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FIGURING THE BUDDHA

"Cambodian Brahmanism", I remember Ang Choulean telling me in my student years, "was teeming with powerful goddesses; Cambodian Theravada Buddhism is not. The singular figure of the Buddha took their place". The comment, integral to his encouragement that I research the cultural vestiges of the early Cambodian Middle Period in the Srei Santhor region,[1] conveyed more than historical fact: it was a celebration of ancient Cambodia and a critique of the Cambodia of our times. Working at Ang Choulean's side for many years, at the Department of Archaeology of Phnom Penh's Royal University of Fine Arts, in Vann Molyvann's cabinet at the Council of Ministers and in APSARA's then Department of Culture and Monuments, making countless research trips under his tutelage, living under his roof, with his wife, her siblings and their mother and grandmother, along with their many children, lingering over meals with Ang Choulean's own extended family..., I came to understand that his revulsion at the misogyny and associated social inequities pervading contemporary Cambodia have accompanied and underpinned his sustained intellectual interest in cultural constructs of the feminine and sexual difference evidenced in over forty years of publishing and

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[1] Srei Santhor is a modern administrative district in Kompong Cham Province, on the eastern bank of the Mekong River approximately fifty kilometers south of Kompong Cham town and sixty kilometers north of Phnom Penh. Here I refer more loosely to the "Srei Santhor region" to include a broader culturally defined area bordering on the modern Srei Santhor district. The Srei Santhor region is one hub of the larger Tonle Touc region, a fertile, protected landmass set between the Tonle Touc, or the "Small River" so named with reference to the Tonle Thom, the "Large River", the local name for the Mekong of which it is a tributary. Branching off the Tonle Thom at Kbal Peam, Koh Sothin district in Kompong Cham province, the Tonle Touc rejoins the Tonle Thom at Peam Roh near Neak Loeung in Prei Veng province.

teaching.[2] This is not to suggest that he perceives a seamless identification between the symbolic and the social; rather he cultivates attentiveness to the import of the cultural construct integral to the social. I am deeply indebted to Ang Choulean for having taken me into his professional and family lives; I am indebted also to the other people and institutions evoked above – including the villagers whom he respects, befriends and supports in the course of his work – for having followed his lead in welcoming me as something akin to one of their own. I cannot count the ways in which his discreet but determined socio-intellectual feminism has inflected my academic understandings and lived experience of Cambodia.

The early Cambodian Middle Period at Srei Santhor, a time and place where Theravada Buddhism emerged as a pervasive force in the Cambodian cultural matrix, would not, in light of Ang Choulean's comment recalled above, seem at first glance to provide fruitful ground for developing any form of feminist intellectual engagement in the world of Cambodian Studies. The logical relation maintaining between the comment on the symbolic status of women as a defining difference between Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism and the encouragement to pursue research at Srei Santhor was indeed characteristically enigmatic. At the time, and for many years thereafter, I could only vaguely appeal to the perception of continuity between the Ancient and the Middle Periods privileged by Ang Choulean as underpinning his guidance to me. Bearing the ancient name of Angkor, Srei Santhor, should, after all, I

[2] To name those publications most explicitly focused on this theme: "Le philtre *sneh*. De la femme humaine à la femme surnaturelle", *Seksa Khmer (SK)*, n° 1-2, 1980, pp. 155-202; "Grossesse et accouchement au Cambodge: aspects rituels", *ASEMI*, vol. XIII (1-4), 1982, pp. 87-109; "Le sacré au féminin", *SK,* n° 10-13, 1987-90, pp. 3-30; "Recherche récente sur le culte des mégalithes et des grottes au Cambodge", *Journal Asiatique*, t. CCLXXXI (1-2), 1993, pp. 183-210; "Le sol et l'ancêtre. L'amorphe et l'anthropomorphe", *Journal Asiatique*, t. CCLXXXIII (1), 1995, pp. 213-238; "The Linga in all Its Aspects", *Orientations*, n° 37 (8), November-December 2006, pp. 76-78; "In the beginning was the Bayon", [*in*] J. CLARK (ed.), *Bayon. New Perspectives*, Bangkok, River Book, 2007, pp. 362-377; "Fleurs d'aréquier et la cérémonie de mariage au Cambodge", *Bulletin de l'AEFEK* n° 13, janvier 2008 (https://www.aefek.fr /page 63.html); *Manuss niṅ ṭī [Man and Earth],* Phnom Penh, Reyum, 2000, 55 p. (also published in English and French); *Braḥ Liṅg [The Souls],* Phnom Penh, Reyum, 2004, 176 p.; "*Srī snaṃ* (on court women in temple decor)", *KhmeRenaissance*, n° 2, 2007, pp. 66-68; "*Anak Mtāy* (Mother)", *KhmeRenaissance*, n° 10, 2015, pp. 88-90; "*Yāy Mau* (on the female spirit 'Black Grandmother'", [*in*] N. ABDOUL-CARIME, G. MIKAELIAN & J. THACH (éds.), *Le passé des Khmers. Langues, textes, rites*, Berne, Peter Lang, 2016, pp. 249-262.

reasoned, be teeming with references to its more famous predecessor.[3] The elliptical style of communication does its work, however, probing the perceptive capacity of the interlocutor, surreptitiously challenging her to make the links, gradually drawing out critical conclusions —the ones foreseen in the vision of the *grū*, the others unforeseen and at times even deemed enigmatic if not indigestible by him. No doubt my own emphatically reiterative style developed in no small measure in direct relation to his oblique one. To begin with, let me be clear: the term "feminist" to describe Ang Choulean is mine. As I return in the following to the question of the feminine in Cambodian Theravada Buddhism, and ultimately if only briefly to Srei Santhor, it should go without saying, then, that any faults in the essay remain with me and me alone. *គួរពុំគួរសូមអភ័យទោសៗ*

ABSTRACTING NARRATIVE

This essay comprises a feminist review of the inaugural sequences of the Buddha's life story —what might be called its core; it is a means of probing Ang Choulean's general characterization of Cambodian Theravada Buddhism cited in opening. It is "Cambodian" insofar as the images I use to illustrate this or that episode in the story are from Cambodia. The story itself is canonical, pertaining across Buddhist cultures and promoting a cosmopolitan figure. Rather than grounding the story, or the select episodes, in any specifically defined geo-historical context, I seek to delineate its broad import in gendered terms. The essay leads nonetheless to observations about Cambodia's early Middle Period, when Pali Buddhism came to replace Angkorian religious constructs as the country's dominant official religion. It leads us also to Srei Santhor, but for want of space leaves us pondering without yet fully exploring the region's remarkable female Buddhas.

The Buddhism dominating mainland Southeast Asia from the thirteenth century —Theravada Buddhism or Pali Buddhism— is an unwieldy beast, taking different forms for different people in different places and times.[4] On one exoteric, cosmopolitan register, however, we can say that Pali Buddhism

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[3] The toponym *Srī Sandhar* (Srei Santhor) is derived from the ancient name of Angkor, *Srī Yaśodhapura*. See LEWITZ, Saveros, "La toponymie khmère", *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient (BEFEO)*, t. LIII (2) 1967, pp. 377-450.

