

In Search of the Khmer *Bhikkhunī*: Reading Between the Lines in Late Classical and Early Middle Cambodia (13th–18th Centuries)

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Was there ever a tradition of *bhikkhunī* in Cambodia? The precincts of *wats*, or Buddhist temples, in modern-day Cambodia usually include a handful of white-clad, shaven-headed women, whose status hovers somewhere between *upāsikā* and novice monk. Yet the inscriptions of the past refer often to a corpus of women as “nuns”. What are we to make of this seeming dichotomy? This paper explores the inscriptions of the 13th to 18th centuries – the period in which Theravada Buddhism became entrenched as the national religion – for an answer.

Introduction

According to most scholars, the *bhikkhunī* tradition either died out in Cambodia long ago, or has never existed.¹ This has not prevented a tradition of female asceticism from continuing, however;² *upāsikā* of advanced precepts, known in Cambodia today as *daun chi* or *yeay chi*, are regular features at *wats* and Buddhist

¹Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 74; Peter Skilling, ‘Female renunciants (*nang chi*) in Siam according to early travellers’ accounts’, *Journal of the Siam Society* 83, 1–2, 55–61, at 55.

²Elizabeth Guthrie makes this point in her excellent chapter, ‘Khmer Buddhism, female asceticism, and salvation’, in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 133–149.

ceremonies. Some are popular healers.³ More than laywomen but less than ordained nuns, they occupy a liminal space that relegates them to a supporting role for male novices and ordained monks, when indeed they are permitted to live at the *wat* at all.⁴ Yet this modern incarnation of *daun chi* is very different from earlier models, and the passivity that they are expected to embrace upon donning the black *sampot*, the traditional length of cloth wrapped around the waist, and white blouse of a five- or eight-precept *yeay chi*, or the white robes of a ten-precept *daun chi*, is a far cry from the agency that women in other periods exhibited in regard to their karmic well-being. In this paper I examine inscriptions in Sanskrit and Old Khmer, ranging from the 13th to the 18th centuries, for evidence of a tradition of Buddhist *bhikkhunī* in Cambodian history – and what the absence of the institution may tell us.

The advent of (state) Buddhism, 12th-13th centuries

Shortly after the most famous of Cambodia's temples, known today as the Angkor Wat, was finished in the middle of the 12th century, the rulers of the Khmer Empire turned to Buddhism. Little is known of the kings who ruled immediately after Sūryavarman II (r. 1113-c.1150), for whom Angkor Wat was built; but there is some evidence to suggest that Dharāṇindravarman II and his successor Yaśovarman II were tolerant of Buddhism – indeed, it would have been peculiar had they not displayed an interest in something other than Śaivism or Vaiṣṇavism, as new forms of religious expression were sweeping the region at the same time.⁵ It was in the reign of Jayavarman VII (r. 1181-c.1220), however, that Buddhism was elevated to the status of state religion, in a form that permitted the inclusion of former brahmanical deities, local spirits, ancestors, and Buddhism that dis-

³Alexandra Kent, 'The recovery of the king', in *People of virtue: Reconfiguring religion, power and moral order in Cambodia today*, ed. Alexandra Kent and David Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 109-127.

⁴Research carried out by the Buddhist Institute in 2006 revealed that most Dhammayut *wats* do not permit *daun chi* to reside there. See *The Situation of Daun Chi in Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute/HBF-Asia, 2006).

⁵See for example Thomas Hunter's exploration of the complexity of politico-religious dynamics at work in maritime Southeast Asia around the same time: 'The body of the king: Reappraising Singhasari period syncretism', *JSEAS* 38, 1 (2007), 27-53.

played Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana elements.⁶ Cambodia is one of the few places where the earth goddess, Preah Neang Dharani, has enjoyed enduring popularity; excised from iconography elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia, she has maintained a presence from at least the late twelfth century in Cambodia, when the king Jayavarman VII caused her image to be included with other members of the Buddhist pantheon in four of the temples erected during his reign.⁷ Members of the elite had clearly embraced Buddhism prior to Jayavarman VII's reign, as the eulogy of his chief queen, Jayarājadevī, is replete with references to Buddhism. In fact, it is from this Sanskrit inscription that we learn a great deal about the role of women in twelfth-century Buddhism.

