

ROYALLY SPONSORED HUMAN SACRIFICES IN
NINETEENTH CENTURY CAMBODIA :
the cult of *nak tū Me Sa* (Mahisāsūramardini) at Ba Phnom*

by

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Toward the end of February, 1877, four columns of troops, including French, Cambodian and pro-French Vietnamese elements, converged on a low range of hills called Ba Phnom, approximately sixty kilometers southeast of Phnom Penh.¹ Their objective was an earth and timber stockade, measuring roughly a hundred meters by seventy-five, where a rebellious prince named Siwotha had installed himself with an entourage and had begun recruiting an army at the beginning of the month.² As the columns approached the enclosure, Siwotha slipped away to the north, on elephant-back, with a few men. His 'army' surrendered soon afterwards without firing a shot,³ and for the moment the revolt was over. The Cambodian king, Norodom, declared a general amnesty and on February 26, appointed a new royal delegate, or *stac trān*, to Ba

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- 1) For descriptions of the region in the late nineteenth century, see Etienne Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, Paris, 1902, Vol. I, 283 and P. Peyrusset, 'Le chemin de fer de Saigon à Phnom Penh' *Cochinchine Française, Excursions et Reconnaissances* (E & R) I (1880) 186-187. The best description of the campaign is France, Archives d'Outremer (FOM) Indochine A-30 (26), Despatch from Duperre dated March 24, 1877. See also Jean Moura, *Le Royaume du Cambodge*, Paris, 1883, Vol. I, 182-183.
- 2) Moura, 183. Siwotha, a half-brother of the Cambodian king, Norodom, had family connections in the area. His mother's father had served there as a royal delegate. See Adhemard Leclère, *Histoire du Cambodge*, Paris, 1914, 449, and Eng Sut, *Akkasar Mahāboros khmaer* (Documents about Cambodian heroes), Phnom Penh, 1969, 1155.
- 3) FOM Indochine A-30 (26) refers to 'quelques serviteurs et cinq éléphants' and says that the rebels were 'saisi de frayeur'. In the course of the campaign, six French soldiers died of fever.

Phnom;⁴ at about this time, also, according to the printed version of the Cambodian chronicle, two prisoners-of-war were 'offered up' nearby.⁵

The reference is obscure. It comes in a speech by the Cambodian commander, Prince Sisowath, to his followers at the end of the campaign.

'I have fought with Prince Siwotha's troops [he said] for a day and a night. Many have fled, many have been killed, and many have been wounded. Two ordinary soldiers have been taken prisoner. One is named A Prak and one is named A Som. I have ordered . . . [an official] . . . to put them in a boat and take them to be offered up in the province of Ba Phnom.'⁶

The chronicle says no more about the matter. One purpose of this paper will be to suggest that the men were beheaded on Ba Phnom in April or May, 1877 in the course of a royally-sponsored ceremony known as *loen nak tã* ("raising up the ancestors") that honored the new *stac trãn*, the agricultural year, and a local ancestor spirit (*nak tã*) known as Me Sa, the 'white mother'.

The evidence comes largely from a Cambodian text, composed in 1944 and printed in 1971 by the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh as part of a collection of documents dealing with the cult of *nak tã* throughout Cambodia.⁷ The central portion of this text** quotes an elderly resident of Ba Phnom, Dok Than, as saying that human sacrifices took place on the northeastern slopes of the mountain when he was a boy, and he describes one of these—perhaps the last, and perhaps the one in 1877 involving A Prak and A Som—which he attended.⁸

** A translation of this text appears on pp. 218-222, below.

- 4) There were five of these 'royal delegates' in nineteenth century Cambodia. Their largely ritual responsibilities connected them with the areas, or *dei*, of Ba Phnom, Kompong Svai, Pursat, Treang, and Thboung Khmum. See Etienne Aymonier, *Cours de Cambodge*, Saigon, 1875, 124-125; Adhémard Leclère, 'Sdach meakh', *Revue Indochinoise* VIII (1905), 1378-1384, and also Institut Bouddhique (ed.) *Bram rachidhi dvad samas* (Royal Festivals in the Twelve Months), Phnom Penh, 1969, 86-88.
- 5) Eng Sut, 1157.
- 6) The boat voyage suggests that the prisoners were not native to Ba Phnom.
- 7) Institut Bouddhique, *Brajum rioen breh* (Collected Old Stories), Phnom Penh, 1962-, Vol. VIII, 81-88.
- 8) Dok Than dates the ceremonies from the regime of Siwotha's grandfather, who had died by 1877; Eng Sut, 1155.

