

THE BUDDHA UNDER NAGA

Animism, Hinduism and Buddhism in Siamese Religion—A Senseless Pastiche or a Living Organism?

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The ridge poles of Siamese Buddhist temple roofs terminate in monster heads (Cho Fa); Vishnu riding on Garuda often presides at the gable-end; the presiding Buddha image may be seated on a Naga throne; the offerings can consist of pigs' heads, duck eggs, fermented fish and liquor.

A Westerner, accustomed to thinking of the historical Buddha as a philosopher, might be excused for supposing that the Siamese had created a monstrous misinterpretation of Buddhism, ignorantly mixing Buddhism with Hinduism and native Animism.

However, after many years of observation I begin to perceive in Siamese religion a wise and generous pattern that accommodates the teachings of the Sage together with Hindu state-craft, and the fertility concerns of rice farmers, without doing violence to any one of them.

It is a system that works, and has worked for many centuries, but today it is threatened by a new generation of thinkers, reformers, well-intentioned and well-educated, who have forgotten how symbolism works. The system is not easy to describe as it is not based on a scripture, and it is complicated by a number of difficulties.

Difficulties

At one level it is very easy to define Buddhism, Hinduism and Animism. For instance:-

1. If one practises Morality (Sila), Concentration (Samadhi) and Wisdom (Pañña), then this is Buddhism, because it is what the Buddha taught.
2. If one worships the Buddha with lustration, lights, incense and flowers, then this is Hinduism as one is treating the Buddha image as a Hindu god.
3. When liquor, pigs' heads and fowl are offered, this is Animism, because these are the sacrifices demanded by the local spirits; they are far from what was acceptable to the historical Buddha as we know him (or think we know him) from the scriptures.

These definitions are, however, oversimplifications, and like other over-simplifications they work only at the most simple level. Siamese religion is an extremely complex subject; Buddhism, Hinduism and Animism interrelate within it at a number of levels, and my simple definitions fail to explain the complex reality. In particular they fail in the face of the fact that ancient peoples produced similar rites and myths under similar circumstances, and that the Buddhism imported here was already contaminated to some extent by Indian earth-religion as Indian Buddhism grew up at a time when the Vedic religion of the Aryan invaders was reacting vigorously with that of the native gardeners. (I have already written at some length on this problem in *JSS* vol. 78 part 1, 1990).

Despite these restraints and the inherent complexity of Siamese religion, I have begun to perceive a pattern of mutual support between Buddhism, Hinduism and Animism here, in which the one accommodates the others without itself becoming sullied (in the case of Buddhism) or losing dignity (in the case of Hinduism) or being rendered infertile (in the case of Animism).

Buddhism is chiefly about world-renunciation; Hinduism is chiefly about world-organization; Animism is chiefly about fertility; they are not easily reconciled, any more than the Christian eschatology, the worldly orientation of classical Paganism and the fertility interests of the Barbarians. At the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. a committee of Jewish and Greek Christians came up with a compromise mythology (an all-male Trinity and a separate Mother of God) that would have made Jesus the Jew rend his garments and must have made the Greeks scratch their heads. Unlikely though this committee's product was, it worked to the extent that it became the basis for what we still call Christianity.

The early Buddhist Councils must also have been the occasion of high controversy, but their purpose was to standardize the memory of what the Buddha had taught. There is no evidence (as far as I can see) for an attempt to achieve an official compromise between Buddhist philosophy

and Hindu statecraft and the interests of the native agriculturalists. However, such a compromise was already taking place on an informal basis, the Vedic gods Indra and Brahma playing an honoured role in the Buddha's life story, and the Naga, bringer of rain, father of grain and older than all the gods, provides the Buddha with his kingly and fatal seat, as early as the 1st century B.C. at Barhut.¹

My picture of how Siamese religion works in all its complexity is still far from complete, but in this paper I should like to present pieces of the jigsaw puzzle which seem to me to form a pattern. I shall begin with the Buddha under Naga image with its serpent symbolism which made the Buddha and his teaching available to primitive agriculturalists who lacked a philosophy expressed in words but who understood the significance of symbols.

1. The Buddha under Naga

Why should the Buddha, Sage of Sages, be seated on a serpent throne?

Much has been written by Joseph Campbell and others about the serpent and all that he means.²

The serpent is master of all the elements and is lord over all levels of the universe. In heaven he dances as lightning in the rain-clouds; on earth he is at home in water and on land; his lordship of the underworld is attested by his frequenting its doors—the roots of trees, termite mounds, caves and springs.

