

PICTURE–PERFECT PAIRING:  
THE POLITICS AND POETICS OF A VISUAL NARRATIVE PROGRAM  
AT BANTEAY SREI<sup>1</sup>

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“Only connect...”  
E. M. Forster, *Howards End*

**Framing the Argument: Picture-Perfect Pairing**

One of the most perplexing aspects of visual narrative as found on ancient Cambodian Hindu temples is that the narrative sequence (or the lack thereof) does not conform to the Aristotelian definition of a narrative, which requires “a beginning, a middle, and an end” (Else 1991 (Aristotle): 30).<sup>2</sup> Instead, one sees episodes taken from different and unrelated Hindu texts rendered on stone bas-reliefs that are juxtaposed in a non-linear narrative arrangement. Consider, for example, the narrative reliefs at the tenth-century temple of Banteay Srei. At initial glance (Figure 1), one sees episodes from Hindu texts, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on Chapter One of my doctoral dissertation: *Storytelling On Stone: Visual Narrative Intention on Ancient Khmer (Cambodian) Temples* (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002): 1-19.

<sup>2</sup> In his seminal article on narrative structure in Indonesian shadow plays, Alton Becker concludes: “As far as I know, the wayang tradition has no Aristotle, [and] no one has attempted to articulate the set of constraints within which underlie the tradition (Becker 1979: 224).” Comparable to Becker, but in a different light and perspective I propose here another way of interpreting the narrative modes at Banteay Srei.

narrated on bas-reliefs (see ground plan in Figure 2). Curiously, their order seems chaotic. I would like to suggest, however, that there is an underlying pictorial system that threads these seemingly disjunctive narrative reliefs together. This organizational device is essentially based on what I call the principle of picture pairing. The content within these correlative pairings can either be complementary or opposite, depending upon their context. Specifically, I will argue here that the different narrative scenes rendered on bas-reliefs at Banteay Srei are paired correlative, based on this picture-pairing principle.<sup>3</sup> The pairing pattern occurs between stories narrated on two different bas-reliefs as well as within a single relief. Moreover, this pairing pattern is part of the whole iconic arrangement and narrative program; narrative sequences can therefore only be connected when they are considered as part of the total program. At Banteay Srei in particular, an important aspect of these pairings



*Figure 1: Cambodians looking at a bas relief at Banteay Srei, 2003 (Photo: author)*

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Eleanor Mannikka and Vittorio Roveda have argued that a similar arrangement of formal pairing is evident at the two corner pavilions at Angkor Wat. However, I am the first to articulate and to theorize this picture-pairing system at Banteay Srei. More importantly, I would like to amplify this local (i.e., Cambodian) concept of pictorial organization and introduce it into the discourse on visual narrative in Cambodian art history. Admittedly, this pairing concept is not consistent at either Angkor Wat or Banteay Srei (although it is more consistent at Banteay Srei) but I find the concept useful and much needed in both practical and theoretical terms when dealing with the established Cambodian cultural interest in duality. More significantly, this picture-pairing principle makes sense of visual narrative patterns and intentions found on some ancient Cambodian temples. Thus I have chosen, with much deliberation, to title my article “Picture-Perfect Pairing” so as to ask the readers to picture (or to imagine) in their minds a perfect pairing of narrative reliefs at Banteay Srei. See Mannikka 1996: 182, and Roveda 2002b: 168-171. For a comparable pattern of pictorial organization, see Michelle 1983: 17-26. In addition, see Wechsler 1994: 27-42. Also see another comparable case (but in a very different context) in Wu Hung 1992: 111-144.

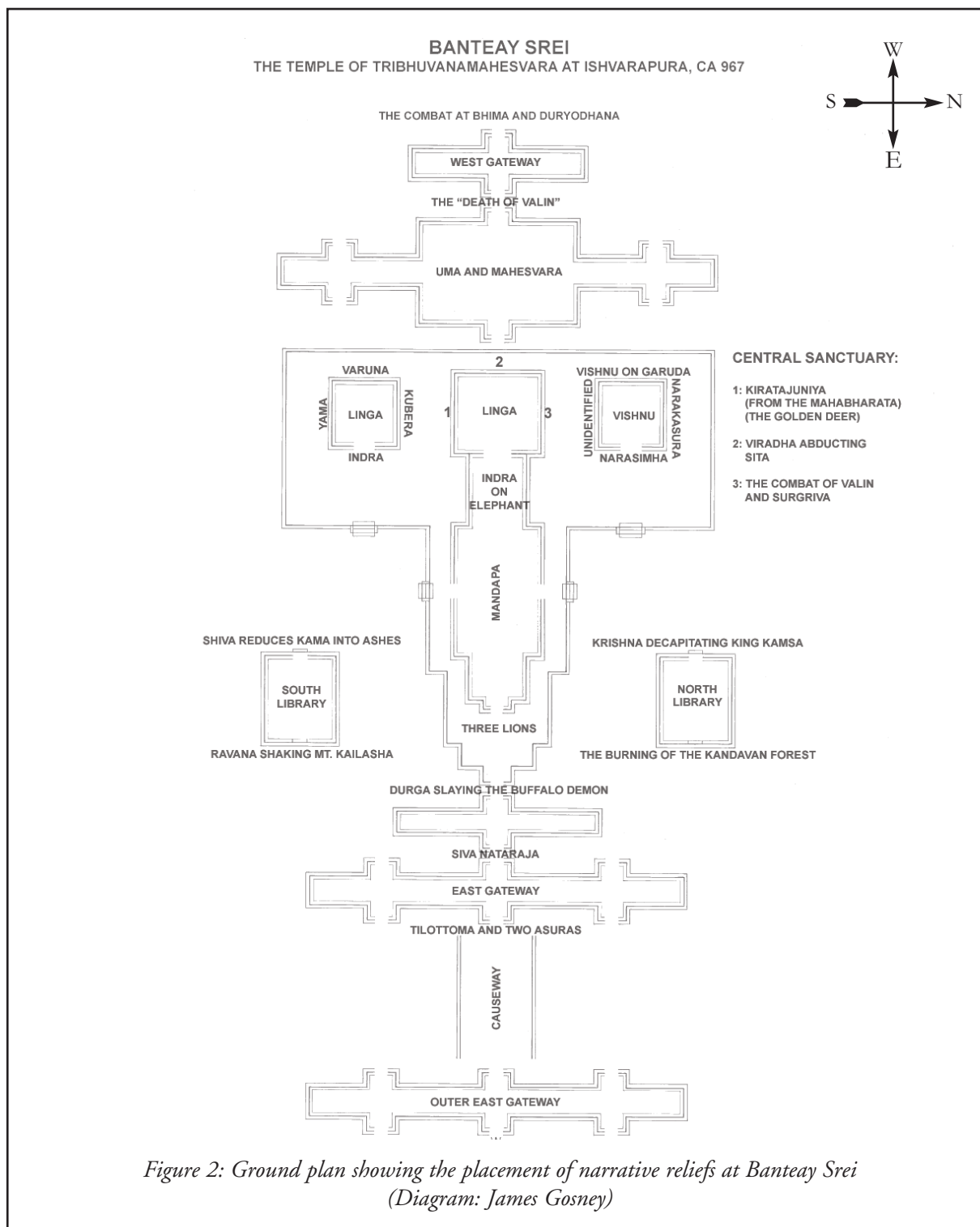


Figure 2: Ground plan showing the placement of narrative reliefs at Banteay Srei  
(Diagram: James Gosney)

concerns the issues of patronage and religious ideology, which dictate the choice and placement of narrative reliefs.<sup>4</sup>