The text begins by describing a small 'Chinese-style' cement temple that had recently been built against the northeastern slope of the hill. In 1944, the temple housed broken statues of several Hindu gods, including a damaged one of a female divinity identified by Dok Than as 'Me Sa'. Perhaps a hundred meters to the east he said, in what was by then 'an ordinary rice-field', human sacrifices had once been carried out. The statue is described as follows :

' . . . an upright human female, approximately sixty centimeters tall, with her hair tucked up inside a diadem. The face is well-rounded, even plump; the breasts are globular and firm. The image [once had] four arms. The lower arm on the right . . . bears a rectangular object . . . The upraised left arm bears a wheel, while the lower one catches hold of the tail of [an animal that resembles] a tiger or a lion. The female presses against this animal with her feet . . . [as if to] lift it up . . . and has a boastful expression.'

No photograph of the statue has been published, but this description matches earlier ones by Aymonier, who visited the site in the 1880s,⁹ Parmentier (1934) and Mme. Porée-Maspéro, who saw the statue in 1941, and is clearly right when she says that it represents Siva's consort, Ume Mahisāsūramardīni, in the act of subduing the demon-buffalo Mahisā. Dok Than's identification of the statue as 'Me Sa' moreover, supports Mme. Porée-Maspéro's additional assertion that the short name is a corruption of the longer one.¹⁰

Uma (or Durga) Mahisāsūramardīni appears to have entered the Indian pantheon, along with other consorts of Siva, toward the beginning of the Christian era, as part of the exchange of religious ideas that took place in India between its Aryan and non-Aryan populations.¹¹ Images

9) Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, I, 235.

10) Eveline Porée-Maspéro, *Les rites agraires des cambodgiens*. Paris and the Hague : 1962, 8-9.

11) See R.C. Agrawala, 'The goddess Mahisāsūramardīni in early Indian Art', *Artibus Asiae* XXI (1958) 123-130; Sukimi Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 167 and B.C. Mazumdar, 'Durga : her origin and history', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1906, 355-362. Regarding Indianization, I am using the arguments advanced by Ian Mabbett, 'San-scritization of Southeast Asia', in press, and Paul Mus, 'Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient* (BEFEO)

of the goddess were widespread in eastern and southern India during the Pallava period in the second half of the first millenium AD.¹² A temple at Mahaballipuram near Madras, for example, is dedicated to her.¹³ This was the era, too, of the most intensive 'Indianization' of much of Southeast Asia, and it is not surprising that images of the goddess are plentiful in the art of early Java.¹⁴

During this same period, Uma Mahisāsūramardini was a popular subject of Cambodian sculpture. Over twenty free-standing statues, and half a dozen bas-reliefs of her have been noted,¹⁵ ranging in time from the seventh to the tenth centuries AD and over space from the Camau peninsula in southernmost Vietnam (then populated by Khmer) to a brick temple about thirty kilometers north of Angkor. By and large,

XXXIII (1933) 367-410. For Indian myths surrounding Mahisāsūramardini, see P.V. Kane, *History of the Dharmasastra*, Poona, 1958-1969, Vol. V. 157-163; F.E. Pargiter (trans.) *Markandeya Purana*, Calcutta, 1904, 473-488; K. van Kooij, *Worship of the Goddess according to the Kalikapurana: Part I*, Leyden: 1971, 94 ff. and W.C. Blaquiére, 'The Rudiradaya, or sanguinary chapter, translated from the Calica Puran', *Asiatick researches* V (1799) 369-391.

- 12) See A. Coomaraswami, *The Art of India and Indonesia*, New York, 1965, 103 and Odette Viennot, 'The goddess Mahisāsūramardini in Kushana art', *Artibus Asiae* XIX (1956) 360-373.
- 13) See Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*, New York, 1954, Plates 210, 234, 284 and 288.
- 14) J. Knebel, "De Dorga-vorstellung in de Beeldebouwkunst en Literatuur der Hindoes", *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde* (TBG) XLIV (1903) 213-240 lists over thirty Javanese images. See also P. Pott, *Yoga and Yantra*, The Hague, 1966, 86: "The number of representations of Durga Mahisāsūramardini in Javanese sculpture is incredibly large. In Java, this is the form *par excellence* of Devi."
- 15) For a description of the cult in pre-Angkorean Cambodia, see Kamalswar Bhattacharya, *Les religions brahmaniques dans l'ancien Cambodge*, Paris, 1961, 91-92 and 155-156. Pierre Dupont, *La statuaire pré-angkorienne*, Ascona, 1955, 139-140 argues that the cult developed among the Khmer in the seventh century AD, and Jean Boisselier, *Le Cambodge*, Paris, 1966, 293 agrees. For notices or plates of the free-standing representations of the goddess, see Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, II, 359; BEFEO XXXIV (1934), 746 and XXXVII (1937) 627; Boisselier, *loc. cit.*; R. Dalet, 'Quelques nouvelles sculptures khmères,' BEFEO XXXV, (1935), 158; Dupont, *Le statuaire*, Plates 25B, 28B, 31B, 32, 38A, 38D, 39, 43 A-C; Sherman Lee, *Ancient Cambodian Art*, New York, 1970, Plate 15; Louis Malleret, *L'archéologie du delta du Mekong*, Paris, 1959-1963, I, 67, 159, 432-433 and figure 96; IV, 39, 56, 84 and plate 12; Henri Parmentier, *L'art khmer primitif*, Paris, 1927, 313 and H. Parmentier, 'Complément à l'art khmer primitif' BEFEO XXXV (1935), 35.

