

6. Significance of the *Teanh Prot*

To determine why the *teanh prot* is performed only during the New Year celebration and or during the *chlong chet* ceremony, one has to examine the main rituals involved. Embodied within the *teanh prot* are three main and significant rituals, and they are, in no particular order or ranking:

- transitioning from the old year and into a new one
- recreating a perfect time and social order
- calling for rain

6.1. Transitioning from the Old Year and into a New One

The general and traditional concept of time is that it is a continuous and eternal cycle. However, as one time cycle finishes and before starting a new time one, there is a period of transition. This transitional period is represented by the three days of the New Year celebration. In addition, it is important to note that this transitional period symbolises one of chaos and social disorder. This is to say that behaviours that are not normally allowed are permissible during this transition. For example, as indicated earlier, while a man is customarily and socially not allowed to touch a woman, during this period and through the pretexts of traditional games, it is allowed. As a way of reordering this chaos and social disorder, communities take part in rituals and ritualised games, for instance making a sand-mountain (Fig. 36) and the game of *teanh prot*.

In terms of the *teanh prot*, the game exists as a way to ritually symbolise breaking the old time cycle to make a clean segue into the new time cycle, which is made up of the twelve lunar months of the year. The obvious representation of this is realised with the ritualised act of physically breaking or cutting the rope (*phdach prot*) at the end of the game.

A similar idea or principle is imbedded in the ritual of breaking the rope during *chlong chet* ceremony. However, it does not symbolise entering into a new twelve-month lunar cycle, but rather the entry into a new rice cultivation cycle. As mentioned in the description in Section 2, the ceremony opens a new cycle for the rice cultivation season, wherein villagers are 'permitted' to start working in their rice fields to start a new cycle only after the celebration has ended. Additionally, for economic and timing reasons, the New Year celebration includes the *chlong chet* ceremony so that everyone can start the rice cultivation process. In other words, the New Year has entries into two new cycles, one for the twelve lunar months and another for a new rice cultivation cycle.

6.2. Recreating a Perfect Time and Social Order

Time wears out everything in the world. Everything becomes less and less perfect or ideal during the cycle, and then the time cycle ends and a new one begins. Before the start of new time cycle, there is a period of transition in which everything is chaotic and disordered. Traditionally, to start a new and perfect time cycle, rituals are performed to reorder the world and to create a new perfect time and social order. This social reordering is the primary purpose of the *teanh prot*.

The game is undoubtedly a manipulation of the Hindu myth related to churning the ocean of milk. The myth demonstrates the unity between the two rival teams—the gods and the demons—as they search for lost treasures, particularly the elixir of immortality (*amrita*). The beliefs and practices associated with this particular Hindu myth are existent in a number of Cambodian socio-religious contexts.

Cambodians know the story and its significance very well. The ancient capital of Cambodia built at the end of twelfth century, known today as Angkor Thom, showcases the act of churning. On each side of city's entrances, demons and gods stand holding Nagas. The depiction clearly symbolises the episode of churning the ocean of milk. While references to the myth do clearly exist on the entrances to the city, to understand the reason King Jayavarman VII (1181-c.1220), one must look more closely at the environment in which the city was built.

One possible reason for including the myth representation is that the demons and the gods are churning the Cambodian city for the 'treasure of glory', which was lost during the series of wars that took place from 1177 to 1181 CE, particularly with the Cham, another powerful neighbouring kingdom at the time. Throughout this period, Cambodia was attacked and controlled by the Chams, which caused chaos and disorder. Therefore, when Jayavarman VII gained full control over Cambodia, he restored the lost glory of Cambodia and ritually and politically attempted to re-establish social and political order in the country. The demons and gods churning the city were included to symbolise obtaining the *amrita*, so that the city would be no longer suffer mortal attacks by enemies.

The historical relevance of the churning myth and the notions of rediscovery and recreation have been manipulated and integrated into the ritual game of *teanh prot*. The game symbolises recreating a perfect time with perfect order and prosperity.

6.3. Calling for Rain

In agrarian societies, prosperity is derived from the perfect amount of rain—not too much and not too little—so that the people will have a perfect crop and harvest. Thus any game that symbolises the act of recreation, necessarily recreates an opportunity for the perfect amount of rain for the community. As we have seen, the *teanh prot* serves this community need.

In addition, certain sexually symbolic acts can be seen as acts of fertility and production that serve as ritualised actions to call for rain. Dividing teams along gender lines and

having the male and female teams face off against one another is symbolic of a sexual act of productivity. This idea is further emphasised when the winning teams chase the losing teams and then rub their buttocks against the bodies of the losing team members. Clearly this action is loaded with sexual connotations.

As the ritualised game of the *teanh prot* and the ensuing punishments for the losing team show, there is a great deal of sexual symbolism in the event. These sexually symbolic acts are calls for the perfect amount of rain for the community as a whole so that everyone can share in a prosperous crop and harvest.

7. Conclusion

This preliminary study shows that the Cambodian *teanh prot* represents a continuity of a centuries-old tradition. Moreover, it demonstrates significant socio-religious symbolisms, which have been masterly manipulated from Indian myths of churning the ocean of milk so that they fit to the local agrarian models and needs. At one point, the game gained national popularity and served Cambodian agrarian communities very well.

Current research, however, shows that the game is fading away yearly to the point that an alert should be made to safeguard this valuable intangible cultural heritage. Other than some television shows commissioned by government institutions such as the MoCFA and the Ministry of Tourism, efforts to safeguard this important ICH element are low. The *teanh prot* has not yet been inscribed as an ICH element, but the MoCFA is just initiating efforts to register ICH elements nationwide and with support from UNESCO.¹⁷ In addition, substituting *teanh prot* with other forms of entertainment, especially dance, many Cambodians are losing interests in playing and protecting the game. One of the main factors is a lack of understanding its significance.

A competent body closely and actively involved with the game in each community is the Buddhist temple committee. The members help organise the event annually. The committee members are typically elderly males who are lay devotees living in the villages around the monastery, and their important roles are to decide on the monastery's projects and sometimes help solve problems of the villagers. They are the key players in safeguarding and transmitting this very important ICH element. Some of them are keen to participate in safeguarding the elements. Engaging the committee members in safeguarding this particular ICH element would be ideal, since they are deeply involved with organising the event annually.

¹⁷ Last year there was a training program supported by UNESCO in order to train the local cultural officials about the ICH registrations.