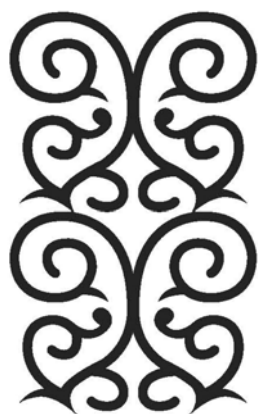


Session 2



***Tugging Rituals and Games
and ICH Communities in Asia***





Presentation 1



Teanh Prot and Rice-Cultivating Community in Cambodia

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For Cambodians, like many peoples in Asia, rice is indispensable and present everywhere in daily life. Besides being principle daily staple, rice—either husked or unhusked, cooked or uncooked—is a necessary ritual material in every religious ceremony. It is even venerated as a Goddess called *Neam Propey*, and by nurturing individual person in the form of cooked rice, She is considered as “*Preah Me* (August Mother).” Thus obtaining enough rice for each year is important. To assure bountiful harvests, various techniques and tools used for rice cultivation were created; associated ceremonies and games were performed by rice-cultivating communities. Notably, the rituals associated with rice are of “Animism” or Animistic oriented in nature.

Each community lead by the villager elders performs ceremonies including *Loeng Neak Ta*, *Poun Phnom Srov* and *Chlong Chet*. The first is a communal ceremony performed in order to propitiate *Neak Ta* to bring villagers good health and prosperity i.e. enough rains for rice cultivation and good crops. *Neak Ta* is, in short, an indigenous “god of the earth” symbolizing the entire village and villagers’ cultivating lands. He can be represented in various forms in a small hut, a broken statue, a rock and termite hill...etc. (Fig. 1). *Poun*

Phnom Srov means “shaping a mountain of rice.” This mountain symbolizes the plentitude of rice in the coming year. Interestingly, in this ceremony normally there is a specific ceremony called “Hau Prolung Srov (calling the souls of rice).” In Cambodian belief, an individual Khmer person is believed to have 19 souls. These souls are very fragile; they can escape the body easily. While some souls escape the body, the person becomes sick. It is therefore important to keep the entire souls in the body. A person with complete souls (*mean prolung*) is healthy. Thus, when some souls are believed to escape the body, a ritual is performed to “call back the escaped souls” to the body. Due to its close contact with the people, rice is also believed to have 19 souls. Therefore, before cultivation seed rice, which is used for growing, is undergone a ritual of “calling of the souls of rice” with similar purpose i.e. to make the rice healthy (Fig. 2). Once the seed rice is healthy, it produces good crops. The third is a ceremony performed shortly after the New Year (mid-April) by villagers to mark the start of rice cultivating season.

During ceremonies, some specific ritual games are played to serve similar purposes of bringing good health, prosperity and good harvest to the rice-cultivating community. One among them is *teanh prot*. This game has rooted profoundly in the rice-cultivating communities of Asia with distinct and unique characteristic accordingly. This paper will focus on this ritual game played in Cambodia in order to see how it means to the Cambodian rice-cultivating community and what will be its future.

1. What is teanh Prot?

In Khmer language, the name, *teanh prot* is a compound noun of “teanh” and “prot.” *Teanh* means “to pull.” *Prot* is a type of rope, traditionally made of woven strips of buffalo or cow hide. Thus, *teanh prot* literally means “to pull the rope made of the woven strips of the buffalo or cow hide.” However, a suitable literal rendering in English should be “rope pulling.” Although it is played along with other traditional games such as *bos angkonh* (“throwing a kind of nuts” known as *angkonh*), *chol chhoung* (“throwing a wrapped scarf”) and *lakanseng* (hiding of handkerchief”), the *teanh prot* proves to be one of the most important ritual games played nation-wide. Every Cambodian has experienced playing or

at least seen the game. Its popularity and prevalence in Cambodia indicate its centuries-old cultural background rooted deeply and firmly in Cambodian agrarian society.

Teanh prot is played during the traditional Cambodian New Year celebrated in mid-April, and/or during *chlong chet*. The game is often played in open spaces of the Buddhist monastery compounds or in an open space of a village (Fig. 3) or just in front of someone's house (Fig. 4). Normally in the afternoon, a rope is brought to the contest arena.¹² A dividing line is drawn in the middle or simply a rope is tied with colored strings to mark the middle line. Two teams of normally male team vs. female teams are contested with each other (Fig. 5). To start the game, each team holds the rope on each side in between the drawn line. Then referee(s) starts counting from one to three in order to begin the game or sometimes the referee cheers the contestants with the sound *yak or* three times in order to "instigate" the teams, whereas each team makes the sound *heouy* each time after hearing the sound of *yak or* from the referee. Sometimes, the game is accompanied by a drum and a *tror*, a string instrument (Fig. 6). The drummer plays active role in the game. The drummer rolls his drum in order to cheer the teams until one side wins. The *tror* is only played for the players and audience to sign and dance.

When a team pulls the other over the drawn line or pulling them always through to their side, that team wins.