the statues are of an earlier date than the bas-reliefs,¹⁶ and all but two of them come from southern and southeastern Cambodia and Vietnam, rather than from the neighborhood of Angkor, where all but two of the bas-reliefs have been found.

The statue at Ba Phnom seems to be in a transitional style, and resembles another image of the goddess discovered in Kompong Cham province in 1934 by R. Dalet.¹⁷ Both depict the goddess mounted on an unrecognizable animal carved in the round while other statues show her standing on a square base where the head of a buffalo has been carved in bas-relief. The livelier pose is popular in the generally later bas-reliefs, like those from the temples of Bakong and Banteai Srei. Tentatively, the statue of "Me Sa" can be dated from the second half of the eighth century AD. There is no written evidence that the statue was *in situ* earlier than the 1880s, when it was described by Aymonier.

However, the statue may well have been on Ba Phnom for hundreds of years, for the mountain is an ancient inhabited site,¹⁸ and George Coedès argued in 1928 that the capital of the early kingdom known to Chinese travellers as 'Funan' was located at its base.¹⁹ Although this view was later modified²⁰ a city was nearby in the tenth century AD.²¹ The earliest inscription found on the mountain mentions a devotion to Siva, and dates from 629 AD.²² In the tenth century, another inscription refers to Ba Phnom as a 'holy mountain'.²³ The

16) For bas-reliefs, see Bhattacharya, *Les religions*, Plates 9-11 and Parmentier, 'Complément', 35.

17) Dalet, 'Quelques nouvelles sculptures', *loc. cit.*

18) For a discussion of the terms *ba* and *me*, see Francois Martini, 'De la signification de BA et ME affixé aux noms des monuments khmers', BEFEO XLIV/1 (1954) 201-210 and L. Malleret, *L'archéologie*, I, 156 ff.

19) G. Coedès, 'La tradition généalogique des premiers rois d'Angkor', BEFEO XXVIII (1928), 124-144.

20) G. Coedès, 'Quelques précisions sur le fin du Funan', BEFEO XLIII (1943-1946), 4; Malleret, *L'archéologie*, I, 423-425. On the absence of archeological sites on Ba Phnom, see Dupont, *Le statuaire*, 17-18 and the plates in P. Paris, 'Anciens canaux reconnus sur photographes aériennes', BEFEO XLI (1941), 365-373.

21) G. Coedès (ed.) *Les Inscriptions du Cambodge*, Hanoi and Paris, 1937-1966, VI, 115.

22) R.C. Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Kambuja*, Calcutta, 1953, inscription 25 (classified by Coedès, *Inscriptions*, VIII, 84 as K. 60).

23) Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, I, 283.

latest inscription there was carved toward the end of 1877; this inscription celebrates Buddhist ceremonies sponsored in a local *wat* by the newly installed *stac trān*, and mentions the reassertion of Norodom's control over the region.²⁴

The phrase *me sa*, with the meaning of guardian spirits in general, occurs in two nineteenth century Cambodian texts preserved by the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. One describes a purification ceremony, sponsored by King Ang Duang, which was held at the royal capital of Udong in July-August 1859.²⁵ The other is an oath used in Cambodian civil trials, known as the *Pranidhan*.²⁶ Both texts contain long lists of *me sa*, associating each one with a particular site. The text from 1859 begins its list with the *me sa* of Udong. The *me sa* of Ba Phnom is not mentioned in this text, but the *Pranidhan* opens its list with the *me sa* of Ba Phnom, putting the guardian spirit of Udong in second place.²⁷ Since Udong was abandoned as Cambodia's royal capital in favor of Phnom Penh in 1866, the *Pranidhan* (which makes no mention of Phnom Penh) is probably at least as old as that. Both texts are interesting in their own right, and would reward comparative analysis.²⁸ What is important for our purposes is that the phrase *me sa* meant something like 'guardian spirit of Udong', if not of the whole kingdom, as

