

# Impermanent frescoes

Unlike the handful of European texts that can truly claim global popularity, the influence of Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* has not been due to its 'permanence', but rather its flexibility. Hundreds of variations blossomed across South and South-east Asia for the past two and a half millennia, making the *Rāmāyaṇa* one of the most accessible texts in the history of literature. Known as the *Ramakien* in Thailand, the *Rian Reamkerti* in Cambodia and the *Phra Lak Phra Lam* to the Lao people, the text has inspired popular performance traditions and several schools of painters who worked on the canvases of royal halls and temple walls.<sup>1</sup>

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IN THE LATE 1960S, R.A. Olsson, one of the most renowned translators of the Thai *Ramakien* walked through the halls of Wat Pra Kaeo, in the royal palace in Bangkok. He marveled at the use of the magnificent paintings as prompts for parents orating the story to their children.<sup>2</sup> Today, visitors to Bangkok, Phnom Penh and Vientiane may be surprised by the remarkable similarities between the three royal palaces. All three palaces claim spiritual potency through the presence, historical or actual, of the famed Emerald Buddha relic, the presence of the localized version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the palace space as the center of a new-cosmologically rooted mandala, pivoting around the *sima* stones. There are, however, also some differences to be noted.

The paintings of the *Ramakien* at Wat Pra Kaeo are clearly influenced by Italian 'fresco' styles, as well as conceptions of landscape and perspective. Yet, they are darker in tone, with deep red hues and black appearing throughout. They also feature impressive golden highlights, used liberally to denote grandeur. By contrast, Cambodian versions are warmer in tone, closer in sensibilities to the Italian palate and, perhaps, more welcoming. The Cambodian *Rian Reamkerti*<sup>3</sup> can be found in at least three notable locations: Wat Bho in Siem Reap, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh and the Silver Pagoda at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh.<sup>4</sup> Known as the Wat Preah Keo Morokot in Khmer, the Silver Pagoda also references the Emerald Buddha that moved from Laos to Bangkok as a result of Thai eighteenth century expansion.<sup>5</sup> There were once *Reamkerti* paintings at Wat Phnom Chisor (Takeo province), but these were destroyed during the coup that created the Khmer

Republic under Lon Nol in 1970.<sup>6</sup> However, the Cambodian royal palace takes on a unique tone, even in comparison with other Khmer samples.

The painter of the *Reamkerti* panels, Oknha Tep Nimit Mak, would have been aware of the Thai equivalents that were created nearly a century earlier. Yet, he was so creative and influential that he was given due recognition through the establishment of his own 'school' of Cambodia's painters.<sup>7</sup> His three principal works were the Wat Preah Keo Morokot (1903, 642x3m), Wat Phnom Del (Kampong Cham) and Wat Sisowath Ratanam (south Kandal) murals. Like Thai painters from the same period, he was famous for his European influenced treatment of vegetation and perspective. Although Thai influence on Oknha Tep Nimit Mak has been acknowledged, he clearly had his own flare, preferring much brighter tones than most Thai murals from the same period.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, his work is memorable to anyone who encounters it.

Due to the tropical climate, lack of restoration funds and general neglect during decades of civil war that ravaged Cambodia from the mid to late twentieth century, the *Reamkerti* murals fell into disrepair. As a 'quick fix' solution, some of the panels were removed and placed in storage. A Polish team began to restore the murals in the 1980s, during the closing years of the civil war. Yet ironically, as peace was declared in 1993, Polish funding for the project ran out.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, international aid at the time focused, necessarily, on abating the humanitarian crisis. Attention to the arts continued its long decline as the country initially began to recover. As stability gradually returned, attention to heritage

sites increased; but Angkor and the tourist industry received the most attention. Even the once renowned Buddhist Institute was barely given credence. Under-supported library staff, the decay of collections and the shuttling of key works off to the National Library and National Archives of Cambodia to save them, combined with a further lack of appropriate funding commitments by government ministries, have added to the decline of the Buddhist Institute; corners of the original site have even been redeveloped as a hotel and casino, appropriately named 'Naga World' (a Khmer reference to 'the underworld'). Set against these realities, when wandering through the royal halls of Wat Preah Keo Morokot, visitors can begin to gain a sense of the intense cacophony of hybridity that gave birth to Oknha's impressive works.