[4] See especially SKILLING, Peter, "The Advent of Theravāda Buddhism to South-east Asia", *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, n° 20 (1), 1997, pp. 99-104; CROSBY, Kate, *Theravāda Buddhism: Continuity, Diversity and Identity*, West Sussex, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 312 p.

is organized around the "Historical" Buddha's life story.[5] A few of the images I will comment are Angkorian and are embedded in Sanskritic Mahayana Buddhist contexts demonstrating that the story spans what can often be too rigidly characterized as discrete Buddhist traditions, even as a particular focus on the Gotama Buddha as a historical figure privileged within a sequential lineage of Buddhas or "Enlightened Ones" can be considered a hallmark of Theravada. My usage here, including reference to Pali and Sanskrit texts, is also a nod to the import of Sanskritic Buddhism in Theravadin Cambodia. Others are taken from Cambodia's Middle and Modern periods, demonstrating the story's temporal span. All can be shown to attest to intra-regional circulation of imagery comprising an object-based *lingua franca* which has evolved for centuries across mainland Southeast Asia in conjunction with creative vernacularising developments of and on Pali and Sanskrit textual traditions. Displayed in temple grounds, they are, as far as I know, exoteric, collective or official modes of representation.[6]

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[5] The term "historical" is multivalent in this context. Buddhist historical periodization sets the life of Prince Siddhattha of the Gotama clan, who reached Enlightenment to become a Buddha, in the current era. Though he is perceived as one in a lineage of Buddhas, his teaching (*sāsana*) is deemed to have founded what would ultimately be called "Buddhism". Modern constructs of "Theravada Buddhism" have emphasized the historical nature of the figure who is nonetheless larger than life.

[6] An historicized account of representation of the Buddha's life story in Cambodia, drilling down to what was known or privileged, when, where and by whom, is still to come. N. Revire's "The Birth of the Buddha at Angkor" is an explicit step in this direction. (REVIRE, Nicolas, "The Birth of the Buddha at Angkor", *Journal of the Siam Society (JSS)*, n° 107 (2), 2019, pp. 63-90). Revire's article focuses on the thirteenth-century sculpted stela found at Angkor Wat which I comment briefly below, and which is part of a series of such stelae representing individual episodes in the Buddha's life story. Revire's article also briefly mentions the stela reproduced as figure 10 of the present essay. This collection of sculpted stelae, which distantly approaches a Pagan-style detailed linear sculptural account, is unique in the Cambodian Middle Period context. Unlike in Pagan, where the narrative can be illustrated in precise detail mirroring textual accounts, Cambodian representation before the modern era would appear to convey the story through selective illustration of specific episodes. In the absence of extensive knowledge of narrative representation in wood —sculpted or painted— prior to the modern era, we cannot yet date consolidation of popular familiarity with the story in any detail in Cambodia. What we can discern is a contrast between a narrative orientation from Pagan to Sukhothai on the Buddha's biography and that of Cambodia and central Thailand oriented more squarely to the Rāmayāṇa developed over the Middle Period. Saveros POU has devoted substantial attention to the Cambodian Rāmayāṇa: "Les traits bouddhiques du Ramakerti", *BEFEO*, t. LXII, 1975, pp. 355-368; "Deux extraits du Rāmakerti", *Mon-Khmer Studies*, t. VI, 1976, pp. 217-245; *Rāmakerti (XVIè-XVIIè siècles)*, *Traduit et commenté par ...*, Paris, École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), PEFEO vol. CX, 1977, 299 p.; *Études sur le Rāmakerti (XVIè-XVIIè siècles)*, Paris, EFEO, PEFEO vol. CXI, 1977, 201 p.; *Rāmakerti (XVIè-XVIIè siècles), Texte khmer*

publié par ..., Paris, EFEO, PEFEO vol. CXVII, 1979, IX + 330 p.; "Some Proper Names in the Khmer Rāmakerti", *The South East Asian Review*, 1980, t. V (2), pp. 19-29; "Études ramakertiennes", *SK*, n° 3-4, 1981, pp. 89-110; "Inventaire des œuvres sur le Ramayana khmer (Ramakerti)", (with LAN Sunnary, K. HAKSREA), *SK*, n° 3-4, 1981, pp. 111-126; *Rāmakerti II (Deuxième version du Rāmayāṇa khmer), Texte khmer, traduction et annotations par* ..., Paris, EFEO, PEFEO vol. CXXXII, 1982, 305 p., pl.; "Du sanskrit kirti au khmer kerti: une tradition littéraire du Cambodge", *SK*, n° 5, 1982, pp. 33-54; "Ramakertian Studies", [*in*] S. IYENGAR (ed.), *Asian Variations in Rāmayāṇa*, Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1983, pp. 252-262; "Rāmakerti - The Khmer (or Cambodian) Rāmayāṇa", *Sanskrit and World Culture*, SCHR. OR, 18, Berlin, 1986, pp. 203-211; "Portrait of Rama in Cambodian (Khmer) Tradition", [*in*] D. P. SINHA & S. SAHAI (eds.), *Rāmayāṇa Traditions and National Cultures in Asia*, Lucknow, Directorate of Cultural Affairs (Uttar Pradesh), 1989, pp. 1-7; "Indigenization of Ramayana in Cambodia", *Asian Folklore Studies*, LI (1), 1992, pp. 89-102; "Viṣṇu / Narāy au Cambodge", *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica*, n° 25, 1994, pp. 175-195; "The concept of *avatāra* in the Rāmāyaṇa Tradition of Cambodia", *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica*, n° 31, 2000-2005, pp. 123-135; *Rāmakerti I* – "*La gloire de Rāma*". *Drame épique médiéval du Cambodge*, (with Grégory MIKAELIAN), Paris, L'Harmattan, 'Les introuvables', 2007, 440 p. Further work of note in this field: SIYONN, Sophearith, "The Life of the Ramayana in Ancient Cambodia: A Study of the Political, Religious and Ethical Roles of an Epic Tale in Real Time (I)", *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies*, n° 6, 2006, pp. 93-149; "The Life of the Ramayana in Ancient Cambodia: A Study of the Political, Religious and Ethical Roles of an Epic Tale in Real Time (II)", *Udaya, Journal of Khmer Studies*, n° 7, 2007, pp. 45-71; et MIKAELIAN, Grégory, "La Gloire du Prince charmant. De la reconfiguration des pratiques discursives du pouvoir dans le royaume khmer du XVII^{e} siècle", *Péninsule*, n° 56, 2008 (1), pp. 47-64; "La gouvernance vertueuse de Rāma versus l'hybris de Kṛṣṇa. Note sur le poème de séparation national des Cambodgiens", *Péninsule*, n° 58, 2009 (1), pp. 19-32; (avec Nasir ABDOUL-CARIME), "Angkor et l'islam. Note sur la stèle arabe du Bhnaṃ Pakhaeṅ (*K. 1081*)", *Péninsule*, n° 63, 2011 (2), pp. 5-59. 'Dvaravati' and/or pre-Pagan Mon materials can be said to fall somewhere in between these two poles, with dominant iconography evoking select episodes of the Buddha's life story in discrete symbolic forms. Of note for any future historical study of Cambodian materials concerning the Buddha's biography; not withstanding its imbrication in Rāma's life story, is a certain emphasis, from the twelfth century, on representation of the episode in which the Buddha calls the Earth to Witness as a means of vanquishing Evil. The episode appears to participate in a larger transition from Angkorian Shaivite and Mahayana Buddhist religious orientation to the Theravadin orientation dominating in its wake in ways I will briefly suggest below. For recent consideration of this broader shift see my Introduction in THOMPSON, A. (ed.), *Early Theravadin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology*, Singapore, NUS Press, forthcoming; and BOURDONNEAU, Éric & MIKAELIAN, Grégory, "L'histoire longue du devarāja: pañcaksetr et figuier à cinq branches dans l'ombre de la danse de Śiva", *Puruṣārtha*, n° 37, 2020, pp. 81-130. For a study of Angkorian reliefs representing select episodes of the Buddha's extended biography in the form of *jātaka* tales, see TUY, Danel, "Reading and Interpreting jātaka tales during the Angkorian Period", [*in*] A. THOMPSON (ed.), *Early Theravadin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology*, Singapore, NUS Press, forthcoming. The trajectory sketched by Ang Choulean, from an ancient Cambodia teeming with goddesses to a later Theravadin Cambodia wanting for powerful women, may be tracked and more precisely historicized through close study of the evolution of artistic representation of the Buddha's life