In Siamese tradition the serpent is controller of water: as rainbow he drinks it up (*Rung-kin-nam*) and then releases it (*Nak-hai-nam*).

As most virulent bringer of death he is also healer, like Nehushtan, the bronze serpent of Moses that was worshipped in the Temple at Jerusalem until the reign of King Hezekiah in the 7th century B.C.³

The serpent is a shape-changer, now snake, now man or maiden, now the kingly Nagaraja, now the ubiquitous South and Southeast Asian Naga King's Daughter. With his ability to slough he is also deathless, renewing his youth instead of dying.

Among agriculturalists the serpent was above all the Lord of the Underworld, husband of Mother Earth, who renewed vegetation year after year following its annual death due to cold or dryness depending on latitude. He was the transformed victim of the priestess of the Goddess who presided over the murder of the Sacred King or Corn King or Rice King.

In later times when the sacrifice of the Sacred King was abandoned and the political king tended to reign rather longer than the Sacred King's allotted year, the serpent remained the symbol of royalty (like China's Imperial Dragon) in some cultures. In the Judaic tradition he was transformed into the Lord of Evil, despite Nehushtan, and the possibility that Yahweh himself may once have been a Sacred King/Serpent of the gardeners, and Azazel a Goat/Goat God of the nomads.

The imagery of the Adam and Eve story (closely

echoed by the Enlightenment of the Buddha with its hero, lady, tree and serpent) is thought to recall the earlier sacrifice of the Sacred King and his transformation into fertilizing serpent. The image is carried further by St. Paul, who calls Christ a second Adam; the Gospels that have Christ descend into "Hell" before ascending into Heaven; and a medieval Florentine relief showing a Tree of Life (or Tree of Jesse?) growing from the corpse of the Old Adam, bearing in its branches Christ (the New Adam) in the arms of the Virgin, thus continuing the cyclical motion of prehistoric agricultural magic, though in these images the serpent is suppressed.

The medieval Florentine icon gave me an insight into another icon, namely Vishnu Asleep on the Serpent, the significance of which had long escaped me. Why should sky-ranging Vishnu need a serpent for a bed?

In the icon we see the hero attended by his two consorts, Sri (Fortune) and Bhu (the Earth). Is he asleep upon the serpent as the myth tells us? Or is he dead and *becoming* the serpent? The lotus arising from his navel suggests the latter. The lotus arising from Vishnu's navel echoes the tree of life rising from the corpse of the Old Adam, and in its calyx is Brahma, creator and New Adam. So the ancient agricultural cycle of death and new life is completed, to be repeated and repeated for as long as man lived close to the earth, knowing that earth was the source of his sustenance and that to earth he would return.

This wisdom was understood for countless generations intuitively, needing no words to express it; symbols like the serpent told the whole story.

In more recent times (about the 5th century B.C. in Northeast India) society had developed to the extent that many of its members were relieved of direct dependence on the soil for their livelihood. For them the ancient, instinctive, symbolic wisdom was lost, just as stones and skulls and animals became dumb after having "spoken" eloquently since the very earliest childhood of man.

The ancient wisdom therefore had to be presented anew, this time in words which we call philosophy or Dharma.

Philosophy/Dharma has provided comfort for many, but for over 2,000 years most of mankind has lived in a no-man's-land of poorly understood or misunderstood symbols, and conflicting teachings of vast complexity that poorly reflect the unending life/death cycle that our prehistoric ancestors must have accepted with an equanimity we lack, who tend to view life as something to hold onto at all costs, and death as the end of all things.

Now we come to the essential point: the image of the Buddha alone is a philosopher teaching in words to those who have lost their contact with the soil; the Naga upon which the Buddha sometimes sits teaches wordlessly all the wisdom that gardeners ever knew about the comings and going of man on this thin earth where plants grow, between the bright sky and the darkness of the Underworld where new life rises from the corruption of flesh.

Of course we have been provided with an iconotropic explanation of the Buddha under Naga; how the Naga Muccalinda slithered from his pool to protect the newly-en-

lightened Buddha from the storm and flood sent by Mara to destroy the Buddha before he could preach the way to the liberation of beings from Mara's thrall.

I reject this explanation because of broad mythological principle:- The image does not derive from the myth; rather the myth is created later to explain (or falsify) the image.

In the image of the Buddha under Naga the figure of the Buddha teaches wisdom in words for those who enjoy a verbal culture; the Naga "speaks" silently to those who are poor in words but who understand symbolism.

In this icon we find Buddhism and Animism reinforcing each other in many subtle ways.

