

## A Brief Summary of the History of Hevajra in Cambodia

### The Khmer kingdom (12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century): King Jayavarman VII and his Wife Indradevi.

I first encountered the ruins of Cambodia's ancient kingdoms on a family trip many years ago. My brother and I were climbing through thick vines and over giant tree roots entwining ancient carved stones. There were Buddha images throughout the intricately carved ruins, most of them decapitated or worn down to being almost unrecognizable by time and the overgrown jungle. I was a Buddhist myself and these ruins spoke to me at a deep level. My little bit of research at that time into these amazing ruins hinted that the Mahayana and Vajrayana were once practiced there. Twelve years passed and I found myself about to move to Cambodia for a year, and my initial curiosity was sparked again. While living there I dove into whatever research I could find on ancient and modern Buddhism in Cambodia and discovered a surprising link to my own Drikung Kagyu Tibetan Buddhist lineage.

In the 12-13th century in Cambodia, and perhaps up to a few centuries before that, the Heruka tantras of Hevajra and Chakrasamvara made their way to the Khmer kingdom in Cambodia. There is little information that has survived to the present from these Vajrayana lineages, due to the secret nature of the teachings, and later to a nearly complete suppression and destruction of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism by successive Hinayana, Hindu and Communist rulers. The small amount of information

we do know primarily comes to us from the time of King Jayavarman VII (1125–1218 AD) who is generally considered Cambodia's most famous and powerful king.

This article is a brief look at what we know of the history of Hevajra in Cambodia from the time of Jayavarman VII to the present. As my primary resource I have relied on the research of Peter D. Sharrock, as well as a little bit of my personal explorations into this topic while living in Cambodia. I am most grateful for Sharrock's exemplary archeological and historical research on the Vajrayana in Cambodia, and would point anyone interested in a deeper understanding beyond the scope of this article towards his original research.

Jayavarman VII was a devout Buddhist and from the beginning of his rule made Mahayana Buddhism the state religion. Before him there was only one Buddhist king, and after him the primary Buddhism that remained



was the Hinayana lineage. Jayavarman is famous for bringing Cambodia to the height of its power and wealth, while at the same time building more temples, hospitals, schools and public places for ceremonies than any other leader. His wife Indradevi was also very important for Cambodian Buddhism and culture, and some researchers think she played a major role in Jayavarman's Buddhist faith. She was considered very intelligent and was a poet and professor. She taught at 3 temple schools where she instructed female students.

At the beginning of his reign Jayavarman VII built many large and beautiful public Mahayana temples and monasteries dedicated to Buddha Shakyamuni, Avalokiteshvara, Prajnaparamita as well as hospitals dedicated to Medicine Buddha.

Later in his reign he continued to build more temples as well as expand on his original temples, however in this latter phase his emphasis seems to have shifted to the Vajrayana, specifically dedicating temples to Vajrasattva and Hevajra. An example of this latter phase is the temple of Bayon, which has towers with large Buddha faces gazing out in the four directions. There are various theories about these faces, some believe they are Avalokiteshvara with aspects of the king's face mixed in. Peter Sharrock, the foremost researcher of Cambodian Vajrayana has presented a convincing case that they are actually Vajrasattva and are the most visible example of Jayavarman's shift to the Vajrayana. Historians aren't certain about what changes in Cambodia at this time encouraged this shift to the Vajrayana, since all records and most images were destroyed, but there is clear evidence that the practice of the highest yoga tantra of Hevajra became prominent in Jayavarman's court.

One of the strongest indications that this was the case are the many Hevajra bronzes excavated at the royal palace at Angkor Thom. More than a hundred Khmer bronze statues of Hevajra have been found. Some of these are the solitary male deity, and in others he is encircled by eight Yoginīs in his mandala. All of these are now held in museum collections around the world or have been auctioned off to private collectors. According to Sharrock the striking elegance of these statues, as well as the sophisticated and refined casting techniques used all suggest they were made for royal ceremonies.





### 3 Meter Stone Hevajra Statue

Apart from the bronzes, there are several images of Hevajra in stone, the principal one being a bust at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, which was originally a three meter high statue. The bust was found broken near the great East Gate of Angkor Thom which was the palace of Jayavarman VII. More recently it's legs which have the traditional dancing pose of other Hevajra statues of the time were found nearby by in the forest. This is one of the largest statues of the late Angkor period, which also points to the prominence of Hevarja in Jayavarman's court.

### At Bantéay Chmàr: Carved Stone Lintel of Hevajra with Swords



There is also a carved stone lintel above a door at Bantéay Chmàr of that Sharrock believes is Hevajra, in which he holds two broad swords, four curved swords, and perhaps three daggers in nine of its 10 right hands. (The left hands of the lintel are all missing). This was thought to be a temple associated with battles, as many of the carvings celebrate the king and his younger brother being protected from death and betrayal. It is assumed that they used the weapons bearing form of Hevajra for this reason.

