

## THE PRESENT STATE OF WORK ON THE SANSKRIT EPIGRAPHY OF CAMBODIA<sup>1</sup>

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I am neither a professional epigraphist nor a professional Cambodia or Southeast Asia specialist. But, so far as I can see, there is nowadays no Sanskritist in the real sense among the Cambodia specialists (the Khmerisants, or rather, Khmerologists as they are called nowadays). It is no wonder, therefore, that the importance of Sanskrit in Cambodia and Southeast Asia as a whole is minimized by those specialists themselves who are regarded as eminent Sanskritists: it has been termed an "accident". This is not the place to enter upon a polemic over this and other similar matters.

To come to my topic; thirty-six years ago, in 1969, died George Cœdès at the age of 83, three years after having completed the publication of his *Inscriptions du Cambodge* in eight volumes (1937-1966). A prodigious scholar, Cœdès had at his young age of twenty, in 1906, already published a major Sanskrit inscription from Cambodia, and in 1908-1909 he published other important Sanskrit inscriptions. But, contrary to belief, the eight (or rather seven – the eighth volume consisting of tables and indices) volumes of his *Inscriptions du Cambodge* do not contain all the Cambodian inscriptions in Sanskrit and Khmer available until the 1960s. (The difference between the Sanskrit and Khmer inscriptions I have discussed elsewhere.) With a few exceptions, they do not contain the earlier publications by Auguste Barth and Abel Bergaigne (1885 - 1893) or Louis Finot or Cœdès himself. Nor do they contain the inscriptions he published in parallel with the *Inscriptions du Cambodge*. The purpose of this paper is to say what has happened until now since the publication of these volumes.

New inscriptions in Sanskrit and Khmer have been discovered, but not all of them have been published. I am not competent enough to speak of Khmer epigraphy, I assume that it is going on fairly well. But, so far as Sanskrit epigraphy is concerned, counting generously, I find only five or six modest texts published over more than thirty years now, and the most significant among them was published in Bangkok by a Thai scholar. I call it the most significant because, coming from Northern Thailand (which was part of ancient Kambuja-deśa, abbreviated into Kambuja, from which comes the modern name Kampuchea), it is the only document that attests the presence of Vajrayāna Buddhism in ancient Cambodia.<sup>2</sup>

This is indeed in sharp contrast with the extraordinary rapidity with which the earlier scholars did their work. Cœdès published his *Inscriptions du Cambodge* in twenty-nine years, in the midst of numerous

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was read at the conference "Sanskrit in Southeast Asia", organized by the Sanskrit Studies Centre, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, May 21-23, 2001, and published in the proceedings of the conference, 2003, p.128-131.

<sup>2</sup> Prapandvidya 1990.

other important works. And Barth published his *Inscriptions sanscrites du Cambodge* (which was to become the first volume of Barth and Bergaigne's *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*) five years after Etienne Aymonier had sent his collection of rubbings to Paris. (I have recounted the story of the early work on the Sanskrit inscriptions from Cambodia elsewhere. Everything here, as in Indonesia, began with the Dutch Sanskritist Hendrik Kern. Contrary to what is heard sometimes, there is, so far as I am aware, no proof that Kern's earlier work made scandal in Paris!).

An inscription recently discovered and now in the Conservation d'Angkor in Siemreap will illustrate the confusion into which Sanskrit epigraphy of Cambodia has fallen these days. I have no idea when nor where it was discovered; but, as will appear from what follows, it also comes from Thailand, probably from the area of Lopburi. It was referred to the highest authority in the field of Cambodian epigraphy, but no precise information about its contents was available. There was also some rumour that a substantial part of it was in prose (which, if it was true, would be unique in Cambodia). It was therefore brought to my notice – people in this field come to me only in the last resort! The Khmer part of the inscription has been edited and translated; but the editor has deliberately left out the Sanskrit part.

Now, this inscription does not contain any prose. On the contrary, the "prose" portion is written in such complex metres as śārdūlavikrīḍita and sragdharā. The historical information it gives is of great value and, so far as I know, unique. Belonging to the reign of Sūryavarman I, whose date of accession, 924 śaka, is given, it mentions a certain functionary, Lakṣmīpativarman, appointed "chief of the Mons residing in the West" (paścimāśāvakaśināṃ rāmaṇyānāṃ adhīśatve niyuktaḥ), and entrusted with the task of restoring to their pristine glory Lopburi (Lavapur) and the "western region" (vāruṇā viṣayāḥ), found in a deplorable condition, probably after a political turmoil the nature of which, unfortunately, is not revealed. Lopburi, says the inscriptions, was, because of the defects of the Kali age, reduced to a jungle, with its form and beauty destroyed, a jungle covered with wild animals like tigers and more terrible in appearance than even a cremation ground:

kāleyadoṣair lavapūr araṇyam  
pranaṣṭarūpā hatasarvaśobhā /  
vyāghrādibhir vyālamṛgaiḥ prakīrṇā  
śmaśānabhūmer api bhīmarūpā //

This was, therefore, the condition in which Lopburi found itself when the Khmer empire absorbed it. And this information seems to contradict what was inferred from the late Chronicles, namely that Sūryavarman I inherited Lopburi from his father of Malay origin, who had occupied it.

This is history. But history is not all in all in Sanskrit epigraphy, whether in Southeast Asia or in India. It has been a grave error to make Sanskrit epigraphy a purely historical science, with the result that historians have looked for only historical information in these texts, regarded as historical documents, not always knowing what to look for and where, for lack of an adequate knowledge of the Sanskrit language and of the Sanskrit culture that expresses itself in them in poetical form.

