

is considered inappropriate behaviour. However, during the New Year and the *chlong chet* celebration, this act is acceptable, particularly in the game. Villagers often say, 'If you don't want to play, it is fine, and if you play, you should not be angry!'

5. Historical Background of the Teanh Prot

Section 3 and 4 detailed the current state of the game as it is played in modern Cambodia. However, to truly have an understanding of the significance of the *teanh prot*, it is important to consider the historical background into the development of the game. To trace its origins and the source of inspiration in Cambodian culture, we will look at the only surviving folktale about the *teanh prot* as well as iconographical representations that depict stories about the game.

5.1. Folktale Associated with the Teanh Prot

Mr Moa Mey heard a *teanh prot*-related folktale from a late monk, Venerable Thong. This story, as narrated by Mr Mey, was published in 1953 in a *Kampuch Surya*, a Cambodian journal. It is now considered a very valuable piece of cultural heritage because it is the only textual resource available that is related to the *teanh prot*.¹⁵

5.1.1. Text Translation

One day, a horde of demons, who were jealous of the gods, said that the gods did not have much more power than the demons at all and that these gods were held higher positions and levels of esteem because of favours granted by Lord Eisor (Shiva). The demons also said that if the gods were to enter into a contest of strength with the demons, then the gods would surely lose.

Hearing such comments, the gods boastfully said, 'We are not afraid of you, demons, even though you are large. If you would like to have a contest of strength, we agree. We are not afraid at all'.

The demons and gods agreed to have a contest of strength that would be performed by pulling a rope. The terms of the game were that if the demons were to win, then they would hold higher positions than the gods. For instance, when approaching the Lord Eisor in his palace or in any meeting, the demons would sit higher than the gods. The rope-pulling game was scheduled for the following day.

The gods paced in front of Lord Eisor's palace courtyard, thinking of a strategy. Then, Valin (the lord of the monkeys), who heard of the contest, approached the gods with an idea. Valin suggested that the gods use the Naga (mythical multi-headed serpent) as the rope. The gods would hold the head side, and the

¹⁵ Buddhist Institute, *Kampuch Surya*, (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1953), 547-549.

demons would hold the tail side. While tugging, the gods would assign a god to tickle the navel of the Naga. Such a move would cause the Naga to move its tail, and the demons would lose their grip and ultimately lose.

On the following day, the demons and the gods met. The demons agreed to hold the tail while the gods held the head side of the Naga. During the struggle of strength, a god tickled the Naga's navel as planned, and indeed the demons lost their grip and lost the match.

5.1.2. Dating the Folktale

The story is strongly associated with a Hindu myth related to churning an ocean of milk, which is about a collaborative task with the demons and gods churning a milky ocean as a way of retrieving lost treasures hidden beneath. This myth was quite popular during the Angkor period (ninth to thirteenth century). In addition, the inclusion of Valin as an intervener in the tug-of-war battle between the demons and the gods provides a small yet very important indication of an integral relationship between the folktale and an ancient bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat, a twelfth-century temple, and at Bayon and Banteay Chmar, which both date to the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth century. On the bas reliefs, which are about churning the ocean of milk, the monkey king is depicted holding the tail of the Naga (Fig. 28 through 30). It is important to note that there is no explicit Indian text about the myth churning the ocean of milk mentioned or information about who the monkey king is. Because of this lack of information, the local folktale transcribed in the previous section is very important as it helps us identify the monkey king as Valin. The interpolation of Valin into the churning myth in Cambodian culture is to justify and to value this heroic king, who according to Ramayana, an Indian epic, died in an unfair way. Interpreting the folktale as being related to the ancient myth about churning an ocean of milk allows us to propose a possible date of the tale to at least Angkor period.

However, it is very interesting to go further in a comparative approach to delve deeper into the origin of the tug-of-war game. Some communities, which were not necessarily Indian influenced in the same way that the Khmers were, for instance some ethnic communities in Vietnam as well as those living in Barangay Hapao, a town in Ifugao Province in the Philippines, also have tug-of-war events. This can be interpreted to mean that it is possible that the game derives from common source—namely, from rice cultivation communities—and that it has existed since time immemorial and spread throughout South-East Asia.

Moreover, the popularity of the churning myth in ancient Cambodia could have come about because Cambodians were living in agrarian communities. So it is possible

that the tradition of the tug-of-war existed before the myth and that it was simply incorporated into the myth.¹⁶

5.2. Iconographic Representations

According to Mr Mao Mey, the storyteller, the *teanh prot* game was originally a contest of the strength between the demons and gods in the Reamker epic (a Cambodian version of Indian Ramayana). Additionally, he confirmed that he saw the bas relief of Angkor Wat that depicts the contest of rope pulling in which ‘the gods hold the head side of the Naga and the demons hold the tail.’ It is true that the bas relief is known by Cambodians, who do not know the Hindu myth of churning the ocean of milk, as the *teanh prot*. However, a small correction should be made here. There is an inconsistency on the southeast corner of the east side of the bas relief gallery at Angkor Wat. In this location, where the churning the ocean of milk is depicted, the demons are holding the head and the gods are holding the tail (Fig. 31).

As mentioned above, the narration shows a strong association with the Hindu myth of churning the ocean of milk. Both inscriptional and iconographic evidence shows that the myth of churning gained tremendous popularity in ancient Cambodia, and it was even more popular in artistic representation than in India, the country of its origin. First artistic representations of the churning myth go back to at least the end of the ninth century (Fig. 32).

A closer look at the bas reliefs related to the churning myth shows that they can be representationally categorised into two distinct types: the churning of the ocean and the pulling of the serpent or Naga rope. The leg movements of the demons and gods on the lintels of Beng Mealea (Fig. 33) and a bas relief from Angkor (Fig. 31) are clearly a depiction of the churning the ocean of milk myth. On the other hand, the leg movements and positions of the demons and the gods on two eleventh-century lintels of Prasat Sneng and Ek Phnom show that the demons and gods are tugging at each other (Fig. 34 and Fig. 35).

Based on current and available evidence, it can be concluded that the origin and source of inspiration for the *teanh prot* in Cambodian culture is associated or strongly inspired from the Hindu myth about churning the ocean of milk in terms of both physical and religious manifestations.

¹⁶ Some information was added after participating in the International Symposium, ‘Diverse and Common Aspects of Traditional Tug-of-War in East Asia’ that was held on 12 April 2013 in Dangjin, Korea.