In the body of the essay I am concerned with artistic representation of narrative, that is scenes sculpted or painted with sufficient detail to convey specific episodes in the historical Buddha's life Story.[7] Discrete narrative episodes are most often part of a more or less complex set, together rendering the Buddha's life through pivotal moments; these distill the Buddha's life story, reducing it to, and thus revealing —and then also constituting as such— its essentials. The scenes in question can also serve as mnemonic devices for recollecting the full narrative. I will take full advantage of this situation in elaborating on the illustrated episodes.

As narrative, these material representations can be said to be on the side of the socio-historical; they are complementary to representations which performatively convey and enable certain forms of detachment from the socio-historical. The narrative materials draw from and contribute to articulation of the heteronormative gendered types which structure at once Siddhattha's *bildungsroman* and social orders of the times and places in which they appear. The linear chronological development of the Buddha's life story is assimilable to lived experience of progression in mundane time. This is not to suggest that lived experience, or Buddhist art, are limited or reducible to linear representations thereof; other temporal modes are at work in Buddhist art and practice.[8] It is rather to delineate this particular temporal dimension as it

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story in Cambodia accounting also, to the extent possible, for relations between exoteric and esoteric, reform and non-reform practices. In any case, it seems clear that the contemporary Cambodian widespread familiarity with the key episodes of the Buddha's more or less full life story is the result of cumulative dissemination of the story in Cambodia, but does not necessarily reflect continuity in such familiarity from the Middle Period. The ways in which such historical drilling down would lead to more precise understandings of function and meaning in the art at hand remains an open question —or at least one which I aim to pry open somewhat in the present paper.

[7] I exclude from this definition a range of statuary representing the Buddha whose hand gestures and bodily postures may be interpreted by art historians today as representing this or that scene in the Buddha's life, but for which we do not have, for many cases, sufficient bases for affirming codified interpretation before the modern era. Even today iconographic codification is of little and always superficial concern in popular milieu. It is likely in fact that twentieth-century codification has obscured interpretations in a range of ways. For an examination of this question in Indian contexts, see SMITH, Richard, "Questions regarding the Word Mudra: A Preliminary Survey of Gestures on Indian Icons and their Designation", http://asianart.com/articles /mudra/index.html, (last accessed November 5, 2019).

[8] See in particular COLLINS, Steven, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 712 p.; WALTERS, Jonathan, "Buddhist History: The Pāli Vaṃsas of Sri Lanka and Their Commentary", [*in*] R. INDEN, J. WALTERS & D. ALI (eds.), *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 99-164; ABEYSEKERA, Ananda "Protestant Buddhism and 'Influence': The Temporality of a Concept", *Qui Parle*, n° 28 (1), 2019, pp. 1-75, and

maintains in narrative materials. I am not taking these images of the Buddha's life story for their explicitly didactic content. Their relations to the socio-historical which I highlight are integral, first as I have just suggested, to the narrative form of linear progress over a human life, and then to the ways in which that progress is structured through heteronormative gender paradigms. The socio-historical as I apprehend it here encompasses a certain transcendence of itself, as paradoxical as that may seem. This is the "complementary" structure evoked above. The Buddha famously leaves domestic life; Buddhist monks and to a more limited degree nuns or other categories of female lay practitioners do the same. But this religious practice of leaving the mundane behind itself is crucially constitutive of, and so integral to the social world. This tension, where leaving the mundane is always already recuperated by the mundane, is, I will argue, variously manifest in the gendered terms of Buddhist art we will examine. It goes some way to explaining, also, how we might read the socio-historical through an assemblage of temporally disparate narrative reliefs; and at the same time, how highly abstract explorations of subjectivity might be analysed through a geo-historical prism.

I. GENDERED TERMS

Siddhattha Gotama is, to begin with, a model of sovereign monarchical power, but also, and inseparably, of heteronormative masculine privilege: a princely power and privilege that is represented by the Buddhist canon in patriarchal, phallocratic and starkly gendered terms: mother, wife, child, harem, prostitutes, and of course kingdom, are at his disposal. So far so unremarkable. The drama really only begins with an apparent departure from this norm: having gained sight of the fate awaiting men of this world —sickness, old age and death— and in a supremely ambivalent gesture, the future Buddha disposes of the women who literally define his princely existence to seek a transcendent state. To begin with at least, women are so many foils —the condition of possibility— for this model man to surpass himself in obtaining perfection. And it should be said that while the modern academic enterprise called Buddhology has tended to isolate and highlight the four sights (a sick man, an old man, a dead man, and an ascetic who has taken action to defy man's fate) as triggering Siddhattha's decision to leave the palace, imagery of women comprising unwitting triggers of the prince's

"Religious Studies' Mishandling of Origin and Change: Time, Tradition, and Form of Life in Buddhism", *Cultural Critique*, n° 89, Winter, 2018, pp. 22-71.

monumental decision tends to dominate textual and visual fields of the Buddha's life story, effectively eliding, as I will discuss below, the penultimate sight of death with the sight of women.[9]

From a psychoanalytic point of view, Siddhattha's project might be said to be predicated on a generalized sublimation whereby the energy of (masculine) sexual desire is blocked and yet retained, and redirected to other nonsexual, or otherwise sexual, ends. We know where this leads: sublimation for Freud does not represent a radical break with what went before. Quite to the contrary: Freud's little boy represses his sexual desire for his mother only under a capital threat, and only to conform more completely to patriarchal norms.[10] Of course Siddhattha was not born in fin-de-siècle Vienna and the cultural presuppositions involved in this model of individual development, notably a certain understanding of the nuclear family and parenting modes, have been amply debated and critiqued already in the West and certainly cannot be said to apply universally. And yet, it is difficult not to see some very familiar and hardly enlightened structures at work in the Buddha's story, including a particularly leaden representation of gendered roles: as objects of desire and desiring subjects, women comprise the material spurring men to the intellectual exploits born of resistance.

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[9] The British Library's stunning recent exhibition, "Buddhism", provides a nice example of modern Buddhological privileging of the Four Sights integral to broader narratives on Buddhism as a benevolent social force with (proto-)feminist underpinnings. The exhibition's signature piece is an illustrated early nineteenth-century Chinese manuscript. Its illustration of the future Buddha's birth appears on advertising materials and on the cover of the book accompanying the exhibition (Inventory number Or.13217, vol. 1, f. 5). The manuscript serves as an opener to the first exhibition space dedicated to the Buddha's life story, where it is set unfolded in a manner to display two scenes, the same panel representing the future Buddha's birth and a later panel representing his sighting of a dead man. The display serves both to open the Buddha's life story and to set the parameters by which the story is interpreted. The Buddha's mother and wife are highlighted in the accompanying text panel, which firmly grounds the prince's inaugural frustration in his palace confinement as a "prisoner" and his realization of the incessant suffering of those bound to worldly life in the Four Sights. This is technically correct, of course, but it also evinces a telling curatorial choice bolstered otherwise throughout the exhibition with a firm emphasis on the support Buddhism provides women practitioners in practical and symbolic terms. See J. IGUNMA & S. S. MAY (eds.), *Buddhism: Origins, Traditions and Contemporary Life*, London, British Library Publishing, 2019, 224 p.