## **Of Inscriptions and Iconic Images at Banteay Srei**

The tenth-century temple of Banteay Srei is located in a village about twenty-five kilometers outside of the modern day town of Siem Reap, in northern Cambodia (Figure 3). Banteay Srei, which means, “Citadel of Women” in Khmer, is probably a modern appellation given to the temple by nearby villagers; it could, however be a remnant of an older name, using the term *srei* in its acception as “glorious.” The temple is built of red sandstone, faces east and comprises three tower sanctuaries (Figures 2 and 4). Each one of these shrines has an entrance on the east side. In addition, there are two libraries located in front of the three shrines. We are quite certain that these two structures were “libraries” because a tenth-century Sanskrit inscription referred to similar edifices as *Pustakashrama* (“library,”) presumably palm-leaf manuscripts (containing stories comparable to the ones narrated visually on the bas-reliefs at Banteay Srei) were housed inside these two buildings (Coedès 1911: 405-406). An inscription dated 967 BCE (the foundation stela)<sup>5</sup> was found in situ; it is written in both Sanskrit and old Khmer, and tells us that Banteay Srei was built under the patronage of a learned brahmin priest, Yajnavaraha and his family. This very same inscription further states that Yajnavaraha and his brother Vishnukumara erected a linga named *Tribhuvanamahesvara* “Lord of the Three Worlds” in the central shrine of a temple at *Ishvarapura*, “the City of Shiva” (Finot et al. 1926: 71-74). The inscription informs us further that the main icon (i.e., the *Tribhuvanamahesvara Linga*) was consecrated on the first day of *Madhava* (October-November), 967 CE (Coedès 1937: 144). Moreover, other inscriptions found in situ inform us that

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to make clear at the outset that I have limited my discussion to narrative events and their relevance to the iconic image at Banteay Srei. An inclusive discussion of all the images such as the directional guardians such Varuna, Yama, Vayu etc., found at the South shrine (see ground plan in Figure 2) and narrative episodes such as Shiva Nataraja and “Durga Slaying the Buffalo Demon” found in the East gateway is outside the scope of this article. In brief, my discussion of the picture-pairing principle is limited to the narrative panels and iconic images that I think are necessary to demonstrate my argument – an inclusion of all the images at Banteay Srei would require a monograph.

<sup>5</sup> George Coedès discovered the foundation stela, which is dated 967 CE. However, it is quite certain that Banteay Srei was constructed in what Henri Parmentier called “duality of construction periods.” The inner galleries, which comprise the buildings discussed in this article, were constructed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but the buildings situated on the outer enclosure were added in the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. See Jessup and Zéphir 1997: 123-128.



*Figure 3: Distance view of Banteay Srei (Photo: author)*



*Figure 4: Distance view of the three towers at Banteay Srei (Photo: author)*

two of the three shrines once housed a *linga*, and the third (the north) shrine housed a statue of Vishnu (see ground plan in Figure 2). A Sanskrit inscription written on the doorjamb of the south shrine reads: “Jahnvi, beloved elder sister of Yajnavaraha, has piously erected a *linga* at *Isvrapura*” (Finot et al. 1926: 93). Another inscription engraved on the doorframe of the north shrine states:

He, who is the guardian and spiritual friend of Yajnavaraha, has gained the title of Sri Prthivindrapandita [=Lord of the Earth]

This honorable Bhagavarta [sage], who knows all the *shastras* [books] has erected a statue of the Lord Vishnu (Finot et al. 1926: 93).

The four-armed Vishnu was originally housed inside the northern sanctuary and was removed from the temple in the 1920s. Subsequently, it was kept at the National Museum in Phnom Penh until it sadly “disappeared” in the 1980s (Figure 5).<sup>6</sup> It is quite certain that the central sanctuary once contained a *linga*, worshipped under the name of *Tribhuvanamahesvara*, that also gave its name to the whole temple complex (Figure 6). Thus Banteay Srei was most likely known in the tenth century as the temple of *Tribhuvanamahesvara* at *Ishvarapura*. Finally, another inscription written in Sanskrit engraved in the doorjamb situated at the east entrance of the west gateway reads:

Yajnavaraha who knows all the religious rituals, commissioned this image of Uma and Maheshvara to increase the merits of his parents (Coedès 1937: 143-144).

It is clear that the exquisitely carved iconic couple, Uma and Mahesvara, was once placed inside a brick shrine situated at the west gate (Figure 7).<sup>7</sup> The main icons in the sanctuaries at Banteay Srei are, thus, from south to north: *linga*, *linga*, and Visnu (see ground plan in Figure 2).<sup>8</sup> The layout of the narrative reliefs also conforms to this iconic arrangement. For example, the buildings situated

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Helen Jessup for informing me in an e-mail message dated December 9, 2004 of the fate of this image.

<sup>7</sup> I revisited Banteay Srei in August 2004. Sadly, very little remains of the brick building that once sheltered the Uma and Shiva image, located behind the three tower sanctuaries. Unfortunately, Uma’s head was stolen from the National Museum in Phnom Penh in the 1970s. See Jessup and Zéphir 1997: 232-233.

<sup>8</sup> The guardian lions embracing the stairs leading up to the south shrine have led Claude Jacques to suggest that a statue of Durga was originally placed here. See Jacques and Freeman 1997: 108.



*Figure 5: Vishnu from the north Shrine of Banteay Srei  
(Photo: EFEO)*



*Figure 6: View of linga housed inside the south Shrine at Banteay Srei  
(Photo: EFEO, 1926)*



*Figure 7: "Uma and Maheshvara" National Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Photo: EFEO, 1926)*

on the south side of the complex contain scenes derived from Shaivite stories, while reliefs on the northern edifices depict stories related to Vishnu.<sup>9</sup>

### Picture Pairing and Poetic Sentiments

Let us now turn to the narratives themselves. Two episodes from the life of Shiva are narrated on the pediments of the south library (Figure 8). The west pediment of this particular library depicts Shiva as a meditative yogi, an ascetic with serpents wrapped around his body and his hair piled up into a chignon. Shiva is shown attempting to meditate while the god of love, Kama, tries to break his concentration with an arrow of love (Figure 9). As a result of Kama's action, Shiva reduces Kama into ashes with the fire generated from his third eye. Interestingly, Kama's bow and arrow may form a metaphor for the eyes as well as for the gaze; the arch of the bow stands for the eyebrows while the sharp and pointed arrows signify the pupils from which the gaze is generated.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Kama's erotic gaze (symbolized by his flower bow and arrow) is destroyed by Shiva's third eye, the ascetic eye that generates the heat (fire) derived from yogic practice and meditation (Figure 10). The moral of the story seems to be the triumph of asceticism over erotic desire.