2. Hinduism

2.1 The Contribution of Vishnu

The highlight of a Siamese Buddhist Vihara (image house) or Uposatha (chapter house) is usually its gable-end with its elaborate decoration consisting of finial (Cho Fa), once a Naga head or monster-mask, jagged barge-board (Bai Raka), and Hamsa's Tails (Hang Hong), actually the tails of Makaras or aquatic monsters.

These decorative elements together tell a tale of sky, rain/rainbow, and fecundity, the universal animistic theme, *but at the centre* of the triangle formed by the gable there occurs a figure that must be of great significance because of its commanding position in the scheme.

The presiding icon on the gable end may be chosen from a variety of sources. It may be a monster mask or a serpent (Animist), or a Buddhist scene like the Enlightenment or the Great Renunciation, or it may be a Hindu subject like Indra (who occurs in Buddhist mythology), or Vishnu (who does not).

Though I have no statistics to prove my point, I claim with confidence that the most common icon on Siamese Buddhist gable ends is that of Vishnu riding on Garuda, and that Shaiva subject matter never occurs in this position.

A number of explanations for the occurrence of Hindu images on gable-ends may be proposed. For instance, Indra and Vishnu may represent the assemblage of divinities (Thep Prachum) who have come to worship the Buddha image within the Vihara. However, this fails to take into account the absence of Shaiva imagery.

A widely accepted explanation is that Vishnu on Garuda represents the King of Siam who is considered to be an incarnation of Vishnu, and that the icon attests to the royal support for Buddhism.

I believe that the latter proposal approaches the truth, but feel that it would be more convincing if Vishnu on Garuda occurred in all royally founded temples. But this is not the case. One also wonders why Vishnu Asleep on the Serpent, so common in Cambodian monuments, does not occur (though the serpent Vasukri occurs on the foundations of the Prince Priest Paramanujitjinorasa who in lay life had been Prince Vasukri).

My proposal to explain the frequent occurrence of

Vishnu on Garuda on Buddhist buildings is that the palaces of the Siamese kings of the Ayudhya Period were designed by Brahmins using the South Indian Vishnu temple as their model, with Vishnu on the gable ends and rampant Garuda in the corners between the gables.

No roofs remain from the Ayudhya period to support my claim, but the 19th century Dusit Maha Prasat and the Prasat Phra Thepbidon are excellent examples.

I propose that when Siamese kings of the historical period began constructing Buddhist temple buildings they based their works on the noblest architecture they knew, namely their own palaces with their Vishnu imagery. The architects being without guile (or perhaps very clever indeed) transferred the image of Vishnu on Garuda from palace to temple and allowed it to speak for itself of the intimate and delicate relationship between palace and temple, between royalty and religion, at once triumphant and subservient.

In this case of Vaishnavism and Buddhism we find yet another dimension of mutual support without intrusion.

2.2 The Contributions of Shiva.

Almost exactly in the middle of the temple complex of Wat Pho, a little to the west of the western Vihara, there is an artificial mountain on which stands a large, beautiful Mukhalingam. It stands within the view of the presiding image in the Vihara, which happens to be a Buddha under Naga. The Lingam, easily datable to the first millennium A.D., is ignored by the monks but receives constant worship from pious local people.

A Shiva Lingam in such a prominent place in an important Buddhist temple comes as something of a shock to the informed Westerner, but it raises no blushes on Siamese cheeks. I have not been able to discover when it was placed there or by whom, but, given the history of Wat Pho, it must have been by royal order.

Why was it placed there at Wat Pho? I do not believe that a Council was called to discuss the pros and cons. Rather the decision must have been based on subconscious wisdom. The Siamese are as aware as Westerners of the Buddha's world-denying philosophy, but they are also aware that until Enlightenment is attained and worldly attachment overcome, mankind needs fertility. The Wat Pho Lingam stands there not to deny or to sully Buddhist doctrine but as a temporary alternative or counterbalance to renunciation for those who are not yet ready to renounce.

At Wat Pho there is an interesting west-east progression from the fertilizing Lingam to the Buddha-under-Naga in the western Vihara that tells both stories, to the presiding Buddha image in the Uposatha hall to the east where there is neither Lingam nor Naga.

The case of the Lingam at Wat Pho is perhaps unique. However, many other large Buddhist temples with their rows of Buddha images in the cloisters reflect exactly the Shiva temples of South India with their rows of Lingams in the galleries, for instance at the Kailasanatha at Kanchipuram and the Rajarajeshvara at Tanjavur. The Siamese Buddha images,

like the South Indian Lingams, form a focus for annual lustration and merit-making by families who claim a Buddha-image/Lingam as their ancestral shrine.