Another factor that Sharrock believes shows that this is Hevajra is that in the same carved stone lintel is an image of Shiva



which Hevajra is staring at fiercely. Before Jayavarman VII's rule there was 350 years of rulers that were Shiva worshipers including the king before him who had killed Jayavarman's relative and taken over the empire. It is thought that this lintel of Hevajra and Shiva is also symbolic of Jayavarman VII replacing Hindu state religion with Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.

## A Ritual Text Called Hevajrasekaprakiyā

There are no surviving Hevajra texts, or any other Vajrayana texts in Cambodia, only stone carvings have survived to today. Based on what information that has been found researchers think that a ritual text called Hevajrasekaprakiyā was likely used by Cambodian Hevajra practitioners at this time. This text was thought to have likely come from China or India. There is a Sanskrit palm leaf text entitled 'The Hevajra consecration ceremony' (hevajrasekaprakiyā) that was photographed in 1914 by Henri Maspero at the P'ou-ngan temple in China and was translated into French by Louis Finot in 1934. Maspero was told by the P'ou-ngan monks that the text had been brought from India with other Tantric texts by the monk Pao-tchang in 1057. Based on his research Finot believed that this text came from Bengal in the 11th century. This is the same time and place that the Indian Mahasiddha Naropa lived. He passed on the Hevajra lineage to Marpa Lotsawa who brought it to Tibet where it has been practiced continually since that time.



A similar text reached Java in Indonesia. Judging by the similarities of the images of Hevajra from Indonesia and Cambodia (to the left is an image of His Holiness Drikung Kyabgon Rinpoche with a Hevajra statue from Indonesia), and knowing that trade was going all through South East Asia from both China and India, it is thought that perhaps this text could also have been brought to Cambodia from Java at that time.



## Female Role in Cambodian Hevajra

Apart from educated guesses, we have no evidence for what selections from the Hevajra-tantra the Khmers adapted for their Hevajra rituals. One of the most obvious

and notable difference from the Tibetan and Indian lineages is that there are no images of Hevajra with his divine female partner Nairatmya in Cambodia. Despite lacking the female Buddha aspect of Hevajra in statues and images, the feminine role in Khmer Vajrayana is still prominent. Female celestial dancers, draped with flower garlands and wearing the 5 ornaments (symbolic Vajrayana ornaments) are accorded primary importance at the entrances to the Bayon temple and in the large halls added late to the other Buddhist temples in Angkor, including Bantéay Chmàr, suggesting an intense female participation in rituals. Chau Ju-kua, the Chinese Superintendent of Maritime Trade in Canton, in 1225 recorded what he had heard was taking place in Jayavarman's temples:



“[In Chen-la, i.e. Cambodia] the people are devout Buddhists. In the temples there are 300 foreign women; they dance and offer food to the Buddha. They are called anan... [Skt. ānanda (bliss)]”

All around the temples built by Jayavarman VII are covered with carvings of many thousands of dancing females. Some of these are Vajrayana yoginis and some are Apsaras (flying and dancing goddesses common to Hindu temples as well). There are a few notable characteristics that differentiate the two. The dance postures of the yoginis look just like the eight yoginīs that whirl around Hevajra in the mandala bronzes like the ones above. Also, the many yogini dancers on the temples of Jayavarman VII often have 3 eyes, the 5 Vajrayana ornaments,

and dance in the same position as Hevajra on corpses or lotuses. These yogini carvings also differ from the apsaras in that the yogini's eyes are fierce, looking straight ahead rather than down submissively. The majority of these yogini carvings were added to the temples later in Jayavarman's rule when his emphasis shifted to the Vajrayana and Hevajra practice.

In this latter phase of his rein these Yogini dancers were carved by the thousand into lintels and pillars of new large roofed ritual halls that were added to Jayavarman's earlier temples in Angkor such as Pra Khan, Tà Prohm and Bantéay Kdei. The largest of these Yoginī halls, in Bantéay Chmar



(where the Hevajra lintel is), measures 35m x 15m. These new halls provide the largest covered sacred spaces in ancient Cambodia. It is guessed that they were used for large initiation ceremonies, tantric dance and other Vajrayana practices.

Dozens of libation conches, such as the ones above to the right, have survived that have images of Hevajra and the Yoginīs. There have been many vajras, bells and other Vajrayana ritual items that have been found, which would have been enough to hold large scale Hevajra empowerments and ceremonies.

As we have seen from the evidence above it seems clear that Jayavarman VII and the Khmer empire was for a good part of 12-13th century a Vajrayana kingdom where the Hevajra lineage flourished. As Peter D. Sharrock summarizes;



The proliferation of yoginīs in the entrances to the Bayon, along with the large group of bronze Hevajra maṇḍalas, the high output of Hevajra-stamped ritual paraphernalia, and the last structural changes to the Bayon and the other temples marked with the yoginī emblem, constitute cumulative and coherent grounds for arguing that the balance of evidence has moved in favour of seeing a shift to a large and well-orchestrated royal Hevajra cult late in Jayavarman's reign.

