concept of *kīrti* could be well cultivated by writers in both their actual and fictional creations. In epigraphy have we not come across many historic names ending with *-kīrti*, such as *Viṣṇukīrti* or *Śaṅkarakīrti*? I went on postulating that any story of Rāma told or written by Khmer writers could have well been given the name **Rāmakīrti* or “the Glory/Fame of Rāma”. And so far there are no other facts to rule it out.

On the contrary my postulate could be justified by the later literature in Middle Khmer – naturally if we care to scrutinize it. Mediaeval writers were basically buddhist thinkers or poets. They held firmly to the *saddhā* or buddhist “faith” which they never failed to praise in a flourishing and exalted fashion. They also held keenly to two tenets, *dharma* and *kerti* (<Skt. *kīrti*), the second one being, as just seen, part of the Angkorian legacy. They included them both in all their writings and in the educational system. Hence the name

10. On this score, see S. Pou (1983a), “*Dharma* and *trivarga* ...”, *Ṛtam*, 11-15: 289-97.

Rāmakerti coined by writers and given to all versions of Rām's story, then and ever after in Cambodia.

III. *The three facets of Rāmakerti I*

The above lengthy discourse was meant to introduce *Rāmakerti I*, so-called "classical", a Khmer literary monument born in the 16th century of Theravādin Cambodia. Sanskrit had then ceased to be used and was superseded by Pāli as a sacred language, while profane works were composed in Middle Khmer¹¹. The text of Rk.I that I have established – from three sources – was conceived as a libretto for live theatre (Pou, 1977a and b). Nevertheless, it is essentially an epic poem of 5.034 strophes composed by a number of outstanding but unfortunately anonymous poets. Ever since I have unearthed more Mss. of it (Pou, 1989) which brought the total to seven. All these Mss. present an amazing similarity in the content as in the language. This points out to the authenticity of the text and its tremendous popularity in olden times. In the entire Khmer literature, Rk.I ranks first on account of its spiritual and aesthetic qualities, thus initially of the genius of its authors. Indeed, these men, spiritually devoted to the teaching of the Lord Buddha, were not only great poets but also men of knowledge, very learned, in the sense that they were tradition-conscious. They possessed the age-old Indian heritage and were quite anxious to keep it on and protect it, hence the epithet of *kavipaṇḍit* normally given to them. In this respect, Vālmīki had survived in their memory, at least in the subconscious part of it, as a strong and fertile base where they sowed the best seed found in the Indo-Khmer heritage in order to create a new epic. The subject is obviously vast and awesome, on which I have already produced several papers. Today, in the new light shed by Angkorian culture, I want to take up a few points again for analysis, viz.:

- the setting of Rk.I,
- the intricate process of evolution of Vālmīki's epic,
- some un-Vālmīkian themes in the epic's spirit.

11. See my survey in (1991) "Sanskrit, Pāli and Khmero-Pāli in Cambodia".

1. *Rāmakerti* I contains an unfinished story of Rām; its begins with his adolescence and ends before the conclusion of the great battle of Lañkā. Despite a few rare alien episodes injected into it – which are beyond the scope of the present paper – it follows the pattern of Vālmiki’s narrative. More precisely, it strikes one as a condensed version of the story told by Vālmiki¹². As such, it lacks the luxuriance and the thrilling capacity which is found in later Khmer *Rk.*’s as well as in some other S. E. Asian *Rāmāyaṇa*-s.

1.1. The geographical setting is entirely Indian, i.e. as found in Vālmiki, with most facts kept and given their original names. The sequence of episodes follows roughly Vālmiki’s pattern, too, and so does the entire casting. On the face of it, the authors were quite satisfied with what their Khmer ancestors had kept from the framework of the Indian epic.

As intellectual members of their community, they were more concerned, besides literary achievement, with airing their own views on the characters and some events of the epic, and particularly as we shall see later, during such times when clashes break out between individuals and sometimes hard conflictual situations ensue.