## *Rian Reamkerti* and the many *Rāmāyaṇas* of Southeast Asia

The murals of the *Rian Reamkerti*, as well as readings of the *Reamkerti* and the *Ramakien* versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, demonstrate a number of unique interpretations of Valmiki's text. For example, in the Valmiki text, the half-monkey half-god Hanuman is a partial incarnation of *Rudra Siva*, protector and demon-dispeller. It is generally assumed that he 'came from a bad family', since being reborn as a monkey would have been a low rebirth. In the sub-continent (South Asia) the deification of Hanuman occurred only from the tenth century onwards.<sup>10</sup> But in Cambodia the role of Hanuman is one of extremes. Hanuman's *kammic* rebirth is even lower, and hence, his debt to the king *Ream* (*Rāma*), even greater. His tendency for promiscuity also makes him, along with the monkey king

Below:  
"Assembling the troops". Monkey troops pictured at lower left. Wat Preah Keo Morokot (1903, Royal Palace, Phnom Penh, Cambodia). Photographed by author, 2014.



# Localization of the Rāmāyaṇa in mainland Southeast Asia

*Sugrib*, a focal point of comedy in the epic. Hanuman is the unsung hero, dear friend of the noble *Sita* and loved even more greatly by the audience than *Ream*.<sup>11</sup>

Other Cambodian localizations include: the transformation of *Agni's* steed from a ram, as it appears in south Indian version, to a rhinoceros;<sup>12</sup> the absence of the 'death of *Ravana*' sequence;<sup>13</sup> and most notably, in the *Rian Reamkerti* *Sita's* fidelity is not judged in a trial by fire.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the *Rian Reamkerti* also contrasts strongly with renditions of the Thai *Ramakien* such as Olsson's<sup>15</sup> and Tipaya's<sup>16</sup> translations, which not only feature a trial by fire, but also include this scene as only one element of a quite extended series of trials to test *Sita's* fidelity. Meanwhile, in the *Rian Reamkerti* *Sita* becomes so furious with *Ream* that she disappears into the *naga* underworld, where the king of the nether-realm gives her a home. *Ream* attempts to trick her by faking his own death, however, *Sita* discovers this. Hence both *Ream* and *Hanuman* are no longer in *Sita's* favor by the end of the narrative.<sup>17</sup> The murals at the Silver Pagoda appear to parallel the *Rian Reamkerti* versions of the text. Furthermore, they are unique in that they appear to end with the narrative of *Ream's* conquests in the lands of the parents of *Ravana*, although it is possible that *Sita's* entry into the *naga* underworld was one of the removed panels mentioned earlier.<sup>18</sup>

Although there are clear differences between the *Rian Reamkerti* and *Ramakien* versions of Valmiki's text, there are also deeper shared elements across localizations of the *Ramayana* in Theravada Buddhist contexts, also present in Lao and Burmese versions of the narrative.<sup>19</sup> For example, the figure *Rama* is conflated with one of the early historical incarnations of *Gautama Buddha*. However, the specific vocabulary used to refer to the individual *Buddha* may differ from text to text. In the *Rian Reamkerti*, for example, the king *Ream* is said to be a literal *Bodhisattva*, a "bud of the *Buddha*", "omniscient", and "in possession of supernatural knowledge".<sup>20</sup> Further unpacking the origins of the *Rian Reamkerti* text may help to explain some of the variations that exist between the *Rian Reamkerti* and the *Ramakien*.

