

STUDIES IN INDO-KHMER PHILOLOGY I:
THE ASSOCIATION OF LITERARY IDEAS IN THE SANSKRIT STANZAS OF
THE SDOK KAK THOM INSCRIPTION, AND THE LOCATION OF STANZA
CXXIX IN THIS INSCRIPTION¹

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Of all the inscriptions of Cambodia known to date, the longest is incontestably the bilingual stele of Sdok Kak Thom (K. 235). Its length is such that the scribe, responsible for engraving both the Sanskrit and the Khmer text, was unable to sustain his focus throughout: indeed he omitted two stanzas which, to make up for his oversight, he later decided to engrave on the top of Face IV of the stele, in the middle of the Khmer section. A brutal decision no doubt, but an effective one: it immediately signals that the two stanzas in question do not appear in their proper place and that readers are to search for their rightful home. I would like to undertake this research by following link by link a chain, which is invisible, but, I believe, present, of association between literary ideas in the Sanskrit stanzas of the Sdok Kak Thom inscription.

The task I am undertaking is surely trivial for a language other than Sanskrit, for any other literary language in which liaison terms are numerous and in constant use, in which phrases follow on from each other in a visible and continuous fashion, making for easy transitions from one proposition to the next, from one idea to the next. Yet we know that no truly positive, really manifest stylistic link exists in literary Sanskrit: on the contrary, despite long, at times very long compounds, everything seems chopped, broken up, cut into impressions isolated from each other. And these cuts appear that much more stark in that we are dealing with a verse form whose

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essential characteristic, according to Sylvain Lévi, is as follows:

Hindu verse is always based on the stanza, a rigorously closed rhythmic ensemble, an organised system of well balanced parts, which sets an end-point to both expression and thought. Continuity is had – just as with Indian metaphysics – through a succession of autonomous instants.

Given such procedures in the art of writing, in the face of such modes of presenting ideas, those who are accustomed to languages in which one phrase is well linked to the next will very easily ascertain the difficulties to be overcome in establishing the exact home of these two vagabond stanzas. For this reason, the problem has been left unresolved since the end of the last century.

The first interpreter of the stele of Sdok Kak Thom, Auguste Barth, simply flagged it. Louis Finot frankly and faithfully avowed his perplexity: “It is difficult to see to what these two *śloka* inserted into the middle of the Khmer text are linked.” (Cf. *Notes d'épigraphie indochinoise*, offprint, p. 295.) Then come Mr. George Cœdès and Mr. Pierre Dupont who, in their joint study of the inscription of Sdok Kak Thom (cf. *BEFEO*, XLIII, p. 111, n.2) find that in their “opinion, they were meant to be engraved at the end of the Khmer text in the guise of a closing formula. But the scribe miscalculated his surface area and, in order to fit the full text on the stele, was obliged to progressively reduce the caliber of his letters and the spacing between lines. Despite this, he ran out of space for these two *śloka* at the bottom of face D. He then engraved them at the top, after having scratched out the number 4 which figured at the top of this face: the trace of this scratching out is very clear.”

Though I do not wish to question the care given by the two eminent epigraphists in their examination of the Sdok Kak Thom inscription rubbing, I have to say there is no trace of “scratching out.” Nonetheless, even if the supposed scratching out was real, it would have only prepared in material terms that place on the stone which we all know, the place where our two stanzas happen to appear, without having, in any case, the virtue of indicating, let alone explaining, where these stanzas should have been.

As for the claim that the two stanzas comprise the inscription’s “closing formula,” and that, for this reason, they should both be placed, one after the next, at the end of the Khmer section – this claim encounters serious difficulties.

