

WHO IS THE STRONG-ARMED MONKEY WHO CHURNS THE OCEAN OF MILK?

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The dramatic act of the divine beings (*devas*) and demons (*asuras*) churning the cosmic ocean of milk is one of the best-known stories in Cambodia. Specifically, the bas-relief illustrating this story in Angkor Wat is much celebrated. This approximately 49-metre carving unfolds on the southern side of the eastern gallery of Angkor Wat, with the central axis showing a large turtle in the lower register and Viṣṇu in an anthropomorphic form in the middle. On either side of him are neatly arranged rows of *devas* and *asuras*, punctuated by large beings in the middle of the lines and on the two ends. The last figure in the row of *devas* –the very last character on the northern end of this panel– is a large monkey, holding the tail end of the serpent, Vāsuki, who served as a churning rope in this celestial enterprise. This brief paper will, with a wealth of sources from multiple fields in South India (the modern states of Tamilnadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka where there is a Venn diagram of shared “Dravidian” languages and ethos), discuss the identity of this mysterious monkey. These sources include passages from Kampaṇ’s Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* (the *Irāmāvatāram*, c. ninth or twelfth century CE); a panel from the Virupaksha temple in Pattadakal, Karnataka (eighth century CE); the *Raṅganātha Rāmāyaṇa*, a Telugu text dating to about the c. thirteenth century; and performing arts in Kerala. While it is certainly *not* the case that one needs to identify themes or characters in Khmer art with Indian literature or worldviews, in this particular case, there seem to be several sources which shed light on the churning monkey. It must also be emphasized that while these sources may be helpful in fixing the identity of the monkey, we may have to look to local Khmer socio-political conditions for further questions such as *why* certain figures

are included in iconographic programs.¹

Although the presence of the monkey is most noticeable in the Angkor Wat bas-relief, he is also found in the churning scene at the Bayon, Banteay Chhmar,² and possibly on a lintel at Preah Pithu.³ The discussion in this paper will focus primarily on the Angkor Wat panel. After an initial survey of scholarly discussions on the identity of this monkey, we shall move on to examining the texts and expressive arts which will illumine the issue, and conclude by acknowledging a few recent studies which establish the connections between South India and Southeast Asia.

The Churning of the Ocean of Milk panel at Angkor Wat has 92 *asuras* and 88 *devas* lined up on either side, pulling the serpent Vāsuki. Viṣṇu is seen in multiple forms through the panel, most famously in the lower register as a large turtle, usually identified as his second incarnation in a series of ten, or, in some sources, as a turtle called Akūpāra. Punctuating the line of *devas* and *asuras* at regular intervals are tall figures, pulling Vāsuki. According to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a Sanskrit text which has generally been dated between the fifth and ninth centuries CE and sometimes much earlier or later (Bryant: 2002), Viṣṇu takes many forms to help the *devas* and *asuras* with the churning (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*: 8. 7. 8-7; See also Mannikka 1996: 164-167). However, at the end of the row of *devas*, literally at the tail end of the row and the snake, is a large monkey who himself has a very large tail, helping with the churning (Fig. 1).

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All translations in this paper are my own unless otherwise noted. I have used the standard Tamil Lexicon style for transliterating Tamil. Place names are rendered without diacritics.

² I am grateful to Siyonn Sophearith for drawing my attention to the presence of the monkey in Banteay Chhmar.

³ Only Madeleine Giteau (1951) has observed that there is a head (and only the head) of a monkey on one of the churning panels at Preah Pithu.



Figure 1: Monkey at the end of the row of devas in the panel depicting the story of the churning of the ocean of milk at Angkor Wat. 12th century CE. (Vasudha Narayanan)

The monkey is about a head taller than the *devas*. He is in front of the snake but turned away from the viewer such that one can see his back and thighs; the end of the snake is partially hidden behind his back. We see his face in profile. Symmetrically, at the opposite end of the panel holding the head of the snake, is a person who seems powerful and strong, but who is *behind* the cord of the snake. The front side of this person's body and head face the viewer. The identity of this figure at the head of the snake is also contested; he has multiple heads both immediately over the shoulders and then several piled up in three layers, almost like a crown.

The monkey's hands firmly grasp the tail of the snake; his left hand is parallel to the left hands of the *devas*. His right hand is raised high, holding the tail of the snake which rises into the upper register of the bas-relief. The monkey smiles, and we can see his teeth; and his noticeably long tail rises, as though in victory. He is adorned with jewelry carved into the panel: he has anklets on his feet, a carved band around his waist and his arms, several necklaces, and bracelets on his hands. More importantly, his head dress is similar to that of the 88 *devas* who are pulling the snake, and this feature is noted specifically by Coedès and Giteau, as we will see shortly. With his eyes wide open, his face smiling in happiness, his muscular body pulling the snake, his right arm victoriously raised, we have a picture of controlled energy and physical power.

The identity of this monkey has never been clear as there is no character like that in Sanskrit

epics or the major Purāṇas in which we have several versions of the churning of the ocean of milk. Many scholars believe that this is Hanumān, the monkey-devotee of Rāma. Coedès, in 1911, was the first to suggest this identity tentatively; in discussing the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat, he says cautiously: “Enfin, le grand singe qui soutient la queue de Vāsuki ... et qu'on retrouve au Bâyon ... dans la même position, est très probablement Hanumat fidèle allié des dieux et grand dieu, lui-même” (Coedès 1911: 176).

More recently, Maxwell identifies this monkey as Hanumān, as many have done (see, for instance, Rooney 2002: 144) for good reasons:

The identity of the monkey at the end of the line of gods in particular has been much discussed. This figure from the *Rāmāyaṇa* can only represent Hanumān, the leader of Sugrīva's monkey-army and ally of Rāma, the righteous and heroic incarnation of Viṣṇu. His image appears on the battle standards of no less than eight of the Khmer army generals in the relief of the Royal Procession (south gallery, west wing), sometimes in exactly the same posture as here, one arm stretched forward and the other raised above his head; a Hanumān standard is moreover carried in front of the sacred fire (*vrah v Beng*) which precedes the king in the same relief. He therefore appears here on the side of the gods as a symbol of generalship and the martial defence of order. The depiction of him fanning the gods with the serpent's tail, which he wields like a huge banner, is a reference to the cooling winds that sustained the Devas during the churning: Hanumān was the son of the wind-god (Maxwell 2007: 25).