The ascetic form of Shiva is paired with, and thus must be considered in relation to, an erotic representation of Shiva taken from the episode of "Ravana Shaking Mount Kailasha" that is rendered on the east pediment of the south library (Figure 11). Enclosed within an elaborately carved *makara* frame is a four-tiered pyramid, symbolizing Mount Kailasha, the mountain where

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<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Professor Robert Brown for calling my attention to a similar arrangement of narrative scenes at the Kailashanatha Temple at Ellora. See Dhavalikar 2003, and Chatham 1994: 156-169.

<sup>10</sup> If my interpretations of the visual narrative reliefs at Banteay Srei seem to be "overdetermined," it is because as an art historian I believe strongly that visual narrative (i.e., images) narrate a visual "history" that is different from the intention embedded in a verbal narrative. In brief, I am guilty of privileging the visual over the verbal. Moreover, intentions of artistic practices were rarely written down in ancient Cambodia. For instance, after almost a lifetime of research on ancient Khmer language and epigraphy, Saveros Pou, one of the great Cambodian linguists and epigraphers, concludes:

In Khmer epigraphy there is no such text as dealing with history (chronicles, diaries, annals, etc.), let alone with art. All Khmer stone inscriptions relate facts connected to three main themes: a) religion, b) the rulers, i.e., Kings, and c) the land itself. It must be added that no straight line can be drawn between these, since religion was the main motivation of human behavior and activities in our traditional society (Pou 1997: 230).





*Figure 8: Distance view of the south Library of Banteay Srei showing the west pediment where "Shiva Reduces Kama into Ashes" (Photo: author)*



*Figure 9: "Shiva Reduces Kama into Ashes" west pediment, south Library (Photo: author)*



Figure 10: Details showing "Shiva Reduces Kama into Ashes" (Photo: author)

Shiva's abode is located. Found on top of this pyramid is an amorous couple, Shiva and his wife, Parvati. The story begins at the bottom center where one sees a large figure of Ravana with ten heads. The demon's twenty arms unfold like the leaves of a fan while he simultaneously shakes his ten heads. Ravana's violent shaking not only terrorizes the animals nearby, but also frightens Parvati, who holds tightly onto her husband's body. Naturally, Shiva is furious with Ravana for disturbing his lovemaking. The scene concludes with Shiva effortlessly snuffing the demon's shaking with his toe. Clearly, the pairing I suggest juxtaposes Shiva in two opposing moods: ascetic and erotic.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, the stories narrated on the two pediments of the north library tell the adventures of Krishna, one of Vishnu's many incarnations. Unlike the pairing I just described between two different pediments, the pairing of narrative scenes at the north library also appears within a single pediment. "The Burning of the Kandhavan Forest," from Book I of the *Mahabharata*, is elaborately rendered on the east pediment of the north library. The panel narrates the battle between Indra, the god of rain, and Agni, the god of fire (Figure 12). Agni is hungry and would like to consume the forest, but he is constantly defeated by Indra, who keeps sending down rainstorms to extinguish Agni's fire (Figure 13). One day, Agni meets the two Pandava cousins, Arjuna and Krishna. He explains his predicament to the two brothers and seeks their help. Arjuna and

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the paradoxical nature of Shiva as an "erotic ascetic" see Doniger O'Flaherty 1973.



Figure 11: "Ravana Shaking Mount Kailasha" east pediment, south Library, Banteay Srei  
(Photo: author)

Krishna decide to help by shooting streams of arrows up into the sky, thus blocking Indra's rain and allowing Agni to consume the forest.<sup>12</sup> It is this crucial moment that is captured in the bas-relief. We see respectively on the bottom left and right corners of the pediment, Arjuna with his bow and arrows and a four-armed Krishna, who is shown holding a discus and a conch shell with his two upper arms. Unfortunately, Krishna's two lower arms are badly damaged so it is difficult to decipher what they are holding.<sup>13</sup> As the two cousins approach the burning forest we see animals fleeing for their lives. Depicted on the very top of the pediment is Indra, who is shown riding his

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<sup>12</sup> Van Buiten 1971: 412-422. This episode has long been misidentified as "Krishna lifting Mount Govardhan" from the *Harivamsha*, but Claude Jacques has suggested that this relief represents "The Burning of the Kandhava Forest." The elaboration and contextualization of this episode are mine. See Jacques and Freeman 1997: 110. To the best of my knowledge this episode from the *Mahabharata* is rarely depicted in Cambodian art and the example at Banteay Srei is an anomaly. Interestingly, however, the "Burning of the Kandhavan Forest" is performed in contemporary Javanese shadow plays. See Sears 1991: 73-74.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the iconographic attributes associated with Krishna rendered in the narrative relief are similar to the ones held by the iconic image of Vishnu from the north shrine. This one-on-one correspondence suggests the connection between iconic images and visual narrative at Banteay Srei.



*Figure 12: "The Burning of the Kandhava Forest," east pediment, north Library, Banteay Srei (Photo: author)*



*Figure 13: Details showing Indra's rainstorm from "The Burning of the Kandhava Forest," east pediment, north Library, Banteay Srei (Photo: author)*

three-headed elephant. With a thunderbolt in his right hand, Indra sends down a torrential rain-storm to put out the fire down below, but it has no effect because the heavenly rains are held at bay by Krishna and Arjuna's arrows. Here, we see that the principle of picture pairing occurs in both form and content of the story narrated. The formal pairing appears in the mirroring of the bodies of Arjuna and Krishna.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, comparable to the opposition of Shiva's moods on the north library, we see an opposition of elements: water and fire.

The theme of oppositions appears again in the episode of "Krishna decapitating King Kamsa" from the *Mahabharata* that is rendered on the east pediment of the north library. It tells the story of the wicked King Kamsa, who was told by a prophetic voice that the eighth child born of his cousin Devaki and her husband Vasudeva would take over his throne. Kamsa immediately ordered every single one of Devaki's children killed. Fortunately, Krishna, the eighth child, was raised by Yashoda, the wife of Nanda, a cowherder, and he therefore managed to escape Kamsa's plan. As soon as Krishna grew up, he decapitated the evil king.

In the pediment we see Krishna and his brother Balarama enter the city of King Kamsa to rid the kingdom of the evil ruler (Figure 14). The next scene shows the climactic moment in the narrative when Krishna, after having entered King Kamsa's palace, drags the wicked King by his hair and is about to decapitate him with a sword (Figure 15).<sup>15</sup> As on the east pediment of the north library, there is formal pairing in the mirroring of the two identical figures representing Krishna and Balarama. Moreover, there seems to be a correlative pairing of moral and ethical concepts, namely, good versus bad. The moral of the story here seems to be the triumph of good



*Figure 14: Distance view of the north Library of Banteay Srei showing the placement of the west pediment depicting "Krishna Decapitating King Kamsa" (Photo: author)*

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<sup>14</sup> See Hildebeitel 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Couture 1991: 312-316. Also see Vaidya 1969.



