

**A Study of the History and Cult of the Buddhist Earth  
Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia**

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**A Study of the History and Cult of the  
Buddhist Earth Deity in Mainland Southeast Asia**

**Volume 1**

**Text**



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## Abstract

This study commenced during a visit to Cambodia in 1994 when I became intrigued by statues and paintings of a beautiful young woman wringing water from her long hair under the Buddha's throne. I learned that her name was "Lady Earth," that she was associated with both the earth and the water, and that she received a cult. I also discovered that her story was part of the Buddha's biography. Just prior to the Enlightenment, Māra the evil one tried to prevent the Bodhisattva from reaching his goal. During his struggles with Māra, the Bodhisattva touched the earth (the *bhūmisparśamudrā*) and called on the earth to be his witness against Māra.

Although no textual source for the hair-wringing earth deity has yet been identified outside of mainland Southeast Asia, her iconography and story are too ancient and widely distributed across the cultures of the mainland to be attributed to one particular location. Today the earth deity can be found guarding the *vajrāsana* in Arakan, Burma, Cambodia, Kampuchea Krom, Central and Northern Thailand, Laos, and Sipsong Panna in Yunnan.

It has been necessary to devise a methodology that can cope with the many different countries, cultures, languages where the earth deity is found. I have found that focusing on the motif of the earth deity, in Buddhist art, the Buddha's biographical tradition, and performative texts (donative inscriptions, *sādhana*, *paritta*, *mantra*, *yantra*) is an effective strategy. I also look at myths and stories about the earth deity and aspects of the contemporary cult of the earth deity gleaned from fieldwork in Cambodia and Thailand.

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## 1: Introduction and Literature Review

During my first visit to Cambodia in 1994, I visited Wat Phnom, an old Buddhist temple overlooking Phnom Penh. After I admired the view of the city, I went into the temple and peered at the dark, smoke-stained murals on the walls and the golden Buddhas on the altar. I noticed a statue of a beautiful young woman, wringing out her long hair, standing by the altar in front of the main Buddha image, and I wondered whom she was and what she was doing there. (1.1) I learned at the Buddhist Institute that she was the earth deity, *nāṅ gaṅhīn* Braḥ Dharaṇī, who witnessed to the Buddha at the time of the Enlightenment. This is her story:

The Bodhisattva was sitting in meditation on his throne under the Bodhi Tree. Māra, the Evil One, was jealous and wanted to stop him from reaching enlightenment. Accompanied by his warriors, wild animals and his daughters, he tried to drive the Bodhisattva from his throne. All the gods were terrified and ran away, leaving the Bodhisattva alone to face Māra's challenge. The Bodhisattva stretched down his right hand and touched the earth, summoning her to be his witness. The earth deity in the form of a beautiful woman rose up from underneath the throne, and affirmed the Bodhisattva's right to occupy the *vajrāsana*. She twisted her long hair, and torrents of water collected there from the innumerable donative libations of the Buddha over the ages created a flood. The flood washed away Māra and his army, and the Bodhisattva was freed to reach enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

I began to see the earth deity everywhere I looked: standing with her crocodile in a main traffic roundabout in Phnom Penh, tattooed onto the arms of an old

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<sup>1</sup>Meng Prang, Buddhist Institute, Phnom Penh, February 1996.

soldier, presiding over the Sanam Luang in Bangkok, stencilled onto the walls of a wat in Luang Prabang. The one place I did not find her was in the Pāli Canon, the texts that Theravāda Buddhism is founded on.

Today, the places where the earth deity can be found wringing her hair – Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Sipsong Panna – are Theravāda Buddhist.<sup>2</sup> Because she is absent from the extant Pāli Canon, some Buddhists and scholars have concluded that Vasundharā is a product of “local genius,” an amalgam of local beliefs and Brahmanic legends about the earth with the biography of the Buddha.<sup>3</sup> But Vasundharā is not included in Southeast Asia’s indigenous pantheons (Cambodia’s *qnak tā*, the *phi* of Thailand, or the *nats* of Burma). The Buddhist earth deity emerged as part of the Buddha’s biography in the first centuries of the Common Era in India, and travelled into Buddhist Asia along with the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, stories about the Enlightenment and ritual texts during the first millennium of the Common Era. The hair-wringing gesture also originated in India as part of the iconography of the *yakṣī*. The conjunction of Buddhist earth deity and hair-wringing gesture seems to be unique to mainland Southeast Asia.

Like the *yakṣī*, Vasundharā is a minor if persistent motif in Buddhist literature and iconography. Despite her overall insignificance, her association with the *bhūmisparśamudrā* provides valuable insight into the arrival of Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia, a largely undocumented period of Buddhist history. Despite ancient traditions that the Buddha visited Southeast Asia during his

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<sup>2</sup> The earth deity’s name changes in different countries, but is generally a form of a word for “earth,” i.e. Pṛthivī, Kṣiti, Dharaṇī, Vasundharā, and so on. In Cambodia the earth deity is known simply by her title: *nān garhīn* (pronounced “neang kongheng”) from *nān*, “lady,” and *garhīn*, a Khmer word for “princess.” In the Tai regions she is known as Nang Thoranee or Mae Thoranee: “lady earth” or “mother earth.” In Burma and Arakan she is Vasundharā (transliterated variously as Wathundari, Wathundaye, Vasundari, and so on). Sometimes she is given the epithet Sundarī, “beautiful one,” or Vanitā, “dear one.” I use the name Vasundharā in this dissertation for consistency, but the reader should keep in mind that this particular form of the earth deity’s name is unknown in Thailand or Cambodia.

<sup>3</sup> Zepp (1997:18).

lifetime,<sup>4</sup> Buddhism was transmitted to the Mainland in successive waves from India and Sri Lanka during the second half of the first millennium. The exact date and form of this early Buddhism is unclear, but recent scholarship has focused on the diversity of Buddhism during this early period. Skilling has located schools of Buddhism that used Pāli and may have been Theravādin in the lower Irrawaddy and Chao Phraya basins from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Brown argued that early Mon Buddhist art shows the influence of northern Indian Buddhism, and Dowling found evidence of the Mūlasarvāstivādin, Sammiti and Sthavira *nikāyas* at the 7<sup>th</sup> century site of Angkor Borei.<sup>5</sup> This diversity continued on a smaller scale into the second millennium: Strong and Bizot have investigated the survival in Laos, Burma and the Lānnā Kingdoms of ancient northern Indian forms of Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> These theories have not found universal acceptance among Southeast Asian Buddhists, who for centuries have reconstructed temples, Buddha images and history to emphasize the region's close links with Sinhalese Theravāda Buddhism, believed to be the most authentic source of Buddhist texts.

