

GOD OF THE DEAD, GOD OF THE LIVING

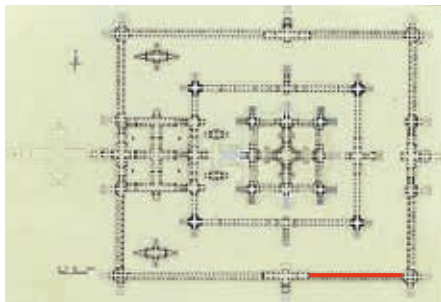
Belief and Ritual Practices around Yama in Cambodia¹

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Along with a few Southeast Asian nations, Cambodia is known as one of the oldest “Indianized states”. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that a god such as Yama was formerly very well known (Ph. 1-4). Let’s take a most significant example: Yama is depicted in bas-relief in the center of a whole panel devoted to scenes of heavens and hells in the Southern Gallery of Angkor Wat (Ph. 5-6). The panel also depicted scenes of torture in hells showing damned souls conducted by torturers, Yama’s servants called *Kinkara* (Ph. 7-8).



Ph. 1-4 Yama



Ph. 5 Plan of Angkor Wat



Ph. 6 Yama seated on Buffalo



Ph. 7-8 Kinkara, Yama’s servants

1 This short note just follows a slide show to a public audience at the City Hall of Fukuoka on March 3, 2018. Please refer to the joint PowerPoint document.

Stone inscriptions from different periods also mention these torturers.

1) A 7th century Sanskrit inscription:

“...*sakopajihmitamukhair abhyāhataḥ kiṅkaraiḥ*...”

“...Beaten by (Yama’) servants with mouth grimacing by anger...”

2) An 11th century Khmer and Sanskrit inscription:

- Khmer text

“...*svey rājabhaya ta nānā prakra... dau jāta dvātriṃṣa naraka yamaloka*...”

“...will undergo punishment of all kinds...and will go into the thirty-two hells and *Yama’s realm*...”

- Sanskrit text

“...*dandair lohamayaiḥ prah ritatanūgrāḥ kiṅkarair uddhataiḥ*...”

“...beaten with iron sticks by violent (Yama’) servants...”

In modern Cambodia we often see scenes of hell with Yama and the torturers painted in different places of Buddhist monasteries (Ph. 9-11).



Ph. 9-11 Yama = King of Law and Order

General Considerations

The location of Yama mounted on a buffalo as the Regent of the South, his position as the supreme judge of the hereafter, is totally conformed to Indian lessons. My point is that this special god gets closer and closer to the everyday life of Cambodian in the course of the religious history of the country.

But first, who is Yama? He is a god, and a most special one. While all the other gods ignore death, he is the only one who has experienced it. Since all non-divine beings are doomed to death, and since human are doted with intelligence, Yama is automatically the human’s closest god. This is how the story roughly goes:

In an immemorial epoch, there was no other creature but gods. There was no night, no darkness but light. In other words there was no time. Yama had a twin sister called Yami. Then Yama dies. Yami falls in a deep sorrow and incessantly cries over her brother’s death. All the other gods come and ask her: “why do you cry”. She answers: “because my brother died”. Gods’ question: “when did he die?” Answer: “Today!”. And she continues

weeping. Later and later on, the same sequences just repeat endlessly: “why do you cry?”, “because my brother died”, “when?”, “today”. Then the gods agree with one another to create night. Therefore time starts to exist. Light and darkness –or day and night– just alternate as repeated cycles without and end. To the question: “when did he died”, the answer is “yesterday”, then “the day before yesterday”... Alongside pain and sorrow go down and down to finally fade away. Indeed we know the wearing effect of time.

From the myth, one can deduce that Yama is at the origin of time, therefore to humankind, since the latter is totally prone to time. But time is cyclical, since day and night just repeat endlessly. Such is life: birth ends provisionally with death but the reemerges in a new life’s cycle.

As mentioned above, and conformed to Indian idea, Yama is the supreme judge of the hereafter. Following death, our souls unavoidably meet with him. Then he sends us to such or such abode in the afterlife, theoretically according to what we have committed in our human life we just quitted. Nevertheless people also condition the quality of the rebirth on the way cremation is conducted, and on the socio-moral prestige of the main officiant conducting the ritual.