- 24) Aymonier, *Le Cambodge* I, 234; numbered by Coedès as K. 59. In the rubbing of K. 59 in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the personal name of the *stac trān* is illegible.
- 25) Institut Bouddhique (ed.) *Bram rac pidhi dvad samas* II, 172-179. For an incomplete and often inaccurate translation, see Adhémard Leclère, *Cambodge: fêtes civiles et religieuses*, Paris, 1916, 81-95.
- 26) The text is numbered MCC 56.036 in the archives of the Institut Bouddhique in Phnom Penh and dates from 1941. I am grateful to Pech Think for providing me with a typescript. Leclère, *Cambodge: fêtes civiles* 634 ff. has a translation of another version of this oath, from Kampot in the 1890s.
- 27) In the list translated by Leclère (note 26, above), the first *me sa* is associated with 'Phnom Bat'.
- 28) The toponyms in the 1859 text, many of which were identified by Leclère in his translation, include archaeological sites like Phnom Krom and Phnom Bakheng near Angkor which, in 1859, had not yet been 'discovered' by the French, as well as places like Nakorn Ratchasima (Korat) which had not been under Khmer control for a century at least. The toponyms in the *Pranidhan* seldom overlap with those in the document from 1859, and seem to have been chosen in many cases to meet the exigencies of rhyme.

Guesdon suggests,²⁹ less than twenty years before the sacrifices recalled by Dok Than in 1944 allegedly took place. The importance of Ba Phnom as the central *locus* of the cult can be inferred from the fact that only two small villages (and not hundreds) in Cambodia are called 'Me Sa' and there is no evidence, from the printed *corpus* of Cambodian legends, that a *nak tā* of this name was worshipped anywhere but on Ba Phnom.³⁰

To this cluster of associations between Uma (Durga) Mahisāsura-mardini, human sacrifice, royal patronage, purification, Ba Phnom and a species of guardian spirit known in the nineteenth century as *me sa*, a few supplementary points can be made. One is that the goddess Mahisāsura-mardini was sometimes associated with ritual suicide, and perhaps with human sacrifices in Pallava India—that is, at the time when Indianization was most extensive in Cambodia and when images of this goddess were most popular there.³¹ Another point, reinforcing the links between royal patronage, mountains, and human sacrifice comes from Wat Ph'u in southern Laos, where a twelfth century inscription incidentally refers to an image of Mahisāsuramardini.³² The site was the center of a cult honoring Siva in very early times, and a Chinese visitor around 600 AD reported that

'On the summit of the hill there is a temple, guarded at all times by a thousand soldiers, This is dedicated to [Siva] and human beings are sacrificed there. Each year the king goes to the temple and makes a human sacrifice at night.'³³

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- 29) Joseph Guesdon, *Dictionnaire Cambodgien-Français*, Paris, 1930, 1380. See also Institut Bouddhique (comp.) *Vajananukrom Khmaer* (Khmer Dictionary), Phnom Penh, 1967, 912, where this meaning of 'me sa' does not occur.
- 30) Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, I, 235 asserts that 'Me Sa' is a frequent toponym in Cambodia, but there are no references to places of this name in the index to *Le Cambodge* prepared in 1916 by G. Coedes. For two current toponyms containing the phrase, see United States Army Topographical Command, *Cambodia*, Washington, D.C. 1971, 185.
- 31) J. Ph. Vogel, 'The Head Offering to the Goddess in Pallava Sculpture', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (BSOAS) VI (1930-1932) 533-544.
- 32) Coedes, *Inscriptions* V, 288-293 (Inscription K. 366). See also G. Coedes, 'Nouvelles données sur les origines du royaume Khmèr' BEFEO XLVIII (1957) 209-220.
- 33) Ma Tuan Lin (trans. Marquis d'Hervey de St-Denis) *Ethnographie des peuples étrangers à la Chine*, Geneva, 1876, 483.

Charles Archaimbault records that memories of this custom were embedded in Lao oral traditions in the 1950s.³⁴ Oral tradition from the eleventh century Sivaite site of Phnom Chisor in southern Cambodia, likewise, associates the temple with living, disembodied heads.³⁵

The beheadings witnessed by Dok Than, and mentioned obliquely in the Cambodian chronicle, are examples of an ancient and at one time nearly universal tradition, studied in many cultures by many authors, whereby human beings are beheaded at planting time, often in honor of a goddess of the soil.³⁶ Annual imperial sacrifices in China and Vietnam, for example, are muted examples of this tradition, and so are the yearly buffalo-sacrifices that have been attested in so much of modern Southeast Asia.³⁷ What is unique about the nineteenth century sacrifices in Cam-

34) Charles Archaimbault, 'Le sacrifice du buffle à W'at P'ou' *France-Asie* (F-A) 118-120 (1956) 840. See also Pierre Lintingue, 'Légendes du Sud-Laos', *Bulletin des Amis du Royaume Lao* Nos 7-8 (1972) 213 ff.