Indeed, what is it that we call the “closing formula” in Cambodian epigraphy? Typically, it is composed of two Sanskrit stanzas, one of which promises paradise to those who ensure the ongoing prosperity of the religious works, the other of which promises hell to those who harm those works: it is the classic coupling of Paradise-Hell, Recompense-Punishment, Blessing-Curse, the famous marriage – if I may put it this way – between *vara* and *śāpa*. The two words figure precisely twice in the Sdok Kak Thom inscription, in the opportune and expressive copulative compound *varaśāpa* (cf. Face C, line 58 and line 78). We do indeed have two stanzas, the exact number required for the foreseen “marriage.” We also have the groom *śāpa* who brandishes, as

he should, the threat of hell's worst punishments. But instead of the expected lovely bride *vara*, promising paradise, there arrives only a *śloka* of praise, a *praśasti* couplet. Here are the two stanzas in question:

CXXIX rājahotā yatīndro vā devasaṃrakṣane 'rhati
 śīlaśrutiguṇair yuktaḥ kulī vā dharmmatatparaḥ
 CXXX bhūrairajatadāsādīn nāśayantaś śivasya ye
 vāgvuddhikarmmabhir yānti te lokadvayayātanām

“Chaplain of the king or prince of ascetics or householder endowed with morality, knowledge, talents and committed to a duty, he is worthy of keeping watch over the sanctuaries.

Those who destroy the goods of Śiva: land, gold, silver, serfs, etc., in word, thought or action, may those people be subjected to punishment in the two worlds.”

In reading we hear – as it were – the two stanzas crying out to be mated. The reasons are serious:

The verb *arhati* which we translated as “he is worthy of” does not have any real personal attachment. Of course it has a person in grammatical terms, clearly indicated in the *-ti* ending. Of course, theoretically, in strict grammatical terms, this grammatical person alone suffices for the Sanskrit verb to function, which is to say to conjugate. But practically, in terms of the ordinary apprehension of meaning, something more is needed: we need a person in the flesh, I mean a human person in addition to the grammatical person. But this human person is unknown. Immediately after the Khmer text, we cannot know, we do not know in fact, who is “worthy of keeping watch over the sanctuaries.” The question remains the same if one takes *arhati* not as a verb conjugated in the 3rd person singular, but as a participle (which is possible in theory) declined in the locative absolute. Because it is obviously not “those who destroy the goods of Śiva” of Stanza CXXX: this would run counter to both grammar (*arhati* is in the singular and *ye* in the plural) and common sense (“those who destroy the goods of Śiva” are manifestly not “worthy of keeping watch over the sanctuaries” of this same Śiva!).

Stanza CXXIX should therefore be detached from its accidental neighbour CXXX, and placed elsewhere. But where? This is the question we are now able to examine.

This examination begins with the firm conviction that, despite the very pronounced fragmentation of the Sanskrit stanzas, there exists for writers of the Sanskrit language, just as for those of any other language in the world, a logical progression in their ideas. Whether this logic is rendered visibly by linking words or by associated phrases, nested together as in the Ciceronian periodic sentence, whether it is rendered invisibly by rhetorical conventions, as Sylvain Lévi once pointed out in a Nasik inscription (cf. *Mémorial*, p. 299), or whether it is rendered by the association of subtly conveyed literary ideas, as we will see shortly in the Sdok Kak Thom inscription, there is a logical progression, a progression inherent to the human spirit. Indeed, it is with this spirit that

the stele of Sdok Kak Thom appears to wish to play.

In fact, it is this inscription which, from the beginning of Cambodian Studies, inspired the claim that “the ancient Khmers did not know how to punctuate their texts” (cf. E. Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, II, p. 254). It was also this text which, in Cambodian archaeology, inspired the attribution of “the Bayon and the towers of Lolei to the same period” (cf. G. Cœdès, *Connaissance d’Angkor par l’épigraphie*, in the *Bulletin de la Société des Études indochinoises*, XXVII, no. 2, p. 141). It was the same inscription again which, in Sanskrit philology, inspired the claim that the scribe engraved, one after the next, in single file, two stanzas of which one is a *śāpa* and the other a *praśasti*. And the same again which inspired the following summary of its content (cf. *BEFEO*, LXIII, p. 60):

The Sanskrit section begins with an homage to Śiva and Viṣṇu, praise of King Udayādityavarman II, ... praise of Sadāśiva and mention of his ancestors. From this moment, we pass to King Jayavarman II, who had a guru named Śivakaivalya, to the arrival of the brahman Hiraṇyadāma, ... to the privileges granted Śivakaivalya, ... then comes the enumeration of lands acquired, ... we return to Sadāśiva, such that stanza LXII actually follows on from stanza XXIII, ... then we come to ..., then we come to ..., etc.

In other words, no progression in ideas, no order in the expression of thought, no principles in editing, no rules in composition! In short, to use the very formula of the cited article, “there are no logical subdivisions.”