Stress Put on Re-incarnation

Yama is not only the god of the dead. Since he is at the origin of time, and since time is cyclical, he is also associated with rebirth. This dimension is clearly underlined in Cambodia since ancient time. It is then quite understandable that in the North-East of Angkor Thom’s royal palace (functioning as such from 9th to 15th centuries), there is an area believed to have functioned as a cremation field called “Terrace of the Leper King” (Ph. 12-13). The walls of this construction show a series of stories punctuated with grimacing characters, which reminds us of *Kinkara* seen at Angkor Wat (Ph. 14-17). On the “terrace” (atop the construction) was installed a statue of Yama with his assessors (Ph. 18).

Angkor Thom was abandoned in the 15th century, and the ensemble royal palace and cremation ground ceased to function as such. Many traditions linked to that area were gradually forgotten. Several centuries later the burial ground was called the “Terrace of the Leper King”, the statue of Yama in question being interpreted as a (legendary) king affected by leper, because of his appearance: the statue, with some fingers mutilate, was covered by lichen, bird droppings, etc. (Ph.



Ph. 12-13 Angkor Thom compound

18). In the 20th century, scholars discovered that it's a statue of Yama flanked by his assessors, thanks to a short inscription engraved on its pedestal. He is called the "Supreme King of Order" (Ph. 19).

Let's recall that the "Terrace of the Leper King" (cremation ground) is located to the North-East of Angkor Thom's royal palace, because this direction is that of re-incarnation. Therefore it is also no surprise that the present-day royal palace and its adjacent cremation field in Phnom Penh follow the same lay-out pattern²: closed to the North-East corner of the palace is what we call Veal Men, which is a cremation ground for kings and for highest monks in the Buddhist clergy (Ph. 20). In reality, in the course of time, the South as the direction of Yama seems to be gradually forgotten or neglected in favor of the North-East.



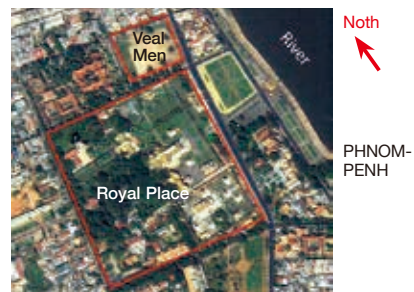
Ph. 14-17 Terrace of the Leper King, sculptures of Kinkara



Ph. 18 Yama (Leper King)



Ph. 19
Dharmādhipati-Adhirāja
= Supreme King of Order



Ph. 20 Veal Men and Royal Palace,
Phnom Penh

² Not to mention Bangkok Grand Palace and the field called Sanam Luang.

Cremation

Now let's come to a modest village in Angkor area today. We notice that the pavilion for cremation is in the center of a light enclosure with a gate entrance in each main direction (Ph. 21).

Cremation Area sketches the general pattern of the enclosed area: funeral pyre in the center, location for Buddhist monks and, most important, in the North-East corner, an altar for Yama linked by cotton thread to five "sand mounds"³ (Ph. 22). Yama's altar and sand mounds, in turn, are linked to the top of the central pavilion for pyre (Ph. 23-24). In evening time, while cremation is in progress, the pyre burning the coffin down, officiants, family's members, and villagers prayed Yama for the good reincarnation of the dead (Ph. 25).

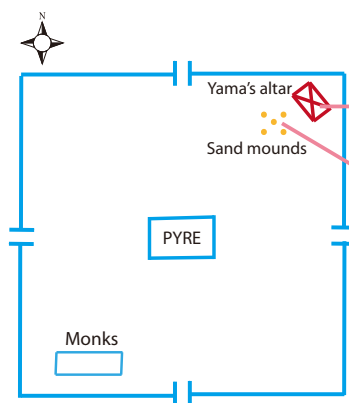
For the sake of the dead, cremation has to be properly accomplished by the living. And all the ritual is addressed to Yama. The living themselves will die one day. Their cremation will depend on others, who will be still living, and who will perform for them necessary rituals addressing Yama. This god is the central god, not to say the unique god, in the affair of death-reincarnation. He is the top of a triangle, at a side of which are the living, and another side the dead.



