



## ***Teanh Prot* (Traditional Tug-of-War) in Cambodia**

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Tug-of-war is a very common game, which is played world-wide. The game is sometimes a pure contest of strength between two teams in some countries, whereas in the others, it profoundly connotes with socio-religious significance, and it is played only in specific ceremonial occasions. In Cambodia, during the traditional New Year celebration (mid-April) and sometimes during a ceremony known as *Chlong Chet* or *Chlong Chnam*, which is performed shortly after the New Year to mark the start of the rice cultivation season, the tug-of-war is played along with other traditional games such as *bos ankonh* (“throwing a kind of nuts,” known as *angkonh*), *chaol chhoung* (“throwing a wrapped scarf”) and *lakanseng* (hiding of handkerchief”). Remarkably, the game proves to be one of the most important games nation-wide. Everyone in Cambodia experiences or sees or at least hears about the game.

Unfortunately, due to mass migrations for jobs of young people, lacks of encouragements from the elders of the villages and emergences of rapid industrialization and urbanization, the game is unfortunately fading away; and it is substituted by other forms of entertainment mainly the modern dancing.

Accompanying my PowerPoint presentation, this short paper aims to provide briefly a current state of the game in Cambodia and to discuss its historical and ritual significance as a part of contribution to the International Symposium on the Tug-of-War in East Asia. The longer and full-fledged paper will be submitted to the ICHCAP at the end of April 2013.

## I. A General Description of the Game

The game is known in Khmer language as *Teanh Prot*, which literally means “pulling the rope.” It is often played in Buddhist monastery compounds, where there are favorable and convenient open spaces for the games and other public religious and social activities. The game can also play in an open space of a village.

During three days of New Year celebration, the last day, as still observed among villagers living the northern provinces of Cambodia, is the day in which the game is played. Interestingly, the last day is known in Khmer as *pdach prot* (lit. “breaking or cutting off the rope”) of the celebration. In the evening at the end of the day rope is physically or ritually broken or ritually cut off (see further explanation of its significance below). If the rope is cut off during the New Year celebration, the game is not played during the *Chlong Chet* ceremony.

To play the game, two teams of generally married male and female at the age ranging from 25 to 60 years old actively participate in game, although the younger and unmarried people can be seen playing. Considering men are physically stronger than women, the women side often has more participants than the men’s. Each team can have 10 to 30 people. One or two referees are selected from the rather old participants. If there are two referees, normally a man and a woman represent each side. A line is drawn in the middle of the contest arena. A rope, which nowadays can be easily bought from the market, is brought to the contest arena. Each team holds the rope on each side in between the drawn line. Then the referee (s) starts counting from one to three in order to begin the game. Sometimes the referee screams the sound *yak or* in order to “instigate” the contesting teams three times, whereas each teams scream the sound *heouy* each time after hearing the sound *yak or* from the referee. Notably, the sound is generally screamed to ward off the malevolent spirits.

After three time of screaming, the teams start pulling the rope. If a team pulls the other passes the drawn line, that team wins. The game indeed draws quite remarkable number of crowd.

At the end of the game, formerly the rope is said to be cut off in the middle by an *Achar*, a Buddhist officiating priest or sometimes the rope was broken by the pulling of the two teams. Since the rope, presently, is brought from the market and it is costly, it is ritually assumed that the rope is broken and kept at the temple for the next year games.

In the game, bets are also staked between the contesting teams. They can be a piggybacking the winning team, smearing mud or rolling over the body of the losing team or winning team use the buttocks hitting the bodies of the losing team. Interestingly, the bets are clearly understood as inappropriate behaviors, but during the New Year and the *Chlong Chet* celebration, they are acceptable. Villagers often say, “If you don’t want to play, it is fine and if you play, you should not be angry!” Such bets often scare away the younger and unmarried people from participating in the game. If there is no such bet, the

younger people very often actively participate in the game. However, the bets symbolically are significant (see further discussion).

## II. Historical Background of the Game

What is just mentioned above is the current state of the game, played in Cambodia. Now let us consider further its historical and religious significance.

Tracing its origin and source of inspirations in Cambodian culture, the game is associated or strongly inspired from a Hindu myth of “the churning of the ocean of milk” of both physical and religious aspects (see further discussion below). Both inscriptional and iconographic evidence shows that the myth of churning gained tremendous popularity and favors in ancient Cambodian society; and it was even more popular than in India, the country of origin itself.