The iconographic evidence collected in this dissertation demonstrates that Vasundharā appeared on the mainland long before Sinhalese Theravāda Buddhism became dominant. While it is possible that she is a remnant of the mysterious Pāli Buddhism of the Pyus and the Mons, it is more likely that she accompanied the stories about the enlightenment and styles of iconography that were transmitted from northeastern India along trade routes into Asia between the 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The pre-eminence given to Sinhalese Theravāda Buddhism in mainland

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<sup>4</sup> Strong (1998:79-80) describes the meeting of the merchants Bhallika and Tapassu with the Buddha shortly after the Enlightenment, and Gutman (2001:30-1) recounts the story of how the Buddha and five hundred *arhants* flew across the Bay of Bengal in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to convert the people of Arakan and establish the first Buddha image in the ancient city of Dhaññavatī.

<sup>5</sup> Skilling (1997:98), Brown (1996:xxix), Dowling (2000:129).

<sup>6</sup> Bizot and Gabaude (1998), Strong (1992).



Southeast Asia has meant that periodically, local traditions and texts are measured against the Pāli Canon, and if found lacking, reformed or suppressed. Buddhist ordination traditions have been reformed many times in Burma and Thailand, as have the rituals used to establish valid boundaries or *sīmā*. The presence of a beautiful, half-naked female deity responding to the hand of the Bodhisattva inevitably jarred the sensibilities of some Theravādins, and it is perhaps not surprising to find that the earth deity has, like women everywhere, been at times subjected to official disapproval, and excluded from her position of power under the *vajrāsanā*.<sup>7</sup>

The paradoxical nature of the relationship between the Buddha and the earth deity was made clear to me during a visit to the old city of Mrauk U in Arakan in Western Burma in July 2000. I was trying to photograph the pedestal base of the Anawma Image, built in 1501 by the Princess Anawma, the daughter of King Salinggathu. The pedestal is covered with many beautiful carvings, and at the very bottom of the center of the base is a small Vasundharā wringing her hair (2.53). The Anawma image is encircled by a protective wall, and it was difficult for me to scramble close enough to take a photograph. Despite my struggles, my guides, two very pleasant and otherwise helpful Arakanese men, would not let me climb over or touch the Buddha in any way although they themselves were standing casually on the statue (1.2). They explained to me that women must not have any physical contact with the Buddha. I succeeded in taking my pictures without any transgressions, but I felt there was a certain irony in the situation: because I was a woman, I was forbidden access to a little female figure on the base of the pedestal of a Buddha image that had been commissioned by a woman...

Doctrines about the inherent karmic inferiority of women lie behind the prohibitions that forbid physical contact between women and monks, bar

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<sup>7</sup> King Badon of Burma (r. 1782 –1819) and the Sangharājā of Thailand, Vajirañāṇa (1860 – 1921) are among those who rejected the earth deity as non-canonical, something that will be discussed in further detail in chapters 2 and 3 below.

women from higher ordination, and – in some Buddhist temples – deny women access to the *uposathā*, the sanctuary of a Buddhist temple demarcated by the boundary markers known as *sīmā*. To compensate for this exclusion, Andaya and others have pointed out that Theravāda Buddhism presents “varied and sometimes conflicting images of femaleness.”<sup>8</sup> Among these images, the ‘trope of motherhood’ was one of the most important and the one that received the highest status. While such an image would seem to be relevant for the earth deity, who is also known in Thailand and Laos as Mae Thoranee, “mother earth,” her cult has never been exclusively associated with women, or with fertility. Strong noted that certain religious beliefs and practices, such as the popular cult to Upagupta in Burma, owe their popularity and prestige to their ostracism from official orthodoxy, becoming “representations of a counterculture, reflecting another side of Buddhism in Theravāda lands, a complement and antidote to orthodoxy.”<sup>9</sup> But this counterculture does not seem to apply to the cult of Vasundharā. Despite the earth deity’s problems with orthodox *sayadaws* and *sangharājas*, she has often been a favorite vehicle for conservative Buddhist elites in pursuit of wealth and territory. Vasundharā cannot easily be categorized.

As I quickly found when I began my research, there is no one earth deity, there are many. Tucci wrote that the Earth Goddess is “the expression or projection of whatever Earth is and means to us.”<sup>10</sup> The earth deity that I describe in these pages is my projection: the sum of the images, stories and rituals I have seen, read and heard during my research. Since I began my quest in Cambodia, much of my material comes from that country. However, I could have just as easily used Burma or Nepal as a starting point. Traditions about the witness of the earth deity can be found throughout Buddhist Asia; tracing all of these traditions would be a life’s work. Fortunately I have been able to rely on the research of others who have also been intrigued by the earth deity

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<sup>8</sup> Andaya (2002:29), see also Keyes (1984), Khin Thitsa (1983), Kirsch (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Strong (1992:185).

<sup>10</sup> Tucci (1954:325).

in her Theravāda Buddhist manifestation. Most of this research has been constructed upon the foundation of a few seminal studies, so I have ordered this review of the earth deity literature by their publication dates.

One of the first scholars to write about Vasundharā was George Cœdès. In 1916, Cœdès published a stele found in the cross-galleries of Angkor Wat among the sculptures in the hall of Braḥ Bān', "the thousand Buddhas" (1.3). The stele depicts the episode in the life of the Buddha called the *māravijaya* or "defeat of Māra". Māra is represented two times on the stele: first on the left, riding his elephant and threatening the Bodhisattva with flower-tipped arrows and then on the right, defeated with his stumbling elephant. Cœdès found little to distinguish this *māravijaya* from other representations found in India and elsewhere except for Vasundharā on the Buddha's right, standing on a lotus and twisting her hair. Cœdès noted that the hair-wringing gesture had no counterpart in Indian iconography. He also noted that although the legend was well known in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos in a Pāli work called the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, none of the classical biographies of the Buddha (*Nidānakathā*, *Mahāvastu*, *Lalitavistara*) contained the episode.

