

# THE ANGKORIAN WORLD

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and Damian Evans*

First published 2023

ISBN: 978-0-8153-5595-3 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-43926-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-351-12894-0 (ebk)

## 23

### GODS AND TEMPLES

#### The Nature(s) of Angkorian Religion

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DOI: 10.4324/9781351128940-29

The funder for this chapter is École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), Paris.

# GODS AND TEMPLES

## The Nature(s) of Angkorian Religion

*Julia Estève*

### The Problem

Our understanding of religion in the Angkorian World was initiated by Indianists and Khmerologists more than one century ago. The standard academic narrative developed from this work focused on the Khmer kingdom's adoption of Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism) around the beginning of the Common Era (Chatterjee 1964[1927]; Bareau 1976). At this time, the long-standing maritime exchanges between South and Southeast Asia germinated and created the hypothesis of a 'natural' impregnation of peninsular and insular Southeast Asian cultures by Indian models (Pollock 1996, 239). A first wave of Indianisation swept over the peninsula into Cambodia, then known as *Funan*, spreading South Asian habits and customs and thereby ensuring a particularly strong diffusion of their religion(s) (Cœdès 1989[1948]). Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism became deeply integrated within the local milieu, with Buddhism also being adopted, though to a lesser degree (Briggs 1951; Cœdès 1953). An important part of this religious package, the Khmer temple, first appeared around the 5th–6th centuries CE and would eventually become the apex symbol of Angkor's political, religious, and economic power.

Scholars recognising these obvious connections to India soon came to consider Angkorian religion as a classic example of syncretism, a label originating in mid-19th-century Indian scholarship (Burnouf 1876[1845]; Senart 1883; Lévi 1896). Hinduism and Buddhism were seen as being intertwined throughout their histories, most dramatically in the formation of Buddhist Tantra. Given the intellectual influence of this research in Cambodia, it is perhaps unsurprising that syncretism was also discovered within multiple domains of Angkorian religion within Hinduism (Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism), between Śaivism and Buddhism, and also between the Indian religions and local chthonic belief systems (Barth 1889; Finot 1901; Briggs 1951). How well these interpretations reflect local realities of Angkorian religious organisation is not yet clear, especially since Indic gods were absorbed into the Khmer cultural substrate with its own collection of landscape-based tutelary spirits (Mus 1933). This chapter suggests that viewing Angkorian religion as pluralistic, not syncretic, more accurately represents the diversity of faiths—exogenous and local—that Angkorian kings, brahmins, and commoners practised than does syncretism. Key to this view is the recognition that Angkorian religion stems from inherently indigenous manifestations linked to a particular Cambodian landscape. This discussion also evaluates the nature of religious practice and seeks to explain how and why Śaivism was selected as the primary focus of Angkor's Brahmins and elites.

## Deconstructing Syncretism

The concept of Angkorian syncretism was largely imposed by colonial (i.e., non-Khmer) scholars, most of whom were trained Indologists (Burnouf 1845; Senart 1883; Lévi 1896). These arguments generally rest on the premise that elite temples were home to Indic gods and assume that local people preferred Indic religious ideals over extant animist beliefs. The fact that Angkor Period Indic evidence (Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, Buddhism, both Theravāda and Mahāyāna) are more visible than animist expressions exacerbates the problem (Sanderson 2003–2004). Close reading of the religious contexts in the epigraphic record offers alternate views to the conventional ‘syncretism’ model. To demonstrate this point, this discussion examines three increasingly problematic examples of the Angkorian texts: discrepancies between the invocative and recording parts of inscriptions and between donations, resource-sharing between gods of different denominations, and foundations of statues and holy places of various faiths.

### *Discrepancy Between Invocative and Recording*

Among the 1400-plus Khmer inscriptions at our disposal, the richest texts are generally divided into one text versified in Sanskrit focusing on the historical data, starting with the eulogies of the gods, sovereigns, and dignitaries and showcasing their good deeds and another text written in ancient Khmer providing administrative information such as donation lists, trial reports, and so on.