35) Institut Bouddhique, *Brajum riaoñ preñ* VI, 56 ff.

36) For general surveys of the phenomenon, see J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (12 vols.) London, 1955 and E. Hogg, *Cannibalism and Human Sacrifice*, London 1958. More specialized studies, dealing with eastern and southern Asia include M.N. Das, 'Suppression of human sacrifice among hill-tribes of Orissa' *Man in India* (MI) XXXVI (1956) 21-48; W. Eberhard, *Cultures of South and East Asia*, Leyden, 1969; E. Erkes, 'Menschenopfer und kannibalismus in alten China' *Der Erdball* I/1 (1926) 1-6; Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, 'Beliefs concerning human sacrifice among the Hill Reddis', MI, XXIV (1944) 11-28; E.A. Gait, 'Human sacrifices in ancient Assam', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* (JRASB) LXVIII (1898) 56-65; R. Heine Geldern, 'Kopfjagd und menschenopfer in Assam und Burma.' *Mittelungen der anthropologische Gessellschaft in Wien* XLVII (1917) 1-65; R. Mitra, 'Human sacrifices in ancient India', *JRASB* XLV (1876) 76-118; Severine Silva, 'Traces of human sacrifice in Kanara', *Anthropos* L (1955) 577-592 and H.G. Quaritch Wales, *Religion and Prehistory in Southeast Asia*, London 1957.

37) See, for example, Charles Archaimbault, 'Religious Structures in Laos', *Journal of the Siam Society* (JSS) LII/1 (January 1964) 57-74; E. Aymonier, 'Notes sur les coutumes at croyances superstitieuses des cambodgiens' *E & R* XVI (1883) 178; Georges Condominas, 'Notes sur le tam bo mae baap aa kuon', *International Archives of Ethnography* XLVII, 127-159 and G. Condominas, *L'exotique est quotidien*, Paris, 1965, 168 ff; P. Guillemenet, 'Le sacrifice du buffle chez les Bahnar de la province de Kontum', *Bulletin des Amis de Vieux Hue* (BAVH) XXIX-XXX (1942), 118-154; R. Hoffet, 'Les Mois de la chaîne annamitique', *La Géographie* LIX/1 (1933) 1-43, A. Leclère, *Cambodge: fêtes civiles*, 577 ff; Paul Levy, 'Le sacrifice du buffle et la prédiction de tempts à Vientiane', *Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme* (IIEH) VI (1943) 69-91, and André Souyris Rolland, 'Contribution à l'étude du culte des Génies ou Neak ta chez les cambodgiens du Sud', *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises* (BSEI) XXVI (1951) 162-173.

bodia is that they took place in a Theravada Buddhist nation and enjoyed royal patronage. In tribal parts of Cambodia, in the mountains of Vietnam, and in southern Laos, there is evidence that human sacrifices of this general kind occurred from time to time in the nineteenth century.³⁸ But these sacrifices were among people not yet converted to Theravada Buddhism (in Cambodia and Laos) or to any of the religions with official standing in Vietnam.

The explanation for this anomaly does not lie necessarily in nineteenth century Cambodia (or the region around Ba Phnom) being 'more primitive' or 'less Buddhist' than other places on the mainland of Southeast Asia. Instead, as the two texts and other pieces of evidence reveal, there seems to have been a royal association with the mountain, carried out in the person of the institutionally 'Hindu' *stac trān*, who were the figures linking the king's ceremonial power with the surrounding regions of Cambodia.³⁹ Indeed, only three sites are associated with ritual beheadings in nineteenth century Cambodia: Ba Phnom, Thboug Khmum, and Kompong Svai;⁴⁰ each was the seat of power of one of the five *stac trān*.