Cœdès continued to work on this subject throughout his life. He produced a critical edition of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* and in 1968, shortly before his death, published an article entitled "Une vie indochinoise du Buddha" in which he revisited the problem of the hair wringing earth deity.<sup>11</sup> In this essay, he wrote that although the *Paṭhamasambodhi* was largely derived from the standard lives of the Buddha such as the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Nidānakathā*, the text also contained passages that cannot be found in the Pāli tradition. The first anomalous passage noted by Cœdès was the episode in chapter nine, "Māravijaya." The second anomalous passage, in chapter thirteen, "Dhammacakka," is a Pāli verse not found in the Pāli Canon, but carved on the great stone wheels of the Law found at the ancient Mon city of Nakhon

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<sup>11</sup> Cœdès (1968).

Pathom. The third anomaly, chapter 28, “Mārabandhana,” recounted the binding of Māra by Upagupta, an episode foreign to the Pāli Canon but recounted in northern Sanskrit sources such as the *Divyāvadāna*.<sup>12</sup>

Despite locating and presenting these anomalies in his essay, Cœdès did not argue that the *Paṭhamasambodhi* was a text known in the ancient Mon kingdoms, or that the *Paṭhamasambodhi* belonged to northern Sanskrit Buddhism. Always a careful scholar, he concluded that the *Paṭhamasambodhi* was based on the Sinhalese biographical tradition, and that the original text, consisting of nine or ten chapters, was composed in Pāli in the north of Thailand, probably during the 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. He hypothesised that the anomalous material was added over time to a *noyau primitif*.

Charles Duroiselle, a correspondent of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient, and the Superintendent of the Archaeological Survey of Burma for many years, was also intrigued by the earth deity, known in Burma as Vasundharā, transliterated here by Duroiselle as Wathundaye. Soon after he was appointed Superintendent in 1920, Duroiselle visited Western Burma, where he found a very old image of the earth deity in the ancient city of Vesāli that he thought belonged to the 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>13</sup> He thought that the story and iconography of the earth deity could have been disseminated through the rest of Asia from Arakan. Duroiselle, who was familiar with Cœdès’ research on the earth deity, spent many years looking for a Burmese *Paṭhamasambodhi* before finally concluding that the text is “rare if at all extant in Burma, for I have not been able to procure a copy, and monks do not seem to have heard of it.”<sup>14</sup> However he found that the legend of Wathundaye wringing her hair was well-known in Burma where it was commonly believed to be from Zimme (Chiang Mai) where the monks are “not quite orthodox.”

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<sup>12</sup> Denis (1977).

<sup>13</sup> Duroiselle (1921:19), Duroiselle (1922:15-16), Duroiselle (1925: 144-145).

<sup>14</sup> Duroiselle (1922:15).

Duroiselle noted the existence of two distinct conceptions of the earth deity in Burma. In the first, the earth deity was personified as a female “Mother Earth,” who witnessed to the Buddha during the *māravijaya*. In the second instance, Vasundharā took the form of a male earth deity whose business was to witness the pious donations of the Burmese, always accompanied by water poured on the ground and the formal invocation to “Wasundhaye, the Guardian of the Earth.” Duroiselle concluded that the story of the earth deity “seems to be perpetuated only by oral tradition, extensive search and enquiries having failed to bring to light, up to the present, any work in Burmese or Pāli, in which it is recorded,”<sup>15</sup> he did find that the legend of the earth deity was the subject of controversy in several Buddhist commentaries.

Although Paul Mus did not mention the earth deity of the *māravijaya* in his 1934 essay “India Viewed from the East” (translated from the French by Mabbett and Chandler in 1975) his writing provokes thought about the ancient cult of the god of the earth in mainland Southeast Asia, and the way this cult has interacted with Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> Mus believed there was a unity of culture – something he called “monsoon religion” – throughout Asia. One important feature of this monsoon religion was the belief that there are spirits present in all things and in all places. The most important of these territorial spirits is the lord or deity of the earth, conceived of as male, and attached to a sacred locale. The cult of the earth deity, and the particular relationship he has with his devotees, are the main characteristics of Mus’s monsoon religion.

Mus noted that the earth deity is usually associated with material objects, such as a tree or a stone. This stone is not the throne of the deity; rather, it embodies the deity, conflating the idea of earth deity, stone and the sacred locale. This idea increases in importance when people are divided into clans or groups and the land is divided into fields. Each socio-political group has its own earth

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<sup>15</sup> Duroiselle (1922:15).

<sup>16</sup> Mus (1975).

deity that is propitiated with a cult; in return this deity is hostile to aliens who trespass on the land. Mus saw a relationship between the local cults of the earth, the corresponding political system in which the chief acts as the intermediary between the earth deity and the group, and the development of dynastic and territorial law.

When Hinduism and Buddhism arrived in this cultural sphere, its tenets were “instantly recognized, understood and endorsed by peoples who perhaps were not always aware of wholly changing their religion in adopting those of India.”<sup>17</sup> Both Hinduism and Buddhism were able to represent local ideas about the prosperity and fertility of the soil as well as the relationship between the leader, the group and the sacred territory they all inhabit. Mus found that the Indic *yakṣa* is closely associated with the guardian deity of the earth as is the cult of the Bodhi Tree.

In 1943, O.C. Gangoly took up the topic of “The Earth Goddess in Buddhist Art.”<sup>18</sup> After revisiting Cœdès and Duroiselle, Gangoly argued that the story of the witness of the earth deity was a late embellishment of the Buddha’s biographical tradition. He argued that the iconographical innovations associated with the earth deity in Southeast Asia – the substitution of hair-wringing for the pot of water, the confusion about gender, and the existence of independent statues – resulted from her new role as the witness of pious donations, a change that freed her from the iconographic constraints of the *bhūmisparśamudrā*. Although he viewed the hair-wringing motif as a Southeast Asian innovation, he found Indian precedents for the iconography, and published sketches of relief carvings of female figures wringing out their hair at Hindu temples such as the Br̥hadiśvara temple in Tanjore and the Vijayanagara complex at Hampī. Gangoly also located references to hair-wringing in Vedic literature.