Differences between the dedications and deities listed in the introductory and body of an inscription provide initial evidence to doubt the syncretic nature of Khmer religion (Estève 2009). Inscriptions K. 161 (1002/1003 CE) and K. 953 (1041/1042 CE), for example, begin with a *maṅgala* (the stanzas of auspicious invocation opening any inscription) worshipping both Śaiva and Buddhist divinities but in separate stanzas (K. 161, Finot 1904, 672; K. 953, *IC* VII, 124; *RS* III, n. 59, 125). During the reign of Dharaṇīndravarman I (r. 1107–1113), inscription K. 258 draws a link between the king and the Buddha, but the rest of the inscription is generally Śaivite in content (K. 258 C22–23, *IC* IV, 175). The text of K. 290.1 (9th c. CE) shows inconsistencies, as its foundation is a hermitage for Buddhist monks and its invocative part uses terminology found in Śaivite and Vaiṣṇava inscriptions (K. 1228; K. 279) of the hermitages founded by king Yaśovarman I (Cœdès 1908[a], 203; *IC* III, 23; Estève 2009, 338). A further example is noted in the Buddhist invocation opening K. 432, while the remaining parts of this text record only Śaivite foundations (10th c. CE, *IC* II, 119). These patterns are combined in K. 158 (1003/1004 CE), where the *maṅgala* is divided between a tribute to Śiva and a tribute to the Buddha, and the donations are for both Śaivite and Buddhist deities (*IC* II, 97). These inscriptions reflect a diversity of denominational settings and also reveal co-residence of practitioners of different faiths.

### *Donations and Sharing of Resources Between Gods of Various Denominations*

The Khmer language parts of the inscriptions most often record the donations of goods, land, or personnel made to the temples in order to ensure their functioning (Soutif 2009). Several Angkorian elite donations to various denominations inscribed in stelae also do not reflect religious syncretism. Inscription K. 180 (948 CE) from Prasat Pram tells us that Śivasoma, *ācārya* [master, teacher] of king Rājendravarmān (944–c. 968), gave workers at the same time to the Devī of Maruktalapura, the *liṅga* of Śivapurālaya, and the Buddha of Amarendrapura (Cœdès 1913, 17). Meanwhile, in K. 198 (966 CE), an individual named Upendra gave land and workers both to

the gods Parameśvara (Śiva) and Āryamaitri (Maitreya) (*IC VI*, 147). Pooled resources to deities of different denominations, much more frequent, have been recorded elsewhere, such as the Viṣṇu from Preah Enkosei temple who had to share his resources (*miśrabhoga*, ‘co-using’) with the deity of Prasat Komphus temple, a Śiva Bhadrēśvara during the reign of Jayavarman V (Bhattacharya 1961, 33). The inscriptions show either an elaborate system of resource pooling or exclusivity of use and or ownership and specify which individuals have the use or the property of the offerings and more specifically the property of lands given to deities. As such individuals can be lay or religious people, this raises questions about who owns the land and who can use it and why these texts deal with the juridical and commercial aspects (see Estève 2009, 425–32).

Our record of elite donations to Angkorian temples reflects the diverse religious Cambodian landscape, structured by an implicit hierarchy of deities who exercised varying levels of power. Specific Śaivite representations, for example, were highly ranked and so powerful that other lower-ranked deities and temples sought to associate with them. The fact that certain temples wanted to be codependent with a more sacred and typically larger temple (K. 165; *IC VI*, 132) suggests that they did so to be granted some kind of financial independence or immunity towards taxes. The connection between temples also explains why these associations had to be vetted by the king. Since the king was the lord of the land, all matters concerning the income from the land had to be submitted to his approval, but he was inferior to the god from the point of view of property, since the god’s property automatically fell under the authority of the deity. These exemptions were probably made to reward some elite servants and dignitaries.