Composed by her elder sister, Indradevī, inscription K. 485 reveals that it was the latter who first instructed Jayarājadevī in Buddhist doctrine. Jayarājadevī, separated from her husband while he was in Champā, practised *tapas*, a form of intense meditation sometimes accompanied by acts of mortification. One of these may have been cutting off her hair.⁸ Buddhism, however, provided a steadying influence:

Queen Indradevī having taught her as a disciple, considering the Buddha, the best-beloved, the wisest for achieving fulfillment, he who passed through hell-fires and the ocean of sorrow, Sugata, his path she followed.⁹

After the safe return of her husband, Jayarājadevī performed many pious acts. The inscription relates that “she rained down magnificent gifts” as donations, that “having seen the fruits of Buddhism”, she “caused her dancers to perform the *Jāṭaka* tales”,¹⁰ and, most significantly:

Having taken as her own daughters a group of poor girls, abandoned by their mothers, she placed them in the village known as Dhar-

⁶This interpretation of Jayavarman VII's adoption of Buddhism was first suggested in 1999 (Trudy Anne Jacobsen, *Buddhist Flesh, Hindu Bones: The Legitimation of Jayavarman VII*, Honours Thesis, University of Queensland, 1999). More recently, Peter D. Sharrock has given a much more sophisticated argument along the same lines, in ‘Garuda, Vajrapāṇi and religious change in Jayavarman VII's Angkor’, *JSEAS* 40, 1 (February 2009), 111–151.

⁷Elizabeth Guthrie, ‘Outside the sima’, *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies* 2 (2001), pp. 7–18.

⁸K. 485, verses 54–57, in *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. 3 [hereafter *IC* 3], ed. and trans. George Coedès (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1942), 168.

⁹K. 485, verse 59, in *IC* 3, 169.

¹⁰K. 485, verse 73, in *IC* 3, 178.

makīrti, renowned for its virtue, prosperous and enjoying good fortune. And so, she entered into religion, with clothes, goods and prescribed rites, the entire village of Dharmakīrti, celebrated for its learning, always mindful of Dharma.¹¹

After the death of Jayarājadevī, which occurred after 1191 as she made donations of ornaments to the temple Preah Khan,¹² the foundation stele of which bears that date, her elder sister Indradevī was taken by Jayavarman VII as his queen.¹³ He appears to have had a genuine respect for her intellect, as we learn from the inscription that the king placed Indradevī in charge of three centres of Buddhist learning, called Nagendratuṅga, Tilakottara and Narendrāsrama, where she taught audiences of women.¹⁴

What, then, are we to make of the Chinese traveller Zhou Dagan’s assertion that despite a year’s residence in 1296-7 he saw no Buddhist nuns in Yaśodhara-pura?¹⁵ Ian Harris characterized this omission as “odd”,¹⁶ but perhaps it is not unexpected. Zhou complained frequently throughout his account of not being able to observe religious ceremonies or learn more about the intricacies of certain groups of people, including the *banjie*, or *paṇḍita*, about whom he truculently admitted “I don’t know what the source of their doctrine is.”¹⁷

On the other hand, the religious order to which Zhou referred as *basiwei*, and which Peter Harris (following Cœdès) translated as *tapasvi*,¹⁸ *did* have female

¹¹K. 485, verses 79 and 80, in *IC* 3, 171. Hema Goonatilake’s rendition of the same verses is not correct and seems to be a summary of other translations in French and English rather than a translation of the Sanskrit transliteration (‘Rediscovering Cambodian Buddhist women of the past’, in *Innovative Buddhist women: Swimming against the stream*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo [Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000], 84-90, at 85).

¹²K. 485, verse 83, *IC* 3, 179. The “Sugata Śrī Jayaśrī” in this verse is the posthumous name of Jayavarman VII’s father, Dharanindravarman II, whose likeness was housed in the temple now known as Preah Khan.

¹³K. 485, verse 95, *IC* 3, 172. I suspect this was carried out in order to maintain a close alliance with the sisters’ family, as the women of the land were believed to be its true guardians. See Trudy Anne Jacobsen, *Lost Goddesses: The denial of female power in Cambodia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 49-58.

¹⁴K. 485, verses 98 and 99, *IC* 3, 180.

¹⁵Zhou Dagan, *A record of Cambodia: The land and its people*, trans. Peter Harris (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2007), 53.

¹⁶Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, 25.

¹⁷Zhou Dagan, *A record of Cambodia*, 52.