Ph. 21 Cremation Area



Ph. 25 Special prayer to Yama while pyre is in action



Ph. 22 Sketch of cremation area



Ph. 23 Sand mounds



Ph. 24 Yama's altar

3 Sand mounds stand for the world newly regenerated. They can be systematically seen everywhere in the New Year (mid-April), because New Year is new time, therefore the mounds stand for new space. Let's recall that time is cyclical, which means that space (the world) is gradually worn out as time progresses. When time comes to an end, the world burns out. A new cycle of time appears and a new world is born.

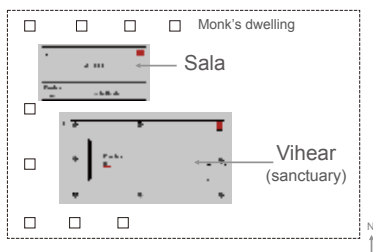
Fortnight of the Dead

The “Fortnight of the Dead” is a collective ceremony lasting a whole fortnight in September-October. The aim is to give a body to a category of wandering souls called *Prèt*, living in different abodes of hell, so they can reincarnate. A pediment from 13th century depicts starving *Prèt* imploring the god Lokeshvara (standing in the center) to save them from their dreadful condition (Ph. 26). Not only dead people of the family is targeted, but the ritual is meant to save all the wandering souls, be they your relative or not. Although the event is rooted in Hindu Cambodia, today it is intimately associated with Theravada Buddhism.

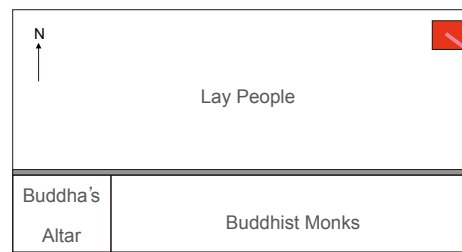
Repetitive ritual during the fortnight happens mainly in two building: the *Sala* and the *Vihear* (Ph. 27). Specially for the event, an altar for Yama is erected in the North-East corner of the *Sala* (Ph. 28-29). Each evening, around 7pm, people gather there to say a prayer to this special god (Ph. 30-31). Just after that, they make rice-ball (using sticky rice), called *Bay bèn*. Each ball stands for a body offering an opportunity of reincarnation to wandering souls. While making rice-ball, each one whispers a short prayer asking *Kinkara* (the torturers, above) to facilitate the conveyance of the rice-balls to the *Prèt* (Ph. 32-34).



Ph. 26 Prèt, starving beings suffering in hell



Ph. 27 A Buddhist monastery



Ph. 28 Sala in the fortnight of the dead



Ph. 29 Altar



Ph. 30-31 Sala in the fortnight of the dead

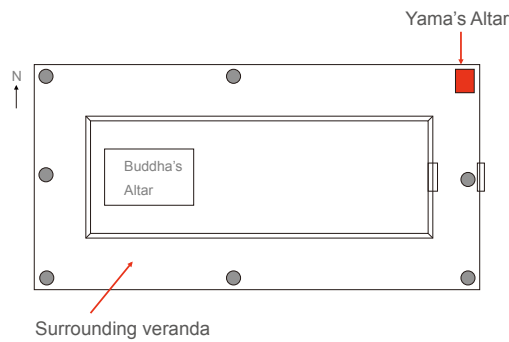


Ph. 32-33 Sala in the fortnight of the dead



Ph. 34 Rice-balls: potential bodies for the wandering souls

Each night is a rather short one, since before dawn, people has to wake up and proceed to a three-turn circumambulation of the veranda of the *Vihear*, clockwise, bringing rice-balls, starting from east side (Ph. 35-36). During the circumambulation some rice-balls are thrown away, some others put on different places, all intended for the *Prèt* (Ph. 37-41). One gesture to be noticed: each time, arriving at the North-East corner, people makes a halt, prostrate themselves before Yama's altar and say a prayer which last a few minutes. Some put rice-balls on the altar or nearby (Ph. 42-44). Soon appear the first sunbeams, and then everyone leaves the *Vihear*, while the officiants alone perform some rites (Ph. 45-46).