### ***Foundations of Statues and Temples of Various Denominations***

Inscriptions on statue and temple foundations also challenge the notion that Angkorian religion was syncretic, since donors often supported multiple denominations at one location rather than a single denomination. Some inscriptions report that Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Buddhist statues were founded in a single location (K. 1155, K. 1141, K. 173, K. 174, and K. 1198; Estève 2009, 2016), and we know therefore that these diverse religious foundations can be made successively or jointly in the same holy place on the same date. According to inscriptions K. 1155 and K. 1141 (839/840 CE; 972/973 CE), the holy place named Damrañ hosted a succession of heterogeneous foundations, during which statues of Buddhist and Śaiva religions repeatedly replaced one other (Chaem 1986, 1987; Estève 2009; NIC II—III, 115–118). A holy place can therefore welcome multiple religions, not combinations of faiths. This practice is illustrated in inscription K. 1198 (beg. 11th c. CE) in which a Śrī Lakṣmīpativarman founds a *līṅga* in a temple, replacing the Buddha who until then had occupied that sacred place (Pou 2001, 240–60; Griffiths 2006, 2009). What is significant here is that the temple is linked to a familial lineage, and thus the religious identity of the deities it hosted may be linked to the diverse beliefs of these ancestors. That holy places welcomed multiple religious faiths is demonstrated in K. 158 (beg. 11th c. CE; *IC II*, 97), which tells us that the Śaiva divinity is surpassed in number by the Buddhist divinities, who are also allocated greater quantities of supplies. Thus, we cannot state that gods were shared or combined in a syncretic way but replaced each other to suit the reverence of elite families.

### **Local Cults, Sacred Places, and the Web of Power**

The traditional view of Angkorian religion emphasises the model that Indic deities were overlain onto a passive indigenous Khmer animism. This, however, is far from accurate, as the local faith provided its own unique system, with chthonic gods and sacredness more generally being

deeply intertwined with specific places in the landscape. The chthonic principles of the local Khmer religion, and the inherent connection to earthly places, were central to the success of Angkor. It is difficult to talk about the local beliefs of the Angkor Period because the inscriptions say almost nothing about them, and that is why they appear rarely in academic discussions. Today *neak ta* or village spirits occupy a central place in popular religion, and this presence naturally leads us to consider that they existed in ancient times (Forest 1992, 24). This cult of terrain and place gathers the community around it through a stone or a tree, which comes to symbolise and materialise the local god. Its essential quality lies in its location, and those who venerate it belong to this community. Each community therefore has at its disposal a limited area demarcated by the space where the god of the terrain is recognised. If someone doesn't recognise it, he or she therefore belongs to another village (Forest 1992, 24). This mosaic landscape remains an integral part of modern Cambodia, which is home to hundreds or even thousands of local gods (Ang 1986).

Similar models of sacred spatial organisation appear in the Angkorian epigraphy, with deities and shrines associated with a territory and the community responsible for their protection. These were places of great power, and pilgrimages to deities of all backgrounds thus created a wide range of religious diversity in the landscape. The heterogeneity and reverence of local gods is clearly illustrated through the work of Yaśovarman I, who at the end of the 9th century claims to have built 100 *āśramas* on sites where powerful and renowned gods had already existed for a long time (Estève and Soutif 2011). The later Pre Rup inscription tells us that under king Rājendravarman in the 10th century, there was a pre-existing cult of '30 self-created gods (*svayambhū*)' (K. 806, IC I, st. CCLXX). The considerable number of gods mentioned in these two texts helps us to understand the religious cadastral organisation and paints a picture of ancient Cambodia as a territory filled with gods, some of whom were more important than the others.