## Exploring origins

Scholarly consensus regarding the relationship between the Khmer *Rian Reamkerti* and the Thai *Ramakien* has frequently responded to both Khmer and Thai historiographical conceptions of the loss of literature. As a result of the Thai conquest of Angkor in 1431/1432 and the particularly strong association between the *Ramakien* and the Thai (Siamese) Chakri dynasty, it is not uncommon to hear allusions to the 'theft of Khmer culture by Thai'. But the *Rāmāyaṇa* was venerated very early and widely in classical Southeast Asia. Perhaps the earliest at the UNESCO World Heritage site of the Champa civilization at *Mỹ Sơn* (now in Vietnam). Portrayals of the *Rāmāyaṇa* also appeared in the statues and latticework of the Angkor complex as well as on the island of Java.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in Thailand, the loss of Angkor to Thai conquest, has been recast through the narrative of 'shared loss,' after the Burmese defeat of the Thai royals and the conquest of their city of *Prah Nakhon Si Ayutthaya* (founded 1350). Hence the Thai murals, upon their creation, represented a revitalization of royal successes. Unlike ancient Khmer society, which drew origins of royal authority from a localization of a section of the *Mahabharata*, the Chakri dynasty literally and figuratively tied the position of the king to the text.<sup>22</sup> All kings have been named *Rāma* and the first version of the *Ramakien* was supposedly completed by King *Rāma I* in 1798. Tipaya<sup>23</sup> has argued that the naming of the Thai kings, combined with the shared imagery of the *Ramakien* murals at *Wat Pra Kaeo* in Bangkok and the famous temples of the Angkor complex and *Bantey Srei*, may be evidence of Thai borrowings from Khmer culture.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the historical imagination of the Chakri dynasty has elevated the *Rāmāyaṇa* to the highest of all positions in Southeast Asia. Hence, it would not be too far off of an assertion to suggest that the painting of the murals in Phnom Penh represented something of a 'reclamation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*' in response to the Oknha's awareness of an increasingly global audience that had been visiting the parallel murals in Bangkok.

## Conclusion

The literary tropes of the Khmer *Rian Reamkerti* may have been present in the statues and epigraphy of Angkor civilization [4th-15th centuries]. However, the *Reamkerti* also appears to have been more solidified as 'uniquely Khmer' with the composition of two texts, *Reamkerti I* and *Reamkerti II*, during the early modern period [15th-18th centuries]. Later in the nineteenth century, the tradition of representation moved further into the realm of court art, as professional dance troops became more organized and the commissioning of murals in the royal place occurred. Since they were commissioned by the royal house, the paintings represented a self-conscious claim toward 'originally Indic' influenced culture, in light of the nearly contemporaneous claims staked by the Chakri dynasty. The drive for originality may also be a factor that could explain the variations that are present in the Khmer Royal Palace. Furthermore, the functionalist explanation of the tints presented in the mural walls deserves a second glance.



Above: "The Bridge to Lanka". Panels tend to show most wear at lower portions. Wat Preah Keo Morokot (1903, Royal Palace, Phnom Penh, Cambodia). Photographed by author, 2014.

The dark tints of the Thai royal palace, constantly highlighted by an excess of gold, simply cannot compare to the soft, yet also, at times, vibrant pastels of the Khmer Royal Palace. While one is ominous and impressive, the other is warm and welcoming. These stark contrasts are of course by no means absolutes, but rather points of comparison that may be used to provoke more detailed studies by historians, art historians, or even just enthusiasts. Perhaps, rather than 'conclusions', these assertions simply provide lines of further inquiry into the role of the transnational epic in identity making. Encouraging further scholarly attention to these works, the history and the popular art of Cambodia, will continue to promote a greater understanding of the *Rāmāyaṇa* among a global and scholarly public, as efforts continue in an attempt to restore the impermanent frescoes in Phnom Penh.