[10] Freudian theory in this regard is developed over many years and publications. For a relatively concise later account of the psycho-social processes by which he sees boys made to become men and girls made to become women, including the castration complex, to which I will obliquely refer at points throughout this essay, see FREUD, Sigmund, "Femininity", [*in*] S. FREUD, J. STRACHEY (ed.) & P. GAY (Introduction), *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. The Standard Edition*, New York, W. W. Norton, [1933] 1995, pp. 139-167.

The Buddha's Life Story: Woman as Foil

Two types of women emerge in the grand narrative. To quote Clare Veal with reference to contemporary Thai (Buddhist) social types, we see: "the ideal model… woman, who is supposed to support a man's movement towards dharmic wisdom rather than pursuing it herself… contrasted with an image of a woman who leads a man astray through acting as an object of desire and therefore as a source of attachment to the material world".[11] Scholars tend to present these two types as contradictory: "on the one hand", it is often noted, there is the positive female image, while "on the other hand", there is the negative one.[12] One of my concerns here will be to examine how these two go hand in hand. Veal insightfully notes the repressive nature of *both* social types. Let me add that both are enablers of the man on his path to Enlightenment; their apparent opposition is itself illusory insofar as they are mutually defined, and function together to define the ideal man.

The Buddha's birth (Figure 1)

Fig. 1. Stela depicting the Birth of the future Gotama Buddha. Late thirteenth-fourteenth century. Found at Angkor Wat. National Museum Bangkok, Inventory no. LB 5. Photograph by Author, 2017.

[11] VEAL, Clare, "Can the Girl be a Thai Woman? Reading the Works of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook from Feminist Perspectives", [*in*] J. CLARK & C. VEAL, (eds.), *Storytellers of the Town: Works by Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook*, Sydney, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art and University of Sydney Gallery, 2014, p. 60.

[12] See for example STADTNER, Donald, *Ancient Pagan. Buddhist Plain of Merit*, Bangkok, River Books, 2013, p. 41.

In this thirteenth-century sculpted stela found at Angkor Wat, Siddhattha, the future Buddha, is born miraculously out of his mother's right side, neatly avoiding any messy passage through the birth canal.[13] It is an immaculate birth in other ways as well. In the womb, he had been encased in a precious chamber, sealed off from impurities. The woman on the right is Siddhattha's mother's sister. She is supporting her sister in giving birth. The double image foreshadows the sister's future role in raising the young boy following his biological mother's imminent (un)timely death. Note that the newborn's sex is made perfectly apparent here by the thing that hides it. Siddhattha is a boy to be sure, which is not what can be said of him after reaching Enlightenment: of the thirty-two marks of the Great Man (*mahāpurusa)* figures the penis retracted into a cavity. The retracted penis is a remarkable mark of the removal of a mark —which begs further analysis.[14] Given the immensity of the particular topic, I will not address explicit anatomical representation of the boy's and the Buddha's sex or sexes, beyond noting this exemplary treatment of the little boy flying high out of his mothers' side.

The Buddha's first steps (Figure 2)

At birth Siddhattha is fully formed, immediately taking seven steps, lotus flowers blooming one by one underneath his falling feet which will thus not be sullied by the ground. This image is from a set of murals painted in 1960 on the inner walls of the *vihāra* of Wat Kompong Thom in the provincial seat

[13] For a historical study of this sculpture including commentary on *K. 976*, the inscription on its reverse side, see REVIRE, N., "The Birth of the Buddha at Angkor", *loc. cit*., forthcoming; see also BOELES, Jan Jetso, "Two Aspects of Buddhist Iconography in Thailand", *JSS*, n° XLVIII, 1960, p. 74, n. 14. For future research, I note also that the pair of two mothers in the Buddha's birth is relatively rare in Cambodian iconography. That it is, on the other hand, common in Pagan provides food for thought in considering Buddhist constructs in thirteenth-century Cambodia.

[14] There is of course work on this particularly notable mark of the Buddha. In a monograph devoted to examination of the Buddha's sexuality as evidenced in early Buddhist texts, J. Powers emphasizes the hypervirility of the Great Man, manifest for example in miraculous psycho-physical exploits by which he inflates and displays his genitals (POWERS, Jonathan, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex and the Body in Indian Buddhism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2012, 336 p.). Note that 'Great Man' is an epithet of the Buddha, and a type identifiable by the thirty-two marks. A translator's blogpost by Sujato on SuttaCentral, which informs my wording here of a 'penis retracted into a cavity' points to the sort of issues embedded in the Powers material but left unanalysed by him, and which I see to beg further study in the larger critical context I seek to develop on the figure of the Buddha as a site for thinking sexual difference. See https://discourse.suttacentral.net/t/the-politics-of-the-buddha-s-genitals/4876 (last accessed November 5, 2019).

of Kompong Thom province.[15] The image is exemplary of modern representation of the birth episode. The future Buddha's mother, named Māyā, "Illusion", is as immaculate as her baby boy.

Fig. 2. Mural painting depicting the future Gotama Buddha's birth and first steps, by Tep Thoeun. Wat Kompong Thom, Kompong Thom province. 1960. Vihāra *with murals destroyed in September 2017. Photograph by San Phalla, 2006.*

Conception was immaculate as well, the miraculous boy first coming to his mother of his own will and in her dream. During pregnancy Māyā famously remained chaste in thought and act. As mother, Māyā is the condition of

[15] Select pre- and post-war murals from Wat Kompong Thom are documented in SAN, Phalla, *gaṃnūr nau tām vatt [Paintings in Buddhist Monasteries]*, Phnom Penh, Reyum, 2007, figures 113, 122, 141, 197 and 309. On the destruction of the *vihāra* and its murals in 2017, see "New Temple Plans Turn a Historical Monastic Temple into a Pile of Rubble", *The Star Online,* October 7, 2017 (https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/living/2017/10/07/ancient-temple-destroyed, accessed November 5, 2019).

possibility of her son. He needs a body as a vehicle for birth, but not just any body. Having himself decided to enter Māyā's womb to be born on earth, the future Buddha is effectively self-created or self-born, and in such needs a body that represents the repression of the body of a real woman in the flesh. In the operation, Māyā is reduced to motherhood through and through —she is nothing more and nothing less than a platform, or a vessel for offspring. The idealization of Māyā underpinning her son's illustrious career comprises a hyper-feminization manifest in her outward appearance and dependent upon an eradication of sexuality. This version of femininity is defined by its pristine, immaculate nature: a pure vehicle for "delivery" of the male child, itself or herself untouched in the process; the ideal, maternal woman can only be gained at the expense of the sexual one.

Māyā's story comes to us through motherhood, and stops there. The newborn son's seven steps are at once a portent for his future and for his mother's demise: she dies seven days after giving birth. In other words, as soon as she is born a mother, she dies. And as the story moves along —the Buddha's story as well as that experienced through emulation by Buddhist monks— the maternal is effectively elevated to a divine status.[16] Siddhattha's mother dies to be reborn in Tusita, a heavenly realm from which she continues to act as a platform for her son's renown. Reborn in the Tusita realm, beyond the mundane, she is fixed in time as the beautiful mother born at her son's birth.