Iconographically, some bas-reliefs of the churning of the ocean of the milk show the pulling of the “*naga* rope” between the demons and gods, rather than the churning (See images in my presentation). In addition, there is an interesting folktale, which associated clearly the game with the contest of strength between the demons and gods (See the full report with the translation, which will be submitted to ICHCAP). Furthermore, when Cambodian people, who are not experts in Hindu mythology, come to Angkor Wat (a twelfth century temple) to see a fifty meter-long bas-relief of the churning of the ocean of milk, they immediately identify it as the *Teanh Prot* scene. Notably, Cambodian people knows the game of the *Teanh Prot* very well that allow them to immediately associate with the depiction of the Hindu myth of the churning of the ocean of milk.

## III. Significance of the Game

Why the game is performed only during the New Year celebration and or during the *Chlong Chet* ceremony?

The Cambodian New Year celebration lasts for three days. These three days represents clearly a transitional cycles of time between the “old” and the “new” years. This transitional period represents a “chaotic” period and “social disorder.” What is normally not allowed is acceptable during this period. For instance, a man is customarily and socially not allowed to touch a woman; during this period and through the pretexts of other traditional games, it is allowed...etc.

To “reorder” chaotic period and the social disorder, rituals and ritual games are performed and played, for instance making sand-mountains (see further discussed below), the games of *bos angkonh*, *Chaol Chhoung* and the *teanh prot*. To serve our purpose here, I would like to discuss only the *teanh prot*.

## 1. Passage of Time into a New Cycle

General and traditional conception of Time is that it is a “cycle.” The passage of time cycle is realized in ritual act of breaking or cutting off the rope. Breaking the rope symbolizes the end of the “old” and the start of the “new” year. In other words, it symbolizes the entry into new cycles: New Cycle of Time i.e. the twelve lunar months, and the New Cycle of Rice Cultivation i.e. the beginning of new rice cultivation season.

## 2. Recreating Anew Perfect Time and Social Order

Time wears out everything in the world i.e. everything becomes lesser and lesser perfect, and then the time cycle is ended. 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 cycle, rituals are performed to reorder and create a new perfect time and social order. The *teanh prot* serves very well this purpose.

The game is without adoubt manipulated from a Hindu myth of the churning of the ocean of milk. The myth of “churning” demonstrates the unity between the two rival teams—the gods and the demons—in order to search for the lost treasures, particularly the elixir of immortality (*amrita*). Let us look closely in the beliefs and practices associated with this particular Hindu myth in Cambodian socio-religious contexts.

Cambodians know the story and its significance very well. The ancient capital of Cambodia built at the end of 12<sup>th</sup> century, known today as Angkor Thom, imitated the act of churning. On each side of city’s entrances, demons and gods stand holding *nagas*. The depiction clearly symbolizes the episode of churning of the ocean of milk. But then why did King Jayavarman VII (1181-c.1220) build the entrances of his city with reference to episode of the churning of the ocean of milk?

The possible answer is that the demons and the gods are churning the Cambodian city for the “treasure of glory,” which was lost during the wars particularly with the Cham. Roughly from 1177-1181 A.D Cambodia was attacked and controlled by the Chams, another powerful neighboring kingdom at the time. When Jayavarman VII gained full control over Cambodia, He *restored* the lost glory of Cambodia and ritually and politically attempted to *reestablish* the social and political orders in the country. The demons and gods churning the city were to obtain the *amrita* (elixir of importunity), so that the city would be no longer mortal with attacks of enemies.

These imbedded notions of rediscovery and recreation have been manipulated and integrated in the ritual game of *Teanh Prot*. The game highly symbolizes “renewing the time of Year,” “recreating the universe” with a “perfect order.” By extension, it symbolizes “reestablishment of the social order”, which has been deteriorated by passage of time. In order words, ritual performance during the New Year’s days is conducted in order to “rediscover the lost auspicious time, order and prosperity.”

### **3. Symbolic Act of Productivity**

The tugging of the rope between *the male and female* teams also symbolizes the productivity. In line, piggybacking, rolling over and using the buttocks touching body of the losing team clearly indicate the sexual symbolism i.e. symbolism of *production*. Such acts can be also seen doing during the performance of the calling for the rain some part of Cambodia.

## **IV. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Cambodian Teanh Prot or tug-of-war represents a continuity of centuries-old tradition, which makes so much sense in both social and religious frameworks. The current state of the game raises huge concerns of fading-away of the game. This living cultural heritage needs to be safeguarded through collaborative work by exchange of ideas and other forms of support internationally.