## What Happened to Hevajra Practice in Cambodia?

Unfortunately not much information has survived from the time of Jayavarman VII. After Jayavarman VII it is believed that Theravada Buddhism and Hindu kings primarily ruled Cambodia. Many of these rulers did their best to systematically erase and undermine the popularity of Jayavarman and assert their control by destroying his legacy. Thousands of Mahayana images (one estimate is 45,000) were roughly chiseled off Jayavarman VII's temples, most likely in a Brahmanical reaction under the Saiva King Jayavarma-parmesvara, who in 1327 raised a śivalinga in the Bayon temple and turned it to Brahmanical rituals. More recently most of what was left over from that time was then either destroyed in the civil war by the Khmer Rouge, or sold off to international markets since then. Many of the Buddhist statues and images I saw and photographed on my first visit to these temples in 2006 were no longer there in 2015.

After the time of Jayavarman VII, we can only guess at the fate of the Hevajra lineage and practice in Cambodia, however judging by most modern Cambodian's almost complete lack of understanding of the role of the Vajrayana in their history it is easy to surmise that it was entirely eradicated in the centuries after Jayavarman VII.



## Hevajra in Modern Day Cambodia

These days it seems like there is no one left in Cambodia that knows anything about the Vajrayana or Hevajra, even among the monks that live in the temples where it is believed Hevajra was practiced. I had the opportunity to live in Cambodia for a year in 2014-2015. While practicing medicine and working to help preserve traditional



Cambodian medicine and spiritual practices, I made friends with a well respected monk that lived in a monastery at Angkor Thom (the palace and main temple of Jayavarman VII). This monk has studied for many years with some of the last living lineages of esoteric Buddhism and shamanism of Cambodia as well as being a longtime Theravada monk. When I showed him a picture of a Cambodian Hevajra from Angkor Thom, and he thought it was Shiva. I showed the same images to several different students of Cambodian history, religion and spiritual traditions and all of them thought Hevajra was Shiva or Vishnu. They were unable to recognize any of the Vajrayana and Mahayana statues I presented to them, mostly confusing them with Hindu gods and goddesses.

Above is a picture of a traditional protection tattoo that comes from a lineage of esoteric Buddhist and Hindu meditation and magic practitioners. All of the various masters of these lineages I worked with thought it was an image of Vishnu. These practitioners do meditation retreats in the mountains, practice mantras (Hindu and Buddhist), use yantra geometric designs and numerology in amulets and tattoos, and give a wide variety of protection blessings as well as other rituals for power, attraction, and other worldly and spiritual concerns. None of these practitioners knew about their history of Vajrayana and Mahayana.

According to a longtime Buddhist nun I studied Theravada meditation with, very few monks practice meditation anymore in Cambodia. Like modern Buddhist monks all over the world, they primarily chant, do rituals for deaths, births and protection. I was told that for most their primary motivation for being monks in poverty-stricken post war Cambodia was to accumulate donations and to have stable food and housing. It is likely

that since the vast majority of monastics were killed in their civil war, or had to escape the country to survive, their meditation and monastic lineages are still suffering.

## **Cambodia and Cambodians: Immense Suffering in the Past and Present**

So many Cambodians are suffering in countless ways, and they have lived through such terrible times in the recent past. Their history with communism and genocide is very similar to Tibet, and like Tibet they are still suffering from suppression of religious practice. Almost everyone I met there as I was practicing medicine had problems with terror and ghosts. Everyone had people they know who were killed and tortured. Many people are hungry, sick, and forced to work in terrible conditions. Human trafficking and slavery are common. They don't have much living Dharma to help them now. In my explorations I only heard of a couple monks teaching meditation to Cambodians. I didn't really grasp the impermanence of the Dharma itself until I spent time in the temples of Angkor, once a Vajrayana kingdom and saw where they used to practice Hevajra, where now it is all only ruins.

The leader of my own Buddhist lineage, His Holiness Drikung Kyabgon Rinpoche, has been tirelessly working to reinvigorate the Hevajra practice lineage. He is doing so with the explicit aim to bring back this most profound Dharma to South East Asia. I join my aspiration to his in the wish that in this time of immense suffering, when the quick path of the Vajrayana is most needed, that the lineage and blessings of Hevajra can remerge and flourish in Cambodia and South East Asia.

*Written by Konchog Tsering Dhondrub (Spencer Ames) on the anniversary of the great Hevajra master Marpa Lotsawa (2/19/19). Spencer is a Dharma student of HE Garchen Rinpoche and HH Drikung Kyabgon Rinpoche. He currently resides with his wife and cat in Andover, MA where he works as an acupuncturist and Functional Medicine practitioner.*