Ph. 35 Vihear (sanctuary)



Ph. 36 People bring rice-balls



Ph. 37-41 Process of throwing rice-balls



Ph. 42-44 Vihear's veranda: Yama's altar at the north-east corner



Ph. 45-46 Officiants perform some rites

The moment chosen for throwing rice-balls is most significant. It marks the passage from darkness to light, from the obscure hell's condition to reincarnation into a new life. We have just seen the crucial importance of Yama. Here again, Yama is not only the god of death, but the god of rebirth as well. This rebirth is conditioned to the rituals properly performed by the living. Without the living the *Prèt* would be condemned forever to wander. The living directly deals with Yama all along the rituals. Considering the triangle noticed in cremation we see no difference here.

From Human to Rice: Ritual Opening the Rice Cultivation Cycle

Not only human life, but also everything linked to human existence is subjected to the same repeated cycle. In traditional Cambodia rice appears as the most striking parallel to human being, because its very complex cultivation is organized in harmony with natural seasons' alternation. From far rice is the most "cultural" cultivation. In all individual rites of passage, rice (husked and unhusked) is present as a constant ritual element. To some respect, Cambodians consider rice as their sibling or their twin sister. A sole example, chosen among the less spectacular from a remote village of the Angkor region, is proposed here. It concerns a ritual of opening a new cycle of rice cultivation, in May, when the first rains appear.

Photo 47, in its center, shows an enclosed area with constructions in light materials in view to perform a ritual opening a new rice cultivation cycle. On the extreme right, north to the enclosure and close to some trees is the hut of the Neak Ta⁴ of the village. A closer look at the area from the west let the enclosure distinctly appears, which marks its particular value (Ph. 48). To the north-east (on the left side), under a yellow parasol, is the altar of Yama that we can hardly make out. Photo 49 is a closer look at the Neak Ta's house, the details of which will be seen later.

The location of the enclosed area to the South of the Neak Ta's house is of no coincidence (Ph. 50). It is a reminiscence of Hindu cosmology, very well known in ancient Cambodia. Here, the animist god Neak Ta clearly occupies the position of the Hindu god on the Meru. In the North-East corner of the enclosed area is Yama's altar, and linked to it by thread, five sand mounds (Ph. 51), exactly the pattern as mentioned in (Photo 25) above. Comparison is not to be looked at the very idea of cremation, but to its aim: the re-incarnation, the re-birth in a new cycle of life. Here a new monsoon cycle is giving birth to a new rice cultivation cycle. Once more the parallel between human

4 Neak Ta is the village ancestor spirit closely associated with agriculture.



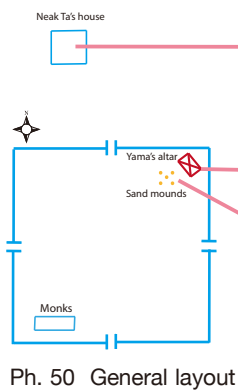
Ph. 47 Enclosed area for ritual performance



Ph. 48 Sacred enclosure



Ph. 49 Neak Ta's house



Ph. 50 General layout



Ph. 51 Sand mounds and Yama's altar



Ph. 52-53 Neak Ta's house and rice seeds

and rice is very strong. Yama is not acting as a judge like for the dead persons. What justifies his presence here is the farmer's wish for a best rice cycle renewal.

Close to the Neak Ta, for whom a stone stands for, packs of rice-seeds are placed (Ph. 52-53) to receive from him the necessary benediction for a best growth, in view of a most fruitful harvest in the end of the cycle.

At a very first glance, it could appear strange that layout for cremation on one hand and that of rice cultivation on the other look alike (see, sketches below). But the mystery quickly disappears when the ideas of cyclical time, death-rebirth, re-incarnation, cycle renewal, etc. are considered.