This affirmation of a lack of logic is inexact. Take for example those stanzas particularly targeted by the critique:

- XXIII tasyāsa devādiyendravarmma-
nāmādadhānaḥ kila yo yaśasvī
gurur garīyān uditodite ’bhūd
dhiyodito ’ninditavañśavaryye
- XXIV yanmāṭrsantānaparamparā prāk
sūryyādisampītakalākālāpā
akṣiṇabhāvā bhuvanodayāya
prādur vvabhūvendum adho vidhātum
- XXV jayavarmmamahībhṛto mahendrā-
vanibhṛnmūrdhakarṭāspadasya śāstā
kavir āryyavarāṅgavanditāṅghriś
śivakaivalya iti pratītir āsīt
- XXVI hiraṇyadāmadvijapuṅgavo ’gryadhīr
ivāvjayoniḥ karuṇārdra āgataḥ
ananyalavdhām khalu siddhim ādarāt
prakāśayām āsa mahībhṛtaṃ prati

- XXIII. He (King Udayādityavarman) had as his teacher, very respectable for his intelligence, the glorious Devajayendravarman, born in a great and irreproachable family.
- XXIV. His female lineage, where the union of talents (or: the *kalā*) was tasted previously (or: in the East) by the descendants of the Sun (or: by the rising Sun), appeared, but without being diminished by it, to produce a Moon here below, for the sake of the happiness of the world.
- XXV. King Jayavarman, who established his residence at the summit of mount Mahendra, had as his teacher a sage whose feet were venerated by the most noble heads: he was called Śivakaivalya.
- XXVI. Hiraṇyadāma, this great supremely intelligent brahman, come like a merciful Brahmā, respectfully demonstrated before the king a powerful magic achieved by no other.

Dated 1915 and republished untouched by Mr. George Cœdès and Mr. Pierre Dupont, this French translation by Louis Finot underlines the Sdok Kak Thom text's subdivisions affirmed to be illogical. Implacably literary, the translation highlights this fragmentation, this cutting up, this autonomy of Sanskrit stanzas, to such a point that it invites us to believe that the poets of the Sanskrit language followed only their poetic whims, that is, that they appeared to pass without transition, with barely a cry, from one idea to the next, from one preposterous image to another fantastical proposition. Words such as *anindita* (stanza XXIII), *indu* (stanza XXIV), *kavi* (stanza XXV), *avjayoni* (stanza XXVI), which signify respectively “irreproachable,” “moon,” “poet,”² “Brahmā,” seem to have no “logical” link between them and appear in an absolutely muddled, entirely unexpected fashion.

But that is only an illusion, a dangerous illusion. These words are like so many signposts which alternatively hide and reveal the continuous chain of our poet's perfectly pertinent association of ideas. The poet, to draw our attention to this chain, brings together in a compound two words which seem to mutually exclude each other: *anindita* and *varyya* in *aninditavaṅśavaryye*.

Without doubt, this compound is a *tatpuruṣa*, and the part of the phrase ... *udito aninditavaṅśavaryye* would be translated as “he was born in the best of irreproachable families.” Which is absurd. An absurdity before which Louis Finot recoiled. But, instead of taking advantage of this distance to see if it might be possible to make of *anindita* something other than an adjective qualifying *vaṅśa*,³ he preferred to retain this pseudo-adjective and inflict soft violence on the grammar of this difficult passage by translating: he was born in a great and irreproachable family. That is, in grammatical terms, Louis Finot transformed the expressive *tatpuruṣa* compound into a

² Translated in st. XXV above as “sage.” (Translator's note)

³ Translated by Finot as “family.”

pale and faulty *dvandva* compound. No doubt a minor mistake, but which resulted in leading the various commentators of the Sdok Kak Thom inscription, beginning with Louis Finot himself, to believe there to be a serious lack in the Sanskrit text with regard to the Khmer text, which was itself, this Khmer text, curiously, regarded with suspicion. In truth, the two Sanskrit and Khmer versions are in agreement in telling us that Jayendravarman came from the city of Anindita(pura).