As observed, there is no obvious verbal betting during the game. However, when a team wins the game, they run over to the losing team and use their buttocks to touch such bodies of the losing teams (Fig. 8-9) as if to "wipe off the dirt" from their buttocks. This act is known in Khmer as *ket*. Such bet indicates highly significant symbolism especially in calling for rain ritual (see further discussion below).

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 is broken by the pulling of the two teams. Since the rope, nowadays, is bought from the market and it is costly, it is only ritually assumed that the rope is broken or cut off. It is then kept at the temple for the next year games.

¹² Although the term *prot* refers to the rope made of buffalo's or cow's hide, the rope used in the current game can be simply vines collected from nearby forest, woven stems of sugar palm leaves or the plastic rope bought from the market.

2. Teanh Prot in its Historical Context:

1) *A folktale about the teanh prot*

One folktale narrated by Mr. Moa Mey, who had heard it from a late monk, Venerable Thong, and which was published in 1953 in a *Kampuch Surya*, a Cambodian Journal, is valuable and the only source we have had so far in association with the teanh prot.¹³

2) *Translation of the text*

The story goes:

One day, the horde of demons, who were jealous at the gods, made comments that the gods did not have much more power than us at all. These gods held higher positions than us due to favors of Lord Eisor (Shiva). If they contested their strength with us, they would be surely lost. Hearing such comments, in return the gods boastfully said, “we are not afraid of you, Demons, even though you have such big sizes.” Except for tricks, if you, guys, like to contest the strength, we were not at all afraid of them. Both the Demons and Gods agreed to contest the strength by pulling the rope. The bet of the game is that if the Demons win, they will hold higher positions than the gods in any place, such as, during the meeting with Lord Eisor in his palace or at any meetings; the Demons must sit higher than the Gods. When the game of pulling the rope was scheduled for the next day, the gods walked to and fro in front of the courtyard of Lord Eisor’s palace. Then Valin (the Lord of the monkeys) knew about the contest, he told a trick to the Gods that ‘the Gods should use the Naga (mythical multiple serpent) as the rope, and holds on the head side, whereas the Demons hold the tale. While tugging, the Gods should assign a god to tickle the navel of the Naga. Then, by feeling ticklish, the Naga will move its tail that makes the demons lost hold of the Naga; and they will surely lose to the gods.’ At the time of the contest, agreed by the demons, the gods held the head side of the Naga. In the contest, the Demons indeed lost to the Gods.

¹³ Buddhist Institute, *Kampuch Surya*, (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1953), pp.547-549.

3) *Teanh Prot and Hindu Myth of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk*

Mr. Mao Mey, the storyteller, confirmed that he saw the bas-relief of Angkor Wat temple, a 12th century temple, which depicts the rope pulling contest in which “the gods hold the head side of the Naga and the demons hold the tail.”¹⁴ It is true that the ancient bas-relief of the myth of the churning of the ocean of milk is known by Cambodians, who do not know the Hindu mythology, as the *teanh prot*.

Both inscriptional and iconographic evidence show that the churning myth gained tremendous popularity in ancient Cambodia (from 9th to 13th centuries); and it was even more popular in artistic representations than in India, the country of its origin.¹⁵ The first artistic representations of the churning were at least dated to the end of 9th century from the temple known by the researcher as “Kutisvara” in Siem Reap (Fig. 10). Why this myth was so popular in ancient Cambodia?

To response to the question, first let us look at its representation in Cambodia and then delve deeper into the reason why. A closer look at the depictions of the churning on the bas-reliefs especially the leg movements, they can be physically classified into two types: “the churning of the ocean” and “tugging the serpent rope.” The lintels of 12th century of Beng Mealea and a bas-relief from Angkor (Fig. 11-12) clearly depict Demons and Gods “churn” the ocean of milk, whereas, 11th century lintels of Prasat Snueng and Ek Phnom show the Demons and Gods are tugging each other (Fig. 13-14). The Hindu myth of churning was blended well with the *teanh prot* or in other words, the *teanh prot* co-existed or even pre-existed the imported churning. Such claim is due to the fact that some communities, which are not Indianized like the Khmers, for instance, Khmu people living in Laos, some ethnic groups in Vietnam and those who live in Barangay Hapao, town of Hungduan in Ifugao province of Philippines also “play” the “tug-of-war” game.

It is possible to suggest that the game derives commonly from rice cultivating communities since the time immemorial and spread throughout Asia. The popularity of the myth of the churning in ancient Cambodia was because Khmers were able to engage the

¹⁴ A small correction should be made here that the southeast corner of east side of bas-relief gallery of Angkor Wat, where the churning of the ocean of milk is depicted, the Demons hold the head and the Gods hold the tail.

¹⁵ For the detail description of the Hindu Myth on “the churning of the ocean of milk” please read Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Hindu Myths* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), pp.274-280.

myth with existing tradition of “the rope pulling” ritual game of the agrarian communities.¹⁶ The myth itself made so much ritual sense to Khmer community and by reenacting and incorporating the myth with the *teanh prot*, it served even better purpose for the Khmer rice-cultivating community.