Maxwell's arguments about this being Hanumān logically rise from the many texts which speak about his preeminence. Hanumān is the best known of the monkey brigade and the paradigmatic devotee of Rāma. The description of the monkey holding the serpent's tail as “fanning the gods,” has an aesthetic touch, but the identification of the monkey with Hanumān seems reasonable. He has an important role in many versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and because he is a half-brother of Bhīma, one of the Pāṇḍavas, he also helps out in the *Mahābhārata* war and flies on Arjuna's flag. I agree with Maxwell in identifying the monkey on the Khmer standards as Hanumān, but would it be the same monkey-god in the churning scene?

There is one folk tradition from Bengal which includes Hanumān in an unusual version of the churning scene, not known in any other part of India. In this version of the churning story, Śiva is not happy with the distribution of the *amṛta*, and a second churning takes place. This time, however, it is only poison that arises; the gods and the demons flee, and Hanumān apparently asks Śiva to drink the poison. When Śiva passes out because of the poison, his wife Chāṇḍī, as a last resort, asks Śiva's daughter Manasā (whom she dislikes intensely in this narrative) to come to the scene

and save Śiva (Maity 1966: 83-84).⁴

There is possibly another argument that one could make to identify this monkey as Hanumān. Hanumān is known in Indian mythology as a *cirañjīvī*. While this is often interpreted as “always young,” one could possibly construe this as his *always* having existence, and as being around for more of Viṣṇu’s *avatāras* than just the one as Rāma. We just noted that he came back to fly on Arjuna’s standard in the *Mahābhārata* war. It is, therefore, possible to speculate—though it would be a stretch—that he was around at the time of the Kūrma *avatāra* and the churning of the ocean of milk story.

But evidently, the process of identification seems to have been far more complex than this, and even Coedès appears to have been perplexed. Madeleine Giteau, writing in 1951, summarizes the discussions thus:

Parfois apparaît un singe, placé le dernier dans la file des Devas, soutenant la queue du naga. Je n’ai constaté sa présence que dans les représentations les plus récentes, aux linteaux de Prah Pithu et aux grands bas-reliefs du Bayon et d’Angkor-Vat. Il est toujours coiffé du *mukuta* des Devas. A Angkor-Vat et au Bayon, il est d’une taille bien supérieure à celle des autres Devas. Au Prah Pithu U, on ne voit que sa tête ; au Bayon, c’est un très grand Deva reconnaissable seulement aux traits simiesques du visage ; mais c’est à Angkor-Vat qu’il est le plus réaliste, coiffé du *mukuta*, il est très proche des singes des divers épisodes du *Ramayana*. Mais qui est ce personnage ? Dans sa première étude sur les bas-reliefs d’Angkor-Vat, M. Coedès rapporte la tradition cambodgienne qui identifie le grand singe-Deva à Sugriva, mais il pense qu’il s’agirait plutôt d’Hanumat, bien que les textes sur le Barattage n’indiquent jamais ce nom. Dans le tome II du Mémoire Archéologique (Angkor-Vat, la galerie des bas-reliefs) le nom de Vrsā-kapi lui est attribué... Mais dans *Ramayana* (Yuddhakanda, *Sarga* XXVIII, *çloka* 6 et 7) nous lisons, d’autre part, lors du dénombrement de l’armée des singes : “ Ces deux que tu vois debout, qui se ressemblent, et qui ont l’aspect de Devas, ce sont Mahinda et Dvividā ; nul ne leur est égal dans le combat. Autorisés par Brahma, ils se nourrissent tous deux de l’*amrita*... ” Est-ce là qu’il faudrait chercher l’origine du grand singe-Deva, bien que dans les bas-reliefs on ne voit jamais qu’un singe ? Il n’y aurait rien d’étonnant à ce que, par la suite, les Khmèrs aient identifié à Hanumat ou à Sugriva, si populaires chez eux, ces singes qui n’apparaissent que d’une façon toute épisodique dans le *Ramayana* (Giteau 1951: 154).

⁴Maity draws primarily from the manuscripts which contain the works of the fifteenth century Bengali poet, Bipradās for the stories on Manasā but cautions that these manuscripts are not edited. He adds that since none of the extant texts were written at the time of the composers, “some interpolations... in the original composition of the poet are to be expected” (Maity 1966: 77).

The allusion to Mainda (“Mahinda” in Giteau’s essay) and Dvidida is from the section in the *Rāmāyaṇa* where important personages in the monkey army are being identified to Rāvaṇa. The reference to the monkeys having had ambrosia, with the permission of Brahmā, is in the text, but neither the context of the incident nor the story, are clear.

In more recent scholarship, Mannikka asserts that this monkey is Sugrīva, the king of the monkeys who formed the army of Rāma in the war against Rāvaṇa in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. She identifies the multi-headed figure at the head of the snake as Bali,⁵ the king of the *asuras*; and extending the royal theme, she argues that the monkey on the tail end is Sugrīva:

Bali, the large *asura* holding onto the head of Vāsuki..., is the king of the *asuras*, and Sugrīva who holds the tail of Vāsuki... is the king of the monkeys.... Sugrīva’s monkeys are equivalent to *devas* at Angkor Wat, as their fathers were gods (Mannikka 1996: 46).

Although she does not provide specific reasons for her identification of the monkey as Sugrīva, she does acknowledge in an endnote that

[s]cholars have not reached a consensus on the identity of Bali and Sugrīva. Although some believe that these two figures are Rāvaṇa and Hanuman, no one offers any “proof” for an opinion. The only such evidence that can be given here is the predominance of the theme of kingship, coronation, and kings in the scene itself, something that was not suspected earlier (Mannikka 1996: 306 n. 20).

Roveda, too, agrees with this identification:

The influence of the *Ramayana* in the iconography of this primordial myth is indicated by the presence, on the side of the *devas*, of the monkey holding the tail of the *naga* snake, identified as Sugriva (rather than Hanuman), and, a general with the headdress of an *asura*, identifiable perhaps as Vibhisana, Ravana’s brother, and an ally of Rama.⁶

Other scholars say that this figure could be Hanumān or Sugrīva (see, for instance, Laur 2002: 340), and we do have plausible arguments for both lines of thinking. As Maxwell and others

⁵ Bali is the king of the *asuras*, the main character in the story connected with the Trivikramaavatāra, and to be distinguished from Bāli (with a long “a”) which is sometimes a regional form of Vāli, the monkey who is Sugrīva’s brother.