Every Buddhist temple in Siam exhibits an affinity to the ideal Shiva shrine. The 'Luk Nimit' buried under the floor of the Uposatha hall, surrounded by eight others under the Sima stones, reflects exactly the presiding Lingam surrounded by the eight subsidiary shrines (Ashthapari-varadevalaya).

Shaivism in Siam has nothing to add to Buddhism, but it forms a bridge between the fertility interests of rice farmers and the world-rejecting teachings of the Sage. This is not surprising because even in India Shiva is the Joker who forms a link between asceticism and lust, and between the pure sky and the polluted/polluting earth that feeds us.⁴

3. Shakti—back to Animism

Here we leave the Buddhist temple and go to the rice field where a fair amount of Siamese religion takes place.

It is my belief that Siamese Animism is so similar to the religion of the Indian Shaktas that no borrowing was necessary, or if borrowing occurred it would be unrecognizable as such. This may seem hard to accept in view of the radical differences in imagery.

The Siamese rice goddess (Mae Phosop) as depicted today is a pretty maiden with a sheaf of ripe rice in her hand. In contrast the Indian Kali is a ravening hag with a human head held by its hair in one hand and a sickle in the other.

These very different icons are not as irreconcilable as they may seem:-

- In the case of Kali, the sickle is the clue as it indicates that the human head held by its hair has been 'reaped'; it is in fact a sheaf of rice and Kali is a Rice Goddess.
- In the case of Mae Phosop one may recall that the Siamese have traditionally considered rice as a human being. At one time lullabies were sung to the new sprouts; when ready for transplanting it became 'bold' (Kla) like a teenager; later when ears formed it became 'pregnant' (Thong); after reaping some of the crop was made up into 'corn dollies'

which were solemnly cremated, their ashes being mixed with the seed of the new sowing.⁵

This intense identification of rice with man must have rendered reaping a traumatic activity, amounting to the slitting of the throat of a being that had been lovingly tended from infancy to maturity. The trauma is vividly expressed in the Kali icon; it is suppressed in Mae Phosop, but the two images both tell the same story. It is another segment of the life-death cycle:- murder and eating:- we eat what we kill; life is sustained by death. Here again we have Animism co-existing with Buddhism (though set a little apart) and supplementing rather than subverting it.

Conclusions

I submit the above observations with some confidence because none of it is new. In modern times the story began to emerge when mythologists, anthropologists and psychologists started comparing notes and the higher criticism had liberated biblical scholars from their blinkers.

Some two or three thousand years ago the Sages tried with varying degrees of success to put the ancient wisdom (in fact no more than the common facts of life and death) into words, and make it bearable for man who was losing his innate equanimity.

Much, much earlier than that primitive man perceived his whole environment as sacred. The hunter begged the pardon of his prey and the gardener tended his crops as his children, and both hunter and gardener must have known themselves to be murderers of what they ate, but rite and symbol rendered the deadly business of living bearable.

In prehistoric times when every stone and bone and tree talked and talked, the forest must have been a noisy place and may have prompted sparse ancient populations to seek the quiet of empty places like the deserts of the Middle East where only the sky had a voice.

However this may be, I submit that Siamese religion is rich in information for the study of man and his environment. The amalgamation of Buddhism, Hinduism and Animism here is not an ignorant clash of ideologies, but reflects a wise, pre-conscious matching of the Serpent and the Sage to tell a tale available to both intellectuals and farmers.

NOTES

1. Boisselier, J., in *Silpawathanatham*, year 12, vol. 2., Bangkok.
 2. Campbell, Joseph, *Occidental Mythology*, Penguin 1988.
 3. Friedman, Richard Elliot, *Who Wrote the Bible?* Harper & Row 1989.

4. Shulman, David D., *Tamil Temple Myths*, Princeton University Press 1980.
 5. Giteau, M., *The Civilization of Angkor*, New York 1976.



Figure 1. Naga Muccalinda, from Bharhut, 1st century B.C., now in the National Museum, New Delhi.



Figure 2. Panel (Tree of Life) from the Pulpit in San Leonardo in Arcetri, Florence.



Figure 3. Vishnu asleep on the serpent-bed, Prasat Phanom Rung, 11th Century.



Figure 4. Gable-end at Na Phra Men, Ayudhya; early 17th century?



Figure 5. Kali of Kalighat Temple, Kalighat, 1875-1900.



Figure 6. Mae Phosop, from a popular almanac.