3. Significance of the *teanh prot*

Why the game is played/performed only during the New Year celebration and or during the *chlong chet* ceremony? Three main ritual significances can be concluded for the *teanh prot*: 1) recreating anew a perfect time and social order, 2) bringing good health and prosperity for the community and 3) marking the entry into a new cycle of time.

1) Recreating Anew a Perfect Time and Social Order

General traditional perception of the Time, which can be construed, is that the Time worsens everything in the universe; and everything will be completely destroyed at the end of time. Then a new cycle of time will be recreated by starting from the most perfect to the worst. Notably, before the start of a new time cycle, there is a period of transition in which everything is in a chaotic and disordered stage.

Repetition of time cycles is clearly depicted in a year cycle. The New Year celebration is a mark of the end of the old year and the start of a new year. In Cambodia like in Thailand, Laos, Burma, the New Year celebration is a three days celebration. During this period of three days is considered a period of transition, i.e. a chaotic and disordered stage. What is normally allowed to do is not allowed. People would do what is socially not accepted or allowed...etc.

To restore the social order and recreate a perfect time, certain ritual and games are required. One among them is to “shape a sand mountain” as symbol of reordering the universe (Fig. 15). At this stage the game of *teanh prot* is also played. Although the game

¹⁶ Some information is added after participation in the International Symposium on “Diverse and Common Aspects of Traditional Tug-of-War in East Asia” held on the April 12, 2013 in Dangjin city, Korea.

can be played at any time as a part of entertainment, it is ritually played three times on the last day of New Year celebration. As stated above, the game is without a doubt a manipulation and incorporation of 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 rediscover the lost treasures, particularly amrita, the water of immortality, by extension the myth of churning is also a symbol of “recreation”. Reenacting the churning through rope pulling symbolizes the recreation and reestablishment of a new “perfect time” with a “perfect order” and “prosperity”.

2) Bringing Good Health and Prosperity

In agrarian society, the prosperity derives from perfect rain (not much and not little), so that the people would have a perfect crops. Thus the game, which symbolizes the act of “recreation” recreates for community a perfect rain which is symbolized through certain sexual symbolic acts. The pulling of the rope between the male and female teams clearly symbolizes this sexual symbolism i.e. acts of productivity. Similarly, the bet of which the winning teams chase the losing teams and use the buttocks touching bodies of the losing team clearly indicate the sexual acts. Such activities can be seen “played” in other rain calling ceremony. When there is no rain, rather old men and women go to Neak Ta’s hut. After making the offering and request for assistance from Neak Ta, women and men “chase” and “touch” each other.

Another sophisticated symbolism derives from the blending of the teanh prot and the Hindu myth of the churning of the ocean. Churning is to create and to obtain the water, not a simple water by the water that brings back life and live healthy. The tugging/churning here is to bring the “good” water for prosperity of the community i.e. the rain.

3) Marking the entry into a new cycle of time

On the last day of the New Year or Chlong Chet, the rope is ritually broken or cutting off. teanh prot or “breaking the rope” is a well-known Khmer expression to mean “the final or the last stage of a game, a race or any contest”. After tugging ritual and game of teanh prot which brings perfect time and social order, good health, prosperity and bountiful

harvest to the community, the ritual act of breaking or cutting off the rope during the New Year celebration and/or the Chlong Chet is to ritually mark the entry into a new Cycle of Time i.e. the twelve lunar months of the year and also a new rice cultivation cycle. Notably, the Chlong Chet ceremony is celebrated in order mark the start of rice cultivation season; after the ceremony, villagers are “allowed” to start the rice cultivation process.

4. Conclusion

The Cambodian *teanh prot* inherits and represents a continuity of centuries-old tradition. It highly demonstrates significant socio-religious symbolisms that have been masterly integrated Indian myths of the churning of the ocean of milk to fit the local agrarian models and needs.

Due to mass migrations for jobs of young people, which make them adapted into new cultural settings and change their attitudes towards their own local customs, lacks of encouragements from the village elders and emergences of rapid industrialization and urbanization, the *teanh prot* is unfortunately fading away. Although the game is still vividly remembered, it was abandoned for some ten years ago in some locations, and other locations were just in recent years or surprisingly this year. Asking for the reasons why it was not played, we were told that it was because no one was interested in the game and the elders did not lead the younger people to play the game. Young people, on the other hand, like to entertain themselves more with the dancing. Moreover, a simple reason, for instance, no availability of the rope could easily lead to the abandonment of the game. The game is highly jeopardized the abandonment.

Although Cambodia is striving to protect the game, among other intangible cultural heritage, sustainable development and international cooperation for developing traditional tugging rituals and games is indeed needed.



[Figure 1]



[Figure 2]



[Figure 3]



[Figure 4]



[Figure 5]



[Figure 6]



[Figure 7]



[Figure 8]



[Figure 9]



[Figure 10]



[Figure 11]



[Figure 12]



[Figure 13]