⁶ Roveda 1998: 108; see also 54 where he reiterates this opinion.

argue, it seems possible that the large monkey can be Hanumān, the best-known simian in Hindu narratives, and a popular figure in Angkor iconography. Indeed, we see a powerful Hanumān carrying Rāma on his shoulders in the bas-relief of the *Rāmāyaṇa* war in the western corridor of Angkor Wat. Found wherever Rāma is glorified, one can argue that if one identifies Rāma with the generic Viṣṇu and, secondarily, with his incarnation as a tortoise, it is Hanumān who is helping in the churning. It is also possible to valorize the themes of kingship and coronation, as Mannikka has done, and speculate that it is Sugrīva, the friend and ally of Rāma, who is in this scene. And indeed, as we will see shortly, that at least according to one thirteenth-century source, this is a distinct possibility.⁷

Thus, for more than a century now, scholars have either identified the monkey as Hanumān or Sugrīva, or perhaps as coming from local sources; and there has not been much progress on this front since 1911 when Coedès wrote:

Il serait vain de rechercher si les sculpteurs ont eu le dessein d'illustrer un texte déterminé. Le mythe fait partie du fonds commun aux épopées et aux Purāṇas. Il semble d'ailleurs avoir reçu au Cambodge l'empreinte de traditions locales, car il n'est pas un seul texte purement indien qui nomme Hanumat parmi les dieux ayant pris part au barattement (Coedès 1911: 176).

Based on multiple, diverse, and pervasive sources –including textual– in South India, however, I would like to argue that this monkey helping so enthusiastically with the churning of the ocean of milk is neither Hanumān nor Sugrīva, but Sugrīva's older brother, Vāli.⁸

Vāli is certainly known in Khmer iconography. A stunning carving of Sugrīva and Vāli fighting each other in a fraternal battle-to-death is seen in a larger-than-life Koh Ker sculpture, now in the National Museum of Phnom Penh (Fig. 2).

⁷ There is also a lesser known oral tradition which places Jāmbavān in the scene of the churning of the ocean of milk. Although Jāmbavān is generally depicted as a monkey, he is considered to be the king of *ṛkṣas*. The Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* (5:44: 9-10) does not draw a clear line between *ṛkṣas* and *vānaras*, or monkeys. See Ludvik, 1997, 111. There is, however, no evidence that he actually helped churn the ocean of milk.

⁸ I have used the Tamil spelling of Vāli, as used by Kampan, throughout this text.



Figure 2: The fight of Vāli and Sugrīva from Prasat Chen; Koh Ker style, 10th century CE, National Museum of Cambodia. (Vasudha Narayanan)

It is also repeated in several friezes, as in the western pediment in Banteay Srei as well as in a carving at the Musée Guimet (Figs. 3 and 4).

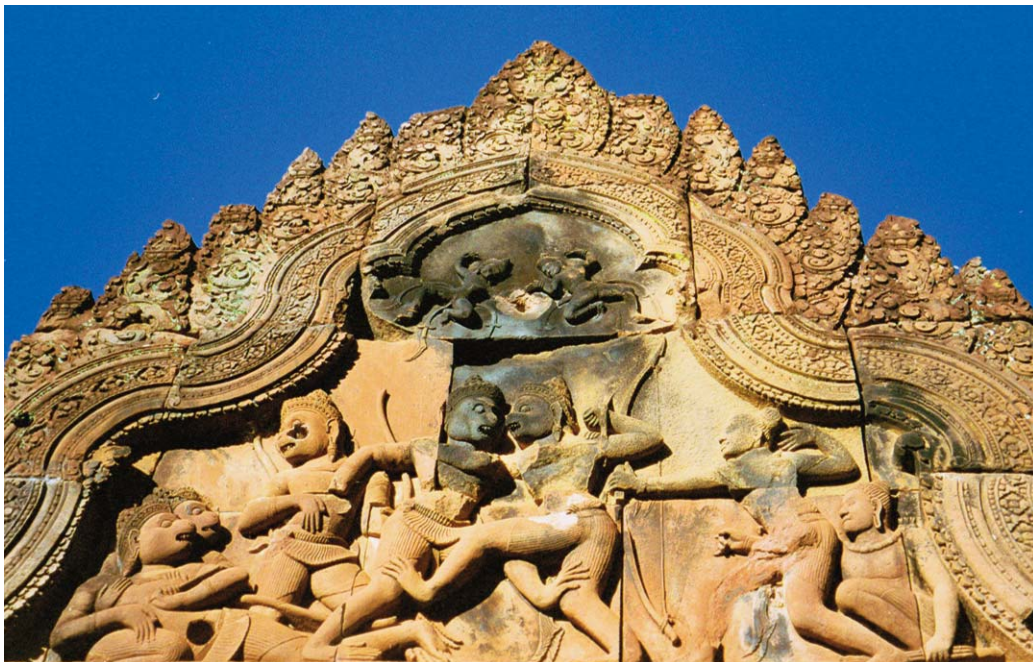


Figure 3: Vāli and Sugrīva fighting. Western entrance, Banteay Srei, c. 967 CE. (Vasudha Narayanan)

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Figure 4: Vāli and Sugrīva fighting. Wat Baset, Battambang District, 11th century CE, now at Musée Guimet. (Vasudha Narayanan)

The theme of two brothers fighting for the throne certainly seems to have struck a sensitive nerve among patrons of art in Khmer history. There is also a moving depiction of Vāli's death in the southwest corner pavilion of Angkor Wat (Fig. 5).



Figure 5: Death of Vāli, Angkor Wat, Southwest Corner Pavilion, Angkor Wat, 12th century CE. (Vasudha Narayanan)

But while carvings of Vāli and Sugrīva are common, and Hanumān certainly appears in several panels, there are very few examples of a monkey in the churning scene in Cambodia. A monkey is present in two (predominantly) Buddhist sites in the churning scene—in Bayon and in Banteay Chhmar—and we noted Giteau’s assertion that a monkey’s head is seen in one of the churning lintels in Preah Pithu (Fig. 6).



Figure 6: Churning Panel, Preah Pithu. The monkey’s head is to the viewer’s left, the last figure in the line of devas. (courtesy of Siyonn Sophearith)

We do, however, have texts and expressive arts in South India which place Vāli at the churning scene. A striking example—though not necessarily the earliest—comes from Kampan’s *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁹ The date of Kampan, author of the famous *Irāmāvatāram* (“The Rāma Avatāra”), is much disputed.¹⁰

Scholars are divided on two very different dates: ninth or twelfth century CE, and the jury

⁹ After having done the research for this paper, I was delighted to find that Jean Filliozat had also thought of this monkey as Vāli and cites a verse from Kampan, as well as the South Indian texts, the undated Sanskrit *Kāñcimahātmya*, which was the inspiration for the Tamil *Kāñcippurāṇam* composed by Civañānacuvāmi (d. 1785). Filliozat makes this point in a brief article which discusses the significance of the Rāmāyaṇa in Southeast Asia. See Filliozat 1993: lxvii–lxviii. Blake Wentworth (email correspondence) has also independently identified the verses in the eighteenth-century *Kāñcippurāṇam* which deal with Vāli’s participation in the churning as *Maṇikaṇṭecappaṭalam* 14.