*Figure 15: "Krishna Decapitating King Kamsa" (Photo: author)*

over evil.<sup>16</sup> In brief, the narrative reliefs found on the pediments at the two libraries at Banteay Srei are paired correlatively as well as formally, in a dual structure based on a series of oppositions.

### **The Politics and Poetics of Picture Pairing**

The correlative pairing of narrative scenes is also found in the narrative of two episodes from the *Ramayana*, "Viradha Abducting Sita" and "The Combat of Valin and Sugriva," that are rendered on lintels situated on the central sanctuary. If one follows a clockwise reading of the three lintels around this middle shrine, as Hindu worship is normally performed, the lintels follow this order: 1) the "Kiratarjuniya," 2) "Viradha Abducting Sita," and 3) "The Combat of Valin and Sugriva" (see ground plan in Figure 2). The most puzzling aspect of this arrangement is the odd

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<sup>16</sup> Wendy Doniger has pointed out that in general, there is no clear-cut interpretation on good and evil in Hinduism. See Doniger 1988. Indeed, there is no clear definition of good versus evil in Hinduism, but I would argue here that one has to interpret specific meaning and ethics in the context of specific narrative, and in the case of "Krishna Decapitating King Kamsa" at Banteay Srei, the evil King Kamsa is harassing innocent folks and thus we can consider his actions to be singularly evil.

juxtaposition of the “Kiratarjuniya,” an episode from an entirely different epic, the *Mahabharata*. Spatially, it precedes both scenes from the *Ramayana*, and, more perplexingly, the most crucial episode of the “Golden Deer” from the *Ramayana* is not depicted. Again, the concept of picture pairing as an organizational device sheds tremendous light on this seemingly confusing narrative structure. The pairing on the middle shrine occurs between the “Kiratarjuniya” and “The Combat of Valin and Sugriva.” Spatially, these two lintels—the former on the south (“Kiratarjuniya”), and the latter on the north (“The combat of Valin and Sugriva”)—are juxtaposed.

“The Combat of Valin and Sugriva” takes place in the *Kishkinhda Kanda* (Book IV) of the *Ramayana*. It tells the story of two monkey brothers, Valin and Sugriva, who fought over their respective rights to rule the kingdom. Sugriva, with the help of Lord Rama, committed fratricide in order to usurp the throne; the episode concludes with the death of Valin. Interestingly, this particular episode appears twice at Banteay Srei. The second version, an extended representation of the story that concludes with the death of Valin, is depicted on a pediment found at the west gateway (Figure 16). I will discuss that example more extensively later.



*Figure 16: "The Death of Valin" (Photo: author)*

“The Combat of Valin and Sugriva” represented on the north lintel is a contracted version of this episode (Figure 17). We see here two identical monkey brothers, Valin and Sugriva, engaged in combat (Figure 18). Surprisingly, there are two Ramas, armed with bows and arrows, shown shooting at the two monkeys down below. Rendered on each end of this elaborately carved



Figure 17: Overview of the north lintel of the central shrine of Banteay Srei showing the episode of "Valin and Sugriva Engage in combat" from the *Ramayana* (Photo: author)



Figure 18: Details showing "Valin and Sugriva Engage in combat" (Photo: author)

lintel are monkeys engaging in playful acts. In short, this narrative panel is read outward from the center.

Directly opposite is the south lintel, which depicts a scene from the *Mahabharata*. It tells the story of Arjuna, one of the Kaurava brothers who performed austere penance in order to obtain a weapon from Lord Shiva to fight his enemies, the Pandavas.<sup>17</sup> Arjuna and Shiva met while hunting for a boar, which turned out to be Muka, a demon in disguise. Finally, Shiva revealed his true self in the form of a *linga* to Arjuna and gave the warrior the *pashupata* weapon (Figure 19).<sup>18</sup>

Unlike the relief of "The Combat of Valin and Sugriva" discussed earlier, this relief is read inwards from the edges. On the left corner of the lintel, one sees the ascetic, Arjuna; to

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<sup>17</sup> I have discussed the visual narrative treatment of the *Kiratarjuniya* at the Baphuon in great detail elsewhere. See Ly 2003: 134-137.

<sup>18</sup> It is possible that the three-dimensional representation of the two "Wrestling Apes" dated to the tenth century, from Prasat Chen, Koh Ker depicts the episode of "Valin and Sugriva engaged in a combat" from the *Ramayana*. Another sculpture (badly damaged) in the round depicting the so-called "Wrestlers" from Prasat Thom, Gopura II, West, also from Koh Ker, might possibly depict Shiva and Arjuna wrestling over the boar Muka from the *Kiratarjuniya*. It is probable that these two sculptures are three-dimensional prototypes of similar subject matter depicted on the lintels at Banteay Srei. See photographs reproduced in Jessup and Zéphir, 1997:188 and 214-215.



Arjuna's right is Lord Shiva disguised as a *kiratar* (hunter). Shiva, represented with voluminous hair and wearing earrings, is armed with the *pashupata* stick, the sacred weapon that Arjuna seeks. As one's eyes move towards the center of the relief, there appear two figures who are armed with bows and arrows: Arjuna stands on the left, and Shiva is on the right. They are shown shooting simultaneously at a boar although only the head of the boar is depicted (Figure 20). Finally, at the center one sees the two heroes engaged in a wrestling match to decide who was the first to catch a glimpse of the boar and who has the right to its ownership.



Figure 19: Overview of the south lintel of the central shrine showing the *Kiratarjuniya* from the *Mahabharata* (Photo: author)



Figure 20: Details showing the *"Kiratarjuniya"* (Photo: author)

The “*Kiratarjuniya*” and “The Combat of Valin and Sugriva” are paired both formally and thematically. Thematically, the content of this complementary pair can be interpreted on two profound levels. First, the meaning embedded in these two scenes registers the conflict between two characters over their respective right to a claim: the boar in the former episode and the throne in the latter. Second, both scenes carry the meaning of failed recognition—the boar turns out to be a demon, and the hunter turns out to be Shiva. Likewise, the resemblance of the two identical monkeys briefly incapacitated Rama’s ability to see clearly which one of them was Valin, the monkey he was targeting.

Equally powerful and visually poetic are the artists' ingenious manipulations of formal structure to ornament and to further articulate the complementary equivalence of the two scenes. For example, it is possible that the narratively inexplicable presence of the two Ramas<sup>19</sup> in "The Combat of Valin and Sugriva" can be attributed to the artists' desire for a formal symmetry—a balance that mirrors the two figures (the hunter and Arjuna) that are found on the opposite lintel—that evokes a visual couplet (Figures 17 and 19). It is perhaps also a desire for perfect formal symmetry that dictates the contracted narrative mode in which "The Combat of Valin and Sugriva" is rendered. In sum, the subtle philosophical and dramatic content embedded in this visual couplet is further amplified by the artists' remarkable formal articulation. This articulation includes the artists' clever construction of a parallel pairing between the form and content of two different stories, rhyming them visually and thematically.

