CATUMUKH[1]

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The intersection of two roads carries particular significance in Khmer belief. Many rituals are related to this notion. Following are a few commonplace examples:

- The most common case is the abandonment of a spirit offering called a *bae* at a road intersection.
- In rural funeral ceremony, as the deceased is transported for cremation, a pot of water is oftentimes dropped at a road junction, making the water inside spread away.
- People whose children have died at an early age, called *arḷs kūn*, often hold a particular ceremony at the birth of their next child. The ceremony "exiles" the infant at a road junction. The child is "discovered" at the junction by a monk or a lay person who then takes the child to raise him or her before, on the pretense of not being able to afford the child's care, returning the child to its biological mother. The mother is requested to raise the child. This type of ceremony is performed for infants only, when risk of illness is greatest.

These three examples show that the principle underpinning these rituals is that of "being lost" or of being "made to be lost." In the first example above, the malicious spirit is attracted by the offerings in the *bae* and follows it. As the *bae* is placed at a crossroad, after enjoying the offerings, the spirit becomes lost. In the second example, the broken pot with spreading water signifies that the deceased is now lost, unable to find his or her way home and so to cause problems for the living. In the last example, placing the child at an intersection causes the child's previous mother,

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mtāy ṭoem - the mother of the child in his or her previous life - to get lost, preventing her from following and reclaiming the child from his or her current home.

In addition to the notion of getting lost, another important meaning is attributed to the intersection. The most precise example is the location of Phnom Penh city. The city's location at the intersection of two major rivers underlies the oral origin legend of this city, also recorded in the Royal Chronicles. That legend recounts that a statue was seen floating from the north down the Tonle Thom (the Mekong river). When reaching the junction with the Tonle Sap river, the statue became blocked. The statue has four faces (some sources says that it was a Buddha statue with four faces, but generally there is no clear indication of which deity it was). A good Buddhist lady named Penh had the statue brought to shore, and gathered people to build a hill in front of that find site – the hill currently known as Wat Phnom. People increasingly came to live in the surrounding area, until it became the city called *catumukh* or "Four Faces."

Allow me a slight detour at this point. During the Protectorate, the French called the junction of the two rivers 'Four arms' (les Quatre Bras). This name refers to the four water ways which meet and separate at this junction; at that time the French did not know of or were not interested in the statue with four faces. Therefore, two different explanations are now known: one is grounded in the "Four Arms" which refers to the four water ways, the other in the "Four Faces" which refers to the statue. At present, these two stories are often confused, though there is a general understanding amongst Khmer speakers that it is no coincidence that the statue with four faces floated and got stuck at this point, since in Cambodian belief, intersections always carry special meaning.

The full name of Phnom Penh capital city is very long and, from one source to another, from one period to another, is written in slightly different ways. Here is one of them: *catumukh maṅgal sakal kambujādhipatī sirīdhar pavar indapattapurī raṭṭharājasīmā mahānagar.*

It is often mistakenly understood that the idea of *catumukh* originates with the city of Phnom Penh, which is to say in the fifteenth century. I will demonstrate that it existed long before this, with clear evidence from the eleventh century. However, before addressing this, a first comment on the number four. The number 4 (*puon* in Khmer, or *catu* in Pali used in Khmer) seems to have itself special meaning: there is an alternative way to name this number: *muoy ṭampa* (= one *ṭampa*). Forty, which is four multiplied by ten is called *muoy phlūn* (= one *phlūn*). Four hundred is called *muoy slịk* (one *slịk*). Four thousand is known as *muoy khnāñ* (one *khnāñ*) (the last word is an ancient word which is now obsolete). Number 4 is also used for counting rank in the ancient period. Inscriptions show that rank was ordered from high to low as *ek* (first), *do* (second), *triṇī* (third), *catvārī* (fourth), as in the ranking of *sabhāpati* or *taṃrvac.* For groups without exact ranking or levels, we still see

teams of four in the epigraphy, such as *caturyācāry* (four ritual officiants). The number four retains its significance in ritual. This is most evident in funerary ceremony which always includes four *bhluk* (funerary ritual actors) conducting the ritual under the supervision of a *yogī* (a ritual officiant (*ācāry*) selected for his achievements in the practice of meditation of the "inner dharma" (*dharm knuṅ*). This not to mention the four high ranking officers of the Middle Period, called *catustambh*, or the theoretical four sections of the military, *caturaṅgasenā.*