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- 38) Citations include R. Baradat, 'Les Samre ou Pear' BEFEO XLI (1941) 76; Brengues, 'Notes sur les populations de la région des montagnes des cardamomes' JSS II (1905) 32; Claeys, 'A propos d'un sacrifice rituel. . .', Far Eastern Association of Tropical medicine, Tenth Congress, Hanoi, 1938, *Transactions*, 848; Guillemenet, 'Le sacrifice du buffle. . .', 131; P. Guillemenet, *Coutumier de la Tribu Bahnar*, Paris, 1952, 58 n.; Hoffet, 'Les Mois. . .' 42 and Erik Seidenfaden, 'Appreciation of the *Cahier* of BEFEO' JSS XXXIII/1 (January, 1941) 45.
- 39) On the connections between *stac trān* and the court 'brahmans' or *baku*, see Leclère, *Cambodge: fêtes civiles*, 610. Aymonier, *Cours de cambodgien*, 125 states that the *stac trān* shared with the king (and with no one else) the power to order capital punishment. In *Le Cambodge I*, 235, Aymonier writes that the annual sacrifices to Me Sa at Ba Phnom took place in the month of *pisakh* (April-May) which, according to Leclère, *Cambodge: fêtes civiles* 575 is sacred to Kali—a statement echoed by a nineteenth century Khmer manuscript (Fonds Indochinois 129 E) in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.
- 40) Porée-Maspero, *Rites agraires*, 246, 248. See also Adhémard Leclère, *Recherche sur le Droit Public des Cambodgiens*, Paris 1894, 189, which associates *stac trān* with human sacrifices, as they took office, in the early nineteenth century.

Another reason for the persistence of human sacrifices at Ba Phnom may have been the coexistence, at the popular level, of Indian religions there long after the conversion of the people to Theravada Buddhism. Jean Moura, writing of the 1870s, calls the region the 'most Hinduized' in Cambodia;⁴¹ in the 1860s, a German visitor, Bastian, had noticed 'local Brahmans wandering about or begging alms',⁴² and prayers invoking Siva and Kali by name were still being recited at village festivals (especially ones associated with the *nak tā*) in this part of Cambodia in the 1950s.⁴³

The sacrifices at Ba Phnom came at the end of an annual ceremony known as *loeñ nak tā* ('raising up the ancestors'). This festival still occurs throughout Cambodia at the beginning of the growing season, and its extensive regional variations have been studied by French and Cambodian scholars.⁴⁴ Dok Than recalls that

'In former times the festival of *loeñ nak tā* [at Ba Phnom] occupied three, five or even seven days. All the officials who were dependent on [the *stac irān* of] Ba Phnom assembled and made their shelter on the grounds of *wat Vihear Thom*, about a kilometer northwest of "Me Sa".'

Buddhist monks were called in, he continues, to recite unspecified prayers at the *wat* in the early days of the festival, and also to pray for the dead (*dār*)⁴⁵ at the cult sites of 'Me Sa' and at those of three other *nak tā*, located respectively to the north, south and west. There was Buddhist clerical participation, then, in the non-violent aspects of the cult of *nak tā*.⁴⁶ Interestingly, too, the sites of the *nak tā* mentioned in the passage stand at the corners of a roughly rectangular line, taking in

41) Moura, *Royaume du Cambodge* I, 173. See also Aymonier, *Le Cambodge* I, 174, 231 and 256.

42) A Bastian, 'Remarks on the Indo-Chinese Alphabets', *JRAS* III (1868) 69.

43) Institut Bouddhique, *Brah racpidhi* II, 183-184; Institut Bouddhique, *Brajum rioeñ preñ* VIII 39-40; 56; 138 and 182. See also Souyris Rolland, 'Contribution', 171-172.

44) For a general analysis, see Institut Bouddhique *Brah racpidhi* II, 1-36 and my review of Institut Bouddhique *Brajum rioeñ preñ* VIII, *JSS* LXI/2 (July 1973) 218-221.

45) Guesdon, *Dictionnaire*, 611.

46) Cf. Leclère, *Cambodge: Fêtes civiles*, 576, where monks retire before a buffalo is sacrificed to a *nak tā*.

at least the eastern slopes of the Ba Phnom,⁴⁷ just as the four other regions governed by *stac trān* were located to the southeast, north, northwest and northwest of Ba Phnom—that is, at the corners of a massive rectangle surrounding the hill itself, suggesting that it was thought of at one time as the central district of the five and, *via* the cult of ‘Me Sa’, the holiest and most important.⁴⁸

The sacrifices at Ba Phnom that seem to have taken place in 1877 were political ones, in a sense, which is perhaps why they are mentioned in the chronicle. Prince Siwotha had been linked, through his mother’s family with Ba Phnom; he had a following there;⁴⁹ and his rebellion against Norodom might have succeeded had the king not benefitted from timely and extensive French assistance.⁵⁰ Several millenarian rebels earlier in the century had rallied forces around Ba Phnom.⁵¹ Perhaps possession of the cult-site, or sponsoring a sacrifice there, was synonymous with legitimation. In any case, the rapidity with which Norodom named a new royal delegate to the region, and the way that this reassertion of political control is celebrated in the 1877 inscription, strongly suggest that the cult site was politically important to him and to his regime.

In closing, the persistence of a royally-sponsored cult honoring a consort of Siva with human victims in the late nineteenth century would indicate that Indian religion was less vestigial outside the confines of the

47) See below, and Aymonier, *Le Cambodge* I, 161.