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<sup>17</sup> Mus (1975:36).

<sup>18</sup> Gangoly (1943).

Giuseppe Tucci published a complex essay about the "Earth in India and Tibet" in 1954.<sup>19</sup> Although he did not address the episode known in Southeast Asia, his essay explored the many aspects that the earth goddess took in India, and the localization of the Buddhist earth goddess into Tibetan culture. Despite references to earth goddesses in Indian literature, Tucci believed that visual representations of the earth goddess in Indian art were rare, and in these "she does not seem to have been possessed of an outstanding character...she seems to occupy, as a personal God, with definite traits, a secondary and subservient role."<sup>20</sup>

Tucci wrote that the concept "Earth" has different meanings for people living in different environments and cultures; the multiplicity of names and characteristics by which she is known is a reflection of the complexity of her archetype:

We cannot say that the Goddesses we have mentioned are identical with Mother Earth. They are and are not: they are that and some other thing also. We cannot say where the limit stands between the two notions, because no such limit exists. The extremely complex image in which they are rooted is capable of infinite modulations, and in this very fact lies the cause of their ever recurring resurrection.<sup>21</sup>

Tucci contrasted the *grāmadevatā*, village earth deities who embody the forces of chaos and creation, with the Pṛthivī of the *Varāhāvatāra*, who embodies cosmic order and is able to control the primal chaos of the ocean. This earth goddess is associated with a spiritual or moral order (*dharma*, or *satya*) and presides over oaths, aids Sītā in her distress, and witnesses for Śākyamuni at the time of the enlightenment. When the wheel of Dharma is turned, she increases the prosperity of the pious, and the creative power of the soil. The

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<sup>19</sup> Tucci (1954).

<sup>20</sup> Tucci (1954:325).

<sup>21</sup> Tucci (1954:355).

development of Tantric Buddhism in India saw the earth goddess merge with Vasudharā, the holder of riches, and with the *śaktī*.

Tibetans adopted the female earth deity who witnessed for Śākyamuni, naming her Sa'i Lha Mo, but she did not play a prominent role in Tibetan liturgy or art. This is in part, Tucci suggested, because the Tibetans are not agriculturalists and a "Mother Earth" never featured in Tibetan mythology. Instead, the indigenous male entities called *sa bdag*, masters of the earth and the *klu*, associated with water, took her place and were localized into stories and rituals concerned with the Enlightenment. The *sa bdag* and the *klu* were local deities like the *nāga*, identified with particular clans, and believed to live under the ground. They defended their territorial boundaries against invaders and were easily offended, quick to punish any wrong-doings on their territory with disease or misfortune. As these earth deities gained status in Tibetan Buddhist iconography and practice, religious rituals were developed to placate them and avert misfortune.

Much of what Tucci wrote about the Tibetan earth deities resonates with Mus's theories about the earth deities of monsoon religion: male deities, also believed to live under the ground, easily offended and quick to guard their territory. Anthropologists working in Cambodia, Laos and Thailand have documented similar beliefs about local deities of the earth. The ethnographer Porée-Maspero spent many years researching the religious beliefs and practices of rural Cambodians before World War 2. She published her research in a series of books and articles, all of which contain valuable snippets of information about the cult of Vasundharā in Cambodia. Most useful is an article entitled "Kroñ Pāli et rites de la maison," in which she described the rituals addressed to the earth deity when a house or other structure is constructed.<sup>22</sup> According to Porée-Maspero, there are three earth deities in Cambodia: Kroñ Bali, the *nāga* king who lies under the soil, a male

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<sup>22</sup>Porée-Maspero (1961).



earth deity called Braḥ Phum (“Lord Earth”) and the female *nān gaṅhīn* Braḥ Dharaṇī (“Lady Earth”). The boundaries between these deities are ill defined, and their exact identity and gender is unclear. While it is possible that this confusion may have originated in the imprecision of the Khmer language, which distinguishes neither gender nor number, Porée–Maspero concluded that there is really no difference between Kroṅ Bali, Braḥ Phum and Braḥ Dharaṇī: they are all manifestations of Cambodian conceptions of the Earth.

Porée–Maspero documented many ceremonies addressed to Kroṅ Bali that included determining the position of this ophidian deity before foundation posts were set in the ground, and the placing of propitiatory offerings into foundation holes. In addition to these ceremonies associated with temple and house construction, Porée–Maspero documented rituals addressed to Braḥ Dharaṇī and Kroṅ Bali during agricultural work. These agrarian rituals were meant to apologize for disturbing the earth deity during cultivation of the soil, and asked permission to reap the harvest.

Porée–Maspero devoted a section of her article to the cult to *nān gaṅhīn* Braḥ Dharaṇī, noting its importance in Cambodia, particularly in the region of Angkor (modern Siem Reap province). She found much regional variation in rituals and beliefs, but throughout Cambodia both Kroṅ Bali and Braḥ Dharaṇī were addressed as *mcās’ dik dī*, “master of water and earth,” and associated with the nation of Cambodia. Braḥ Dharaṇī was also closely associated with the element of water, and aquatic animals such as the crocodile or *nāgī*:

Dans l’iconographie indienne, lorsqu’on représente sous forme humaine des *nāga*, ils ont une chevelure dégoussante d’eau. Ainsi la figuration de Prah Thorni tordant sa chevelure serait celle d’une *nāgī* dans l’exercice de ses fonctions aquatiques.<sup>23</sup>

In his article on a Mon version of the episode of Vasundharā, Emmanuel

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<sup>23</sup> Porée–Maspero (1961:913).