Although I have described only a few examples, stories at Banteay Srei are first and foremost told in pairs; indeed, all narrative reliefs at this temple are arranged in pairs except for one particular panel, the west lintel of the central shrine. It is on this odd lintel that one finds the representation of "Viradha Abducting Sita." This episode occurs in the *Aranya Kanda* (Book III) of the *Ramayana*. The lintel depicts the encounter between Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, and the demon Viradha in the *Dandaka* forest that leads to the first abduction of Sita in the poem. The artists at Banteay Srei have skillfully manipulated the carved ornament (which comprises vegetal and mythological animal motifs) into a forest suitable for the staging of this episode. The narrative begins in the middle with the abduction itself, the climactic moment when Viradha carries Sita off on his left shoulder (Figure 21). On the lower corners of either end of the lintel, Rama and his brother, Lakshmana, are watching anxiously as Sita is carried off by the demon (Figure 22).

It is puzzling that the subject matter depicted on the two opposite lintels of the central shrine has no obvious correlation with this *Ramayana* scene. For instance, the outer east lintel (placed directly above the main entrance to the central shrine) represents three lions, while the interior lintel depicts Indra, riding on his three-headed elephant. Thus, the "Viradha Abducting Sita" panel functions singularly as a bridge that connects "The combat of Valin and Sugriva" (Figure 19) and the "Kiratarjuniya" (Figure 21).<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, the three episodes described above were intended to be viewed sequentially in a clockwise direction: 1) "Kiratarjuniya," 2) "Viradha Abducting Sita," and 3) "The Combat of

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<sup>19</sup> It is possible that one of these two identical figures portrayed in the act of shooting at the two monkeys might be Lakshmana, Rama's brother. However, to the best of my knowledge it was Rama who shot Valin and not Lakshmana.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Filliozat (1981: 199-200) has questioned the odd placement of this episode and has dismissed it as ornamental.



Figure 21: Overview of the west lintel of the central shrine showing "Viradha Abducting Sita" from the *Ramayana* (Photo: author)



Figure 22: Details "Viradha Abducting Sita" (Photo: author)

Valin and Sugriva" (see ground plan in Figure 2). The placement of the "Kiratarjuniya" episode before the two *Ramayana* scenes might appear erratic, but it is only appropriate if one considers that Banteay Srei was dedicated to Shiva. Moreover, this lintel is located on the south side of the temple which means that, spatially, it belongs to the Shaivite half of the edifice; therefore, a scene related to Shiva (i.e., the "Kiratarjuniya") is most apropos here.

### Of Patronage and *Pashupata*: The Poetics of Duality

Although Vaishnavite and Shaivite icons, as well as narrative reliefs, number equally at Banteay Srei, the patron's apparent favoring of Shaivism and its rituals is evident in both inscriptions and images. We know that *Yajnavaraha* and his brother erected the *Tribhuvanamahesvara Linga* at the central shrine. Another piece of suggestive evidence is *Yajnavaraha's* interest in establishing his erudite genealogy, which is very characteristic of Shaivism. Inscriptions tell us that Yajnavaraha was not only a learned brahmin; he was also of royal descent. He was the grandson of King Harshavarman I, whose reign lasted from ca. 900-921 CE, and he was the wise *shivacharya* to the young Jayavarman V (968-1001 CE) (Jacques and Freeman 1997: 104). We know that he performed the *Shiva Diksha* (initiation ritual) with Jayavarman V and taught him all worldly wisdom

(Bhattacharya 1961: 73). In addition, a short inscription informs us that the patron had images made in honor of his two gurus at Banteay Srei:

Yajnavaraha, who knows well the temple complex, has faithfully erected a Statue of Vagisvari and two images of his two *vidyaguru*, “Teachers of Wisdom” (Finot et al. 1926: 185).

The precise form of Shaivism practiced at Banteay Srei is uncertain, but the inscription points to the patron’s strong interest in tracing his chain of gurus. This genealogy, ultimately harkening back to Lord Shiva (the source of all knowledge), is very characteristic of the *Pashupata* school of Shaivism. Moreover, we know that Visnukumara, the patron’s younger brother, made numerous copies of the *Kasikavrtti*, a seventh-century commentary composed by the Sanskrit grammarian, Panini (Bhattacharya 1961: 48). Panini was believed to have gained his knowledge of Sanskrit grammar from Lord Shiva (Bhattacharya 1997: 40.) Moreover, the Vagishvari mentioned in the inscription is the goddess of speech (a tantric form of Sarasvati), another sign of Yajnavaraha’s erudition (Pou 1986: 321-339).

Another characteristic of the *Pashupatas* is their favoring of the *Yogi* (ascetic) form of Shiva (Bhattacharya 1957: 479-489).<sup>21</sup> We know there is an image of Shiva as a *Yogi* on the west pediment of the south library of Banteay Srei. As I pointed out earlier, there is an opposite pairing between the ascetic representation of Shiva and the amorous manifestation of Shiva on Mount Kailasha that is rendered on the east pediment of the same library. Again, the moral of the story is the triumph of asceticism over eroticism, which coincides with one of the *Pashupatas*’ religious goals (Flood 1996: 55-158).<sup>22</sup> In brief, the intellectual ambiance and rituals practiced at Banteay Srei were closely associated with Shaivism.<sup>23</sup>

It is possible that sectarian and visual formal symmetry and the politics of patronage dictated the specific choice and placement of the “Kiratarjuniya” on the south lintel of the central shrine. I attribute the specific placement of the “kiratarjuniya” at the central shrine to the following reasons. First, it provides an equal balance between the two sects, Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Second, the boar below Arjuna and Shiva is a pun on the patron’s name, *Yajnavaraha* (Sacrificial Boar) (Giteau 1956: 234). We see here a parallel between the role of Muka in the “Kiratarjuniya,”

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<sup>21</sup> See also Hara 1992 and 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, no image of Lakulisha (the founder of the *Pashupata* school of Shaivism) has been found in Cambodia.