Yet this elevation of the mother, in life as in death, does not counter social misogyny; to the contrary, in certain ways it participates in it.[17] Māyā's allegorical register is otherwise apparent in her name, "Illusion". This is to say that despite her miraculous overcoming of sexuality to embody a desexualized

[16] For commentary and substantial critical bibliographies on conceptualization of the maternal in monastic and para-monastic Southeast Asian Theravadin contexts, see CROSBY, K., *op. cit.*, Chapters 9-11, pp. 218-261.

[17] On the social underpinnings and effects of the silence surrounding Maya's death, see WALTERS, Jonathan, "A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story", *History of Religions*, n° 33 (4), 1994, pp. 358-379; OHNUMA, Reiko, "Debt to the Mother: A Neglected Aspect of the Founding of the Buddhist Nuns' Order", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, n° 74 (4), 2006, pp. 861-901; SASSON, Vanessa, "Maya's Disappearing Act: Motherhood in Early Buddhist Literature", [*in*] L. WILSON (ed.), *Family in Buddhism*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2013, pp. 147-168; GUTSCHOW, Kim, "The Death of The Buddha's Mother: Silence surrounds maternal death, in Maya's time and in ours", *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, n° 44 (1-2), 2016 (https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/ winter spring2016/death-of-buddhas-mother). For more detailed consideration of maternal imagery in Indian Buddhism, see OHNUMA, R., *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, 262 p.

femininity, she remains a woman, if not *the* woman. Woman = Illusion; and one of the morals of the story, announced in its opening scene and to be reiterated as the story progresses, is that Woman/Illusion must perish for Man to reach Buddhahood. If the illusory attraction of the sexual woman is first defeated in the body of the idealized mother, it is definitively revealed and extinguished in the figure of the dead woman. More than anything else, perhaps, the figure of the dead woman is wielded to enable Buddhist practitioners to see the illusory nature of attachment —quintessentially captured as it were in the form of sexual attraction.[18] Māyā is the Buddha's mother: she literally gives birth to him; without Illusion, the Buddha would never have been; again, she is the condition of his possibility. But Illusion is there *to be disposed of* on the road to Buddhahood. Or at least sublimated out of existence. It is key that the primeval Buddhist mother —pristine as she is— is also a dead mother. Dead in our realm yet alive in another, she remains intact, untouched, as Mother.

Antechamber of the Great Departure (Figures 3 & 4)

This is the antechamber as it were of the Great Departure, when Prince Siddhattha finally resolves to leave the Palace in search of —he and we do not yet know what. This decision follows the birth of his son, and a night of palace revelry sponsored by Siddhattha's father in a last bid attempt to keep his son in the family fold. In Figure 3's sixteenth-century relief from Wat Nokor in Kompong Cham we see the disheveled, slumping members of the harem at the feet of the upright future Buddha.[19]

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[18] In addition to the Crosby chapters cited above, see in particular WILSON, Liz, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figures of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, 276 p. Note that a fuller study of these questions would also account for the ambiguous sexuality of the monastic body in relation to meditational practices of self-abject/objectification. See for example BIZOT, François, *Le Don de soi-même. Recherches sur le Bouddhisme khmer III*, Paris, EFEO, PEFEO vol. CXXX, pp. 70-74. I will point to the complexity of which this additional element is a part in later discussions in the present article of ways in which the Buddha figure himself transcends sexuality.

[19] Notwithstanding the facticity of this interpretation, the fronton can also be read to render, or foreshadow, Maitreya in Tusita heaven. The future Buddha in the sculpture's upper register, sat under a four-faced finial embodies at once a future Buddha (Siddhattha) and future Buddhas. It is the proper of Buddhas to escape the proper. That is, the individual is always already a type whose very genre is defined by the escape from individuality. Theravadin iconography probes these relations between socio-historical specificity and theoretical abstraction.

Fig. 3. Western pediment, central sanctuary, Wat Nokor temple, Kompong Cham province, depicting, on the upper register, Siddhattha, and on the lower register, the sleeping harem. Sixteenth century. Photograph by Author, 2017.

Fig. 4. Mural painting depicting Prince Siddhattha contemplating the harem with disgust, by Tep Thoeun. Wat Kompong Thom. 1960. Vihāra *with murals destroyed in September 2017. Photograph by San Phalla, 2006.*

Siddhattha is repulsed by the sight of the women of the harem the morning after. Figure 4, a 1960 *vihāra* mural scene from Wat Kompong Thom, like the *Lalitavistara*, an early Sanskrit version of the Buddha's life story, gives particularly clear insight into this pivotal moment:

> When the Bodhisattva looked at the entire retinue of women, he saw that some had garments that had slipped off, some had disheveled hair, and some had their jewelry in disarray. Others had lost their head ornaments, some had ugly shoulders, while some had uncovered arms and legs. Some had repulsive expressions, while the eyes of others were crossed. Some were drooling, and others were snoring. Some were laughing wildly, some were coughing, and others were prattling incoherently. Some others were gnashing their teeth, and the complexion of others had changed. […] The Bodhisattva looked at the retinue of consorts, who were lying there on the floor looking utterly revolting, and he had the impression that he was indeed in a cemetery.[20]

At this (in)sight, Siddhattha decides to leave; yet as he leaves, he sneaks a last glimpse of his wife and newborn child. Is this a moment of hesitation? Or a bold affirmation of the decision to leave? The second look is the last before he mounts his horse.

Fig. 5. Mural painting depicting Prince Siddhattha's departure from the paternal Palace, by Maen Bun. Wat Maha Mantrei, Phnom Penh. Late 1960s. Photograph courtesy Elizabeth Guthrie, 2006.

[20] *Lalitavistara*, trans. from Tibetan into English and checked against the Sanskrit version by the Dharmachakra Translation Committee, 2013, p. 153. (https://aryanthought.files.wordpress .com/ 2014/05/lalitavistara-sutra.pdf, last accessed November 5, 2019).

(Figure 5) In this late 1960s mural from Wat Maha Mantrei, Phnom Penh, we have a common modern Cambodian composition in which the two scenes, seeing the harem and then the wife and child, are depicted together. The decision to leave palace life is textually and pictorially clinched by the sight of women. This is the model moment which underpins a boy's departure from the household to enter the monastic order.

The two visions would appear, at first glance, to be of opposite orders: the repulsive harem and the beautiful wife with child. Yet, as Māyā has shown us, and as this depiction insists, they are one and the same. The beautiful women of the harem appear as corpses. The newly-born mother can only be elided with them in her beauty. The sighting of these women whose beauty is shown to be illusion gives the future Buddha decisive insight into the nature of women and so to that of attachment to the worldly the beautiful woman represents —which is to say the sighting of women gives Siddhattha insight into attachment in the absolute.

As mentioned in opening, this dual sighting episode follows that of the "Four Sights", when Siddhattha leaves the palace to see the real world. The "Four Sights", which are images of what Siddhattha himself might become (sick, old, dead, holy man), are sightings of men of course, and they get the Prince thinking about his own future. The final decision to act on these thoughts comes however with the vision of women I have just described, a vision which receives extensive pictorial and textual attention. The *Jinālaṅkāra*, a life-story of the Buddha composed in Pali in Sri Lanka in the twelfth century and which appears to have been of import in Southeast Asian contexts, is telling in this regard. This text presents the Four Sights in a perfunctory stanza in conjunction with the sight of the "uncomeliness of women". This singular stanza is followed by no less than thirty-seven more elaborating on the sight of Siddhattha's wife and the harem. Like a sustained adjectival clause, this ornate development illustrates and consolidates the penultimate sight of death.[21]

[21] See BUDDHARAKKHITA, *Jinālaṅkāra or 'Embellishments of Buddha'*, edited with Introduction, Notes and Translation by James GRAY, Lancaster, Pali Text Society, 3rd edition, 2006, st. 49-87, pp. 87-93 (first published in 1894). On the importance of this text in Southeast Asian Theravada, see BALBIR, Nalini, "Three Pali Works Revisited", *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, n° XXIX, 2007, pp. 336-346.