Guillon reviewed the work of Cœdès, Duroiselle, and Porée–Maspero.<sup>24</sup> He noted that the gender of the earth deity can be either male or female in Burma, but dismissed the notion that this ambiguity developed from misogynist repression of the earth deity, instead attributing it to the confusion between Prince Vessantara of the *Vessantara Jātaka* with Vasundharā (names spelled similarly in Burmese transliteration) sometime during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Guillon’s area of interest is Mon culture, and his article focused on Mon beliefs about Vasundharā. He wrote that the Mon people living in Burma believe that Vasundharā is female, and call her *wisun teri tewi* (Vasundharā devī). She is also known as *pectai sundarī* (*pectai* = “grandmother,” “sorcerer,” “demon” and *sundarī* = “beautiful”) epithets associated with power and feminine beauty. Guillon recounted two texts that demonstrated the importance of the cult of the goddess for Mon Buddhist culture. The first was a prayer to the goddess Sundarī in Mon and corrupt Pāli entitled *bca devatau bau ti sundhari*, “the offering of food to the goddess Sundharī.” The prayer, similar in form and content to a *dhāraṇī* or *paritta*, is recited to ward off danger, ill health and misfortune, and ensure good fortune, well-being, and the destruction of all enemies in the ten cardinal directions. The Buddha and the eight *arhants* are honored, and the recitation of the prayer is accompanied by ritual offerings (food, umbrellas, banners, garlands of flowers, candles, betel leaves, areca nut, etc.). The second example provided by Guillon was a Mon text called the *Lik Visundri* (the “story of Vasundharā”), about a beautiful woman named Visundri who came to the monastery of Kosala, where the Buddha was staying, and claimed that she was the Buddha’s mistress. A sect of heretics killed Visundri, and accused the Buddha of Visundri’s murder. King Pasenadī had the Buddha driven from the monastery. Finally the truth was revealed, the Buddha reinstated in the monastery, and he explained to the

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<sup>24</sup>Guillon (1987).

king that in a former life, Visundri was his wife.<sup>25</sup>

Although Duroiselle had been unable to locate a text in Burma that included the episode, Guillon discovered a Mon biography of the Buddha, called the *Lik Sidhat*, with a colophon dated 1798, in the National Library in Rangoon. He thought that that the reason Duroiselle was unable to find such a text in the 1920s was because Mon language, religion and culture had been savagely repressed in Burma at that time. Because of differences between the *Lik Sidhat* and the *Paṭhamasambodhi* (namely, the timing of the earth's appearance, her speech and actions towards Māra) Guillon did not think that the Mon text was a direct translation of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*. Due to similarities to the story illustrated by Mon plaques of the army of Māra from Bagan and Pegu, Guillon hypothesised that *Lik Sidhat* might originate in Mon Buddhism.

Janice Leoshko's article, "The Case of the Two Witnesses to the Buddha's Enlightenment," is about northern Indian representations of the *bhūmisparśamudrā* that depict earth deities.<sup>26</sup> She links the earth deity and the *bhūmisparśamudrā* together, noting that both are rare in Kushan, Gandhāran, or Mathuran art, but during the Gupta period (5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> c.) they become more common. In the earliest representations, the earth deity is shown in *añjali* or bearing a pot. During the Gupta period, two earth deities began to appear under the Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā*; two earth deities were also common during the Pāla period (8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> c.). Leoshko identified this deity as Aparājītā, a Tantric deity who destroys the obstacles to enlightenment, and noted that there is no information in the extant biographies to explain such iconographic innovations.<sup>27</sup> Leoshko argued that in the absence of extant textual sources, Xuanzang's 7<sup>th</sup> century chronicle, which tells a story about two earth deities, and the *sādhana*s offers valuable insight into Buddhological developments in

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<sup>25</sup> Malalasekera (1974:1216-7); this seems to be a variant of the story of the *paribbājikā* Sundarī.

<sup>26</sup> Leoshko (1988).

<sup>27</sup> Leoshko (1988:50).

India at that time, and concluded that:

The fact that these two females and the defeated form of Māra are the only elements that were regularly retained in later images of the Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā* may indicate that such works were primarily intended to emphasize the importance of religious practice in overcoming obstacles to enlightenment.<sup>28</sup>

Catherine Raymond, in her 1998 essay on the iconography of Vasundharā in Burma and Arakan, began by reviewing the work done by Cœdès and Duroiselle.<sup>29</sup> She noted that in central Burma, Vasundharā is considered male, and in the Shan regions she is female. Raymond thought the confused gender of the earth deity was due to the presence of two separate traditions: the first is the Buddhist tradition of the earth as witness to the Enlightenment, and the second, an indigenous cult addressed to an earth deity that is the guardian of the site. In this cult, water and offerings were placed on the ground or deposited in a hole in the earth.

Raymond described several styles of earth deity. In the first style, Vasundharā is represented as a small female figure placed next to or under the Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā*. In the second style, Vasundharā appears as an independent figure, either kneeling or standing (a trait Raymond attributed to Khmer influence during the Konbaung dynasty). Additional iconographic variations included *vīrāsana*, *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* and even *padmāsana*. Female figures in a kneeling position have their legs covered modestly with a long skirt; figures wearing short kilts, with the legs showing in various active positions (dancing, trampling) are male. The hair is also subject to variation: it usually comes from the occiput in a tress that falls over the left shoulder, then across the front of the chest where it is grasped by the two hands, which show torsion, and then continues on to the ankle. During the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, in a short-lived iconographical innovation, Raymond noted that the earth deity

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<sup>28</sup> Leoshko (1988:50-2).

<sup>29</sup> Raymond (1998).

was sometimes depicted grasping two tresses of hair rather than one.

Raymond discussed several disputed images of Vasundharā from Bagan without reaching any conclusion about dates or identification. Then she turned her attention to Western Burma, noting that the cult of Vasundharā was important in Arakan and representations of the earth deity common. Raymond hypothesized that a set of stone images of Vasundharā (some male, some female) located in a corridor in the Shittaung temple in Mrauk-U, may have played a role in the coronation ritual of the Arakanese kings.

After the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Burmese cult took on a popular character, and the appearance of Vasundharā was influenced by Khmer art (transmitted by way of the Shan states). Independent wooden and stucco statues of the earth deity were positioned on the platforms of the main Buddha images in Buddhist temples or placed in pairs on either side of the image of the Buddha in small *stūpa*-pavilions, for example those on the platform of the Shwedagon. Raymond concluded that Vasundharā was present in Bagan as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and in Arakan by the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Today, images of Vasundharā are less common, and the cult seems to be gradually disappearing.