The older scholars were not familiar enough with that language and that culture. So they made many mistakes.<sup>3</sup> But at least, they were aware of it. The very first day I was meeting Cœdès, somewhere

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<sup>3</sup> Bhattacharya 1997.

toward the end of September 1955, he told me this: I don't think I have made many mistakes in reading the inscriptions but I can't say the same about my translations. He often used to tell me: I work with the help of grammars and dictionaries (*à coup de grammaires et de dictionnaires*).

Experience showed that there were mistakes not only in his translations but in his readings as well. And, whenever it happened to me to correct him, during my long acquaintance with him, he used to rejoice. When I was defending my two theses for the Doctorat d'Etat in Paris, in February 1962, he, as a member of the jury, publicly thanked me for correcting him, before such eminent Sanskritists as Louis Renou, citing as a model the correction made by Barth to Bergaigne's work.

Later experience showed that Barth and Bergaigne's works, either, was not exempt from error and omissions – not to speak of Finot's and even Kern's. A certain number of them have been corrected over the years, mostly outside the circle of Khmerologists, by one person. But much more, I am sure, remains to be done.

The older scholars were in a hurry to make the document available, and they did that with an extraordinary rapidity as we have seen. They, therefore, had no time to acquire that knowledge of the Sanskrit language and culture it was necessary to acquire to understand fully and correctly the texts they were deciphering and translating. But, when not more than five or six texts have been deciphered and translated over more than thirty years, one may assume that one had enough opportunity to acquire that knowledge, the more so because the French academic institutions offered unprecedented facilities in that respect in France as well as in Asia. Nothing, however, has been done. Rather than assuming the twofold task of editing and translating the inscriptions newly discovered and of correcting the earlier works, one has preferred to reveal to us sometimes (but not always) what is judged "important" in the former and to give vent to fantastic historical speculations, either on the basis of wrong interpretations of newly discovered texts or on that of wrong translations already existing.<sup>4</sup>

This is the result inevitably achieved when Sanskrit epigraphy is conceived – as it has been over the years – as a matter of paleography and history.

In what I consider a historic discourse, pronounced before the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres on November 20, 1960, Cœdès, defending epigraphy against certain attacks, stated:

Mais s'il est vrai que les inscriptions sanskrites ont déjà livré l'essentiel de leur contenu historique, on n'en a pas pour autant épuisé la substance.<sup>5</sup>

What is that "substance" of the Sanskrit inscriptions? In great part, at least, it is constituted by the *śāstra* – *śāstra* which, nowadays, would be regarded as an "accident" because they are Indian.

There are many instances to be cited but I shall confine myself to a couple of them. There is, for instance, the doctrine of the "unity of the *ātman*" (*ātmaikatva*) of Advaita-Vedānta in the Pre Rup inscription of Rājendravarman – the longest Sanskrit inscription (298 stanzas) ever composed. Although expounded in a historical context, it was missed by Cœdès.<sup>6</sup>

Here is another instance, illuminating for my topic. In the Baksei Chamkrong inscription, also belonging to the reign of Rājendravarman, there is a stanza where the poet uses for comparison (as is often

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<sup>4</sup> On *chandoga trihasra* (related to the 3000 saints of Chidambaram, "80 km south of Pondichery") and the so-called dispute over the *kṣatriyahood* of King Rājendravarman and its implications for the dynastic history of Cambodia, see my paper in the P.C. Bagchi Commemoration Volume (Calcutta), to appear.

<sup>5</sup> Cœdès 1960 :5.

<sup>6</sup> Bhattacharya 1971.

the case in classical Sanskrit poetry) a grammatical theory on which there is a long discussion in the Mahābhāṣya:

vṛddhiṃ guṇaṃ yo guṇavṛddhihīnām  
vilkaḷpayām āsa nayan nayādhyah /  
yuktyānuśāstā prakṛtiṃ paṭiṣṭho  
mṛjiṃ vidhitsann iva saṃkramajñah //

Cœdès attached some importance to this inscription. He published it first in 1909, when he was 23 years old; and he republished it in the fourth volume of his *Inscriptions du Cambodge* – one of the few exceptions referred to earlier.

So far as this stanza is concerned, Cœdès simply reproduced without question his translation of 1909, which is entirely wrong. He was not aware of the technical term of grammar, saṃkrama (it is not Pāṇinian, but pre-Pāṇinian, prācām as Nāgeśa informs us).

I have explained the matter in detail<sup>7</sup>, but no Khmerologist, to my knowledge, has understood my explanation. My article, in English, was translated into French by a distinguished Khmerologist: but the translator also misunderstood my explanation.

This is, then, the situation in which Sanskrit epigraphy of Cambodia finds itself in our time. An enormous work remains to be done. I devoted the whole year 1999-2000 to the task of reediting and retranslating a selected number of inscriptions at the University of Bonn. Among them was the most famous inscription from Cambodia, the Sdok Kak Thom inscription: most famous because it mentions the cult of Devarāja. It was amazing to see that even the text that had been the most worked upon – at least three scholars were involved, L. Finot, G. Cœdès and Adhir Chakravati, who worked with Cœdès and devoted his life to this one text – had to be reedited and retranslated again. Even Finot's absurd identification of the metre of v. XCIV – in fact aupacchandasika – as samavṛtta was repeated by others!

I cannot tell what will happen in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> Bhattacharya 1984.

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