¹⁸Zhou Dagan, *A record of Cambodia*, 104, note 26.

officials, although again Zhou was unable to investigate their exact practice.¹⁹ The fact that the word *tapas* appears is indicative of a brahmanical sect (although not necessarily a Śaivite one) – and, as we have learned, only a century earlier Jayarājadevī had been performing *tapas* before her conversion. Additionally, one of the places in which Indradevī taught Buddhist doctrine was Narendrāśrama, literally “the *āśrama* of Narendra”. Although a Sanskrit word usually associated with brahmanical sects, the sense of *āśrama* is a secluded place used specifically for religious instruction. There are two hypotheses to be drawn from this: First, that Zhou confused Buddhist nuns with women who were connected with sects that worshipped brahmanical gods, and second, that the nature of the places in which Buddhist women were occupying at the end of the 13th century precluded Zhou from accessing, or indeed, knowing about, their existence. In any event, we should probably not take Zhou at face value in his dismissal of female Buddhist practitioners, as they appear again in the epigraphic record in the 16th and 17th centuries.

The context of early Middle Cambodia (c. 15th-18th centuries)

Yaśodharapura lost its status as capital of the Khmer Empire in the middle of the 15th century as the Khmer kings moved south of the Tonle Sap.²⁰ Over time, the name of the city evolved into *Mahānagara*, or “great city”. It remained, however, a place of religious significance. Despite a brief backlash against Buddhism at one point in the late classical period, Buddhist motifs were incorporated in the art and architecture of the site, often resulting in hybrid forms that were retained throughout the Middle Period.²¹ Other elements of non-Theravada tradition can also be found; significantly, many concern women. Adhémard Leclère described a very old text he had discovered in a Cambodian pagoda at the end of the nineteenth century that spoke of a female *bodhisattva*, sister of the Buddha Tibangkar, who earned her status by her meritorious acts toward her brother. In his footnotes, he said that this was a tenet peculiar to the Cambodian context; he had never come across such a prediction in any other country or literary tradition. Buddha im-

¹⁹Zhou Daguan, *A record of Cambodia*, 53.

²⁰Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, 30.

²¹Pisith Phlong, ‘Prasat Beng Mealea’, Undergraduate thesis, Royal University of Phnom Penh, 2003. The 15th-century carving of the reclining Buddha into the rear wall of the Baphuon temple, originally constructed to contain the *liṅgam* of Udayādityavarman II (r. 1050-1066) is another, albeit later, example.

ages themselves could become infused with ‘femaleness’; a wooden statue of the Buddha, dating to the seventeenth century, was said during the colonial period to have become the dwelling-place of a female *neak tā* or ancestor spirit called *Neang Khmau*, ‘black lady’.²²

Buddhist women in middle Cambodia seem to have been perceived as spiritually equal to their male counterparts. Spouses performed meritorious deeds in tandem, the merit accruing to both or to other persons. One such couple, Naga and Pan, paid for the construction of a temple compound complete with a college for monks. The complex was called *Wat Me Pan* after Pan herself, who was described as ‘a slave’ of Buddhism. Another spousal endowment came from Abhayaraj and his wife Dhamm in 1566. They manufactured images of the Buddha in gold, silver and stone, restored a *chedi*, planted a grove of sacred trees, and commissioned copies of Buddhist texts. It was also common for women to perform good deeds alone.²³ Elite women were particularly zealous in the accomplishment of meritorious acts, undoubtedly due to their greater resources. An inscription dated 1577 was executed at the command of the queen mother:

I here profess my good works ... I, the queen mother Mahākalyāṇavattī Śrī Sujātā, princess of noble birth, devout *mahā-upāsikā*. I prostrate myself at the noble lotuses that are the feet of the revered Triple Joy who is our lord, our supreme refuge.... My heart full of *dharma*, I have regularly accomplished many pious acts, up until the present, that is to say the year of the Ox 1499 *śaka*.²⁴

These pious deeds included using her influence to convince her son the king to restore Angkor Wat. Having meditated on the impermanence of existence and the

²² Adhémard Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1889), 223–224, note 6; Ang Chouléan, ‘Le sacré au féminin’, *Seksa Khmer* 10–13 (1987–1990), 7–9.

²³ IMA 11, line 5, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 10–16c’, 224; IMA 17, lines 5–6, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 17–25’, 164; IMA 19, lines 4, 16, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 17–25’, 173–174; IMA 21, lines 14–15, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 17–25’, 179; IMA 29, line 2, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 26–33’, 215; IMA 34, lines 1–5, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 34 et 38’, 284; IMA 37, lines 5–6, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 35, 36, 37 et 39’, 309. This may indicate that Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia reflected very early Buddhist practice in India, when women were not precluded from attaining the highest spiritual level of *arhat*, although in later times rebirth as a woman indicated punishment for bad deeds in the previous life. Barbara Watson Andaya, *The flaming womb: Repositioning women in early modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2008), 76.