Temptation by Māra's Daughters/Calling the Earth to Witness (Figures 6 & 7)

The last life story episodes I will discuss here comprise a key sequence in the drawn-out moment of Siddhattha's enlightenment —when the prince who has abandoned home transforms into a Buddha or *the* (Historical) Buddha. This is the episode when the three daughters of Māra, the Incarnation of Evil or Worldly Attachment —not to be confused with Māyā— assist their father who is vying for the future Buddha's throne. Bearing allegorical names, Craving, Discontent and Lust, the women wield their beauty to arouse passion in the meditating Siddhattha as a means of disrupting his omniscience. The women envelop Siddhattha, from below and from the sides. Like in the harem scene from Wat Nokor, the women crowd, or inhabit his pedestal. The future Buddha is unmoved.

Fig. 6. Mural painting depicting the future Buddha's Temptation by Māra's Daughters, by Tep Thoeun. Wat Kompong Thom. 1960. Vihāra *with murals destroyed in September 2017. Photograph by San Phalla, 2006.*

In its form, the Temptation by Māra's Daughters can be likened to the *Jinālaṅkāra* cited above, or to the *Vinaya* in Janet Gyatso's critical reading of "Sex" in Buddhism.[22] Gyatso notes that the *Vinaya*, the canonical collection of texts on monastic discipline, expends abundant time and energy detailing precisely what sexual acts the monks should *not* accomplish. The very form given to the repression of sexuality itself titillates. The female body must be put on display in calling for its erasure, and, in a range of ways I am seeking to highlight here, the very viability of the Buddhist order depends on it. The designation of women in general as "Māra's daughters" in the *Jinālaṅkāra* is indicative in this regard. Rather than appearing as specific if allegorical figures at a specific moment in time, in this twelfth-century text, the phrase "Māra's daughters" functions as a designation of women in general —something like Eve's daughters. It is in this sense that they are repeatedly and amply described in assimilation with Prince Siddhattha's harem and wife, thus making woman in general —embodied at times by specific women— the condition of emergence of the Great Man.

Fig. 7. Lintel from Sasar Sdam temple, Siem Reap province, depicting the Earth Goddess rising under the throne of the future Buddha Calling the Earth to Witness on the eve of Enlightenment. (The Buddha figure has been chipped out.) 3rd quarter of the twelfth century. Cliché EFEO, Fonds Cambodge (EFEO_ CAM12314. Photograph taken 1937. Photographer unknown).

The scene of seduction by Māra's daughters indeed follows another version of woman as condition of emergence of the man. This is when the future Buddha calls up the Earth to fight the last great battle with Māra's full army. The Earth is a goddess, who has witnessed the miraculous accomplishments of Siddhattha's past lives, the recollection of which serves as a sort of moral arm to confirm his right to the throne. The Earth Goddess also has a physical

[22] GYATSO, Janet, "Sex", [*in*] D. LOPEZ (ed.), *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 271-290.

weapon: her long wet hair, which she wrings out to drown those who would have attachment to worldly affairs reign. This powerful partnership of opposites in which she appears to assume the role of male power in the social world, is that much more manifest in the hair —in a manner inviting Freudian analysis: whereas he cuts his off to become a Great Man, she makes a show and indeed a weapon of her own (Figures 8-11).

Fig. 8. Pediment from Banteay Thom temple, Siem Reap province, depicting the Earth Goddess vanquishing Māra's army on the eve of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Late twelfth-early thirteenth century. Cliché EFEO, Fonds Cambodge (EFEO_CAM10763. Photographer and date of photograph unknown).

There are numerous representations of this scene from the late Angkorian and early Middle periods. The Earth Goddess frequently appears in the Buddha's pedestal. In many, the pedestal and/or the Earth Goddess, occupies a colossal space, equal to if not dwarfing the Buddha himself. This can also be the case in modern representation. Assimilated with the pedestal, she is yet another condition of possibility for the Buddha to triumph. In literal and aesthetic terms, she is the ground —the Earth, the pedestal— against which he figures. She fights his battles in this world such that he may transcend it. She is his counterpart, his opposite, his mirror image, but is at the same time one with him. The pedestal is part and parcel of the figure from which is it nonetheless separated.

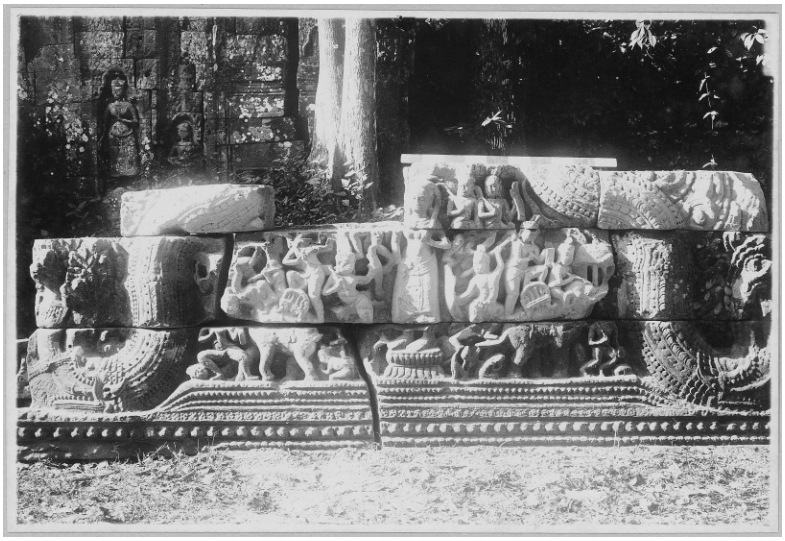

Fig. 9. Pediment from Banteay Kdei temple, Angkor, depicting the Earth Goddess vanquishing Māra's army on the eve of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Late twelfth-early thirteenth century. Cliché EFEO, Fonds Cambodge (EFEO_CAM10638. Photograph taken 1929. Photographer unknown).

Fig. 10. Pediment from Ta Prohm temple, Angkor, depicting the Earth Goddess vanquishing Māra's army on the eve of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Late twelfth-early thirteenth century. Cliché EFEO, Fonds Cambodge (EFEO_CAM10329. Photograph taken 1929. Photographer unknown).