<sup>23</sup> For sound speculation on the Hindu and Buddhist religions in ancient Cambodia see Bhattacharya 1997.

who is literally the “sacrificial boar,” and the sound of the patron’s name. There is an intentional play on the relationship between the sound and meaning of form.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, according to Jean Filliozat, one of the uses of sacred texts, such as the ones narrated at Banteay Srei, was for recitation:

In Cambodia the illustrations in stone of Ramayana episodes are numerous. They alternate in many Khmer monuments with illustrations of Bharata [*Mahabharata*] and Purana stories... according to the inscriptions, [they] were prescribed for recitation in temples... (Chabra 1965: 81)

In brief, this play on the correlation between word and image and the recognition of their limitless ways of generating multiple meanings is one of many Sanskrit literary tropes –an aesthetic notion that is grounded in the Sanskrit tradition.<sup>25</sup>

It is possible that the “Kiratarjuniya” was specifically chosen by the patron to play two simultaneously flexible roles, one being a story in its own right and, at the same time, serving as a substitute for the “Golden Deer” episode from the *Ramayana*. Thus, if one moves in a clockwise direction around the middle sanctuary, the three scenes are viewed in the following order: 1) “Kiratarjuniya” (standing in for the “Golden Deer”); 2) “Viradha Abducting Sita”; and 3) “The Combat of Valin and Sugriva.” Moreover, the “Kiratarjuniya” scene serves as a visual marker on which the patron’s name (Yajnavaraha) is subtly registered on his own temple, next to the central shrine. Hence, the *Mahabharata* episode was chosen by the patron to serve both political and personal ends. Personally, it signifies Yajnavaraha’s intimate affinity with the gods (probably he had a deeper affinity with Shiva than Vishnu) and politically, the visible coupling of word (sound) and image amplifies the patron’s reputation and social status.

One important issue remains to be addressed in regards to the missing episode of “Ravana abducting Sita.” Viewers familiar with any version of the *Ramayana* would be inclined to

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<sup>24</sup> The episode of *Tapahktista Parvati* (song V) from Kalidasha’s poem, *Kumarasambhavan*, narrated on a pediment from the 13<sup>th</sup>-century temple of Preah Pithu, reinforces my argument about the ancient Khmer patrons’ and artists’ conscious representation of word, sound, and image. Situated at the top of this pediment is Parvati, who is shown fasting so that she could be the worthy bride of Shiva. To her left is an ascetic (Shiva in disguise) who makes much noise (criticism) about Shiva’s erotic character, while Parvati is depicted as plugging her ears with her fingers to block out the noise. Admittedly, this pediment is of later date, but it reinforces my argument about ancient Khmer’s profound understanding of the intersection between words, sound, and image. A photograph of the image discussed above is reproduced in Jessup and Zéphir 1997: 330-331.

<sup>25</sup> For an in-depth discussion and debate on sound and sense in Indian texts and linguistic see Sullivan 1986: 1-33.

ask why “Viradha Abducting Sita” here precedes “The Combat of Valin and Sugriva” when “Ravana Abducting Sita” should come first.

The answers to this question have to do with the role that Ravana plays in Shaivism. Ravana, the ten-headed demon who was responsible for abducting Sita in the epic, is treated rather differently in Shaivite literature. For example, Ravana is described as a major Shiva *Bhakta* (devotee) in the *Shiva Purana*. According to the *Shiva Purana*, the motivation behind Ravana’s shaking Mount Kailasha is twofold: first, he shook Mount Kailasha because he wanted to ask Lord Shiva for his *Atman Linga* (the Self *Linga*) to bring back to his beloved mother, who was also a devotee of the Lord; and second, the naïve and devoted demon so wanted to be eternally favored by Shiva that the sage Narada easily tricked him. Narada told Ravana that it would please Shiva enormously if he shook the Lord’s abode (Shastri 1969: 1366-1372).

I have already discussed the formal aspects of the scene of “Ravana Shaking Mount Kailasha” as rendered on the east pediment of the south library. It is perhaps worthwhile now to elaborate on the significance of characters included in this episode. To Ravana’s right is a monkey, shown seated on the second tier from the bottom, along with one of Shiva’s sons, Ganesha (Figure 11). This monkey is no other than Nandikeshvara, one of the manifestations of Shiva’s vehicle, Nandi, who commonly appears in the form of a bull. However, Nandikeshvara is described in the *Uttara-Kanda* of the *Ramayana* as a dwarf with a human body and a monkey face who guards Mount Kailasha (Rao 1971: 458-549).<sup>26</sup> In the relief, this monkey is rendered with his left hand up, gesturing to warn Shiva of Ravana’s violent act. Situated on the third tier from the bottom is a group of chatty ascetics; one of them must be Narada, the sage who played the trick on the lovable but violent demon.

Admittedly, the episode of “Ravana shaking Mount Kailasha” appears in the *Uttara Kanda* (Book VII) of the *Ramayana*, but it is a compilation added later to Valmiki’s original plot (Winternits 1964: 493). Thus, contrary to Louis Finot’s interpretation, the version that appears at Banteay Srei has very little to do with the *Ramayana* (see Finot et al., 1926: 65). On the contrary, it is more closely associated with the *Shiva Purana*. Furthermore, any textual ambiguities (written or oral) found in the Banteay Srei version of the *Ravananugrahamurti* can be dismissed because both versions of the text portray Ravana as a Shiva *Bhakta* and not as the antagonist responsible for Sita’s abduction.

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<sup>26</sup> The *Ravananugrahamurti* was a subject favored by artists in the tenth century, and there are two examples found at Tonle Bati and at a temple located in the province of Battambang. See Giteau 1981.

It is probable that this Shaivite recognition of Ravana as a Shiva *Bhakta* explains the rather conspicuous absence of the “Ravana Abducting Sita” episode on the temple reliefs at Angkor proper. The only other example of “Ravana Abducting Sita” in ancient Khmer art that comes to my mind is found at Phnom Rung, a temple located in modern northeast Thailand.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to conclude that Ravana’s role as a Shiva devotee in part explains the pious patron’s reluctance to have Ravana represented as the antagonist he is in the *Ramayana*. Therefore, at Banteay Srei “Viradha Abducting Sita” replaces “Ravana Abducting Sita.”

As I mentioned earlier, there are two representations of the Valin and Sugriva episode at Banteay Srei. The fuller rendition of “The Death of Valin” remains to be addressed. “The Death of Valin” is paired with “The Combat of Bhima and Duryodhana,” an episode from the *Mahabharata*. Both of these scenes are depicted on pediments on the west gateway. However, unlike the previous pair of episodes, these two scenes are paired rather differently regarding two aspects. Thematically, they are united under the themes of kingship and legitimacy as well as illusion. Also, these two Vaishnavite scenes depict the two heroes, Rama and Krishna, as avatars of Vishnu. Formally, the artists seem more interested in narrating the stories clearly to the viewer than in presenting us with a highly ornate visual couplet, as found in the other pairing of lintels.

For example, “The Death of Valin” pediment, which faces east, is viewed from right to left in a continuous narrative mode (Figure 16). It begins with Rama shooting at the two monkeys who are engaged in fierce combat, and concludes with the death of Valin, who is shown reclining on the ground. Lakshmana is depicted kneeling and holding a bundle of arrows while his right hand gestures towards the two identical monkeys in an attempt to help Rama identify Valin. It is possible that Lakshmana’s indexing also signifies the major theme embedded in this episode: illusion (*maya*). As mentioned earlier, Kama’s bow and arrow can be seen as a metaphor for his erotic gaze; the same symbolism applies here to Rama’s weapon, which stands for the idea of vision and illusion. Thus, it is no coincidence that Rama’s bow is rendered meticulously and is heavily invested with subtle details that entice the viewer to look closely. A case in point is the remarkably carved thin bowstring; it is so delicate and refined that it is barely visible to the naked eye.