²⁴ IMA 2, lines 1–10, French translation, in Lewitz, ‘Textes en kmer moyen: Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 2 et 3’, 103–104.

physical form, she cut off her ‘luxuriant hair’ and burned it, scattering the ashes over the statues of the Buddha.

The city of Phnom Penh, according to legend, was established as a consequence of an act of Buddhist piety by a woman named Penh, who lived on the banks of the confluence of the Tonlé Sap and Bassac rivers. One day, after the flood-waters had receded, she found four statues of the Buddha and one of Viṣṇu in a *koki* tree. She brought them to her house and established a shrine for them there, exhorting the neighbouring people to construct a small *phnom* (hill) near her house and a sanctuary on top of it. She placed the four Buddha statues in the sanctuary, the statue of Viṣṇu at the foot of the hill, to the east, and invited monks to come and establish a monastery at the foot of the hill on the opposite side.²⁵

Another woman, Neang Paen, had performed good deeds ‘from the age of sixteen to her present age [44]’. These acts included the construction of seventeen statues and one painting of the Buddha in diverse materials; the making of nine banners, three platforms, and an umbrella; the construction of over a thousand stupas; the ordination of nine youths; the production of five religious texts; the offering of five monks’ robes and forty monks’ *vatthabandh*, lengths of cloth worn over the robe; and providing candles and combustible materials for use in temples and monasteries.²⁶ In 1684, a consort of King Jai Jettha III (r. 1677–1702) erected gold, silver and leaden statues of the Buddha, had a banner and a dais made, and caused five manuscripts to be copied, all of which she gave to a monastery. She also gave furniture, clothing, food, and utensils for the monks’ use. The merit of these acts she directed to her husband. As *Cbpab Preah Rajasambhir* stipulated, ‘to form an estimate of a queen, one must look at her pious acts.’²⁷

²⁵ *Chroniques royales du Cambodge*, vol. 1: *Des origines légendaires jusqu’à Paramaraja Ier*, trans. and ed. Mak Phoeun [hereafter *Chroniques 1*], 283; *Chroniques royales du Cambodge*, vol. 2: *De Bona Yat à la prise de Lanvaek (1417–1595)*, trans. and ed. Khin Sok, Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1988 [hereafter *Chroniques 2*], 102–105; IMA 4, A, lines 6–15, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 4, 5, 6 et 7’, 108.

²⁶ IMA16a, lines 11–12, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 10–16c’, 236; IMA 35, lines 11–14, in Pou, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 35, 36, 37 et 39’, 302; Coedès, ‘La fondation de Phnom Penh’, 8; IMA 26, lines 4–11, in Saveros Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33’, *BEFEO* vol. 60 (1973), 206; Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 26–33’, 207, n. 17; IMA 28, lines 1–4, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 26–33’, 212; IMA 32, lines 20–27, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 26–33’, 227.

²⁷ IMA 2, lines 3–9, 16–21, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 2 et 3’, 102–103; IMA 30, lines 2, 11–16, in Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 26–33’, 216–217; *Cbpab Preah Rajasambhir*, verse 37, in Pou and Jenner, ‘Les *cpap*’ ou <codes de conduite> Khmers IV’, 375; Justin

“Entering into religion”

The transference of merit to the karmic bank of others, alive or dead, was a common occurrence, and nothing seems to have incurred more merit than the practice of *puos*. According to the Khmer linguist Saveros Pou, *pos* or *pvas* in the preclassical and classical periods (modern *puos*) meant “to pass from the profane state to the sacred” or “to become a monk, to take the habit”.²⁸ Sometimes it is used in conjunction with object words, as in *pvas jee-a sāmaner*, “performed *puos* to become a novice monk”, found not only in the late classical period, as used in the example given by Pou,²⁹ but also in Middle Cambodian inscriptions.