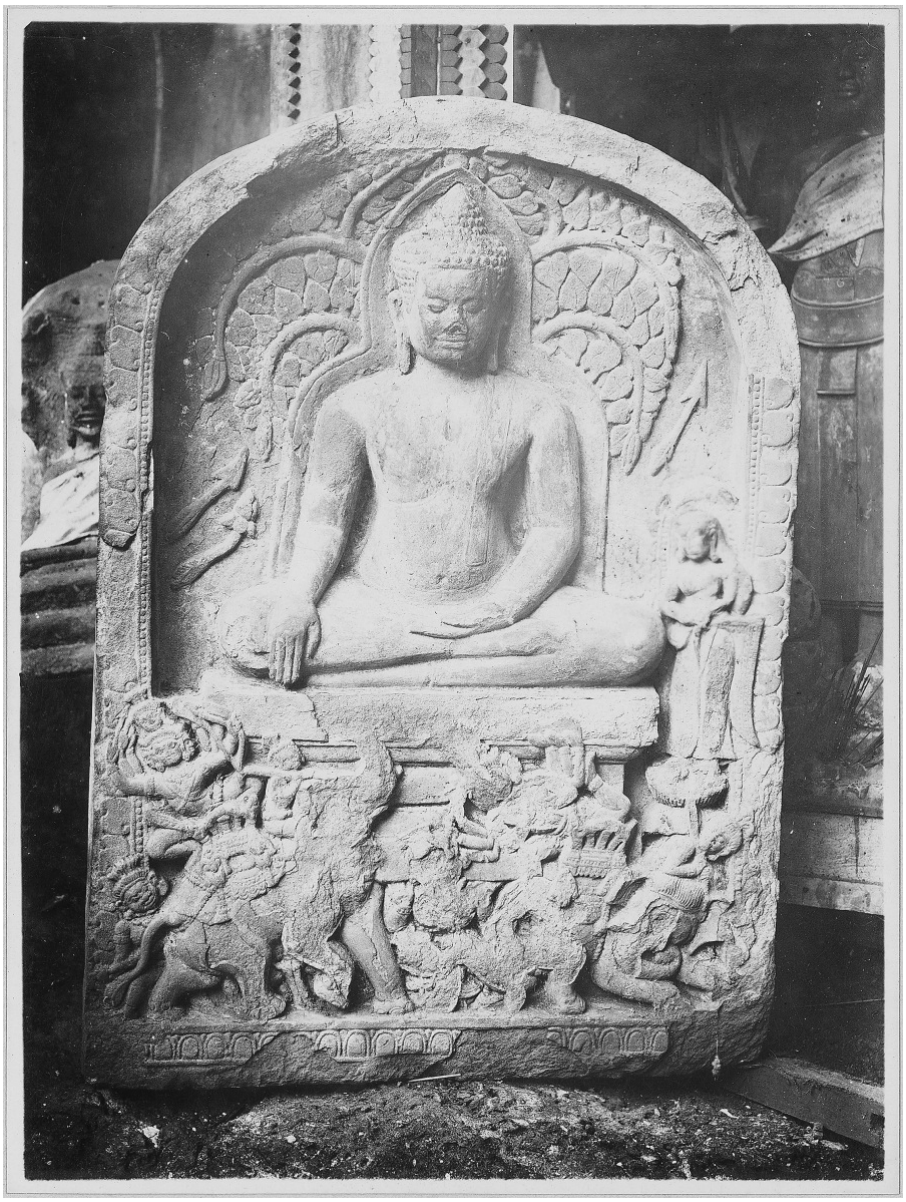

Fig. 11. Stela depicting the Buddha calling the Earth to Witness. Late thirteenth-fourteenth century. Found at Angkor Wat. Now in the Angkor Conservation Depot. Cliché EFEO, Fonds Cambodge (EFEO_CAM04309. Photographer and date of photograph unknown).

Fig. 12. Statuette of the Earth Goddess. Found at Khum Prasat, Kong Pisei District, Kompong Speu Province. Middle Period. Bronze. National Museum of Cambodia inventory n° Ga. 5473. Photo courtesy National Museum of Cambodia.

What is of particular interest to me here in pursuing reflections on the many lives of the Angkorian *liṅga-yoni* ensemble in previous publications is the anthropomorphization, or more precisely the anthropomorphic feminization

of the pedestal.[23] Usually a pedestal is nothing; it is nondescript, and must be so for the figure it supports to appear as such. At this crucial moment, however – *the* crucial moment in the Buddha's life story, the pedestal-throne takes on monumental importance. Siddhattha has it; Māra wants it, because whoever sits atop it reigns. As Siddhattha transforms from worldly man to transcendent Great Man, the pedestal effectively transforms into a woman. The Banteay Kdei and Ta Prohm frontons pictured here are particularly telling: the pedestal has been fully usurped by the female figure. While Māra's army stands on the ground, the Earth Goddess stands on a pedestal, thus ultimately usurping even the Buddha's place. A fascinating gestalt shift takes place here, where the figure of and in the pedestal becomes the figure on the pedestal, such that Mara's army is attacking her more than him —unless we accept that he has become her. This is of course not the first time a pedestal has been assimilated with the feminine in Indic cultures, and we are dealing here with one manifestation of a complex cultural phenomenon. But what is striking here is that with the transformation of the male figure, from worldly to transcendent, we also witness the transformation of the ground —the feminine condition of possibility— into a figure in her own right. One of the most remarkable works of art from the Cambodian Middle Period is a small bronze figure of the Earth Goddess, Nāṅ Dharaṇī. She is a rare explicitly female sculpture in the round amongst the many Buddha statues produced after Angkor (Figure 12).

As Ang Choulean has noted, in modern Cambodian practice, female spirits are frequently thought to inhabit the pedestal.[24] These can be called *brāy*, a Khmer term generally designating malevolent female guardian spirits, or *pārāmī*, a Sanskrit and Pali term designating the "perfections" —a series of moral and intellectual accomplishments the Buddha has made, and which have in turn made him a Buddha. As Ang suggests, the latter appellation, and the assimilation with the indigenous *brāy* conveyed in usage, is likely to have originated in the Angkorian Mahayana Buddhist Prājñā*pāramitā*, the goddess celebrated as the mother of all Buddhas and named for her 'perfection of wisdom' who rose to particular prominence alongside the Buddha and the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara during the late twelfth to early thirteenth-century reign of Jayavarman VII, and who was associated with the king's female

[23] See especially THOMPSON, A., *Engendering the Buddhist State: Territory, Sovereignty and Sexual Difference in the Inventions of Angkor*, London, Routledge Critical Buddhist Studies, 2016, 203 p.

[24] ANG, Chouléan, *Les êtres surnaturels [...]*, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-5; "Le sacré au féminin", *loc. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

counterparts —mother and consort.[25] Comprising the pedestal, one form of the Angkorian Shaivite *śakti* also haunts the *pārāmī* in a particularly explicit manner.[26] The Angkorian lineage should not be taken to negate any Theravada Buddhist lineages linking the *pārāmī* in one way or another to other Southeast Asian Theravadin cultures, where the Earth Goddess likewise has risen in prominence at the Buddha's side.[27] The multiplicity of sources is rather indicative of a historical complex irreducible to a binary of continuity on the one hand and change on the other.[28]

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[25] IDEM, *Les êtres surnaturels […]*, *op. cit.*, p. 134, n. 322. Ang reads more than an assimilation of the indigenous and Mahayana Buddhist feminine figures; the Mahayana figure who vanquishes defilements, or her conceptual abstraction, contributes to a transformation of the malevolent animist figure into a benevolent Buddhist one. Though Ang never explicitly associates the female spirit of the pedestal with the Earth Goddess, Nāṅ Dharaṇī, in his description of the former, he does subtly evoke their association as I analyse it here, also in conjunction with Angkorian goddesses. In his following description of the relation between the pedestal spirit and the Buddha one could easily substitute Nāṅ Dharaṇī for the *brāy*: "la *brāy*… élit residence dans le socle même de la statue principale de l'autel. L'astuce est d'ailleurs bien trouvée. Ainsi la dimension éminemment spirituelle et morale du Buddha demeure intacte. Doté d'un prestige sans égal, il est au-dessus de la mêlée…" ("the *brāy*… takes up residence in the very pedestal of the principal statue on the altar. It is an astucious choice. In this way the eminently spiritual and moral dimension of the Buddha remains intact. Endowed with unequaled prestige, he is above the fray". ("Le sacré au féminin", *loc. cit.*, p. 9)). In this context, the short inscription *K.293*, 40 naming an enshrined divinity at the Bayon as *vraḥ bhagavatī dharanī* merits further consideration.