Moreover, the absence of an arrow in Rama’s hands foreshadows the death of Valin. In other words, Rama, in a myopic moment, has committed the act of killing a defenseless monkey (see Goldman 1994: 37-45). Consequently, one sees Valin reclining helplessly while he attempts to pull the arrow out of his wounded chest. This melodramatic wound with a view also points to

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<sup>27</sup> Regrettably, due to its overwhelming complexities and poor restoration, I have chosen not to provide an in-depth discussion of the narrative significance of the “Ravana Abducting Sita” episode at Phnom Rung. A photograph capturing the episode of “Ravana Abducting Sita” at Phnom Rung can be found in Moore 1992: 297.

how differently stories are dramatized on pediments as opposed to those rendered on the lintels, in which the structure of ornament dictates the narrative modes (Figure 17). For instance, the dramatic placement of figures within the stage-like setting in “The Death of Valin” and the unfolding of events in a continuous narrative enhances the emotional intensity of the drama. As Bernard Philippe Groslier points out:

One really might have said ‘play’, for one seems to be looking at the scene in a theatre. Moreover, it is not impossible that the artists were inspired by the mimed dramas which at that time, must have revived for the Khmer memories of the great religious epics, dramas which were also the origin of modern dance and shadow theatre (Groslier 1962: 117).<sup>28</sup>

It is in part true that contemporary Cambodian classical dance and shadow plays imitate ancient reliefs (Brunet 1974), but the narrative in these dramas are rather linear and different from the pairing patterns that appear on ancient reliefs. A case in point is the “Death of Valin” which is paired with “The Combat of Bhima and Duryodhana,” which is also based on the theme of kingship and legitimacy.

“The combat of Bhima and Duryodhana,” found on the pediment of the west gateway, faces West. The relief depicts an episode from the *Shalya Parva* of the *Mahabharata*. We see two warriors, Bhima and Duryodhana. Bhima leaps up in the air on the right in an attempt to strike Duryodhana with his mace (Figure 23). Duryodhana is one of the one hundred Kaurava brothers who usurped the Pandavas’ throne (here represented by Bhima) (Narasimhan 1965: 167-178). From the viewer’s right are the five Pandava brothers: Yudhishthira, the model of a just king par excellence; Arjuna, the warrior who is shown holding a lotus flower in his right hand; the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva; and Bhima who leaps up in the air with his mace. To the viewer’s far left is Krishna, shown with four arms, attempting to prevent his older brother Balarama from attacking Bhima with his plow. Because of his strong sense of protocol, Balarama is compelled to attack Bhima (one of his allies) for not obeying the honorable rules in combat (Jessup and Zéphir 1997: 224-226).<sup>29</sup> Krishna, represented with four arms, corresponds to the iconic images of the four-armed Vishnu housed in the north shrine. This one-to-one correspondence suggests a close association between iconic images of deity and their respective avatars or incarnations within the narrative.

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<sup>28</sup> For more information on the transmission of Hindu epics from India to Southeast Asia see Sears 1984.

<sup>29</sup> See also Coedès 1955.





Figure 23: The "Combat of Bhima and Duryodhana," National Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Photo: author)

Subsequently, a situational parallel can be drawn between these two episodes. The motivation behind Valin and Sugriva's hostile confrontation and the combat of the Pandava and the Kaurava brothers are essentially the same: the right to claim the throne. Thus, these two episodes are paired under the theme of kingship and legitimacy. It is possible that the subtext of this politically charged topos alludes to the political turmoil associated with Jayavarman V's reign. An inscription mentions that in 968 CE the wise guru Yajnavaraha saved a ten-year old boy (i.e., the future Jayavarman V) from a conspiracy that killed his father, Rajendravarman II (Jacques 1988: 42).

Another parallel between these two episodes is evident in their use of formal language to articulate the identical twinning embedded in the content of both stories. For example, the identical figures of Valin and Sugriva directly mirror one another. This pattern of formal mirroring is even more apt when applied to the depiction of Bhima and Duryodhana because both are shown holding a mace. In fact, there is no physiognomic distinction between the two figures. Moreover, the presence of the identical Pandava twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, further articulates the correlation between visual mirroring and illusion that is inherent in the content of both episodes.

Another episode from the *Mahabharata* that visualizes and reinforces further the above theme of formal mirroring and illusion is "Tilottoma and the Two Demons," which is depicted on a pediment that was probably situated at the east gateway. This pediment is now kept at the Musée

Guimet, Paris (Figure 24). The uncertainty of its original placement has compelled me to exclude it from my argument on formal pairing. I would, however, like to integrate it into my argument on the recurring theme of illusion (*maya*).



*Figure 24: "Tilottoma and the Two Demons" Musée national des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet (Photo: author)*

The episode tells the story of two invincible demon brothers, Sunda and Upasunda, who have taken over the universe and are making trouble for the gods (Van Buiten 1971: 392-398). What is so unusual about these two demons is that no gods could kill them because they received a boon from Brahma, the god of creation, which dictated that each must always remain by the other. Brahma, however, created a beautiful nymph named Tilottoma to seduce them so that they would cancel each other out.

In the center of the pediment, we see the gorgeous figure of Tilottoma, with the demon brothers on either side of her. The relief captures the climatic moment in the story when the two brothers fight over ownership of Tilottoma. The moral of the tale is that desire is a form of illusion, and form in and of itself is by nature illusory. Thus, as in all forms of desire, the appearance of the nymph is simply an illusion.

## Why Pairing? Visual Discourse on Duality and Nonduality

It is apparent that the principle of picture pairing dictates the outcome of narrative modes at Banteay Srei. For instance, the Valin and Sugriva episode from the *Ramayana* is used twice, but it is paired very differently each time with two separate episodes from the *Mahabharata*. Moreover, the visual mode in which the artists chose to narrate an episode caters entirely to the aesthetic context and content of each specific pairing. More significantly, stories are paired at Banteay Srei because pairing is a duality suitable for the representation of a syncretic parallel between Shaivism and Vaishnavism. In fact, the formal union of these two sects harks back to iconic images of *Harihara* from the so-called “Pre-Angkorian” period (Figure 25). An example of this theological fusion of Shiva and Vishnu into one three-dimensional sculpture is a seventh-century “Harihara” from Phnom Da, Angkor Borei. On the viewer’s left is *Hara* (Shiva), and on the right is *Hari* (Vishnu). Shiva is shown with many of his iconographic attributes: his hair piled up with a half moon, a trident, and a tiger skin on his leg because one of his epithets is “Lord of the Beasts” (*Pashupati*) (Jessup and Zéphir, 1997: 164). Clearly, there is a close relationship between iconic images and narrative reliefs.<sup>30</sup> The pairing pattern in which stories are arranged