Most of this research on the iconography of the earth deity has focused on a particular country or region: Leoshko looked at Northern and Eastern India, while Duroiselle and Raymond confined their research to Burma and Arakan. Such a research strategy is eminently practical, but it can obscure the fact that the Buddhist earth deity is “transnational.” Many of her characteristics – the association with the *nāga*, with holes in the ground, even the hair-wringing gesture – are common throughout India, the Himalayas, mainland Southeast Asia, and even southern China, and therefore unlikely to be “indigenous” or a “local legend.”

A second point that emerges from the literature is that information about the

earth deity can be found in many sources and in many languages: the Buddha's biography, *sādhanas*, texts concerned with Buddhist consecration, kingship, myths and legends about *nāgas* and crocodiles, pilgrims' travel accounts, and so on. Topics that clamor for further investigation include the confusion about the earth deity's gender and number, her relationship with the Buddha, the *nāga* and the territorial spirits of the land, and the element of water. And finally, the persistence of the earth deity's cult among Buddhists for many centuries must be explored: what did the worship of the earth deity mean in the past, and what does it mean for devotees today?

Research on so many fronts presents challenges, and it has been necessary to devise a methodology that can cope with many different countries, cultures, languages and styles of representation. In the absence of securely provenanced materials art historians use the study of iconographic motifs to establish chronology.<sup>30</sup> Motifs are extracted from the image and compared with their counterparts in other artefacts. Working with small units, stripped of their context, allows the researcher to be more objective; more important, it allows the research to concentrate on a particular motif instead of being overwhelmed by the complex iconography of a stele or mural painting. The process of motif analysis builds up a glossary or "database" of information that can be used to trace the origins of decorative motifs and to translate the religious concepts and meanings communicated by the image.<sup>31</sup> Such a study builds up a detailed map and chronology of the distribution of the motifs that can be used to trace the introduction of ideas into the region.

While I am not an art historian and have not been trained in motif analysis, I have found that locating "earth deity motifs" and using these small bits of information to build up an "earth deity database" is a useful way to work with an otherwise bewildering variety of visual and textual sources. Like the nine

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<sup>30</sup> Brown (1996:124-5).

<sup>31</sup> Bautze-Picron (1998:15-6).

authors presented above, I begin by locating the image of the earth deity at certain places and times in Buddhist Asia. Next, I isolate the earth deity episode from the Buddha biographical tradition, and performative texts (donative inscriptions, *sādhana*, *paritta*, *mantra*, *yantra*). I look at myths and stories that contain important information about the earth deity. Aspects of the contemporary cult of the earth deity gleaned from fieldwork in Cambodia and Thailand, a cult which manifests itself in independent statues, secular logos and mediumnic activity, are also resources for this dissertation on the history and cult of the Buddhist earth deity in mainland Southeast Asia.

## Chapter 2: The Image of the Earth Deity

People like to know what they are looking at. When I first saw the statue of a beautiful young woman wringing her hair at Wat Phnom, I wanted to know who she was and why she was standing in front of the Buddha, wringing her hair. My first research efforts focused on Buddhist texts. But while Buddhist texts can be useful tools for understanding Buddhist images, in the case of the earth deity they are misleading. The earth deity does not appear in the extant Pāli Canon. Buddhist texts written in Sanskrit, some of which have been preserved in Chinese, tell stories about the earth deity but describe the deity as making *añjali*, or holding pots of water and jewels. Texts that refer to the hair-wringing gesture can be found throughout mainland Southeast Asia but they are comparatively recent. The absence of early, Indian, mainstream textual evidence for the hair-wringing gesture suggests that “the elimination of the jar, containing the donative water of lustration (*dakkhiṇodaka*) and the replacing of it by tresses saturated with them” are a recent Southeast Asian innovation, a theory that explains little while being difficult to prove or disprove.<sup>1</sup>

Fortunately, some of the information about the earth deity that is missing from the texts has been preserved in Buddhist art works. For centuries, artists have been decorating Buddhist temples with depictions of the earth deity. These images, the product of the time they were made and not later recensions, are material evidence for the earth deity. They are also icons or visual codes, one of the ways that the message of Buddhism is communicated.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gangoly (1943:5), Giteau (1967:132).

<sup>2</sup> Huntington and Huntington (1990:81).



We can ask artists living today why they painted a mural in a temple a certain way, or observe cult activities that take place around a sculpture. But it is more difficult to understand what images from the past, taken out of their original context and displayed in museums or books, are trying to communicate.<sup>3</sup> Many of the strategies used by scholars to understand Buddhist images revolve in some way around texts. Luce, aware that King Kyanzitha (r. 1077– 1113 CE) wanted to reform Burmese Buddhism, theorized that the images of the lives of the Buddha decorating the Nanda temple were three-dimensional illustrations of the *Tipiṭaka* because “the most effective way to teach them [illiterate peasants] Buddhism was to give them a large number of images to worship.”<sup>4</sup> Williams examined Gupta period steles of the Buddha’s life and built up a statistical impression of iconographic styles and narrative content which, when considered together, suggested that the artists working at Sarnāth were informed by certain artistic and textual sources.<sup>5</sup> Dehejia found that although “the relationship between text and image, in the context of Buddhist sacred art, is exceedingly complex,” identifying the artist’s choice of mode of visual narration can help determine the textual basis for a particular narrative.<sup>6</sup>

Because the earth deity is not explained by the mainstream textual tradition, these same scholars have struggled to explain her appearance, or ignored her presence altogether. Luce, describing a plaque from the Nanda Temple which shows the Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā* confronted by the daughters of Māra, Taṇhā, Aratī and Rāgā in seductive poses, identified the two hair-wringing deities on the Buddha’s proper right as “two small figures” and commented that the daughters of Māra appear at the “wrong time” since (according to the

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<sup>3</sup> Dehejia (1997:36): “Every culture, ancient or contemporary, possesses a specialized set of codes of viewing that enable it to interpret... works of art.”

<sup>4</sup> Luce (1969:361).

<sup>5</sup> Williams (1975:179-181) concluded that the Gupta steles make few references to the Pāli texts and are instead closest to Sanskrit texts, namely the *Lalitavistara*, *Divyāvadāna*, *Mahāvastu* and the *Buddhacarita*.

<sup>6</sup> Dehejia (1997:56-60).