As the patron of all religions, kings present themselves as the protectors of all denominations and essentially of sacredness itself. The king also stands at the apex of the religious hierarchy of temples, which requires redistribution of economic goods upward to serve the greater elites. Though required to share resources, a temple aims to be exempt from any authority other than that of a temple whose sacredness is superior and therefore other than divine authority. The inscriptions provide clear examples for this web of temples and the diverse gradations of power between them. Angkorian gods had powers of protection—and destruction—in the Khmer world. Their deities were imbued with magical powers, and it is reasonable to believe that, from the perspective of the insider and outsider enemies of the kingdom, it was necessary either to divest them of these powers or to monopolise them to take possession of territories and subjugate the local population. According to the inscription K. 235 (1004 CE), people under Sūryavarman I 'threw down the statues from Bhadrappattana and Stuk Ransi' (D, l. 40–42), leaving these *snuks* 'totally devastated' (D, l. 46). Given that places retain power, the act of destruction is often followed by the founding once again of the statues, expressed by '*phoñ viñ unmiḷita*' re-opening of their eyes (D, l. 46–47; see Jenner 2009 s.v.). This process was recorded in K. 258 (1069 CE; A, l. 65–70) by King Harṣavarman III, who ordered the new foundation of the gods Vraḥ Śivaliṅga, Vraḥ Nārāyaṇa, and Vraḥ Bhagavatī because 'the enemies had taken them off Stuk Sramo' (IC IV, 198). The act of corruption or destruction occurs precisely because these deities were Kaṃrateñ Jagat or 'the High Lord of the World'. During the Pre-Angkor Period and until the early Angkor Period, the gods bore the same title as the king, princes, and high dignitaries, namely Vraḥ Kaṃrateñ 'Añ, but starting in the 10th century, the Kaṃrateñ Jagat gods multiplied to the point of overtaking them. The majority of these gods have names formed from the terrain (mountain, city, garden, forest, etc.), which shows that their power was linked

to this very terrain and they held control of a sacred domain (Estève 2014, 182–86). These deities come from an indigenous conception of religion linked to an essential animism for the Khmer population which considers sacredness deeply linked to the locus or terrain.

A further example of conquering gods in the landscape comes from K. 237 (1066 CE), where one sees Kaṃvau, a *senāpati* or general of the army of King Udayādityavarman II, who had a desire to conquer power: he took possession of the ‘domains’ (*kaṃvau khmān ni ter cāp viṣaya phoñ*), in that he captured not only the land but also the temples erected on them and the arable land and workers who were associated with them. In inscription K. 289 (C. st. XXI), it is said that Kaṃvau has ‘wish[ed] to conquer all the gods’, while according to inscription K. 237, he hit these religious images and has somehow denatured them (st. II, the *liṅga* was ‘altered’ and l. 6–7, the images were ‘torn’). Barth had noted this insistence on the destruction of statues, and he wondered about the religious intentionality of the practice (1885, 174). The high-ranking army chief named Saṃgrāma who was sent by King Udayādityavarman II to stop Kaṃvau’s rebellion visited temples before battle in order to invoke the assistance of various representations of the god Śiva (K. 289, 1066 CE), suggesting that he engaged in rituals intended to confer, through magic, a phenomenal power as well as a practical means to overcome his enemies. This was not his first battle, as he stopped other rebellions before: a first led by a certain Aravindhara in 1051 in the south of the country (st. X); a second led by the Kaṃvau with whom we are concerned, presumably in the northwest of the country (in the region of Phnoṃ Ruñ); and a third, led by an enemy chief named Svat, also in 1061, in a region named Praśānvairmyat (st. XIV). Each time Saṃgrāma defeated his enemies, he made pious donations: to the Śiva of Rājātūrtha for his victory in the south, then to the Śiva of Pṛthuśaila for his victory over Kaṃvau, and finally to the deities of the Mādhava for his last victory. The fact that the deity worshipped by Saṃgrāma changes according to his enemy, or more likely the place where the critical battle will take place, confirms the sacredness of territory.