Allow me to comment excerpts from two inscriptions:

– The Saṃroṅ inscription (K. 1198):

> 936 śak pañcāmi ket mārggaśir vudhavār nu dhūli vraḥ pād kaṃmrateṅ kaṃtvan añ śrī sūryavarmmadev stāc vraḥ caturmmukh vraḥ śilatatāk vraḥ śrī jayendranagari (…).

Translation:
> "In the year 963 śak , Wednesday, the fifth day of the waxing moon in the month of Migasir , King Śrī Sūryavarm resided at Vraḥ Catumukh Vraḥ Śilataṭāk Vraḥ Śrī Jayendranagīrī (…)'.

Vraḥ Śrī Jayendranagarī here (Figure 1) might be considered as the name of the capital (*nagarī*), but in other passages of the same inscription, we read *vraḥ śrī jayendranagiri* (Figure 2) which leads us to think that the Sanskrit word *giri*, with reference to its usual meaning of "mountain," could designate a building in the Royal Palace insofar as the ancient word *vnaṃ* (Khmer for "mountain") can also refer to a building which has characteristics like those of a temple, i.e. a mountain. A pertinent example comes from the inscription of Prasat Kok Po (K. 255). On the damaged stone we can read *mandir śrī jayendranagiri* (Figure 3) which we can complete as *mandir vraḥ śrījayendranagiri* (in modern Khmer: *mandīr braḥ Srījayendranagiri*). Here it is clear that the word *śrījayendanagiri* refers to a building (*mandīr*) in the Royal Palace, not to the city. Note that in the ancient period, the word
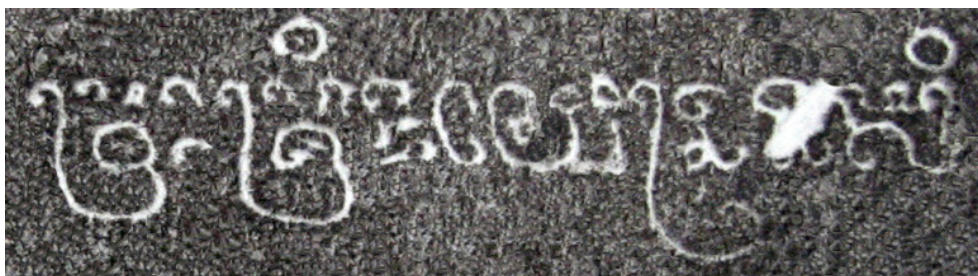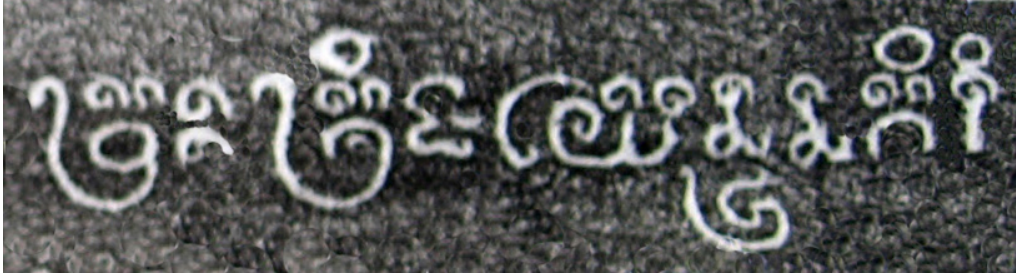

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

mandīr was used only for buildings in the Royal Palace.