1.2. As regards the universe, it has kept the general Indian image of “The Three Worlds” (*traibhāv*), made of Heaven, Earth and Hell. The terrestrial world belongs to humans, animals and demons – and presumably a host of invisible spirits. Unlike in Vālmiki though, no gods have a share in their existence. More than the Earth, the Heaven in *Rk.I.* appears truly un-Vālmikian (Pou, 1975b:360-1). For it is that of the buddhists made up by the heaven of Indra called *traitriṅs* and that of Brahmā-s or *brahmalok*, with the famous “six-tiered” one or *soḷas*. This much for the concept of the world, as I shall be called on to substantiate it later.

2. As in the preceding, *Rk.*’s protagonists have kept the main traits drawn by Vālmiki, whether they are humans or demons. This first aspect in *Rk.I.*, incidentally, must be strongly stressed upon for all

12. For instance, Khmer authors never mentioned the marriages of Rāma’s brothers as in Vālmiki. Neither have they bothered about lengthy accounts on genealogies.

scholars interested in a S. E. Asian comparative study. If, for instance, I describe *Rk.*'s Laks as a valorous young prince, virtuous, but temperamental, irascible and rebellious at times, and yet entirely submitted to his brother and nearly tame, you can aptly regard him as a replica of Vālmīki's Lakṣmaṇa. In the same vein, if Indrajit is praised for his prowess and moral virtues, this is not an innovation from the Khmer authors¹³. But things are slightly different in the case of Rām in the sense that he has been made to incarnate both a brahmanic hero and the Khmerized bodhisattva.

2.1. In a Middle Khmer inscription of Angkor Vat dated 1702 A. D., which is a typical votive text¹⁴, the author, a high-ranking official, after recalling several meritorious deeds he had accomplished, expressed his wishes – in accordance with a Khmer buddhist practice. Thinking ahead of his future existences, he thus asked to be re-born a human of an extraordinary fortune, chiefly like: a) some bodhisattvas such as Temiy, Mahosadh, Vessantar and the Lord Śrī Āryametrī, b) the learned Nāgasen, c) Rāma:

“Whose power was famous far abroad when he left his heaven to be reborn as Rāmadeb, in order to submit all the demons in Laṅkā”.
(st. 133)

What strikes us first is that Rām stood as a model for educated male members of the community. He was held equal to the most prominent bodhisattvas including the future Śrī Āryametrī who was to come and preach the Law anew in order “to save” (*pros*) all the creatures. But it must be borne in mind that none of those personages were identified with the Buddha, and neither was Rām.

In *Rk.I*, he is a human. As just alluded to, he has kept many virtues known in Vālmīki, to wit uprightness, loyalty, generosity and gentleness, and self-control. There is incidentally a Middle Khmer quaint yet pregnant phrase to qualify him: *metrī sabb ge*, “loving all the creatures”. And these virtues are to merge with those of the Buddha, the most revered by the Khmer, i.e. *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* which make up the celebrated *brahmavihāra*.

13. See more details again in *Études...* (1977b).

14. So-called “IMA 38”, published by S. Pou (1975a), “Inscriptions modernes ...”, BEFEO 62: 293-343.

He is at times named a *bodhisatv*, or else “the bud of a Buddha” (*buddhaṅkur*), and even “the glorious Omniscient” (*braḥ sṛī sārabejñ*). But these terms are not to be taken to their face value, they are in fact rhetorical epithets of an extolling nature. In other words, Rām could be regarded in a sense as the Vālmikian Rāma garbed with some supreme buddhist virtues¹⁵.

2.2. More strikingly, the poets include him also in what is left from the Angkorian culture; they thus mainly make him to partake of the glory of god Viṣṇu and the Angkorian king.

A human prince, he belongs to the Khmer society which is not based on the caste-system, no matter how it has been permeated with Indian civilization. Rām is not the replica of an Indian *kṣatriya*; he is not a warrior in a true sense. He is revered as a *cakravartī*, served by outstanding military chiefs who fight on his behalf and whom he helps to achieve victory through his supernatural power. This can be best illustrated by Rām using his miraculous arrows (*brahmās*, *aggivās*, *vāyuvās* and *ardhacandr*) to remove obstacles and eventually to put his foes out of action.