¹⁰ I have used the on-line version of Kampan’s *Irāmāvatāram* in this paper. There is a wealth of scholarship on Kampan in many languages. For many excellent articles on Kampan’s *Irāmāvatāram*, see for instance, Shulman, 1978, 1979, 1987.

is still out on a definitive date. We will come back to the vexing issues of dating this work towards the end of this paper.

In Kampan's *Rāmāyaṇa*, we hear several times that Vāli participated in the churning of the ocean of milk. For example, in the *Cuntara Kāṇṭam* (*Sundara Kāṇḍa*), Hanumān, in talking to Sītā about Vāli's strength, says:

Vāli, who is older than Sugrīva,
is the victorious one,
who tied the strong Rāvaṇa tight to his tail,
such that [the demon's] power was blown apart!
He then leaped and jumped in eight directions.
When the *devas* beseeched [Vāli],
he, the one with strong arms,
used as a churning rod
the mountain, circled by the snake,
—whose body was worn thin
when it grated against the mountain,
until the nectar rose....¹¹

This verse refers to two stories unique to South India. In this paper, we are focusing on the second one, where the *devas* asked Vāli to help them with the churning. Vāli apparently agreed; the Tamil story indicates that the girth of the snake was too big and that the *devas* could not grasp it firmly, and that one way in which Vāli helped was to make the snake's body thinner by rubbing it against the mountain.

The first allusion in the above verse—Vāli tying Rāvaṇa by his tail and thrashing him in all eight directions—refers to Rāvaṇa's early connection with the monkey-king. While this incident is noted many times in the Tamil stories and oral tradition, as well as in the Kerala Teyyam dances, it is not found in Vālmīki or North Indian sources. Rāvaṇa apparently tried to harass Vāli while he was performing rituals in the sea; in some accounts, Vāli is doing his *sandhyāvandanam* (rituals which are done three times a day by men of the “upper” castes who wear the sacred thread); in other versions, it is the *tarpaṇam* or ancestor rituals. Vāli's regular way of performing these was to go to the ocean in

¹¹ *maṛṇu avaṇ muṇṇōṇ vāli; irāvaṇaṇ vali taṇ vāliṇ*
iṛṇu ukakkaṭṭi, eṭṭuticaiyiṇum eḷuntu pāyṇta
veṇṇiyaṇ; tēvar vēṇṭa, vēlaiyai vilaṅkal mattil
cuṇṇiya nākam tēya, amutu eḷa kaṇṭainta tōḷaṇ 30
Irāmāvatāram 5.4.30 (Cuntara Kāṇṭam)

different quarters of the land –some say, the earth itself– and do the rituals. When Rāvaṇa tried to sneak up and bother Vāli, the monkey, without batting an eyelid, apparently wrapped the edge of his tail around the squirming Rāvaṇa; and everytime he lashed his tail, he dunked the hapless demon in the ocean. Finally, he let go of Rāvaṇa who never, ever, troubled him again. In some oral traditions of this story, Vāli even ties up Rāvaṇa as a mobile toy for his son to play with in the cradle.

Kampaṇ talks about Vāli being in the churning of the ocean of milk scene not just once, but several times in his Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa*. We hear of Vāli's participation in the enterprise in the *Kiṭkintā Kāṇṭam* (*Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa*), frequently in the context of a description of his unbounded strength. When Hanumān first introduces the name of Vāli and illustrates his might to Rāma, it is the churning story that he describes:

By the grace of [Śiva] who
protects the ocean of the faultless Vedas,
lives in the mountains,
and bears the trident,
Vāli obtained his boundless strength.
Standing with the *devas*, and the demons,
when the whirling Mandara's form was worn out
and the wrathful snake's belly hissed fire,
[Vāli], the one with strong shoulders,
churned the swirling sea.¹²

In another chapter in the same canto when Tārā, Vāli's wife, tries to dissuade him from going out and accepting his brother Sugrīva's challenge for a rematch, Vāli boasts of his role in the churning of the ocean of milk in many verses. He reminds her of his own strength, thus:

The towering mountain Mandara was the churning rod;
Vāsuki, who has no end, was the churning rope;
The anchor-stone was [Viṣṇu] who bears the Wheel

¹² *nālu vētam ām navai il ārkali*
vēli aṇṇavaṇ, malaiyiṇ mēl uḷāṇ
cūlitaṇ aruḷṭuraiyiṇ muṇṇiṇāṇ
vāli eṇṇu uḷāṇ varampu il āṇṇalāṇ 37
kaḷaṇṇu tēvarōḷu avuṇar kaṇṇiṇ niṇṇu
uḷalum mantarattu uruvu tēya muṇ
aḷalum kōḷ arā akaṭu tī viṭa
cuḷalum vēlaiyaik kaṭaiyum tōḷiṇāṇ 38
Kampaṇ, Irāmāvatāram 4.3.37-38 (Kiṭkintā Kāṇṭam)

the moon was the support;¹³
in high spirits, the immortal ones, beginning with Indra,
and others pulled on opposite sides.
Oh my wife, beautiful as a peacock,
with words as sweet as a *koel*-bird!
Do you forget—
 when, as the [*devas*] pulled
 and the mountain turned around,
 seeing that they were bereft of energy and tired,
 I, then, seized the rope and churned the ocean
 like it was a pitcher of yogurt;
 procured the nectar— and gave it to them?¹⁴

It is almost like Kampan̄ was writing about an eighth-century sculpture that one can see in Karnataka. There are not too many sculptures which show a monkey in a churning scene, but we find one in the Virupaksha temple, Pattadakal, which seems to portray in stone what Kampan̄ narrates in words (Fig. 7). The Virupaksha temple was built around 740 CE by Lōkamahādevī, the Queen of the Chalukya king, Vikramāditya II (733-745 CE), to mark her husband's victory over the Pallavas in Kanchipuram. There are two churning scenes in the Pattadakal temple complex. One is in the Virupaksha, and the other is in the Mallikarjuna temple.¹⁵ Both occur in pillars in which we see sculptures in horizontal panels. In both pillars, the churning story with *devas* and *asuras* lined up on two sides, churning rod on top of a turtle, is in the second horizontal panel from the top.