48) By the mid nineteenth century, the *dei* of Treang, greatly reduced in size, was actually located west of Ba Phnom, rather than to the south near what is now the southern Vietnamese province of Soc Trang; see Malleret, *Archeologie*, I 139; at one time, however, this *dei* probably included most of the Mekong Delta. The map enclosed with G. Aubaret’s translation of the *Gia-Dinh Thung Chi* (Histoire et Description de la Basse Cochinchine.) Paris, 1863 lists the royal capital, Udong, as the capital of Treang, located to its southwest.

49) M. de Villemereuil (ed.) *Explorations et Missions de Doudart de Lagrée*, Paris, 1883, 344.

50) Archival sources indicate that French support in putting down the rebellion was a *quid pro quo* for Norodom’s accepting a French-sponsored programme of reforms earlier in February, 1877. See FOM Indochine A-30 (26), letter from Duperre to Minister of Colonies, 12 February 1877.

51) For some examples, see Leclère, *Histoire*, 252, 287, 334, 376, 415 and 457; Eng Sut, 1125, and Moura, *Royaume*, 143, 162 and 183.

court than has been thought. Likewise, the location of the cult-site of 'Me Sa' at the rough center of a rectangle marked out by the four other *locii* governed by *stac trān*, and the occurrence of the words *me sa*, in at least two nineteenth century texts to mean 'patroness of the capital city' all indicate that the cult of the goddess Mahisāsūramardini at Ba Phnom may have extended back for several hundred years and perhaps, under a different name, to an era preceding 'Funan' and the introduction in Cambodia of a recognizably Indian religion.

TRANSLATION

Nak Tā Me Sa (Ba Phnom)

About 1,500 meters to the east of the summit of Ba Phnom mountain, and about 500 meters southeast of the district offices of Ba Phnom, there is a small hillock, approximately 10 meters high, located at the edge of the forest. On the top of the hillock, in the space between large rocks lying helter-skelter against each other, there is a small shrine, nicely made of cement, measuring approximately two meters on each side. The building opens onto a field to the east, across which a cement walkway has been laid, culminating in a stairway that zig-zags up the hillock to the shrine. Inside the shrine the rear half is raised up approximately a meter off the ground, flush against the stones of the hill, and these stones have drawings of animals on them. Along this shelf there are 'Brahmanical' images—some large, some handsome, but all stuck together with cement to form heads, arms and feet as the case may be. On the ground in front of them is a jar for incense sticks, and two small statues of elephants, carved out of marble. On either side of the statues are vases offered to the shrine by the Chinese. In front of them there is an open space, paved with brick, wide enough for two people to kneel side by side and make their offerings.

The shrine and its furnishings are in a Chinese style, because the Chinese are the ones who most recently rebuilt the shrine. In former times, the *nak tā* had a (wooden) shelter (*arsam*) but it disappeared, and was replaced.

In the second of the three rows of statues at the back of the temple, exactly in the middle, is the upright statue of a female, approximately sixty centimeters tall, with her hair tucked up inside a diadem. The face is well-rounded, even plump; the breasts are globular and firm. The image [once had] four arms. The lower arm on the right side, thrust forward, bears a rectangular object, slightly indented . . . the upraised left arm bears a wheel. The lower one, reaching down, catches hold of the tail of [an animal that resembles] a tiger or a lion. The female presses down with her feet as if to lift the animal up. The statue stoops a little to the right, giving the impression that it is trying hard to lift up the beast; and has a boastful expression . . .

An old man named Dok Than, seventy years old, from the village of Rong Damrei, near the northern slopes of Ba Phnom, who showed us around the shrine, said, 'This is the statue of *nak tã* Me Sa, the most important of all the *nak tã* in Ba Phnom. Her cult site is the one most honored by the people of the district. This has been true since ancient times, and it is true today.'

There are fourteen other statues of *nak tã* there, of secondary importance. About fifty centimeters in front of the statue of Me Sa, there are two (statues of) *nak tã*, on either side of a space opening in front of her. These are [sometimes] called the *nak tã* of the gates; others call them the *nak tã* of right and left.

Approximately ten meters in front of them (at the foot of the stairs?) is the place where buffaloes are sacrificed to the *nak tã*. A hundred meters further east is the place where human beings were sacrificed in former times. Nowadays, this is an ordinary rice-field.

In former times—I have no idea of the date, for people's memories are imprecise—tradition asserts that a man was beheaded every year as an offering to *nak tã* Me Sa. Sacrifices were still being made (as recently as the 1860s and 1870s) in the era of *kralahom* Pang, *thommadechou* Haen and *thommadechou* Tei,* who succeeded each other as governors of Ba Phnom.

