Exploring the goddesses of the Bayon style temple complexes of Cambodia with focus on Banteay Chmar and researching their iconographic significance in the Khmer Esoteric Buddhist architectural tradition.

This paper analyses the goddesses of the Temple of Banteay Chmar who elegantly drape the facade of the east entrance of the complex. This Hall is named by scholars as the hall of dancers even though these Yoginis do not assume the same pose of their Bayon sisters. Yoginis within the Khmer religious format belonged to the Vajrayana sect of Buddhism. They served as intermediaries for the initiate to attain enlightenment, and play an important role in the meditation process. The Yoginis are first seen in the temple of Phimai where they are consorts to Samvara (Image 1). They were later adopted by Jayavarman VII in most of his larger temples, where their presence was most important in energizing the temple. Their most prolific display is in the Bayon at Angkor Thom. They are displayed in Ardhaparyanka pose, dancing on a lotus pedestal. They have wide open eyes and most of them sport a third vajra eye, similar to the face towers in the same temple. (Image 2)

They goddesses that are displayed in the hall of dancers at Banteay Chmar, are iconographically different from their Angkor sisters. Firstly, they are not displayed dancing in the same pose. They strike an androgynous pose, in a mutated half eagle form. They too have the dramatic open eyes as is symbolic of the Bayon style. (Image 2) In this report I would like to suggest a revisitation of terming this temple as one that follows Mahayana Buddhism as mentioned on site. I would rather suggest this temple is one that marks the culmination of the maturation of Jayavarman’s religious pantheon. It is here that all his religious affiliations were and represented in an assimilated form and I would suggest a more evolved taxonomy rather than simple Mahayana or Vajrayana.

If we look at the iconographic distribution of the imagery at this temple we find a Khmerized indic mix of deities borrowed from sects of religions, prominently featuring, Vajrayana, Mahayana, and Saivism. It is also clear to us that within both these sects there is an esoteric bent in the adoption in Cambodia. This would be because of the khmer fascination with magical rights of indic traditions which were the basis of their adoption. In this report I would like elaborate how tantric Buddhism had an efflorescence in Cambodia and adopted formally by Jayavarman VII. Hence urging a revisitation of terming the temple as a Mahayana complex. And the second section will trace how the Yoginis have evolved from their first representation at Phimai to be finally displayed at Banteay Chmar in their matured form.

The development of Buddhism in Cambodia was also reinforced by the arrival of Punyodaya, an early tantric Buddhist sage from Bengal.1 This event of Buddhism actually crossing international borders into Cambodia took place in the mid-seventh century. This Tantric Buddhist scholar arrived in the Chinese capital with a chariot full of Sanskrit scripts to be translated into Chinese. He was later sent on an imperial mission to Zhen-la to learn about the Khmer expertise on medicinal Herbs. Punyodaya’s story indicates Cambodia maintaining contact with China at frequent intervals where similar travels, official or unofficial gave Buddhism its international character. I believe it was Punyodaya, as the disciple of Amoghavajra, who planted the seeds of a tantric state structure that matured overtime to finally bloom in the reign of Jayavarman VII. Raffaello Orlando substantiates this when he states: “It was only toward the end of the seventh century, with the arrival of the Indian masters who had studied at the Nalanda Monastery, that text and practices associated with the new Vajrayana movement came to be introduced into China”2. It becomes clear over time that the influence which was received was mostly from the Pala dynasty from the 8th century. But at the

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1 Li-Kouang, Lin (1935:83-100) ‘Punyodaya (N’ati), un propagateur du Tantrisme en Chine et au Cambodge à l’époque de Hsuan-Tsang’ Journal asiatique Juillet-Septembre