Just above the churning scene in the pillar in the Virupaksha temple, the top panel has a carving inside an arch-like frame for the relief. Here we see a large monkey/ape-like being, holding a snake as a rope swirled around a churning rod. The rod sits on top of a turtle. Across from him are little figures who cannot be identified; but if we hold Kampan̄'s verse to illumine this panel, we

¹³ *Tūṇ* which can be translated as “pillar,” may also refer to the weight on top of the churning pole.

¹⁴ *Mantara neṭu varai mattu, vācuki
antam il kaṭai kayīru aṭai kal āliyāṇ
cantiraṇ tūṇ etir tarukkiṇ vāṅkunar
Intiraṇ mutaliya amarar ēṇaiyōr 26
peyarvuṛa valikkavum, miṭukku il peṛṇiyār
ayarvuṛal uṛṛatai nōkki, yāṇ atu
tayir eṇakkaṭaintu avarkku amutam tantatu
mayil iyal kuyil moji! maṛakkal āvatō? 27
Kampan̄, Irāmāvatāram 4.7. 26-27 (Kiṭkintā Kāṇṭam, vāli vataippaṭalam)*

¹⁵ See George Michell: 2002 for further reading on this site.



Figure 7: Panel showing churning scenes at the Virupaksha Temple, Pattadakal, Karnataka. Early 8th century CE.
(Vasudha Narayanan)

realize it could be Indra and other *devas*. In the sculpture in the Virupaksha temple, it looks like in the top panel, Vāli is single-handedly twirling the mountain with the snake-rope; and in the lower panel, there is a standard depiction of the churning of the ocean of milk with the *devas* and *asuras* lined up on two sides of the mountain. This close proximity of the two panels seems to suggest that they are connected.¹⁶ Indeed, Vasundhara Filliozat also identifies the monkey-like figure in the Virupaksha temple as Vāli. Her identification is based on a verse from the *Tattvasaṅgraha Rāmāyaṇa* (*Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍa*), which is quoted in the *Purāṇanāma*, a Kannada language encyclopedia.¹⁷ It

¹⁶ A. K. Bhattacharyya, however, identifies the figure who looks like a monkey in this panel as an *asura*. Bhattacharyya says that “[h]ere in one of the top panels the Churning scene is depicted with one of the *asuras* representing their clan holding the mouth of the Serpent Vāsuki as also helping to entwine it around the Churning pillar, Mandara” (Bhattacharyya 1959: 125). George Michell, on the other hand, identifies this figure as Garuda pulling the snake Shesha (Michell 2002: 52). However, since there is no textual (or other) account that has yet come to light which speaks of one *asura* helping to lasso the serpent around the mountain and since (a) we do, on the other hand, have a narrative of Vāli churning the ocean alone; (b) there is no text saying that Garuda helped with the churning; on the contrary, some texts (see for instance, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8. 6. 39) explicitly say that Garuda was *dismissed* from that scene because of his enmity to snakes; and (c) the churner’s face looks like that of a monkey, I am inclined to interpret this panel as Vāli churning the ocean.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Dr. Vasundhara Filliozat for sharing the relevant pages from the manuscript of her forthcoming book on Pattadakal. Email correspondence July 14, 2013.

must be noted however, that there is a puzzling sculpture, similar to the one described above, in the Mallikarjuna temple, immediately adjacent to the Virupaksha temple (Fig. 8). The Mallikarjuna temple was built by Trailökamahādevī, the sister of Lökamahādevi and a junior queen of Vikramāditya. It is similar to the one constructed by Lökamahādevi but is unfinished in some parts.



Figure 8: Two churning panels in Mallikarjuna Temple, Pattadakal, c. 8th century CE (Vasudha Narayanan)

Here, in one of the pillars, right under a Durga relief, are two panels depicting the churning. The lower one is a traditional portrayal of the churning with the *devas* and *asuras* lined up on either side. The middle panel, however—the one just under Durga and right above the churning—shows an individual holding the churning rod and churning alone, very much like the figure with the monkey-visage in the Virupaksha temple. However, the figure on this panel in the Mallikarjuna temple has a crude, unfinished face. I have not been able to identify this figure with certainty; while it is possible it is a more human depiction of Vāli, it is most probably a depiction of Ajita, a form of Viṣṇu, attempting the churning alone.¹⁸

Even without the sculpture in the Virupaksha temple, it is fairly clear that the story of Vāli churning the ocean of milk is used time and again to illustrate his strength. Kampan mentions the

¹⁸ “When the ocean was churned by the *devas* and by the *asuras* and the nectar [of immortality] did not appear, Ajita (the unconquerable one) himself began to churn.” *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 8. 7. 16. I would like to thank Dr. Ananth Rao for concurring with this possible identification through personal communication, June 4, 2012.

same incident several other times his work (including the *Yutta Kāṇṭham* or the Canto of the War, 6. 12. 17 and 6. 31. 48), clearly saying that the churning was successful only because of Vāli. When Vāli's wife, Tārā, beholds his dead body, she chooses –of all the stories she can tell about her husband– to allude in three verses to his role in the churning of the ocean of milk. She wails in grief, asking if the *devas* in heaven are welcoming Vāli there now, saying that they are alive only because Vāli procured and gave them the nectar of immortality.¹⁹ In some verses, we are told that he stepped in when the *devas* pleaded for help –and it is in this way, that he is depicted at Angkor Wat in the large bas-relief; in other verses, he jumps in and twirls Mandara singlehandedly with the ease of churning a jar of buttermilk or yogurt. In one verse, we hear that the girth of the snake was too big, and he helped to mould its shape such that the *devas* and the *asuras* could hold it; in others, we hear that he was there to take over the churning. There seem to be a few minor variations of this story.

Before we leave Kampan, we should note that apart from these many explicit descriptions of Vāli in the churning scene, there are many other allusions to the narrative in passing, especially in the chapter where Sugrīva meets Rāma (*Kiṭkintā Kāṇṭham*, chapter 3: “The Formation of Friendship”). Hanumān's shoulders are like Mandara (4. 3. 1); Hanumān happily announces the arrival of Rāma in the Kiṣkindhā forest and dances as Śiva did after he had drunk the poison when the ocean was being churned (4. 3. 2); and Vāli, “with the arms he had used to churn the ocean, ” is said to have hit Sugrīva (4. 3. 64).