A series of Old Khmer inscriptions found in Siem Reap, dating to the “middle” period of Cambodian history (16th-18th centuries), refer several times to people voluntarily joining, or causing others to join, a religious order at Mahānagara, the name by which Yaśodharapura became known over time. In most cases, the people who “entered into religion” – men, women, children, slaves, and elite – were “bought out” of the community within days. In 1747 an *oknha*, or court official, named Vañsaekkeareach,³⁰ was rewarded by the king of Cambodia for having subdued a rebellious princess by being appointed the governor of Kompong Svay. The *oknha* refused, and instead set off for “Preah Bang”, evidently an important site of Buddhist practice at Mahānagara, to perform meritorious acts:

The *oknha* prostrated himself before His Majesty to take his leave... and went to perform good deeds at Preah Bang, causing to *puos* the *jamdev* Ratnakaññā, who was his maternal aunt; *jamdev* Srīratnakesar, his wife; *neang* Kim, who was his sister-in-law; and his two nieces. All performed *puos* to become *neang chi*. They performed this meritorious act for one day.³¹

This inscription, known as IMA 39, has been the subject of intense discussion due to the reference earlier in the inscription to the princess that raised an army against her own husband. Yet the fact that a group of elite women were apparently

J. Corfield, *The royal family of Cambodia*, Melbourne: The Khmer Language Culture Centre, 1993, 16.

²⁸ Saveros Pou, *Dictionnaire vieux khmer-français-anglais* (Paris: CEDOREK, 1992), 320.

²⁹ Ibid..

³⁰ It is likely that this name, composed of *vañsa*, “clan”, *ekka*, “one”, and *reach*, “royal”, indicate a relationship to an earlier king or royal lineage.

³¹ IMA 39, lines 49-52, transliterated in Saveros Pou-Lewitz, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 35, 36, 37 et 29’, *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient* 61 (1974), 301-337, at 320.

ordained as *neang chi* – is hardly less astonishing, as, according to most scholars, Buddhist nuns never existed in Cambodia. What, then, are we to make of the appearance of the term *neang chi* in the middle of the eighteenth century? And under what circumstances were they permitted to become “nuns” for a single day?

The latter question is the easier to answer. The practice of adopting persons so that they could be caused to *puos*, or “enter into religion” temporarily or permanently, became something of a fad in Middle Cambodia. A king (“Chey Chestha”) of the 17th century abdicated four times in order to become a monk; Leclère commented that once “he re-ascended the throne three days after he had descended it; his vocation had spanned 72 hours”.³² Six people, three men and three women, donated one golden and three silver statues of the Buddha and a banner to a temple. Then, ‘filled with sympathy and compassion’, they committed a young slave boy to the monastery. One of the three donors adopted him ‘as if he were a son of her own’. Not only did merit accrue from the act of releasing a slave from bondage; the act of placing the boy in a monastery resulted in significant merit for the adoptive mother. Eleven years later, the same woman travelled across the Tonlé Sap with her family in order to visit relatives living at Mahānagara. In addition to making donations of statues and banners, they placed two more boys in the monastery as novices. *Puos* was a common term in the *Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor* (IMA). The same inscription that contains the term *neang chi* records that the *oknha* Vaṅsaekkareach gave his son Kan to Buddhism through *puos* and then paid for his immediate release. The congregation was asked to record the merit of those that had performed *puos*.³³ Boys in modern Khmer performed *puos* so as to become *sāmaner*; women, apparently, became *neang chi*. What exactly does this phrase mean? Saveros Pou and David Chandler both translated *neang* as ‘nuns’ in their studies of IMA 39; Sok Khin did the same in his analysis of the inscription in relation to the royal chronicles.³⁴ As their focus was on political events and royal alliances, however, none interrogated the meaning of the

³² Adhémard Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1899), 401.

³³ IMA 23, lines 8–12, in Saveros Pou, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 et 25’, *BEFEO* 60 (1973), 184; Barbara Watson Andaya, ‘Localising the universal: Women, motherhood and the appeal of early Theravada Buddhism’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 33, 1 (February 2002), 1–30; IMA 12, lines 4–11, in Saveros Pou, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16a, 16b et 16c’, *BEFEO* 59 (1972), 226; IMA 39, lines 64–70, in Saveros Pou, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor 35, 36, 37 et 39’, *BEFEO* 61 (1974), 321.