* that is, in the 1860s and 1870s. See Eng Sut, *Akkasar*, pp. 1155-1156.

An elderly man, Dok Than, related that approximately sixty years ago, during the administration of Tei (*sic*) he had twice been present at sacrifices at Ba Phnom. According to him, men or animals were killed and offered to the *nak tã* on a Saturday in the month of *ches*, (May-June) either during the waxing or the waning phases of the moon. According to . . . the governing official [nearby] at Kompong Trabek, the sacrifices took place on a Wednesday, during the waxing phase of the moon in the month of *ches*; an old man named In Va, aged seventy-three, however, who works as an adviser (*ajar*) at *wat* Prasat in the district of Kompong Trabek, said that the festival occurred on either Tuesday or Saturday in the waxing phase of the moon in the month of *pissakh* (April-May) or *chës*.

In former times, the festival of *loeh nak tã* used to occupy three, five or even seven days. All the officials dependent on Ba Phnom assembled and made their shelters on the grounds of *wat* Vihear Thom, about a kilometer northwest of Me Sa. To this place monks were invited to recite prayers. In the mornings, they would [perform the Buddhist ritual known as] *dar** at various places, including the cult-site of *nak tã* Me Sa, the cult site of *nak tã krohom ko* ('Red Neck') to the north of the hillock; the cult site of *nak tã sap than* ('Everyplace') on the slopes of the larger mountain, to the west, and *nak tã tuol chhneah* ('Fishing-Basket Mound') to the south. These prayers were recited every day until Saturday, the day of the festival of *loeh nak tã*.

As for the victims, only a man under sentence of death for a serious crime was chosen. He was informed of the choice beforehand, and was allowed to go and watch the activities [at the *wat*] just as if he were an ordinary man.

On the execution day, the victim was put into a neck-stock and led off to the sacrifice-site. The file of people behind him made a clamorous noise as they moved; in front and behind him were soldiers carrying swords, spears and fire-arms, followed by about a thousand people. The file moved off [first] to the cult site of *nak tã prah sruk* (Lord of the district), about five hundred meters east of *wat* Vihear Thom. The people paused there to honor the *nak tã* by setting off firecrackers and rifles.

* prayer for the dead

When this was over, the victim was led off to Me Sa, approximately 800 meters to the south. Here the site was properly prepared for the sacrifice, and the people humbly asked the *nak iā* to help them to be healthy and fortunate, to help the governing officials and all their assistants, and also the ordinary people. They joined together, too, in asking that enough rain fall, and at the proper times.

When the prayers were finished, the crowd shouted *yak oieu* three times, and then the executioner, who was entitled *monu* ('intelligence') and whose given name was In, holding a sword, danced hesitantly around the victim and then cut off his head with one stroke. The people looked to see what direction the victim's blood fell. If it fell evenly, or spurted up, then rain would fall evenly over the entire district. But if the blood fell to one side, rain would fall only on that side of the district.

At this point, rifles were fired off, and firecrackers lit, and there were all kinds of loud explosions. When people who had assembled at other cult sites—that is, those of *nak iā krohom ko*, *nak iā sap than* and *nak iā tuol chhneañ* heard the explosions from the cult site of Me Sa, they fired off rifles and set off firecrackers, too, in honor of these *nak iā*.

In the meantime, the victim's head was impaled and offered up (*thway*) to *nak ta* Me Sa, and so were a hundred pieces of his flesh. Fifty pieces were impaled on a stick and offered to *nak ta sap than* and fifty others were offered to *nak ta tuol chhneañ*.

In the era of *thommeadejou* Tei, people gave up killing men, and sacrificed buffaloes instead. Only rutting buffaloes were chosen, which were valued at more than 50 *riels*.

The character of the festival, however, was unchanged, and people made the same predictions about rainfall from a buffalo's falling blood as from a man's. When the buffalo was killed, its flesh, too, was divided up; one hundred pieces went to Me Sa; one leg was offered to *nak iā krohom ko* and another was offered to *nak iā sap than* but *nak iā tuol chhneañ*, it seems, was no longer honored. Perhaps the cult of this *nak ta* had been abandoned for a long time, since his cult site was far away.

There was one innovation in these buffalo-sacrifices. If at the time it was being prepared for execution the buffalo ran off, this was a sign that the *nak tã* would not accept it, and another buffalo was purchased to be sacrificed in its place.

In the years of *thommeadechou* Plun, the sacrifice of buffaloes was abandoned, and live ones were offered (symbolically) instead. About twenty years ago (c. 1924) people began to sacrifice a pig instead of a buffalo, but afterwards even this stopped, and now (1944) the sacrifice takes the form of an offering of cooked pork, purchased at the market . . .

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