Another South Indian literature source, the Telugu *Raṅganātha Rāmāyaṇa*, which was composed around the thirteenth century CE, also talks about Vāli's involvement with the churning of the ocean of milk, with a couple of major differences. In this text, Sugrīva, Vāli's brother, is also present at the churning scene; and second, Tārā, who is said to come out of the churning, is gifted to *both* Sugrīva and Vāli. To the best of my knowledge, this gifting of Tārā to both brothers is only found in this text. The relevant passages which place both the monkey-brothers at the scene are located in a conversation between Rāma and Sugrīva:

Rāma asked:

King of monkeys, how did your elder brother become your enemy? Sugrīva said:

“...Rāma, let me tell you the entire story, of how Vāli became my enemy. When the gods came to churn the ocean, made the Mandara Mountain the churning rod, and Vāsuki the churning rope, they asked us with great respect and, we with all our wisdom and strength hung to one side of the rope.

All the gods, falcons, snakes, demons, Siddhas, and Sādhyas churned the ocean.

Poison came out of the ocean and began to burn the worlds, Śiva swallowed it, and then as a wonder, the Elder woman, Jyeṣṭha was born. King Kali lovingly took her. A number

¹⁹ For a discussion of these remarks, see, Shulman 1979: 657-58.

of objects came from the ocean worthy of praise and each one took whatever suited their wishes. The Airavāta elephant, the goat, the buffalo, the crocodile, the female elephant, the horse, and the bull, — and Indra and other lords of space took them for their vehicles. When Lakṣmī arrived with auspiciousness as her own quality, Nārāyaṇa fell in love with her and made her his queen, then the moon came, and the women of the gods. From among them, gods gave us the woman called Tārā and we took her with love. When all of us churned the ocean Amṛta, the essence of life came out. All of the gods took it with great joy along with the wishing tree, the giving cow, and the moon. Then the gods gave us leave and we returned with pleasure to our land and lived with the woman. Sometime later, I married Ruma, the daughter of Sushena. (Translated by V. Narayana Rao)²⁰

The Hindi translation in the twentieth century closely follows the original:

“when [during the time of churning the ocean], the devas made Mount Mandara into a churning rod and Vāsuki into a rope, they, knowing about the strength of our arms, pleaded with us. Then both Vāli and I, to help with the churning stood together on one side, and on the other side were the, the devas, Garuḍas, Siddhas, . . . *asuras* and others. [A list of all that came out of the churning follows]. . . . And then, the moon and the celestial enchanting beings were born. From these beauties, the *devas* then took the beautiful one called “Tārā” and gifted her to us and we then held on to her.”²¹

Since Sugrīva is narrating this tale, it stands to reason that he is part of the action and that Tārā is given to both him and to Vāli. Other texts say she was Vāli’s wife initially, but the main point to be noted in this Telugu version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is that, here too, Vāli is present at the scene. Sugrīva’s presence is also to be noted; and so, there is at least one textual passage which may bear out Manikka’s identification of the monkey in the churning scene as Sugrīva.

The preponderance of the evidence, however, is on just Vāli being at the churning scene. We have noted substantial support for this from Tamil, Kannada (Pattadakal), and Telugu cultures. To complete the shared “Dravidian” ethos of this story, we can also consider the significant evidence

²⁰ *Kiṣkindhā Kāṇḍamu*, pp. 177-178 in Gōna Buddha Bhūpati (author of *Pūrva Rāmāyaṇa*) and Kāca Bhūpati and Vitthala Bhūpati (authors of the *Uttara-Rāmāyaṇa*), *Raṅganātha-Rāmāyaṇamu*, *Purva-Uttara Kāṇḍamulu*. Hyderabad: Telugu Visvavidyalayam, 1989. I am greatly indebted to Professor Velcheru Narayana Rao for kindly translating the relevant verse for me.

²¹ *Raṅganātha Rāmāyaṇa*, by Raja Gonabuddha, translated into Hindi by Sri AC Kamakshi Rao, Patna, India: Bihar Rashtrabhasha Parishad, 1961. I have translated this passage which is from section 4. 4 (179-180) of the Hindi translation of the text.

from Kerala. Here, in the Teyyam dances, where the performer assumes the guise of a character from the epics and becomes possessed with divine energy and even speaks as the deity itself, we find many dances focusing on “Bāli” (Vāli).²² Discussing its history, Rich Freeman translates the Teyyam of Vāli, the long-tailed one:

At the time when Mannaram [i. e. Mandara] was lowered in churning the deep,
The gods saw the beautiful Tāra had come there.
Saying “Praise, they made Tāra a wife for Bāli [Vāli].
Praised be stainless Long Tail! May you be my support!
(Freeman 2001: 197)

Freeman notes that this story “alluded to in the most archaic of his Teyyam pieces, gets expanded elsewhere in the songs” and that “early documentation of this myth occurs in Kerala in the original text of the *Abhiṣekanāṭaka* itself.... . In Kerala the myth appears again in the great *Rāmāyaṇa Campu* of the fifteenth century, a number of Kathakali plays, and is especially relished in both of the eighteenth century Bāli street-plays, (*tullals*) of Kuñcan Nambyār” (Freeman 2001: 214). The story of the churning of the ocean of milk

establishes Bāli [i. e., Vāli] as a great hero, superior to the gods and finds greater elaboration later in Bāli’s teyyam songs. It tells how the gods proved too weak to finish churning the milk-ocean with Mount Mandaram, in their efforts to extract all the delectable of creation. So, mighty Bāli came to their aid, and seizing the serpent Vāsuki as his rope, he churned the sea by spinning this great mountain (Freeman 2001: 198).

While most of the evidence that I have discussed so far in this paper comes from about the eighth-fourteenth centuries CE,²³ and *only from South India*, we also see a painting from c. mid-nineteenth century in which a monkey is near the churning scene. The British Museum has a painting with a single *asura* and a monkey on opposite sides, involved in the act of churning with the mountain and the snake (Fig. 9).

²² Extensive discussion on the Teyyam dances and also on the birth of Vāli is to be found in Rich Freeman, 2001.

²³ Arguably, it is a most vexing project to date these Teyyam pieces, and one cannot say anything definitive about the time of composition, “other than to say that it is not, like pure ‘folk-literature,’ purely modern and oral, but that strata of it are definitely premodern (being rote-liturgical, linguistically archaic, and sometimes passed down in palm-leaf mss.) reaching back into the “medieval” of uncertain temporal depth.” Freeman, personal correspondence.



Figure 9: Vāli and an asura churning the ocean. 19th century painting. Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. Asia 1993, 0806, 0. 7 Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund.