Figure 25: *Harihara Phnom Da, Angkor Borei, 7<sup>th</sup> century, Musée national des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet (Photo: author)*

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<sup>30</sup> Robert L. Brown has proposed a rather interesting argument in his article “Narrative as Icon: Jataka Stories in Ancient Indian and Southeast Asian Architecture.” Brown argues in this article that visual narrative, particularly stories from the previous lives of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, as found on Buddhist monuments in South and Southeast Asia are not meant to be read or to be viewed but were probably intended as part of the iconic images. The argument I have presented in this essay is very different from Brown’s perspective in that: 1) What I have discussed in the above is Hindu art and not Buddhist; 2) I see a symbiotic relationship between iconic and narrative images in Cambodian art. See Brown 1997: 64-109, along with Brown 2004: 351-368. Joanna Williams has written a critique of Brown’s perspective on the narrative art of South and Southeast Asia. See Williams 1997-1998: 93-98.

at Banteay Srei is similar to the two separate composites that made up the Harihara. Thus fragmentation and totality form a duality that can only make sense when there also exists a nonduality. Therefore, the existence of these two notions is symbiotic. Interestingly, this philosophical notion is found in an inscription at Banteay Srei dated to 969 CE, which is entirely devoted to the debate over the monism of the Vedanta versus the dualism of the logical school of Nyaya.<sup>31</sup> The inscription ends with a favoring of monism and the unity of the self over duality: “[Shiva] is the unique and supreme origin of all visible and invisible knowledge, he is the manifestation in all of us, individuals, comparable to the reflection of the moon in the water” (Bhattacharya 1961: 60-63). Clearly, the author of the 969 CE inscription insisted that there is no duality between the cause and effect.<sup>32</sup> Thus comparable to the reflection of the moon in the water; there is no distinction between phenomenal and metaphysical reality. Therefore, the universe is a projection (manifestation?) of Shiva himself and vice versa (Bhattacharya 1961: 61-62). Last, this non-linear approach (i.e., pairing of stories) to visual narrative on Khmer temples might also be attributed to the artists, patrons, and cultural desire to tell stories about the different emotions rather than privileging the importance of time and visual narrative sequence. One of the most effective ways of narrating moods or sentiments is through a series of binary oppositions and complementary narratives.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, this monistic perspective cannot be grasped without a profound understanding of duality. It is by looking closely at the surface and depth of the stories narrated on the bas-reliefs that we gain insight into these two symbiotic philosophical ideas and concepts. Hence one cannot understand the act of destruction without knowing the state of preservation. Thus it is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that tenth-century Cambodian religious worldview and culture was based on a series of correlative dualities: ascetic/erotic, water/fire, preservation/destruction, word/image, illusion/reality, and so on. It is possible that this dualistic perspective influenced the schematic execution of pictorial narrative organization at Banteay Srei, a system that is based on the principle of picture pairing.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> We know that Vedanta philosophy as advocated by Shankara is mentioned in the long inscription from Pre Rup dated 961CE. See Bhattacharya 1971.

<sup>32</sup> For an introduction to the different schools of Indian thought and philosophy, particularly the monistic school of the Vedanta and the dualistic school of Nyaya, see King 1999: 42-73.

<sup>33</sup> Although there is no evidence that the *Natyasastra*, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Sanskrit dance treatise, is cited in ancient Khmer epigraphy, the juxtaposition of moods in the form and content of stories narrated at Angkor Wat and Banteay Srei points to similar depictions of the nine sentiments (*Rasa*) found in the *Natyasashastra*. See Goswamy 1986: 1-10 and Rangacharya 1966: 1-77. See also Sears 1994: 90-114 and Levin 2000.

<sup>34</sup> See also Nass 1970.

## **The Politics of Time: An Evolving Visual Narrative Program**

Admittedly, my consideration of the Banteay Srei narrative program in its religious and ideological totality seems to contradict the fact that the construction and production of any visual narrative cycle is a composite of different periods within the history of Cambodian art, culture, and religions. In her writings on temple art of Bali, Hildred Geertz has cautioned us by pointing out:

The apparent permanence of stone carvings gives viewers a false sense of cultural continuity. The physical forms of carvings in almost any Balinese temple are residues of several quite different historical periods, eras in which even the basic theological principles within which a temple may have conceived may have been quite different from those holding today (Geertz 2004: xi).<sup>35</sup>

Likewise, ancient Cambodian stone temples were built in progressive stages, and because materials from old temples were often reused in the construction of new ones, the dating of different parts of a single temple can be extremely complicated. Banteay Srei is no exception (Roveda 2002a). However, I strongly believe that the sculptural program at Banteay Srei and its narrative intention and meanings point to a gradual articulation of complex cultural and political ideologies. Moreover, the production of art and culture in Cambodia is by no means a rolling stone; there seems to always exist a dialogue between past and present.<sup>36</sup>

The highly complex pattern of storytelling at Banteay Srei leads one to question Bernard Philippe Groslier's practical explanation that the lack of long gallery space at this small temple naturally forced artists to depict stories on pediments.<sup>37</sup> Groslier never addressed the complex

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<sup>35</sup> Also see Roveda 2002a.

<sup>36</sup> For a comparable case study that addresses the issue of tradition and continuity in the production of a visual narrative program, consider the *Ramakien* narrative cycle found at the Royal Funerary Boat Hall at Wat Xieng Thong, Luang Prabang, Laos. The production of this narrative cycle began in 1960 and was not completed until 1975. More importantly, according to the designer, Monivong Khattignarat, there is an overall political meaning embedded in this narrative program. See Ly 2002: 59-78.

<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, when the Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann designed the Independence Monument (located in Phnom Penh) in 1957, he modeled the edifice after Banteay Srei, particularly foregrounding Banteay Srei's elaborately carved ornaments. Moreover, Molyvann's design was enriched by other layers of meaning: Molyvann's citation of motifs from Banteay Srei was also intended as homage to his grandfather-in-law, Henri Marchal, a French conservator who had employed the technique of anastylosis to restore Banteay Srei in 1926. In brief, nationalism and colonialism were interwoven into twentieth-century conceptions of Banteay Srei's narratives. See Muan and Ly 2001: 20-23, and Thompson 2003: 36. Also see Groslier 1962: 117.

arrangement of these reliefs and the theoretical underpinning of their visual narrative structure. Indeed, it is important to retain a practical view of how these reliefs were produced and how they functioned in the context of the architectural setting. At the same time, the complex layout of these narrative reliefs is so conceptually grounded in the idea of pictorial pairing, conceptual dualism, and formal symmetry that they beg viewers not to accept too simplistic dismissals of “randomness” and “chaos.”<sup>38</sup>

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*This article is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend, Ingrid Muan (1965-2005) and her unborn daughter Lili Malu Muan.*

*“Good night, sweet prince [ses], And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest”  
Hamlet Act V, Scene 2*

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<sup>38</sup> The complex type of narrative structure found in the reliefs at Banteay Srei continues to evolve in temples in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos.

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