³⁴ Khin Sok, ‘Les chroniques royales et l’inscription modern d’Angkor no. 39’, *BEFEO* 64 (1977), 225–241, at 229.

term *neang chi* itself, or its usage. *Neang* today translates as “miss”, or “young woman”; *daun* is an honorific title given to widows and women past childbearing age. *Daun chi* is the term used to describe the laywomen who renounce secular life and devote themselves to *dhamma*, living either in or out of the *wat* environment. In Middle Cambodia, however, *neang* was a title, meaning “Mistress” or “Lady”, indicating a well-born woman. The Thai chronicles refer to a ‘Nak Chi’ living in Ayutthaya who had originally come from Cambodia at around the same time as the IMA 39 inscription. *Neak* indicated royal descent. These are the only references to *neang* or *neak chi* in the epigraphic record of Cambodia. There are, however, references in Dutch and French records of neighbouring Siam to “*nang chi*” from the 1620s to 1690, including an intriguing mention of a *Wat Nang Chi*, “*wat of the neang chi*” near Ayutthaya.³⁵

The merit that the women received for having spent this time as *neang chi* was transferred to the spiritual benefit of others.³⁶ It does not follow, therefore, that women were believed to have no importance in terms of religious or extramundane significance. Similarly, the lack of a *bhikkhunī* tradition should not be read as evidence that women in Cambodian Buddhism, or in terms of spiritual significance, were not as important as men. Indeed, as Peter Skilling remarked regarding the absence of *bhikkhunī* in Siam, although “women could not become nuns in the technical sense (that is to say, as fully ordained *bhikkhunī*), they could still devote themselves to religion as female renunciants (*nang chi* or *mae chi*)”.³⁷ Ashley Thompson has commented that the agents of both supernatural and mundane Middle Cambodia (15th-18th centuries) seem to be distinctly *female* in collective Cambodian cultural memory.³⁸

The folktales and legends of Middle Cambodia, written down for the first time in the late nineteenth or twentieth century, bespeak some agency for women. Legends such as *Rioeng Neang Rasmey Sok* ‘The tale of the young lady of the beautiful hair’ and *Neang Kangrei* ‘Tale of the young lady Kangrei’ tell of female protagonists, including *yakṣiṇī*, female demons, leading their supernatural armies into

³⁵ Skilling, ‘Female renunciants’, 58-59.

³⁶ Andaya, *Flaming womb*, 76-77; David P. Chandler, ‘An eighteenth century inscription from Angkor Wat’, *Journal of the Siam Society* vol. 59, no. 2 (July 1971) 23; Pou, ‘Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor’, 35-39, 324.

³⁷ Skilling, ‘Female renunciants’, 55.

³⁸ Ashley Thompson, ‘Introductory remarks between the lines: Writing histories of Middle Cambodia’, in Barbara Watson Andaya (ed.), *Other pasts: Women, gender and history in early modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2000), 47.

battle and fighting to the death. In *Rieong Kang Han* ('Tale of Lucky Han'), Han is chased up a tree by a tiger; a coward, he remains there until his wives rescue him, driving the beast away so that he may descend from his undignified roost. In addition to being represented as physically braver, women are often more intelligent and quick-witted than men, whose greed and laziness land them in hot water time and time again.³⁹ The Cambodian *Jātaka*, tales of the Buddha's lives, similarly reflect women as purposeful agents rather than passive.⁴⁰ The presence of Preah Neang Dharani, the Earth Goddess whom Buddha calls forth from the earth to vanquish the armies of the demon Māra is testament to the acceptability of agency for women in Cambodia throughout the premodern period, even within the usually conservative tenets of Buddhism.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Adhémard Leclère, then *Résident Supérieur du Cambodge*, saw a woman offer a fresh fish to a flock of birds. He asked her what motivated this act of piety. She replied,

I offer this fish to the birds, who are beings like myself, in the name of my father and mother who are long dead, to my grandparents whom I knew, to my ancestors whom I did not know, that they can be delivered of their sufferings, happier if they are happy in the beyond, for they will come and stay near me so they will protect me.⁴¹

Perhaps, after all, the reason that there was no option for remaining within a Buddhist order for women as a *bhikkhuni* was precisely because of the agency accorded women in premodern Cambodia. The impermanence of *puos* actually enabled more possibilities for making merit – as donatrices, as mothers committing their sons to the religious life, and as *neang chi*.

³⁹ *Rieong maya srei*, in *Kambujasuriya* 7-9 (1938), 327-337; *Rieong Kang Han*, in *Kambujasuriya* 8, 4-6 (1938), 45-53.

⁴⁰ Muriel Paksin Carrison (comp.), *Cambodian folk stories from the Gatiloke*, trans. Kong Chhean (Rutland, Vermont; Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle, 1987), 16; Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge*, 223-224, note 6.

⁴¹ Leclère, *Le Bouddhisme au Cambodge*, 386.

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