That this painting is also from South India should not surprise us; Rich Freeman most persuasively argues that “[the] myth exemplifies a number of those whose narrative elements go back not to the prototype of Vālmīki or other such Sanskrit works, but to a shared south Dravidian literary and folk heritage of the Keralas and other Tamils” (Freeman 2001: 198). The Teyyam dances, along with the other evidence from Tamilnadu, Andhra, and Karnataka, seem to point to the monkey in the churning panel at Angkor Wat being Vāli.

In addition to the materials from South India, we have contemporary ethnographic data from Cambodia itself which, intriguingly enough, sets Vāli in the scene of the churning. In the careful evidence gathered by Siyonn Sophearith, et al. in Cambodia, we see Vāli’s presence in the background story for the *dāñ brät*, a traditional rope-pulling that resembles a tug-of-war. This game, which is played during the traditional New Year, involves two teams pulling a rope. The origin story for the game says that the rope was a snake pulled by the demons and the gods; the gods were afraid they would lose, until Vāli appeared and came up with a strategy. He advised the gods to have someone tickle the snake’s navel and that would move it in a way that the demons would lose control. While the origin and provenance of this game is not clear, it is certainly a fascinating story to show that Vāli still lives—and for many reasons.²⁴

²⁴Bong Sovath, Vin Laychour, Chy Rotha, Siyonn Sophearith, Tuy Lida, Tan Sovann Oudom, “Research on the Teanh Prot (Traditional Rope Pulling) in Cambodia.” Final Report, May 2013. Unpublished manuscript.

Where does this take us? Before we address this question, we should briefly consider the dating of the evidence presented in this article. As in many cases to do with Indian literature, dating is extremely difficult, since layers and layers are packed on over the centuries. Kampan's date is either the ninth or the twelfth century CE, depending on how one reads the Śaka date given in the beginning of the work. While the simplest and most direct interpretation seems to be the ninth century, manipulation of the Tamil words giving the date could lead one to the twelfth century CE.²⁵

The Telugu *Rāmāyaṇa* is said to be around the thirteenth century, and the most conservative dates one could possibly put on the early sections of the Teyyam dances goes to about the fourteenth century. The Pattadakal sculpture, on the other hand, is early eighth century CE, and it would be just a little before the date attributed to Kampan, if one takes the ninth century as the correct one.

It would, however, be a mistake if we were to take Kampan as the *starting* point of the story. Rather, what we can take away from this discussion is (a) a shared South Indian ethos of the story and (b) that these narratives and art forms are the result of a longer tradition which includes this and other stories not necessarily seen in Vālmīki or in other north Indian versions. I have shown elsewhere that the *ālvārs*, Tamil poet-saints, who lived between the seventh and ninth centuries CE, had access to narrative traditions that are unknown to us, and have referred to stories and incidents from the *Rāmāyaṇa* not seen in Vālmīki (Narayanan: 1994). This has also been seen in many other parts of India.

What we have then, given the twelfth-century dating of the churning panel at Angkor Wat, is a situation where those who were in charge of the iconographic program there as well as those who produced the poetry and art forms in South India, probably had access to and engaged with the similar traditions prevalent in a large geographic region. It is not clear how precisely these stories were transmitted on both sides of the Bay of Bengal, but Vāli's appearance in the churning scene in South India as well as in Angkor strongly suggests that people in both places drew from common pools of narratives and lore; but what got valorized and when depended on the socio-political conditions in local cultures.

How did these traditions travel? While there are many lacunae in our understanding of the connections between South India and Southeast Asia, and it is not the purpose of this paper to review the scholarship of transmission studies, it would perhaps be helpful to point out the work which shows that such connections were reasonably deep-rooted. This is *not* to deny connections from other parts of India; in fact, it is assumed here that there were a plurality of routes and connections. It is also not to deny the great significance of Sanskrit in Southeast Asia or to connect Sanskrit only

²⁵ A persuasive argument for the earlier date is made by M. Arunachalam, 1999. Blake Wentworth has shown, however, in his lecture notes (sent through personal correspondence, June 4, 2013) with very careful arguments that a twelfth century date is to be preferred.

with North India; as is well celebrated, Sanskrit texts have been composed and have flourished in South India.

We know from current research there must have been many strong networks in place; further, we can be certain that there was *reciprocal* transmission between South India and Southeast Asia. Although, after an extraordinarily detailed and brilliant study of Śiva in Kambujadeśa, Alexis Sanderson says: “[w]hat we do not find among the Khmers or their neighbours in mainland and maritime Southeast Asia is any trace of that range of ancillary Śiva-forms that has seemed so central to students of Śaiva India because they are found throughout the Śiva temples of the Tamil-speaking South... ,” he soon thereafter cautions: “. . . while it is entirely possible that the Khmers received their Śaivism from sources other than the Tamil South, there is as yet no evidence that definitely excludes that region. On the contrary there is evidence of South-Indian influence in other spheres that should make us hesitate to do so in this” (Sanderson 2003: 444-445).

Hermann Kulke refers to these “other spheres,” giving some examples: “The first distinct South Indian influences are usually linked with the famous Buddhist art of Amaravati, and the Pallava Grantha of present day Indonesia’s earliest inscriptions in the fifth century AD, followed by the strong impact of Pallava and Chola art and architecture in Southeast Asia” (Kulke 2009: xiii). One such instance of where and how early the script connected with the Pallava style traveled is seen in an explanatory sign near an inscription in the Ubon Ratchathani museum. This sign says: “Inscription at Pak Dom Noi: Pallava alphabet (*sic*), Sanskrit language, 6th-7th century AD, move[d] from Pak Dom Noi, the right bank of Mun river, Sirindhom district, Ubonratchathani.”²⁶

Karashima and Subbarayalu have documented several inscriptions which link the Chola dynasty of South India with Southeast Asia; in 1020 CE, the Kambhoja king sends a chariot as a gift to the Chola king, seeking friendship; and in 1114, the Kambhoja monarch sends a gemstone to Kulottunga I, which he places in the Chidambaram temple (Karashima and Subbarayalu 2009: 279 and 283).

We do know for sure that by the eleventh century CE, Rajendra Chola of South India took the unusual step of sending a naval expedition –a military one– to Southeast Asia (Kulke, Kesavapany, and Sakhuja 2009: 1-19; 61-95). The painstaking work of Jan Wissemann Christie, Kenneth Hall, Hermann Kulke, Tansen Sen, Noboru Karashima, and Y. Subbarayalu (among many others) has established military and commercial connections between South India and Southeast and East Asia, which contextualizes how traditions such as these stories could have moved easily in both directions in the Bay of Bengal.