A ruler, he holds and upholds *dharma*, two attributes which are blended in the Khmer single phrase *drañ' dharm*, thus along the lines of Angkorian culture. But while the Angkorian king observed the *tri-varga* in all his actions, Rām does a kind of **dvi-varga* made up only with *dharma* and *artha*. This new amputated tenet of brahmanic origin (Pou, 1983a) needs strongly be stressed upon, because Theravāda has wiped out of the Khmer mind the concept of *kāma* with all its implications. The result of this banishment resounded terrifically in the Khmer culture. As regards *Rk.I*, from a sheer dramatic point of view, there is an all-pervading constraint, a remarkable lack of pathos which eventually helps achieve serenity even austerity all through.

Holding *dharma* means having a strong sense of “good and bad” (*puṇy* v. *pāp*). The good involves uprightness, veracity, loyalty and obedience to the elders, to which the buddhist ethics adds the above mentioned *brahmavihāra* and the observance of the basic “five *śīla*-s” or *pañcaśīl*.

15. See mainly S. Pou (1975b), “Les traits bouddhiques ...”, BEFEO 62: 355-68. Conversely, demons are given disparaging epithets of the buddhist vocabulary such as *mār*, *micchādiṭṭhi* “those who hold wrong views”, *tiracchān* “beasts”, etc.

A *dharmik* ruler, Rām was responsible for the well-fare then the ethics of all, including the behaviour of demons, and for law and order. Paternal and firm, he makes his monkey subjects behave nicely, dissuading them gently from frolicking and even doing mischiefs. This explains why there are no amorous interludes involving any characters in *Rk.I*, as opposed to occasional lascivious episodes found in the later Khmer versions or some S. E. Asian ones.

Rām is always reluctant to take violent actions. He resorts to do so only after striving to achieve peace through moral argument and persuasion. This is how he proceeds with Bālī and Rāb. With the latter, Aṅgad acts as his official envoy, bearer of a message of goodwill whereby Rāb is requested to release Sītā and in so doing to ward off the risk of a war.

Dharma is not absent in the demon kingdom. Indrajit, Kumbhakār regard the war as *a-dharmik*. They, and also queen Mandodarī, disapprove strongly of the abduction of Sītā, therefore entreat Rāb to release her, but to no avail. They are toughly rebuked by Rāb and told by him to mind their duties. They resign, because their righteousness cannot weigh against their fidelity to the Elder.

3. The climax is reached when serious conflicts arise and compel individuals to weigh alternatives against each other and make a choice.

3.1. Here the poets appear to enjoy their art to the utmost, as this enables them to exercise their ethics. They dwell on such situations, they go into minute detail in their comment and conclude their analysis in a predictable buddhist way. As a rule, they make such conflicts accountable for through *karma* (or the Pāli form *kamm*). It is granted that the notion of *karma* is traceable in Vālmīki (Brockington, 1985: 211; Buck, 1991: 15-16), but it never reached there the strength and the pregnancy it shows in *Rk.I*. Through *karma*, poets emphasize the individual responsibility, to the extent of turning it into a leitmotiv all through the epic. When the mean and evil-minded Kaikesī urges Dasarath to send Rām in exile and appoint Bhirut instead as heir apparent, she acts alone – there is no Mantharā about in the Khmer tradition – on account of the “fruit” (*phal*) of her bad *karma*. When Rām comes across the chief hunter Kukhan in the forest, and also some forest-dwelling hermits, these persons sympathize with his sad

situation, and in their lament they query about possible bad *karma* performed by him in the past. When Bālī is killed by Rām's arrow, this is accounted for by his past mischievous *karma*, and so forth. Let us point out incidentally that this Khmer buddhist rationale would rule out any blame expressed against Rām on this score.