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## References

- 1 Thanks for this piece go to the staff of the Center for Khmer Studies (Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, Cambodia), to Professor Anne Hansen, to Frank Smith, and to Luke Schmidt, as well as the students from RS 101 in fall 2014.
- 2 Olsson, R.A. 1968. *The Ramakien: A Prose Translation of the Thai-Rāmāyaṇa*, Bangkok, Thailand: Praepittaya Company Limited Partnership.
- 3 Most titles imply 'The conquest of Rama', but *Rian Reamkerti* implies 'the glory of Ream'.
- 4 Lao murals also appear at *Wat Oup Moun* (Sahai, S. 1976. *Rāmāyaṇa in Laos: A Study in the Gvay Dvorahbi*, Delhi: BR Publishing, p.xiii). They were painted much later than the Thai and Khmer murals, however, 'with cheap house paints', but are also, seemingly contradictorily referred to as 'fresco' (ibid., pp.75-77).
- 5 Ibid., p.127.
- 6 Giteau, M. 2003. *Chefs d'oeuvre de la peinture cambodjienne dans les monasteries bouddhiques post-angkoriens/Capolavori della pittura cambogiana nei monasteri buddhisti di epoca post-angkoriana*, Torino, Italy: Abaco Editori, pp.95-110.
- 7 His students went on to paint the *Wat Kompong Tralach Krom* (Kampong Chhnang) and *Wat Kompong Traach Loeu* murals as well.
- 8 Ibid., Giteau, M. 2003, pp. 114-115, 127, 129.
- 9 Dean, J.F. 1989. 'The Preservation of Books and Manuscripts in Cambodia', *The American Archivist* 53(2):282-297, see p.289.

- 10 Lutgendorf, P. 2002. 'Evolving a monkey: Hanuman, poster art and postcolonial anxiety', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 36(102):71-112, pp.74,77,100.
- 11 Pou, S. 1992. 'Indigenization of Rāmāyaṇa in Cambodia', *Asian Folklore Studies* 51(1):89-102, pp.96-98.
- 12 *Agni* upon a rhinoceros can be found at the Angkor complex, as well as in the sixteenth and seventeenth versions of the text.
- 13 There is a 'funeral of *Ravana*' sequence in some versions of the text, however. A painting that was present in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, which disappeared after 1970, portrays the funeral of *Ravana* (Ibid., Giteau, M. 2003, Tav. 21 ill. 78).
- 14 Ibid., Pou, S. 1992, p.92; Marrison, G.E. 1989. 'Reamker (Ramakerti), The Cambodian Version of the Rāmāyaṇa. A Review Article', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 121(1):122-129.
- 15 Ibid., Olsson, R.A. 1968, pp.310-331, image 312.
- 16 Tipaya, M. (ed.) 1993. *Ramakien: The Thai Rāmāyaṇa*, Bangkok, Thailand: Naga Books, pp.145-146.
- 17 Ibid., Marrison, G.E. 1989; Jacob, J.M. 1986. *Reamker (Ramakerti): the Cambodian Version of the Rāmāyaṇa*, Oriental Translation Fund, New Series. Vol XLV, London: Royal Asiatic Society.
- 18 Ibid., Giteau, M. 2003, p.97.
- 19 The Lao text appears in several versions. The main text is the *Prah Lak Prah Lam*. A second text is the *Gvay Dvorahbi*, which appeared as a palm leaf manuscript from the royal collections in the twentieth century (Ibid., Sahai, S. 1976, p.xiii).
- 20 Ibid., Pou, S. 1992, p.93.
- 21 The popularization of the *Rāmāyaṇa* among Southeast Asian courts seems to closely coincide with a period of emergence in political discourse in central and western India, during the eleventh to the fourteenth century. See: Pollock, S. (1993) 'Ramayana and Political Imagination in India', *Journal of Asian Studies* 52(2): 261-297, p. 264 on the emergence of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Indian political discourse wherein the text was used to suggest a cosmic dualism that ultimately would have reified political order.
- 22 This contestation, between the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, as the 'competing' to be the central text of a given court has also been recorded in India. See: Ibid., Pollock, S. (1993). 'Political Imagination', p. 269.
- 23 Ibid., Tipaya, M. (ed.) 1993, pp.11-12.
- 24 An example includes the combat of *Sugriva* against *Valin*, pictured from the third quarter of the tenth century (Ibid., Giteau, M. 2003, p.100).