

Cambodian people's concept of God and spiritual world of the Angkor monuments

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It is a pure truism to state that Khmer people (as well as many other populations in Asia or elsewhere) has no notion of "God" as it is understood by Christian people, for example. I am attempting here to illustrate a certain notion of "divinity" which is characterized by a more or less high degree of abstraction. The basic and brilliant idea of this was developed by Paul Mus,¹ I have no authorship at all. For some time now I am only trying to test it through Khmer culture.

Let's begin with examples taken among some ethnic minorities, thought to have shared the same animistic system of beliefs with Khmers before the Indianization of Cambodia. The comparison can bring to light the basic representations of "divinity" among Khmer people, before their culture was largely enriched by Indian contribution.

Nowadays the whole culture of different ethnic minorities (Mon-Khmer and Austronesian) living on Eastern Cambodia's North-East High Plateaus, in the mind of Khmer people, is resumed and expressed in a "folk-dance" (invented by the latter) called "kâp' krapî phik srâ", which means "killing buffalo and drinking alcohol".² In spite of the unavoidable condescending nature of such an invented folk-dance,³ buffalo and alcohol are effectively most crucial in their culture, in particular in their ritual. "Killing buffalo and drinking alcohol" is not an expression of a feast, even a ritual feast. The two elements are directly connected with the representation of "god, divinity...".

I. A pure abstract representation of divinity

1. Alcohol: a living substance

It is unimaginable that alcohol could be absent from Pnong society, for example. The whole ritual system intimately linked to their agricultural cycle requires alcohol, used for libation and consumption-communion⁴. Each family needs an average of six jars of alcohol per year. The Pnong, as well as many other ethnic populations in Mondolkiri and Ratanakiri provinces⁵ ignore the use of candle and incense sticks and other cult accessories used by Khmer, especially ignore material – even less anthropomorphic – representation of the divinity they deal with. Alcohol then is an instrument enabling to reach the divinity: it makes possible the presence of the divinity. In some extent this living substance⁶ is the divinity, in the precise moment of libation. This is why the sacrificer, while pouring alcohol on a special object or a particular space, talks to this liquid as to an entity able to understand his saying. In short the smallest rite requires alcohol. In ritual context, one would make a serious mistake not seeing in the alcohol absorption an act of communion with the sacred.

On the same cultural area, in funeral, one is struck by the absolute necessity of breaking down alcohol jar on the grave, once the last drops are used (libation and drinking). Among Pnong people, it is just broken down and abandoned purely and simply, following no special way. A Pnong burials area gives an impression of a total desolation or devastation. One cannot help comparing the broken and abandoned jars with the dead persons in question, condemned not to return back to the village. A much better impression can be felt in Ratanakiri's burials, among Kreung, Jarai, Tumpuon, Brou...: empty jar has its bottom pierced in a more or less important hole, and often carefully buried up to the neck: one would see the buried dead person eternally condemned to stay in the spot.⁷

2. Blood: a higher degree of life's expression, or of god's presence

When a ritual reaches a certain importance, a real "sacrifice", i.e. a bloody sacrifice, has to be made. The animal concerned goes from a chicken, passing through a pig, and culminates with a buffalo. It is true that the final use of the meat is for

consumption. But this consumption is first meant to realize the communion with the divinity or the sacred. More significant, blood which flows out from animal makes the god's presence a reality, the time of the sacrifice. Blood materializes then the divinity. Like alcohol, but in a stronger way, it *is* the divinity. A buffalo sacrifice is not meant to offer any blood or meat to the god. The latter, a purely abstract entity, amorphous anyway, cannot be imagined as cannibal.⁸

It is quite frequent that a buffalo sacrifice is made for a funeral, and that the buffalo's horns are ostensibly suspended on the front roof of the grave. Kreung's tombs, by their shape, sometime recall a buffalo's, as if the dead person were blended with the sacrificed buffalo to reach eternity.

II. The divinity materialized: the focal point of land's energy

1. Seizing materially the divinity-soil

Among Khmer people, although abstract or amorphous, the divinity can be seized through a focal point, said to be the "village's navel" and materialized by a post (or an ensemble of five posts) put up at the center of the village, especially if the latter has a round shape. The navel is also called "Preah Phum", which means very approximately "Sacred land". And the land in question relates to the village in a broad sense, which is the habitat unit including houses, collective area, rice-fields, and the immediate vicinity such as a section of forest regularly frequented by draft animals in daytime... In short: a community village space. The basic idea is that all the energy of the village is concentrated in its navel materialized by the post. There is no distinction between the latter and the village itself. It is a simple relation between microcosm and macrocosm. Through the post one can accomplish ritual for the sake of the whole community village.

2. Making the soil fertile

The main worry of villagers being a well regulated monsoon system, factor of soil fertility, thus productivity and prosperity, the ritual concerned is first connected with rain. By some natural reflex, they try to make the soil fertile through sexual metaphors. This is why the microcosm above-mentioned often has a phallic shape.

III. Toward a certain anthropomorphism

A pebble or a termite-hill standing for the whole village domain can be seen dressed. A certain anthropomorphism of the divinity is thus taking form or suggested.

Moreover, a human head can be associated with the said pebble. Although incomplete, the humanization of the divinity goes further. One would misunderstand in seeing here a sort of intermediary step toward a complete anthropomorphic representation of the divinity. On the contrary this is an accomplished form of soil-divinity representation. Indeed the foundation of a village is based on a historic or mythic pioneer, whom the villagers consider as the community's ancestor. Generally thought to be a man – this is why he is called Neak Ta, "Venerable Grand-Father" – he was brave and strong enough to transform a section of wild and dangerous forest into a cultivated and fruitful space which, progressively after him, became a real village community. With time, the ancestor ends up melting intimately with the land he first humanized. Here ancestor and soil is one.

Ancient Khmer found in the Indian mukhalinga an exact conceptual replica of their soil-ancestor.

In Angkor region, each spirit possession medium (almost systematically a woman) venerates a personal spirit, whom she considers to be her "Master" (Kru), personally attached to her from her birth (Kru Kamnoet). During the annual possession ceremony, this spirit has to be shown physically to the audience, and not only through the body and the voice of his medium. The Master in question is basically composed of elements from nature, mainly vegetation and birds. But often, we notice a certain humanization of this fauna-flora representation, with the presence of a hat and even a waistband.

Footnotes

¹ "Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa", *BEFEO* XXXIII, p.367-410.

² As far as I remember, this folk-dance was invented and performed first by artists of the Faculty of Choregraphic Arts (the Royal University of Fine Arts) around the year 1965.

³ Nobody is at issue ; I just point out here that a folklore of a given population is rarely correct, when imagined and schematized by another.

⁴ Few Pnong villages have been recently Christianized. Lifestyle has significantly changed. Slash-and-burnt rice cultivation is then abandoned, replaced by new crops such as cafe and pepper.

⁵ To go no further than Cambodia.

⁶ Cf. « spirits » (French « spiritueux », « eau de vie »).

⁷ Jars in question are stoneware. In general, natural stones or stoneware fragments symbolize eternity.

⁸ Mus (p.).