3.2. Khmer Buddhists concentrate further on one aspect of *karma* productiveness, i.e. when it affects harmfully another person than the doer himself. If that person responds to it in an equally harmful manner, he is said to commit *verā* (or the Khmer form *bīer*), a term usually rendered by "hatred" but which practically means "revenge or malevolence". The result thereof is a link between people's *karma*, a true chain which could go on indefinitely and bring about suffering everywhere. The individual is thus exhorted to take the adverse course, i.e. to avoid *verā*, not to tie up (*cañ*) *karma*-s and to exercise instead self-control and forgiveness. This is where the authors' discourse becomes truly homiletic, as exemplified by the case of Kaikesī's bad *karma*. When the news breaks out on Rām's exile, Laks becomes infuriated, then draws his sword, ready, he says, to chastise evil. Thereupon Rām intervenes quickly to contain his anger and very gently points out the danger of *verā*, in itself and as contrary to the teaching of the Buddha and of all wise men. Later, when Bhirut learns about the evil in his mother's thought and behaviour, he takes the same course as Laks to start with. In a beautiful tirade, he analyses and condemns her villainous and shameful action, decides upon punishing her himself. But he suddenly recalls the fearful course of *kam-maverā*. He must, he says, calm down and rule out *verā* from his mind and behaviour, and always remember that a mother's benefaction is unquestionable. Therefore, he must seek another course of action to propitiate all the harm committed by her.

3.3. This highlights the non-finality of *karma*. The individual is quite aware that "he is his own refuge" (*atta hi attano nātho* in P., and *khluon dī biñ khluon* in Khm.). Responsible for himself, he is free to decide, therefore when he faces an emotional or moral conflict, he has freedom of option, and in most cases he chooses his way in accordance with *dharmā*. Sītā, gentle and submissive, stubbornly chooses to follow Rām in exile, according to the voice of *dharmā*. Vibhek chooses to leave his brother for Rām because he deems Rām *a-dharmik*,

Centuries	5.—6.—7.—8.—9.—10.—11.—12.—13.—14.—15.—16.—17.—18.—19.—20.—
History	Pre-Angkorian Cambodia ANGKOR Mediaeval & Modern Cambodia (Middle & Modern Khmer)
Religions & Other Creeds	Animism Brahmanism: many forms Buddhism: Mahāyāna, Hīnayāna, Tantra Animism Official Theravāda Buddhism Various Tantric practices
Art: a) Iconography b) Theatre	Numerous vestiges: not systematically studied yet Indication of a type of theatre: <i>bhāṇi</i> Abundant Iconography Arts & Crafts Theatre: a) <i>lkhon khol</i> b) <i>spaek</i> (shadow)
Epigraphy	Abundant inferential evidence: a) Recitation b) Book offerings c) Onomastics d) Literary themes (cf. inf.)
Literature	No Rāmāyanian text has survived Concept of <i>kīrti</i> “fame, glory” tremendously cultivated in Cambodia’s Sanskrit <i>prasāsti</i> Classical RĀMAKERTI in Middle Khmer Modern Versions (Siamese influence)

Fig. 1



Fig. 2 National Museum
Phnompenh
Reclining Viṣṇu (11th c.)



Fig. 3 Courtesy of Dr. Ch. Ang
Bālaha-horse/Lokeśvara
(Neak Pean group)



Fig. 4 Courtesy of the Museum für Indische Kunst Berlin
Hevajra

and his fidelity to the elders is easily overridden by his attraction to *dharmik* Rām. The other prince-demons are also free to choose the path into which their duties call them. Even Rāb, after the death of his beloved son Indrajit, chooses to carry on the battle, because he deems it right to observe a ruler's *dharma*.

4. I shall now examine some un-Vālmīkian themes in *Rk.I* which can be accounted for by a strong tie with the Angkorian tradition, and to this effect shall bring in three points for analysis.

4.1. Let us recall the mahāyānic concept of salvation as incarnated by either the Buddha or Lokeśvara (*sup.*, II, 1.3). The authors of *Rk.I* in regarding Rām as *buddhaṅkur* extend their rationale in ascribing to him a rescuing and healing role, too. Some usual epithets of his are "the One who leads creatures to the other shore", "out of the domain of *avijjā*", or else "the One who leads all to deliverance". His encounter with the ascetic Bhāradhvād in the forest is the most significant and awesome illustration thereof. It is thus related that:

"On seeing the peerless Bodhisattva, the ascetic's heart leaps up, filled with an ineffable joy,
 "as in the case of a sick man nearing the hour of death,
 "to whom, however, the prince appears as a doctor (*bedy*) who brings and pours over him a remedy to preserve his life" (st. 566-8).