- The Prasat Sraṅae inscription (K. 933) is even clearer on this point:

> 934 śak pañcāmī ket phālguṇ śukravār kṛtikānakṣatr nu dhūli vraḥ pād kaṃmrateṅ kaṃtvan añ śrī sūryavarmmadev stāc vraḥ caturdvār vraḥ yaśodharapurī (…).

Translation:

> "In the year 934, Friday the fifth day of the waxing moon in the month of Phalgun in the lunar mansion of *kritikā,* King Śrī Sūryavarm resided at Vraḥ Caturdvāra of Vraḥ Yaśodharapurī (…)'.

The key information here is that both inscriptions were erected in the same reign of the King Suryavarman I, only two years apart; in 1014 and 1012 CE. The city is *Yaśodhar,* the ancient name of the capital of Angkor. In the Sraṅae inscription, the word *caturdvār* was probably the name of the Royal Palace located in the city of *Yaśodhar.* In the Saṃroṅ inscription there is one word that suggests we are in the Royal Palace: *vraḥ śilatatāk* (Figure 4). Scholars generally believe this to designate a pond now known as *sraḥ srī* located near the northeast corner of the former Royal Palace of Angkor Thom. We do not know exactly what is designated by the term *vraḥ śrījayendanagirī,* but the mention of *sraḥ srī* leads us to believe that *catumukh* designates a building in the Royal Palace. (In Figure 5 we see that the scribe missed out the vowel "u" under the double "m" while in Figure 6 the same vowel is missing under the "t ")
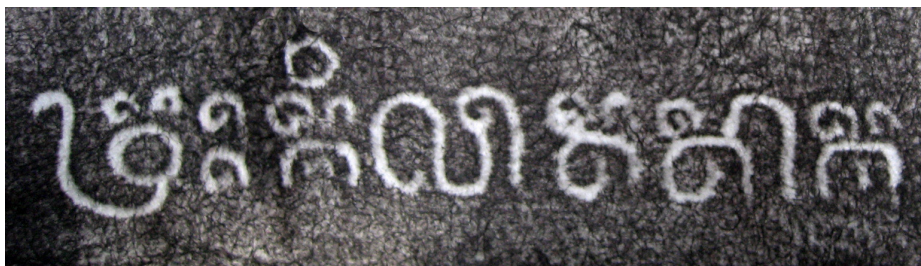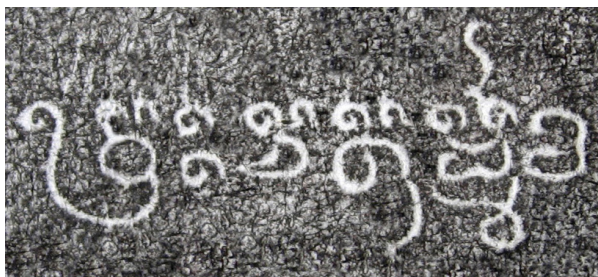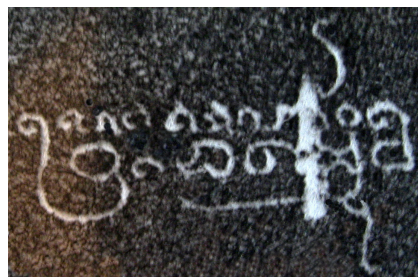
Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

This demonstrates that the word *catumukh*, with its underpinning notions, did not emerge because of Phnom Penh city. Rather, it has existed since at least the eleventh century. Now let us turn to the present Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. The most important building among all the buildings in the Palace is the Throne Hall (Figure 7). Let me simply note, after others, the four faces on the top of its tower (Figure 8). If we take a step back in time to bas-reliefs of the sixteenth century at Wat Nokor, we see the Buddha-to-be, before he has left the palace to cut his royal topknot, residing in a *mandīr* in the Royal Palace, with, at its top, four faces (Figure 9).

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9