Certain deities of various religious backgrounds also frequently appear side by side in the epigraphy, such as Śiva of Liṅgapura and Buddha of Chpār Ransī (see Estève 2009, 453–54, for tables of these deities and references and Estève and Vincent 2010, 149). Throughout the 10th and early 12th century, six inscriptions (K. 158, K. 276, K. 277, K. 237, K. 249, and K. 254) notably recall the allocation of resources for the Buddhist temple but also to other Kaṃrateñ Jagat gods: the Kaṃrateñ Jagat Liṅgapura (Śiva), the Kaṃrateñ Jagat Śrī Campeśvara (Viṣṇu), and the Kanloñ Kaṃrateñ ’Añ Añve Danle (the defunct queen). Offerings in these inscriptions are made without consideration of religious denomination, suggesting that it did not matter at this level precisely because they concern deities named Kaṃrateñ Jagat who stand above such religious divisions. When one of these Kaṃrateñ Jagats is associated with a deity whose title is only ‘Vrah Kaṃrateñ ’Añ’, donations are shared with the Kaṃrateñ Jagat, as if it needed to pay tribute to the higher deity. Thus, these deities seem to have possessed completely independent temples and were independently managed by the religious personnel directly attached to them. The existence of this recurring group of deities named Kaṃrateñ Jagat—their shared donations and relationship to terrain notwithstanding the apparent religious heterogeneity—again supports the idea of religious pluralism.

Temples must be kept prosperous and flourishing because they match the openness advocated by the Khmer rulers in religious affairs and because the political control of the territories directly depends on their existence as linked to the sacredness of the terrain. This variety of Kaṃrateñ Jagat deities forms the sacred landscape and parallels the administrative landscape. In this sense, the religious sphere and the political sphere were so intertwined in Angkorian Cambodia that it was necessary to wage war against the reigning king’s gods for whoever wished to overcome and monopolise his political power. The conception of sacredness is so much linked

to the terrain that it affects the relationship to power, and it is the source of the adoption of Śaivism as the primary state religion in the early Angkor Period. Śaivism provided the most appropriate framework for the organisation and expression of power, but it also provided political power with a very powerful magic. The power belongs to whoever controls these religious topographical centres, and this power had chosen to take the clothes of Śaivism. Owing to this link, multiple deities are welcomed in the same place since the crucial component is the terrain, and, along with it, animism prevails.

The indigenous religion welcomed new deities without embracing their exclusivity. For example, the Śaiva impregnation of the territory that has been highlighted (Sanderson 2003–2004, 421) reveals, in our opinion, a fundamental aspect of the religion of ancient Cambodia in that it is the names of great Indian pilgrimage sites that have been adopted by the Khmers. If we relate this practice to the designation of the deity by his place of residence for the first rank deities named Kamrateñ jagat (Estève 2014, 182–192) and second to the theme of duplicates that appears as a filigree in epigraphy (Estève 2009, 365 *sqq.* and 437 *sqq.*), we find a space of religiosity that is inherently indigenous.

### **Khmer Religion in Action: Brahmins, Śaivism, and Royal Patronage**

Angkor's pluralistic religion(s) had its most obvious impact on the world of Khmer elites. Brahmanism in India started to evolve from the Vedic priesthood after the Mauryan Period (322–185 BCE), and its socio-political status enabled it to spread widely and diversely. Francis (2013) shows for example that early states in Southern India had no priests, and therefore the king was responsible for necessary magic-religious functions. It is only with the Pallava dynasty (ca. 300–ca. 900 CE) that the Brahmanical culture started spreading and slowly began divesting magical power from the hands of the rulers. The Brahmin ultimately came to represent both a social order and orthodoxy in Indic culture (Bronkhorst 2011). This new formula of Brahmanism also convinced rulers of 'Indianised' Southeast Asia to adopt it as an essential politico-religious mechanism to shift from local chiefdoms to unified kingdoms. Brahmins were the holders of ancestral and timeless knowledge (coming from the Vedic India) and as such were seen as the most eminent members of society because they were the depositories of a magic, ritualistic power that was valuable to the kings. They could predict the future, create protection spells, and, of course, serve as political advisers, and the Bakus still present in the palace claim to be Brahmins of foreign origin. Cambodian inscriptions praise the Brahmins for their textual knowledge, particularly the Veda. For example, Inscription K. 267 (10th c. CE) from Bat Cum (*JA* 1908 [2], 213) registers the Buddhist foundations made by Kavīndrārimathana, minister (*apabhṛtya*) of Rājendravarman, and nonetheless specifies the injunction: 'Let no one, except the Brahmin who knows the Veda, bathe here, in this pure water, in the great moat dug according to the rites' (st. XXXVIII, *ibid.*, 247). But their own religious flavour did not really matter, for, as Bronkhorst claims, Brahmanism could not be assigned to the category 'religion' but was instead primarily linked to ensuring the social order (2011, 54–55). This explains numerous references where we see coexisting vocabularies or individuals possessing textual or theoretical training that seems to belong to various religious affiliations such as Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Buddhism. Knowledge of Indian Sanskrit texts and rituals was conceived as a sign of great intelligence, while the connection to India guaranteed authenticity and enhanced local prestige (see Pollock 1996, 2006). Brahmins coming from India, such as Hiranyadāma from K. 235 (1053 CE), were so highly revered that kings often offered them a daughter or sister to marry to become part of the familial lineage and provide politico-religious clout.