Nonetheless, Louis Finot's erroneous translation of the proper name Anindita with the qualifying adjective "irreproachable" has its place, its rightful place: this time, on the rhetorical level. Insofar as the family of Jayavarman comes from Aninditapura, city which signifies "irreproachable," it can only be compared to the moon (*indu*) – we pass from stanza XXIII to stanza XXIV – this "nocturnal star (or planet)" which the inhabitants of countries burdened with the heat of the day never reproach (*anindita*) for its soft rays and "full quarters" (*kalākalāpa*). And the moon (*indu*) in turn calls forth *kavi* – we pass from stanza XXIV to stanza XXV – because of *kavīndu*, this poet-moon or this moon of poets or else this moon among the poets, ... as one pleases, this time, grammar matters little or, rather, offers us the choice of its many resources, – Kavīndu, *alias* Vālmīki, whose very tender, particularly sensitive heart, is moved at the death throes of a tiny bird shot by a cruel hunter, cursing the latter with "immortal" *śloka*, "pure sobs" which have the effect of provoking the god Avjayoni's, that is to say Brahmā's descent to earth (*āgatah*). This brings us to stanza XXVI.

Yet the author of the Sdok Kak Thom inscription does not stop there. He follows the chain associating his heretofore known literary ideas, in awarding Śivakaivalya, the ancestor of Jayendravarman, the title *muniśvara*, the very title borne by Vālmīki who became at the end of his life *muniśvara* the "prince of ascetics," remaining immobile for his meditations, to the extent that he resembled a statue. Another Indian, and thus also Cambodian, literary theme of adoration or glorification of Vālmīki, which we find at the end of the Sdok Kak Thom inscription (stanza CXXVII) with the concluding announcement of the erection of the divine statue of Śivakaivalya. In the meantime, the poet himself wishes to participate in this adoration of glorification, by immediately and voluntarily abandoning such meters as *indravajrā*, *aupacchandāsika*, *puṣpitāgrā*, ... to adopt the "immortal" *śloka* à la Vālmīki (stanza XXXIIIff.) A flowing, simple meter, best suited to narratives, especially when these narratives include allusions to be discerned, which allusions comprise on the level of editing or composition invisible transitions to be seen.

Nonetheless, one should not see only the words and the facts that I have just flagged to comprise the whole of the chain associating the poet's ideas. Take the apparently most semantically distant terms from this chain, for example *rahasya* (stanza XXIX) which Louis Finot opportunely translated as "mystery" – there is not only this "mystery" (*rahasya*) which in the end comes to attach itself to this *kavi* to remind us of the *Kavirahasya*, that work that is at once grammatical and lexical, because it comprises a list of word roots, a list presented in the form of a poem that is both epic and historical. And let us not forget that our Sdok Kak Thom inscription is, itself as well, a poem *par excellence*, a *mahākāvya* at once historical and epic, of the great family of Jayendravarman, a family presented by the poet as one of the "roots," one of the pillars, as I believe we might say in French, of the ancient Khmer empire.

Thus, nothing is left to chance, nor to whim, nor even to this overflowing creative imagination admired in highly but exclusively literary works, whose perfect exemplar in Indochina is *Le pèlerin d'Angkor*, a *mahākāvya* being by very definition the work of an artist, of a poet no doubt, but of a poet who is at the same time a scholar (*kavi*).

Having acknowledged the existence of a continuous chain of ideas, it is now easy to locate the place where our vagabond stanza belongs: it suffices, as I said in the opening of this exposé, to follow this chain link by link to perceive the precise place where one of the links was skipped due to the scribe's lack of attention, to manage finally to solder into this place the homeless stanza, provisionally numbered for convenience's sake: CXXIX.

This stanza, as we have said, celebrates an unknown character who was: 1. *rājabotā* (chaplain of the king); 2. *yatindro* (prince of ascetics) and 3. *kulī* (householder). Indeed, in the Sdok Kak Thom text, only Jayendravarman (named in stanza XXIII and who is the same as Sadāśiva in stanza LXII or Devajayendra, stanza LXXV), brings all of these together in his person, according to the stanzas:

- LXIII ... avanibhr̥tpurodhāḥ (chaplain of the king)
 LXXI saddarśśane... na mānsake... (paraphrase for “prince of ascetics”);
 LXXIV ... gārhasthyadharmme... (householder).