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same time "Pala culture did not arrive in Southeast Asia as a pioneer, but rather as a participant in an already active international arena in which several other major powers played principal roles."³ In the case of Cambodia the development of this religious language led to the development of the Angkor’s mysterious goddesses. Esoteric beliefs have been present in Cambodia for a long time. As mentioned before, the Khmers, like the Chinese, were deeply influenced by the magical powers of the Indian Brahmins and early tantric Buddhists. This is evident through the example of Jayavarman II, who was consecrated in 802 by a Brahman named Hiranyadama, through the medium of magical practices which were the main element of tantric rituals. This process of consecration was conducted by using four tantric texts, and the rituals were specifically conducted in order to transform the king into a Chakravartin by receiving the divine powers of Lord Shiva. (This is based on an account given more than two centuries later in the Sdok Kak Thom temple inscription dated 1053 CE). This was the beginning of the divine cults which Coedès terms as “Personal Cults”⁴. Coedès further elaborates on the role of magic, which played a key role not only in consecrating the king but also in state formation and defining the vernacular architectural format. According to him “the arrangement of a Khmer city and its architecture and decoration were governed by a whole series of magic and religious beliefs, and not determined by utilitarian or aesthetic aims."⁵

Sanderson (2004) cites the instance of Kirtipandita in the 10th century: "An inscription of the reign on Jayavarman V (r. 968-c. 1000/1) reveals a similar arrangement in the Khmer court of Angkor. It tells us that one Kirtipandita, a Mahayanist scholar and adept of the Buddhist Yogatantras, who had been adopted by the royal family as their guru, was frequently engaged by the king to perform apotropaic, restorative and aggressive Mantra rituals within the royal palace for the protection of his kingdom."⁶

It was not uncommon for kings to have a personal deity and a state deity. In the case of Jayavarman VI, about whom we don’t know much due to lack of inscriptions; the inscriptions of his successors and a Brahmin Divakarapandita “associate his name with some constructions in the Saiva monuments of Phnom Sandak, Preah Vihear, and Vat Phu and at the Buddhist temple of Phimai.”⁷ Phimai, formerly called Vimayapura, is located in Northeast Thailand, with Laos to the North and Angkor to the South. The main gate faces south-southeast towards Angkor with a straight road running to the Khmer capital. This temple is one of the first in the history of the Khmers that displays tantric Buddhist reliefs. Dedicated to the Buddha, the reliefs on the walls of the inner sanctum depict Vajrasattva and Trailokyavijaya. I believe this temple was the personal temple of Jayavarman VI and the first to display Yoginis. (image 3) “Rob Linrothe surveys the evolution and spread of tantric Buddhism through a ninth-eleventh century phase led by Vajrapani-Trailokyavijaya and defines a further, for him third, phase dominated by texts and images of Heruka, Hevajra, Samvara. He perceives that something special happened with the deities of this phase in Phimai, Angkor and Java/Sumatra where Hevajra/Heruka was adopted politically into a royal cult and not only in monasteries: ‘Phase Three krodha-vighnantaka (‘wrathful destroyers of obstacles’) especially Heruka and Hevajra, appear after the eleventh century in Southeast Asia as well [as in Tibet], in Java and in Thai and Khmer contexts.”⁸

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⁵ Coedès (1963: 9)


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“Outside of his principal focus on Tibet, Linrothe observes a clear political application of such a third phase cult:

If there was a Hevajra cult, it seems to have thrived in Southeast Asia. Hevajra imagery may have come overland to Thailand from eastern India, directly from Bengal via Burma. The transmission of Hevajra teachings was probably reinforced through contacts along the maritime routes from island Southeast Asia and eastern India. Whatever the route it clearly had considerable influence in the highest levels of society. Seemingly removed from his yogic and monastic origins, Hevajra was utilized in the royal cult, not, as in the Ming court to improve relations with Tibet, but as part of an attempt at local political legitimization...The compelling power of the Hevajra image seems to have contributed to the cult, which sponsored commemorative monuments more so than monasteries.”

Phimai displays the result of this integrative role of women within the religious structure of the Khmers. With reference to the Sab Bak Inscription (K. 1158), Phimai was the product of the Mahidharapura dynasty which came to power after “usurpation of Jayavarman VI in 1018 and clearly signaled its Tantric Buddhist affiliation in the construction of the vast temple complex”.