Angkor's priests were thus living sources of esoteric and powerful knowledge in Cambodia by the 7th century. For example, inscription K. 604 (627 CE) from Sambor Prei Kuk records the erection of a *linṅa* by the high official Vidyāviśeṣa, a Pāśupata brahman, who was versed in grammar (*śabda*), the brahmanical systems of Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya, and Sāṃkhya, and 'the doctrine of the Sugata' (IC IV, 17–18). Brahmins' central role is visible in the plurality of attributions of the *purohita* ('brahmanic priest of the king's house') in the Buddhist inscription of Wat Sithor (K. 111, 968/969 CE; 1883, 190) who is said to be 'versed in the knowledge of Buddhist letters and rites'. This centrality explains that king Yaśovarman I built four hermitages for the important communities at the end of the 9th century, one for the Brahmins, one for the Śaivas, one for the Vaiṣṇavas, and one for the Buddhists. The superiority of Brahmins is clearly seen in these very foundation inscriptions of the monasteries of Yaśovarman I: one joint stanza to the four monasteries explains that Brahmins should be honoured first (st. LVIII in K. 701, LVII in K. 279, LIV in K. 290 and LIII in K. 1228, all from 9th to 10th c.) and only then the religious scholars belonging to each monastery: 'Immediately after the brahman (*vīpra*), the master Śaiva and the master Pāśupata (*śaivapāśupātācāryyaū*) shall be honoured, and if one of them is learned in grammar, he shall be honoured more than the other.' An example here is the Śaiva monastery stanza LXI from K. 279, the equivalent stanzas being LXII in K. 701, LVIII in K. 290, and LVII in K. 1228, 9th–10th c. CE. Clearly, therefore, these were the communities with a key socio-political and religious role. While Khmer society ignored some aspects of Indic religious organisation such as the caste system or *varnas*, Angkorian power and kingship were undeniably defined in Brahmanical terms that remained unchanged for centuries (Sanderson 2003–2004, 389). However, these examples demonstrate that, within this Brahmanical framework, religious pluralism was encouraged or at least tolerated. The creation of separate spaces for each faith in the āśrama is perhaps the clearest evidence for pluralism.

### *The Strength of Śaivism*

Brahmanism's success in the Angkorian World lay in its religious neutrality, serving to anchor the social order and legitimise Angkorian kingship. However, this lack of partisanship led to struggles between sects for religious supremacy, and Śaivism eventually solidified itself at the head of early historic states in India and most of early historic Southeast Asia (Bronkhorst 2011). Together, Brahmanism and Śaivism formed a two-tiered hierarchy that became rooted in this socio-political milieu (Sanderson 2018, 22). Śaivism succeeded because of its ability to provide a body of rituals and theories that legitimised the key elements of the social, political, and economic process at work at that time. This included the spread of the monarchical model of government, the movement of political and economic power of the capital into the peripheral territories, and the progress of rural territories through infrastructural development and the growth of new urban centres (Sanderson 2009, 253).