*Nidānakathā*, the Pāli text the Nanda temple supposedly illustrates) the episode does not take place until two weeks after the Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> Williams identified the second running female figure under the Buddha on a Gupta stele as Meghakālī, one of the female spirits in the *Buddhacarita* who plagued the Bodhisattva. She rejected Banerji's identification of the running figure as an earth goddess because "there is no text for such a story."<sup>8</sup> While describing a bas relief in the Ajantā Caves Dehejia confused the earth deity with the daughters of Māra, remarking "goddess earth is not present here."<sup>9</sup> To avoid losing the earth deity, a research strategy that gives primacy to images rather than texts must be employed.

In her study of early Indo–Tibetan and Burmese paintings, Bautze–Picron analysed the earth deity as one of many "iconographic motifs" used to depict the life of Śākyamuni.<sup>10</sup> I have found this method useful for tracing the origins of gestures and attributes. Brown's study of the *Dvāravatī dharmacakrastambha*, large stone wheels with Pāli texts inscribed on the spokes, also provides a useful model for image–based research.<sup>11</sup> Because there are no texts to explain the appearance of this Indian Buddhist art form in central Thailand during the 7<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, Brown relied in part on motif analysis. However, he warned that there are two drawbacks with this method. First, only some motifs lend themselves to this sort of analysis. The second drawback is that the method becomes unwieldy when a motif occurs over a large geographical area. A particular motif might seem indigenous to Southeast Asia – "Mon" or "Khmer" rather than "Indian" – but until all of the relevant art history has been examined (an impossible task in the case of India) we will never be certain. While Brown's caveat has a particular relevance for this study of the earth deity, Woodward has argued that the compilation of such empirical data is a valuable enterprise in its own right as

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<sup>7</sup> Luce (1969:134, plate 297).

<sup>8</sup> Williams (1975:180).

<sup>9</sup> Dehejia (1997:236, 258-59).

<sup>10</sup> Bautze-Picron (1998:15-6).

<sup>11</sup> Brown (1996:124-5).

“Vast quantities of painstaking analysis may pave the way for more, and more valid, generalizations.”<sup>12</sup> In this chapter I will concentrate on two iconographical motifs: the image of the earth deity in the context of the *māravijaya*, and the hair-wringing gesture.

The first obstacle encountered in the study of the image of the earth deity is that there are many stories and depictions of the *māravijaya* with no earth deity. When she does appear, her appearance, attributes, number and even gender vary, and she can easily be confused with other figures in the scene. Because of this variability and ambiguity, the most important clue for locating the earth deity – whether she is visible or not – is the “indexical symbol” used by the Buddha himself: the *bhūmisparśamudrā*.<sup>13</sup> The *bhūmisparśamudrā* is the gesture of touching the earth made by the Bodhisattva when he defeated Māra at the time of the Enlightenment. In this *mudrā*, the Buddha is portrayed seated cross-legged, with his left hand lying on his lap with the palm turned upwards. The right arm hangs down over the right knee, and the right hand has its palm turned inward with all the fingers hanging down, almost touching the ground.<sup>14</sup> The gesture summons the earth to witness for the Buddha; it also summons the idea of the earth deity to the mind of the viewer.

To further complicate matters, the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, like the earth deity, is not always part of the story of the Enlightenment. The *mudrā*, which is considered “late,” did not appear in Indian Buddhist art until the Kushān period (1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE), and did not make a regular appearance until the Gupta period.<sup>15</sup> One early depiction of the *māravijaya* that did not include the *bhūmisparśamudrā* was the northern gate at Sañchi, the ancient Buddhist site in central India (2.1). The relief represents the Bodhisattva by the empty seat under the Bodhi Tree. A small figure (2.2) stands just next to the tree on the

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<sup>12</sup> Woodward (1975:13).

<sup>13</sup> Dehejia (1997:36).

<sup>14</sup> Moore (1977:150).

<sup>15</sup> Leoshko (1988:42).

right, separate from Māra's hordes, carrying a pot by its handle in one hand and a tray of flowers (?) in the other. Dehejia identified the figure as Sujātā, the woman who fed the Buddha milk and rice before the Enlightenment<sup>16</sup> but Perera identified this female as the pot-bearing earth deity.<sup>17</sup> Since there is no image of the Bodhisattva, there is no *bhūmisparśamudrā*, and positive identification of the pot-bearing female is difficult.<sup>18</sup> An early representation of the earth deity under the *bhūmisparśamudrā* can be found in a Gandharan relief (2.3): she is emerging from a lotus with her hands clasped in *añjali mudrā*.<sup>19</sup> There are several depictions of the *māravijaya* in the Ajantā caves, Deccan Plateau, ca. 6<sup>th</sup> century. 2.4 is a painted mural: the earth deity, bearing a pot, stands underneath the Bodhisattva's hand. She is surrounded by the dancing daughters of Māra but can be differentiated from them because, in addition to carrying the pot, she is not in a seductive pose and has an earnest expression on her face. 2.5, also from Ajantā ca. 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, is a stone relief depicting the assault of Māra. The earth deity is shown from the waist up, emerging from the ground directly underneath the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, again bearing a pot. She can again be differentiated from the dancing daughters of Māra by her sweet expression, demure stance and smaller size.

By the Gupta period, the earth deity was often depicted under the *bhūmisparśamudrā* in the *māravijaya*. But her appearance varies. She is shown full-length standing next to the *Bodhi* Tree, or from the waist up, emerging from the earth. Sometimes she is borne on a lotus blossom and holds her hands in *añjali mudrā*, and sometimes she holds a pot. These iconographical variations reflect different versions or interpretations of the

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<sup>16</sup> Dehejia (1997:115).

<sup>17</sup> *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (1990:3).

<sup>18</sup> Without the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, there is little to identify the female as the earth deity, but the water vessel she is carrying does not look like Sujātā's pot of rice gruel, and resembles the water vessels used to pour water on the ground during donative rituals.

<sup>19</sup> Leoshko (1988:40).