There is no clear indication of whether Jayavarman built a temple in Angkor, but Sharrock (2010) believes that Banteay Samre could have been constructed under the patronage of the same king. The Sab Bak inscription brings to our attention the worship of Vajrasattva, as the “lord of the five Buddhas of the Vajradhatu Pentad that was first defined in the STTS.” Apart from the inscriptive evidence, the material evidence of the central shrine also points towards a Vajrayana following. The four lintels of the central sanctum display Tantric Buddhist elements. “The upper part of the eastern lintel depicts ten ornamented Buddha Images in meditative attitudes. Divine beings rejoice along the lower registers. At the centre is a dancing male figure with four faces and eight arms, believed to be the Bodhisattva, Trailokyavijaya.” And three lintels depict the presence of dancing women. These women I will term as Yoginis. They can be termed so due to their iconographic attributes corresponding along with their representation beside Samvara. Samvara is another emanation of Vajrasattva, who is the transcendental emanation of Hevajra or Trailokyavijaya. The dancing postures of these women in the dramatic ardhaparyanka pose and their deep staring eyes match the postures of the Yoginis of the Bayon. The Yoginis of the Bayon can be termed so as they correspond to the numerous bronze Hevajra mandalas found where these dancing goddesses encircle Hevajra. (Image 4)

According to the Hevajra Tantra, the Yoginis serve as the intermediaries to initiate the yogin into the tantric ritual of initiation. If so why don’t we find inscriptions stating the religion of the king and why only dedicatory inscriptions towards Buddha and Siva? One thing that can be determined from the Sab Bak inscription is that Tantric Buddhism was definitely not the official state religion at this point in time, but was royally recognized.

At Phimai the Yoginis were the predecessors to the fully evolved Bayon Yoginis. They symbolized the intermediary phase of the religion and hence dominated the reliefs of Phimai purely in the iconographic fashion as prescribed in the sacred texts. I don’t believe they had a ritualistic role in a largely Saivite state.

9 ibid.
11 ibid.
12 Sharrock (2010: 10)
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I believe at this point that there was a clear progression in the representation of women and the tantric role of religion. The empowering role of women, along with a transforming role of the goddesses will be illustrated through the various definitions of a Yoginī. "A Yoginī’s path may include the practice of Tantra, a religious philosophy focusing on the interplay between the male and female forces of the universe embodied by Shakti and Siva." Yoginīs are also another form of Devi or Durga. They originated when “during a battle to save the universe, Durga emanated eight Yoginīs to achieve her goal.” Vidya Dehejia, in her exhaustive account on the Yoginīs cult and temples in India mentions a number of different interpretations. “Sanskrit dictionaries give the following meanings: female devotee; sorceress or witch; fairy; attendants of Durga.” Within the connotation of the Nepali Buddhists they are defined as consorts of the gods who use them for initiation processes and copulation. They inhabit the earth and are usually the manifestation of local protector goddesses.

The identifying features of the Yoginī that demarcates them as tantric are their eyes two or three but staring and very assertive like holding a secret knowledge. This is also projected by their alert body, pulled back shoulders and thrusting breasts and the knowing, mystical smile. Their dancing (ardhaparyanka pose) is a form of meditation in the tantric realm. They “wear five out of the six insignia or symbolic adornments prescribed in the Hevajra Tantra; tiara, earrings, necklace, bracelets, girdle.” The apron of bones is not known in the tantric history of the Khmers. This is a steep shift from the typical representation of the conventional Yoginīs. But then again within the Khmer artistic tradition more stress, as we have noticed from the account above, has been placed on the beautiful yet forceful aspect of power rather than the wrathful!

At Banteay Chmar the Yoginīs are displayed differently from their Bayon sisters. I would suggest this temple to be a personal temple of Jayavarman VII, where he was initiated into his initiation ceremony. I would call the women Yoginīs where their winged arms and lion legs are metaphors of them as earthly intermediaries of heaven. The repetition of the same kind of yogini would suggest how he would have been initiated through one yogini whose attributes are replicated repeatedly. Another indication of this would be the miraculously standing Hevajra lintel, whose iconography corresponds with the numerous Hevajra bronzes found in Angkor, from Jayavarman’s rule.

After this analysis the question rises as to why these Yoginīs are so different to other representations in the architectural reliefs and the bronzes. There could be two explanations for the same, both of which are open to critique and would require a deeper analyses according to sacred prescriptions. First they could be the representation of a particular yogini who may have been the intermediary for the initiate into a vajrayanic initiation. According to the Hevajra Tantra, the role of the Yoginī within the Hevajra Mandala, which I consider as the one that was primary to the ruler, was to “help tantrikas tear themselves away from the phenomenal world and lead them through often terrifying experiences with the aim of eventually seeing the world through the eyes of a Buddha. Each initiate identifies closely with a particular Yoginī They lead adepts into the imaginary mandala with garlands in their hands for the garland consecration process or malabhisheka. This leads the adept to form his bond with the deity of the sector where the flowers offered to him by the Yoginī falls. The Yoginīs are also integral to the other stages of the consecration process where the yogin copulates with the Yoginī but holds his semen to experience bliss, an importance stage of the process.