As noted, temples were primarily the dwellings of gods, fulfilling functions as ritual and scholarly centres, but they also served significant political and economic roles as landowners, employers, consumers, recipients of gifts, and mediators of political legitimation (Morrison 1995, 214). During these early centuries Śaivism was itself evolving and offered different paths for salvation that managed to seduce kingship in two ways: (1) the Siddhānta path via the legitimation and sacralisation of royal authority and (2) the Śākta Śaiva path offering rituals of state protection, particularly in times of danger (the introduction of Śaiva Tantric path known as Mantramārga in Cambodia can be spotted in K. 1236 (CE 763) according to Goodall 2013, 354–55). As such, Śaiva ascetics knowledgeable in Tantrism grew to great fame in Cambodia and often occupied the office of Royal Preceptor (*rājaguru*) and priest of the elite. Perhaps the



strongest illustration of this fact is the founding of the *devarāja* cult that happened, according to the Sdok Kak Thom inscription (K. 235), in the 9th century. Most authors agree that this Devarāja was a Śaiva entity, as union of the king and Śiva (see Finot 1915; Bagchi 1930; Cœdès and Dupont 1943; Filliozat 1960; Cœdès 1961; Jacques 1994; Bourdonneau 2016). Śaivism became the cornerstone of the Angkorian Empire and was propelled to the status of state religion through the support of Śaiva tantric texts called ‘The Four Faces of Tumburu’ coming from the main *Tantra* of the Vidyāpīṭha Vāmā branch (Sanderson 2001, 7, n. 5; 2003–2004, 355), which achieved a supernatural authority greater than that of any previous texts (see Einoo 2009, 31–32 for these rituals).

### Royal Patronage

Angkorian kings respected state Śaivism but also supported other religions. Although some instances of royal patronage have been offered as evidence for ‘syncretism’ (see Cœdès 1908b, 206–208 about Yaśovarman’s *āśramas* and 1908b, 213 about Bat Cum inscriptions), these are better viewed as being politically rather than ideationally motivated. Royal patronage—kings subsidising great temples of all religious denominations present on their lands—during Angkorian times is more often cited as evidence of pluralism (Salomon 1998, 238), and many examples of this process are visible in the epigraphic record. The inscriptions indicate that religious obedience was dependent on family lines and also the idea of a personal religiosity (as *iṣṭadevata*). Thus, the discrepancies identified in the inscriptions, whether between the invocative and descriptive parts or even within them, often derive from the point of view adopted by a given passage in the inscription. In K. 485 (12th–13th c. CE), for example, the differences in the religious obedience of the characters involved in the story shifts depending on whether it is about Indradevī, a Buddhist, or her sister, who was successively Hindu and Buddhist (Finot 1925, 372; *IC* II, 161). Even if the protagonist of the inscription K. 237 (1066 CE) bore a name with a strong Vaiṣṇava sound, the text shows that he also respected state Śaivism, paid homage to the great Buddhist temple of the kingdom, and followed the Khmer idea of sacrality of the terrain (Estève 2014).

In K. 528 (953 CE) stanza CIII, Rājendravarman is said to be devoted to Śaivism, while in stanza CLXXII, we learn that he was also versed in Buddhism (Finot 1925, 309; 953 CE). In K. 834 (10th–11th c. CE), Śrī Sūryavarman I’s *praśasti* (r. ca. 1002–1050) is typically built around comparisons with deities (Indra, Brahmā) and mythological episodes (Rāvaṇa) and is said to be united with or embodying Śiva. But by stanza XXV we see an element of Buddhist religion appearing as the king is compared to Śrīghana, a name of the Buddha (Skilling 2004). The Bat Cum inscriptions (K. 266, 960 CE; K. 267 and K. 268, 10th c. CE) relate the foundations of the king Rājendravarman (944–ca. 968) and his minister Kavīndrārimathana (Cœdès 1908b, 213). Instead of highlighting the kind of religious unity we might expect from the king and his minister, the text instead tells us that the king’s foundations belonged to the Hindu faith, while those of his minister were Buddhist. This is corroborated by another text (K. 157, 953 CE), independent of Bat Cum, which also notes the fundamentally Buddhist character of Kavīndrārimathana, who was nevertheless respectful of royal Śaivism.

Angkor’s kings generally patronised all religions in a political strategy used to ensure the contentment of all faith communities and maintain social order. It is also a mechanism that provided power through the propitiation of all the divinities and the magical powers belonging to them. Ultimately, it was the surest way to achieve success in all their endeavours.