While studies in the communications and connections between South and Southeast Asia in maritime trade are burgeoning now, we have the opportunity to draw on a diverse set of scholarly

²⁶ Transcribed from a picture I took of the sign near a stele in the Ubon Ratchathani Museum in 2007.

works to see when and how these relationships have been forged. In particular, it would be useful to see how religious personnel and objects of material religion traveled alongside cultural traditions and textual matters. We do not have evidence at this point to say that the story of Vāli being at the churning scene came from Cambodia to South India, though that would be an interesting line of thought; nor do we have evidence to say that the builders of Angkor Wat knew Kampaṇ, though that may well be the case. What we can say is that both sets of people, divided by the Bay of Bengal, have churned the ocean of narrative, drawn the treasures from it, and depicted stories which were significant for them, probably for very different reasons.

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សង្ខេប

ស្វាខ្លាំងក្លាដែលកូរសមុទ្រទឹកដោះជានរណា?

Vasudha Narayanan

អ្នកស្រាវជ្រាវតែងជជែកវែកញែកថា ស្វានៅចម្លាក់អង្គរវត្តត្រង់ឈុតកូរសមុទ្រទឹកដោះជានរណា។ គេឃើញស្វានោះជួយពពួកទេពឲ្យកូរសមុទ្រដើម្បីយកទឹកអម្រឹត។ អ្នកភាគច្រើនអះអាងថា នេះជា ហនុមាណ ឬ ជួនកាលថាជា សុគ្រិត។ អត្ថបទនេះផ្អែកលើប្រភពច្រើនផ្សេងៗគ្នានៃតំបន់នានានៅឥណ្ឌាខាងត្បូង (សព្វថ្ងៃ គឺរដ្ឋ Tamilnadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh និង Karnataka)។ ប្រភពទាំងនេះរាប់បញ្ចូលផ្នែកខ្លះនៃរឿង រាមាយណនៅ Tamilnadu (តែងនៅស.វ.ទី៩ឬទី១២), ផ្ទាំងចម្លាក់នៅប្រាសាទ Virupaksha (ស.វ.ទី៨), រឿង Ranganātha Rāmāyaṇamu, អត្ថបទ Telugu មួយតែងនៅរវាងស.វ.ទី១៣, ព្រមទាំងនាដសិល្បៈនៅរដ្ឋ Kerala ផង។ ពិតហើយថាខ្មែរពុំមែនធ្វើអ្វីតាមតែឥណ្ឌានោះឡើយ ប៉ុន្តែក្នុងករណីនេះ គប្បីយើងយកប្រភព នានាពីឥណ្ឌាមកពិចារណា។ ប្រភពទាំងប៉ុន្មានមកពីឥណ្ឌាខាងត្បូងនេះបង្ហាញច្បាស់ថាស្វានោះជា ពាលី។ វត្តមាននៃពាលីក្នុងឈុតកូរសមុទ្រទឹកដោះនៅឥណ្ឌាខាងត្បូងផងនិងនៅអង្គរវត្តផងបញ្ជាក់ថាចេញពីក្រុមប្រភព ដើមមួយជាមួយគ្នា ប៉ុន្តែរបៀបរបបដែលទទួលយកមករៀងៗខ្លួននោះ អាស្រ័យទៅតាមទេសកាលសង្គមនិង នយោបាយនៃអារ្យធម៌នីមួយៗ។

Abstract

Who is the Strong-Armed Monkey who Churns the Ocean of Milk?

Vasudha Narayanan

Scholars have debated the identity of the monkey seen in the large bas-relief in Angkor Wat which depicts the story of the churning of the ocean of milk. The large monkey is seen helping the devas churn the ocean of milk for the nectar of immortality. Most scholars identify this monkey as Hanuman or, occasionally, as Sugriva. This paper, with a wealth of sources from multiple fields in South India (the modern states of Tamilnadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka), will discuss the identity of this mysterious monkey. These sources include passages from Kampan's Tamil Rāmāyaṇa (the Irāmāvatāram which was composed either in the ninth or twelfth century CE); a panel from the Virupaksha temple in Pattadakal, Karnataka (eighth century CE); the Ranganātha Rāmāyaṇamu, a Telugu text dating to about the c. thirteenth century; and performing arts in Kerala.

While it is certainly not the case that one needs to identify themes or characters in Khmer

art with Indian literature or world-views, in this particular case, there seem to be several sources which portray the churning monkey. All these sources from South India clearly identify the monkey in the churning scene as Vāli. The paper argues that Vāli's appearance in the churning scene in South India as well as in Angkor strongly suggests that people in both places drew from common pools of narratives and lore; but what got valorized and when, depended on the socio-political conditions in local cultures.

Résumé

Qui est le singe fortement armé qui baratte l'océan de lait?

Vasudha Narayanan

L'identité du singe qu'on voit dans la scène du barattage de l'océan de lait figurant sur un grand panneau de bas-relief d'Angkor Vat fait l'objet d'un débat chez les chercheurs. Le grand singe est montré aidant les *devas* à remuer l'océan en vue d'obtenir le nectar d'immortalité. La plupart des chercheurs identifient ce singe avec Hanuman ou, parfois, avec Sugriva. Cet article, appuyé sur une variété de sources provenant de plusieurs régions du sud de l'Inde (aujourd'hui les États du Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh et Karnataka), tente d'examiner l'identité de ce singe mystérieux. Ces sources comprennent des passages du Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* de Kampan (le *Irāmāvatāram*, composé soit au 9^e soit au 12^e siècle), un panneau sculpté du temple Virupaksha dans Pattadakal, Karnataka (8^e s. de notre ère), le *Ranganātha Rāmāyaṇamu*, un texte Telugu datant des environs du 13^e s., et les arts scéniques dans le Kerala.

Certes l'identification des thèmes ou personnages de l'art khmer ne doit pas systématiquement se référer aux normes indiennes, mais dans ce cas particulier, il semble qu'on doive considérer plusieurs sources qui, en Inde, dépeignent le singe en question. Toutes ces sources de l'Inde du sud identifient clairement le singe dans la scène du barattage comme Vāli. Toutes ces sources de l'Inde du Sud identifient clairement le singe dans la scène du barattage comme Vāli. Cet article montre que la présence de Vāli dans la scène du barattage en Inde du sud d'une part, celle d'Angkor Vat d'autre part, mettent fortement en relief la référence à un foyer de sources commun, mais les modalités des emprunts relevaient des conditions socio-politiques de chaque culture concernée.