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17 Sharrock, (2008: 170)
The second explanation could be a khmerized fusion of the garuda with the yogini of the Bayon to present itself in a mature form of the goddesses at this temple. However I have not been able substantiate this as all evidence does point to the former.

In most of Jayavarman’s structures there was a deliberate addition of a yogini hall, as suggested by scholars at a later date. Their placement and arrangement in the plan of the temple corresponds with the hall of dancers hence indicating that these women could also be Yoginīs. This could have been due to the rulers initiation into the vajrayanic realm.

However the other question that arises with this hypothesis is why would this temple then display not only mahayana iconography, but also saivite iconography. In a gallery west of the hall of dancers I came upon a few yonies, scattered in the dark. (Image 5) There is also a linga in the relief of the outer wall of the northern section of the complex (Image 6). According to Dr. Sharrock, it could be a representation of Jayavarman paying his respects at Mt. Kulen. Which would further lead us to conclude how the ruler was a tolerant one to other forms of worship and displayed an agglomeration of the same at Banteay Chmar.

Apart from the Yoginīs in the hall of dancers a second format of Yoginīs are seen in reliefs, especially the avalokiteshwara panel where they are seen dancing in their typical ardhaparyanca pose underneath the feet of the deity. (Image 7) This is a good example to show the distinction between apsaras and the Yoginīs. As in image 8 apsaras are seen in upward flight noted by the legs folded backwards. A definition of the Apsaras would reveal them to be celestial goddesses who are the representative of heaven born out of the churning of the milk ocean. (Image 8) The Yoginīs are very different from the Apsaras. They represent the earth and the Apsaras represent the heavens. The identifying features of the Yogini that demarcates them as tantric are their eyes two or three but staring and very assertive like holding a secret knowledge. This is also projected by their alert body, pulled back shoulders and thrusting breasts and the knowing, mystical smile. Their dancing (ardhaparyanka pose) is a form of meditation in the tantric realm. These are subtle Khmer Yoginīs that present themselves as a far more subdued version of the Tibetan or the Indian version, who are fashioned with fangs, and protruding eyes, and sense of wildness. They “wear five out of the six insignia or symbolic adornments prescribed in the Hevajra Tantra; tiara, earrings, necklace, bracelets, girdle”. They do not adorn the apron of bones as the wildness of the Yogini becomes apparent with their “typically tantric”. Another interesting fact noticed at the Bayon was how these Yogini did not trample on corpses, instead danced on lotuses even in bronze depictions.

When Jayavarman VII took over the throne of Angkor, he did so after a psychologically destructive Cham raid on the Khmer capital. Hence a consecration was in order where he praised the name of wrathful protector deities. This was done against external and internal threats. This extreme esoteric move was justified in this sense and a royal religious change was in order. Consecrations took place for which special architectural changes were also ordered. Oliver Cunin (2007) in his petrological analysis has mentioned that the Hall of dancers in most of the King’s temples were later additions to Jayavarman’s temples. Hence the role of the Yoginīs as we can see had greatly increased from their predecessors at Phimai. They too imbied within them the protector deity qualities of Vajrasattva which justifies their staring prevalence on the doorways and lintels. I agree with Peter Sharrock (2008) when he concludes they could have been used to badge the hall of dancers for mass rituals, as this religious shift was also marked by mass participation.22

I would suggest it was here in this hall of dancers that the consecration would have taken place. Hence very specific iconography, which includes the avalokiteshwara panel too.