[26] THOMPSON, A., *Engendering […]*, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-110.

[27] Elizabeth Guthrie's dissertation remains the primary reference on the topic: GUTHRIE, Elizabeth, *A Study of the History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia*, PhD dissertation, University of Canterbury, New Zealand, 2004, vol. 1, 188 p.; vol 2, 54 p. In Cœdès' wake and while exploring Sanskritic traditions of the Buddha's life story featuring the Earth Goddess rising out of and as the Earth to vanquish Evil, Guthrie highlights the pivotal role of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, a Pali Life of the Buddha from what would become Thailand, in the diffusion of the episode. Of equal pertinence to our context, in particular to the ways in which art historical analyses probe the nature of religious distinctions, the supposed primacy of textual sources and the artificiality of established historiographical frames, is the more recent commentary by Nalini Balbir on the Pali *Jinālaṅkāra* composed by Buddharakkhita in Sri Lanka in the early twelfth century as being intimately related to the *Paṭhamasambodhi*. The twelfth-century Angkorian art historical evidence, along with a twelfth-century epigraph from Nakhon Pathom bearing a citation from the *Paṭhamasambodhi* which also appears in another twelfth-century Pali text, compounds this textual evidence to suggest a twelfth-century date for the *Paṭhamasambodhi*. See BALBIR, N., *loc.cit*.

[28] For broader recent reflections on the historiographical schema evoked here, with reference to a caesura typically attributed to the thirteenth century and anchored in the spread of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia, see BOURDONNEAU, É. & MIKAELIAN, G., *loc. cit.*; and THOMPSON, A., "Introduction", [*in*] A. THOMPSON (ed.), *Early Theravadin Cambodia […], op. cit.*

These feminine spirits called *pārāmī* are not generally explicitly seen in the figure of Nāṅ Dharaṇī; they are there, in the pedestal of any Buddha statue worthy of the name. With —or as— the *pārāmī*, the Earth Goddess supports the Buddha; yet she also comes into her own with him. Her place is alternately subaltern, in the pedestal, and defying any simple relegation to the subaltern. As in any master-subaltern relation, the Master is nothing without her. The pedestal can visually grow in importance and she can emerge fully bodied from it.

To what degree can we say, however, that she is not another iteration of the "good woman" like the beautiful mother who is also representative of woman as illusion? Nāṅ Dharaṇī's features are, in Cambodian art, those of conventional female beauty; and vice-versa, her forms have no doubt actively contributed to consolidation of convention. Her role as water-bearer has lived on in the painterly conventions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which hold the perfect Cambodian woman to be holding a traditional water pot.[29]

But if this beautiful woman is paired with the Buddha in his moment of transcendence, in the narrative sequence, she is also set up against Māra's daughters. Indeed, Nāṅ Dharaṇī and Māra's daughters make for a pairing analogous to that between the Buddha's beautiful wife-with-child and the repulsive harem. As we have seen through Ang Choulean's research cited above, the positive beneficent *pārāmī* residing in the pedestal of the central Buddha in Cambodian *vihāra* are assimilated with the malevolent female spirits, or *brāy*. If the one type might be seen to overcome the other in transforming her, they likewise protect the Buddha such that he may do his important contemplative work. The assimilation of these feminine animist spirits with abstract Buddhist 'perfections' in the body of the pedestal out of which the Earth Goddess arises, echoing Angkorian goddesses likewise defeating defilement, gives body to a complex image of male-female relations. Despite her prominence and her promise —or perhaps because of it, one must nonetheless conclude, Nāṅ Dharaṇī is a foil to the Great Man, through the gender binary the two construct as well as through her persistent relation to the ground. She rises to prominence *as* embodiment of the local, the ground; whereas the Buddha sits on the pedestal as transcendent. Her emergence as figure is wholly grounded in the worldly. Her subjectivity is acquired at the moment subjectivity itself is reneged by the Prince. If the Buddha may be said in some fundamental way to transcend sexuality —as part and parcel of the

[29] See THOMPSON, A., "Anybody: Diasporic Subjectivities and the Figure of the 'Historical' Buddha", [*in*] P. FLORES, & L. PARACCIANI (eds.), *Interlaced Journeys: Diaspora and the Contemporary in Southeast Asian Art,* Osage Art Foundation, 2020, pp. 113-127.

crucial moment of transcending subjectivity— Nāṅ Dharaṇī remains a woman. The Freudian model appears to maintain: it is precisely in resisting sexual temptation that the boy converts sexual energy into intellectual accomplishment —a process called sublimation; as for the girl, she is never made to resist sexual energy; there is nothing to overcome; she has nothing to lose; her sexual energy is seamlessly channelled into domesticity —defending the here and now— rather than abruptly converted into the power of the mind.

Transcending Narratives: The Figure of the Buddha as a site of (de)construction of societal norms

The Buddha had the choice to stop the narrative of his life on earth here at the attainment of Enlightenment; but he decided to postpone entry into nirvana in order to teach for a spell. From this point on, he holds an ambiguous position, at once a transcendent figure and a mundane one, wandering the land to spread those insights into our conventional world which enabled him to become detached from it. His wandering figure is on the order of a statue. Infinitely reproducible in space and time, it is an embodiment not of a person *per se* but of its transcendence —where the evacuation of personality makes the Buddha, like the Buddha statue, what he or she or it is. Thus, in the body of the Buddha, the ultimate realization of masculine domination meets its own deconstruction: the Buddha can be variously characterized, in textual, visual and ritual terms, as hyper-masculine, effeminate, feminine, transsexual or asexual. The figure of the Buddha becomes a site for exploration of the societal norms from which it has sprung.

In a future instalment —as ever in homage to Ang Choulean— I will explore these questions through the prisms of a series of more or less feminine Buddha or Buddhist figures from Cambodia. In each, we see the transcendent body of the Buddha as a site of challenge to the societal constraints the Buddha's life story itself variously affirms; as well as the limits of possibilities on offer. This will bring me back to Srei Santhor whose interest I can now vividly see to lie not only in the fact that the region is teeming with vestiges of early Middle Period history but also in the ways in which the cults devoted to these vestiges are uniquely invested in the feminine sacred —*Le sacré au féminin*— to cite the title of Ang Choulean's seminal 1992 article in which he evokes the Buddha statue of Srei Santhor's Vihear Koh Andet called Mae op phdai or the "Mother embracing her belly", in her close relations with a termite hill worshiped as Raṃyol daṅ phkā, or "Flower stalk", another distinctly feminine

apellation.[30] The pervasively feminine cults of the Middle Period vestiges of Srei Santhor are, I will argue, integral to a larger phenomenon of working relations between the amorphous and the anthropomorphic —*L'amorphe et l'anthropomorphe*— to cite another of Ang Choulean's seminal works.[31] Following this great master's lead in so many ways, I will hope to show how these seemingly insignificant material remains are in fact pregnant with meaning.

[30] ANG, C., "Le sacré au féminin", *loc. cit.*, pp. 22-24.
[31] *IDEM*, "Le sol et l'ancêtre. […]", *loc. cit.*