## Conclusion

The Khmer adopted a practice of patronising many religious faiths and a structure of power and society based on the Indian texts. While this politically clever approach served to please the respective religious communities it does not mean the religions were amalgamated into a single system or single collective thought. Looking over the specific cases used to support the qualification of ‘syncretic’, we see a diversity of situations and instead must recognise that the Angkorian World is more accurately seen as pluralistic. More practically, the term does not in itself explain much (Augé 1993; Baird 2004; Kitiarsa 2005) and is actually insufficient in explaining the myriad of cases and forms that religious phenomena took throughout the five centuries of political history that constitute the Angkor Period.

Based on this review of Cambodian inscriptions, the most useful tool to think about moving towards pluralism or eclecticism is the notion of magic, efficiency, or power of the landscape. Khmer animism began to use Indian religious tools in their own manner. Another way of conceptualising this is from the human point of view: the person from ancient Cambodia was taking in everything to ensure his or her health, happiness, and prosperity, to protect him- or herself from evil. The place was of utmost importance and sacredness. Statues of Śiva or Buddha added to a place reinforced its effectiveness, and perhaps each had a special power, a specific function. The most surprising cases can therefore be explained by adopting a logical systemic thinking of religion in context. The foundations of the monasteries were built by the king Yaśovarman I at the end of the 9th century in Angkor to represent separate religious communities in our Western conception of religion (see Chea et al. 2023, this volume). But for the provincial monasteries, planted in places where a local deity already existed, they all lived under the same roof. This does not mean that Buddhist monks, once outside the capital, followed the Śaiva rites. This means that all religions lived side by side, and this is what we understand by pluralism. What was important in the end was the chthonian divinity to whom the monastery was dedicated and the magical force that these religions participated in to increase their power.

### List of Inscriptions in the Text

<i>K.</i>	<i>Reference</i>	<i>K.</i>	<i>Reference</i>
89	IC III, 164	289	ISC, 140
111	Cœdès 1942; IC VI, 195	290	Cœdès 1908a, 203; IC III, 231
136	ISC, 122; IC VI, 284	342	IC VI, 236
143	IC VI, 218	366	IC V, 288
157	IC VI, 123	432	IC II, 119
158	IC II, 97	468	IC III, 225
161	Finot 1904, 672	485	IC II, 161
165	IC VI, 132	528	Finot 1925, 309
173	Roeské 1914, 638	604	IC IV, 17; Goodall 2019
174	Roeské 1914, 644	659	IC V, 143
180	Cœdès 1913, 17	701	Cœdès 1932
194	Cœdès & Dupont 1943, 134	706	IC V, 217
198	IC VI, 147	818	IC VI, 65
235	Finot 1915, 53; Cœdès & Dupont 1943, 56	834	IC V, 244
237	ISC, 173; IC VI, 293; Estève 2014	842	IC I, 147
249	IC I, 267; IC III, 97	933	IC IV, 47
254	IC III, 180	953	IC VII, 124

(Continued)

(Continued)

K.	Reference	K.	Reference
257	IC IV, 140	957	IC VII, 137
258	IC IV, 175	958	IC VII, 141
263	ISC, 77; IC IV, 118	1141	NIC II-III; 115-118; Estève 2009
266	Cœdès 1908b	1155	Estève 2009
267	Cœdès 1908b	1171	-
268	Cœdès 1908b	1198	NIC II-III, 240-260 (Ka. 18)
276	ISC, 97; IC IV, 153	1228	-
277	ISC, 97; IC IV, 155	1236	Goodall 2012
279	ISCC, 418		

IC = Inscriptions du Cambodge; Cœdès 1937-66.

ISC = Inscriptions sanscrites du Cambodge; Barth 1885.

ISCC = Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge; Bergaigne 1893.

NIC = Nouvelles inscriptions du Cambodge; tome I: Pou 1989; tome II-III: Pou 2001; tome IV: Pou 2011.

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