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22 Sharrock (2008: 180)
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With the above circumstantial evidence corresponding with the iconographic evidence at the site, I would urge for the revisitation of the temple as a Mahayana complex. And owing to the iconographic detail in the hall of dancers, I would try to put forward a hypothesis that this temple could have served as Jayavarman's private temple, where he could have been initiated and consecrated as an adept in the *vajrayanic* tradition. However much of the material evidence still lays potentially undiscovered owing to the rebuilding of the temple through Global Heritage Fund, and when once completed this complex would serve as a Pandora’s box for unravelled Jayavarman’s mysterious religion, as this complex was one that was saved from the hindu reaction that succeeded his reign.
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Online Resources:


APPENDIX I

Timeline of Key Historic events in India and Southeast Asia

200-300
Southeast Asia
-Kingdom of Lin-yi which later becomes northern part of Champa kingdom -Pyu kingdom of the Irrawaddy

300-400
India
- Beginnings of the Gupta era and Gupta art style - Gandhara art flourishes

Southeast Asia
- Sanskrit inscriptions from Champa

400-500
India
- Mahayana Buddhist caves of Ajanta, Ellora - End of the Gupta dynasty

Southeast Asia
- Thailand: Influence of South Indian art

500-600
India
- Cave art of Ajanta, Ellora

Southeast Asia
- End of Fu-nan kingdom
- Cambodia: Beginnings of Chen-la kingdom
- Thailand: Gupta influences in Thai sanctuaries; Khmer inscriptions in eastern provinces

600-700
India
- Reign of Mahendravarman I, Pallava dynasty of southeast India.
- Pallava art style.

Southeast Asia
- Champa: Mi-Son site established
- Java: Beginning of the Shrivijaya kingdom
- Thailand: Rise of the Dvaravati school of art; Pre-Angkorian art in the eastern provinces of modern Thailand; Buddhist inscriptions; founding of Haripunjaya kingdom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>700-800</th>
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India
- Pala dynasty in Bengal and Bihar
- Rise of Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism

Southeast Asia
- Indonesian raids in the Indochina peninsula
- Java: Sailendra dynasty established
- Thailand: Shrivijaya kingdom rules in the peninsula

<table>
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<th>800-900</th>
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India
- Chola art

Southeast Asia
- Cambodia: Reign of Jayavarman II; reign of Indravarman temples founded at Roluos, Prah Ko, Bakong; founding of Angkor
- Burma: founding of Pegu
- Champa: Buddhist temple of Dong-duong established
- Thailand: Mahayana school of Buddhism dominates Shrivijaya Pallava influences in Peninsula art

<table>
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<th>900-1000</th>
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</table>

India
- Khajuraho

Southeast Asia
- Cambodia: Reign of Jayavarman IV; new capital at Koh Ker
- Vietnam: Independence from China
- Champa: Invaded by Vietnam 1000-1100
- Sacking of Buddhist temples of Mathura

<table>
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<tr>
<th>1200-1300</th>
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India
- Muslim art in Delhi

Southeast Asia
- Champa: Annexed by Cambodia
- Vietnam: Tran dynasty
- Burma: Pagan defeated by Mongols
Thailand: Founding of Sukhothai kingdom; independence of Lopburi; decline of Shrivijaya in peninsula; founding of Chiang Mai as capital of Lan Na kingdom; sculptures in U Thong art style; Lan Na art style

1300-1400

India
- Founding of Vijayanagar

Southeast Asia
- Vietnam: Conquers Champa Peninsula; spread of Islam
- Laos: Founding of kingdom of Lan Chang
- Burma: Founding of Ava
- Thailand: Ayutthaya kingdom; Sukhothai school of art flourishes; Sawankalok ceramics; Lan Na kingdom
- Champa: Campaigns against Vietnam

1400-1500

India
- Development of Muslim architecture

Southeast Asia
- Cambodia: Angkor defeated by Ayutthaya; capital moves to Phnom Phen - Thailand: Sukhothai subjected by Ayutthaya

APPENDIX II

Iconographic traits of the Angkor Wat and Bayon Devatas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bayon Devatas</th>
<th>Angkor Wat Devatas</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Devata Portraits</td>
<td>Devatas in Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flame style crown common</td>
<td>Triple crown common</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flower garlands common</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mudras</td>
<td>Mudras</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossed “sautoir” chest bands common</td>
<td>Only on selected <em>Devatas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Waist-Hip Ratio</td>
<td>Lower Waist-Hip Ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotus pedestal seen</td>
<td>Lotus pedestal extremely rare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampot “tail” not seen</td>
<td>Sampot “tail” common</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Courtesy: Kent Davis*