Stanza LXXIV constitutes therefore on the stele the *terminus a quo* of our research. As for fixing the other limit, below which we cannot descend, our good poet comes again to the rescue, in ostensibly relegating to the end of the śloka, CXXIX, the mark of praise *dharmmatatparaḥ* “committed to a responsibility.” Which suggests that he is going to let us know exactly what this responsibility is.

In fact, stanzas XC and XCI tell us that it consists in the supreme responsibility that Jayendravarman was determined to render his master Vāgindrakavi (*gurvvartham*). They give us thus the *terminus ad quem* we have been seeking.

But between stanzas LXXIV and XC, there is a latitude which we must obviously reduce or eliminate. The possibility to do so is offered by a quick examination of the meter and the grammar of the stanzas situated between the two limits, now established.

From the metrical point of view, we note that our homeless stanza is a śloka. As such, it can only find its place in the series of *śloka* beginning with:

- LXXVIII yo bhadrapaṭṭane līṅgaṃ pratime dve vidhānataḥ
 saṅsthāpya śarkarāmayaprākāraṃ valabhin dadhe
 LXXIX devatrayārhaṇaṃ sarvvan dyumnan dāsādisaṅyuttam⁴
 dattvā cakre saridbhaṅgan taṭākan tatra bhūtaye

⁴ °yuttam (which would be unmetrical) appears to be a slip (on the part of Au Chhieng) for °yutam (Dominic Goodall communication with the translator).

- LXXVIII. “At Bhadrapatana he erected, according to the rite, a *liṅga* and two statues, and built a terrace with a laterite wall.”
- LXXIX. Having given these three gods all the necessary goods, serfs, etc., he made a dyke and a reservoir for the prosperity of the region.

From a grammatical point of view, the vagabond stanza is characterized, as we have already said, by the absence of a subject “in the flesh” in the conjugated verbe *arhati*. Indeed in stanza LXXIX, the verb likewise in its conjugated form *cake*, also has no real subject pronoun. But for this verb, we know that it depends on the relative pronoun *yo* placed at the head of the preceding stanza LXXVIII. A simple metrical balancing act requires a counterweight to this *cake* to establish the necessary stylistic equilibrium. A bit like an Indochinese porter (those who have been in Indochina will have noticed this on a daily basis) maintains in equilibrium, even while running or walking very quickly, the loads at either end of his pole by a regular balancing back and forth, from both the shoulders and the hips. So on one end of the pole metrically represented by *yo*, we already have *cake*. We need at the other end the required counterweight, which counterweight is advantageously provided in *arhati*, which in turn finds in the relative pronoun *yo* its real subject. And our vagabond stanza takes advantage of this discovery to return to its true home, situated exactly between stanza LXXVII and stanza LXXVIII, home to which we can attribute the number LXXVII *bis* to keep from disturbing the extant numbering system.

Happy to find lodging, stanza LXXVII *bis* will have harmonious relations with its new neighbours. With that above (stanza LXXVII), it will be in perfect accord in shedding light on its *vastir adbhikadhāmnām* which Louis Finot, lacking context, in this case the stanza omitted by the scribe, translated as “depository of a high power.” Yet *dhāman* is in the plural and designates in a concrete and obvious fashion the “residences of the gods,” that is, the sanctuaries that Jayendravarman inherited from his ancestors. And in the poet’s chain of association of ideas, this word serves as a first marker allowing for another to be placed in stanza LXXVII *bis* (previously CXXIX), that is: *deva* – to be interpreted also in the plural in the compound *devasamrakṣane* – which is to say the sanctuaries over which Jayendravarman was deemed to be “worthy of keeping watch.” Stanza LXXVIII and those following it are charged with conveying in detail the different works justifying this “honourable charge” (*arhati*).

There remains stanza CXXX, whose meaning is complete on its own, an imprecation threatening with hell “those who destroy the property of Śiva.” Given that this stanza does not have its habitually inseparable companion, promising paradise, I would have liked to see it appear after stanza CXXVIII where it is said that “Śiva’s goods bring misfortune to those who wish to steal them:” it would explain in a concrete fashion what constitutes this “misfortune.” But this is nothing more than a question of taste and shading. This is why, with the slight reservation which I have just mentioned, I accept the opinion of Mr. George Cœdès and Mr. Pierre Dupont, who wished to place it at the end of the Khmer text.