And Rām can perform miracles, great and small, on account of his *pāramī* like the Buddha, to alleviate pains and sufferings in all creatures.

4.2. Twice in the epic some predicaments occur whereby there is doubt about Rām's power, and the princely cause is questioned. For example, when he needs the alliance of the chief monkey Mahājambū known for his awkward and aggressive temperament, he must devise a convincing scheme, and to this effect resume his divine appearance, i.e. as god Nārāy. This cannot be achieved without the divine succour and assent of Ṇsūr, the lord of the gods ruling from the Kailās. When Rām obtains Ṇsūr's agreement, he appears at the window of his pavilion, thereupon:

"King Mahājambū sees the image of the Ten-powered (*dasabal*) Nārāy sitting in state in his pavilion,

“impressive with his four arms bearing the wheel, the mace, the globe and the victorious trident” (st. 3255-6).

This breathtaking flitting dramatic episode entails no less awesome cultural implications. In mediaeval Cambodia, the chief remaining brahmanic gods stand in the background whether in life or on the stage. Here, the prince of Ayodhyā is backed by Nārāy whence he has emanated and drawn his superhuman power. This accounts incidentally for one of his popular epithets, to wit “the One who came from the ocean”. Nārāy, the world creator and saviour, is the lord of the terrestrial world. In the end, however, decisions are left with Śiva-Īsūr, the lord of Kailās ruling over the universe. This partnership of Śiva and Viṣṇu calls up to our mind vividly that of the Śiva-liṅga and the Angkorian king (*sup.*, II, 1.1), meant to ensure success and prosperity to the kingdom.

In addition, in his capacity of the world’s judge and protector, Īsūr exercises mostly his magic power, because he is the supreme magician, *paramagrū* as he has been called ever since. In the same respect, it must be noted that he also identifies himself with a mahāyānic bodhisattva, in particular with Hevajra (*sup.*, II, 1.3).

4.3. The last point to survey, and not the least important, is the concept of *kerti* embedded in the epic (Pou, 1983b), which the poets remind us of as being the purpose of all human actions, and which is to be likened to *kīrti*, a current theme in Angkorian *praśasti-s* (*sup.*, II, 2). Motivated by *dharma*, good people are careful as to avoid making *faux pas* or to debase themselves by easy thinking and easy action-choice. When Bibhek arrives from Lan kā to join the princes’ cause:

“Then the illustrious Nārāy-Rāma seats himself in this victorious pavilion,

“and, a smiling grand lord, he questions forthwith the astrologer Bibhek:

“How now, Demon! You are our enemy.

“Are you making up a scheme in order to exterminate us in battle and destroy the *kerti* of Rām?” (st. 3693-96).

The same Bibhek, now counsellor of Rām, takes keenly care of the renown of his lord. Thus, when Rām proposes to go out and face Trīsīr in battle, Bibhek declares:

“Mylord, a great prince like you must not fight with a son of Rāvaṇa. “Rāma’s *kerti* would be tarnished by such a fight with a demon’s son” (st. 4819-20).

To conclude this survey, I want to point out that *Rāmakerti* I is not merely a libretto for theatre. Beyond this basic dramatic aspect, it overwhelms us by its profound spirituality and its amazing syncretic structure. We must keep in mind that, since the introduction of Vālmiki in ancient Cambodia, many spiritual forces have contributed to process the Indian epic on the Khmer soil. Angkorian Indo-Khmer beliefs and myths (Viṣṇu, Śiva and great figures from mahāyāna), Angkorian literature, the Theravādin Buddha’s teaching and the everlasting indigenous magic, all converged together and merged into the Vālmikian heritage to create a Khmer epic in mediaeval Cambodia: *Rāmakerti* I.

Abbreviations

Khm.	Khmer
P.	Pāli
Rk.	Rāmakerti
Skt.	Sanskrit
Sm.	Siamese

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