*māravijaya*. Many of these versions are absent from the “classical” biographies of the Buddha (the *Buddhacarita*, *Mahāvastu*, *Lalitavistara*, *Nidānakathā*) and can only be found today in Chinese translation, but that does not mean that such stories were late, unusual or inauthentic. From a very early date, stories and images of pot-bearing earth deities travelled from India to Central, Southeast and Eastern Asia where they have been preserved in paintings and sculpture.<sup>20</sup> There is a pot-bearing earth deity at the 8<sup>th</sup> century monument Borobudur (2.6). While Krom identified this relief and others at Borobudur as faithful illustrations of the *Lalitavistara*,<sup>21</sup> the earth goddess does not carry a pot in any of the recensions of the *Lalitavistara* extant today.<sup>22</sup> If nothing else, this anomaly suggests that the version of the *Lalitavistara* known at Borobudur was different than the Nepalese and Tibetan recensions Krom translated and published in his book.

Krom associated the pot carried by the earth deity at Borobudur with the custom of pouring water on the earth to ratify a gift or a vow. But the *Vajrāvalī-nāma-maṇḍalopāyikā*, a 12<sup>th</sup> century *sādhana* text composed by Abhayākara Gupta, equates the earth deity’s pot with Vasudharā’s jar full of gems and other attributes (sheafs of grain, four and six arms) rarely seen in depictions of the *māravijaya*. In a variation on the pot motif, during the Kandy period in 18<sup>th</sup> century Sri Lanka, the earth deity is often depicted holding a pot with a coconut flower in it (again, this detail is absent from the extant Pāli Canon).<sup>23</sup> As Banerji noted, “the female with the jar has not been properly identified as yet.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Dehejia (1997: 378-397), Brown (1996:80-81), Mair (1988).

<sup>21</sup> Krom (1974:103-4).

<sup>22</sup> Leoshko (1988:50): “In no surviving version of the Buddha’s life is she described [holding the pot].”

<sup>23</sup> de Silva (1981:82), Cone and Gombrich (1977:plate a), earth deity, late 18<sup>th</sup> century cave Kabāllalena Rāja Mahā Vihāra, Vāllāgala, Kurunegala District, also Dhanapala (1964:plate 21) and Holt (1996:plate 13), an earth deity painted in a late 18<sup>th</sup> century cave at Degaldoruva, also figure 3.2. The Sri Lankan form of the earth deity is (fortunately) beyond the boundaries of this dissertation.

<sup>24</sup> Banerji (1933:60-1).

Another motif absent from the Pāli Canon and from the classical biographies of the Buddha is the multiplication of the earth deity. 2.7 is a 5<sup>th</sup> century stele from Sārnāth that shows two small female figures underneath the Buddha's throne.<sup>25</sup> One holds a pot and the second is running and waving her arms in a warning gesture. Leoshko identified the first figure as the pot-bearing earth deity and the second as an aggressive form of the earth deity who rushes to the aid of the Bodhisattva against Māra. Her identification was based on a report by Xuanzang, the Chinese monk who travelled to India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and brought a *māravijaya* containing two earth deities back to China.<sup>26</sup> There are several *māravijayas* preserved in the Chinese *Tripitaka* that tell of twin and multiple earth deities who work together to help the Buddha and to defeat Māra.<sup>27</sup> Like Xuanzang's *māravijaya* story, these Chinese texts do not indicate the gender of these earth deities; they may be either male or female. In India (and in Cambodia and Thailand) these multiple earth deities are generally represented as female, but in Central Asia and in Burma, this is not always the case.

A wall painting from the Māyā Cave at Kizil in Central Asia may show two earth deities.<sup>28</sup> The original painting was taken to a museum in Berlin where it was destroyed during bombing raids during World War II, but photographs survive (2.9).<sup>29</sup> In figure 2.8, a female earth deity can be seen directly under the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, emerging halfway from the earth in *añjali*. Next to her, sprawled on the ground and apparently wringing out his long hair, is a male figure with a moustache, armed for battle and dressed in a tunic with leggings.<sup>30</sup> This male figure is usually understood as one of the soldiers of Māra, sprawled in defeat in front of the Buddha. But the existence of male

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<sup>25</sup> Leoshko (1988:40).

<sup>26</sup> Leoshko (1988:44).

<sup>27</sup> For example T. 190, *Fo ben xing ji*, a text discussed in detail in chapter 3, below.

<sup>28</sup> Howard (1991) and others have dated these paintings several centuries earlier, i.e. 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE during a period of close rapport between China and India

<sup>29</sup> Turfan Collection, Museum für indische Kunst, Berlin.

<sup>30</sup> The possibility that the male figure may be wringing his hair was pointed out to me by Robert Brown.

earth deities dressed for battle, most notably in Arakan, makes the identification of the Kizil figure as the second earth deity who comes to aid the Bodhisattva against Māra, possible. 2.10 is from a 14<sup>th</sup> century Uighur manuscript of the *Lalitavistara* and shows a female earth deity dressed warmly in flowing robes, mounted on a lotus, and surrounded by an entourage of “one hundred ten millions” of multiplied (female) earth deities: 2.11 is a detail of the “lotus–borne earth deity.”<sup>31</sup>

Between the 9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *bhūmisparśamudrā* Buddha became the dominant iconographic type in north-eastern India. This popularity reflected the importance of Bodhgayā, the site of the Enlightenment, located in the Pāla kingdom during this period. Perhaps because of the economic importance of Bodhgayā as a pilgrimage destination, or because of the prestige of having the navel of the earth located in the midst of their empire, the Pāla kings (even those who were not Buddhist) were eager to associate their rule with this famous Buddhist site. The copper plate inscriptions that date from this period refer to the events of the Enlightenment, and describe the kings as the protectors and supporters of Buddhism and conquerors of the army of Māra, or the forces of chaos.<sup>32</sup>

Many images of the Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā* carved on steles or in free–standing statues have survived from this period. Most of these sculptures were placed on altars or in wall niches for worship. Although the narrative content of these images was reduced, their iconography became increasingly complex and the role of the earth deity became more important.<sup>33</sup> 2.12 shows a late 9<sup>th</sup> century sculpture from Kurkihar, near Bodhgayā.<sup>34</sup> The Buddha is depicted in *bhūmisparśamudrā*. Māra’s army is not depicted, but two earth deities appear under the throne. The first deity (2.13) is kneeling and holding a

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<sup>31</sup> Poppe (1967:60, 157, folio 60r).

<sup>32</sup> Huntington and Huntington (1990:104-5).

<sup>33</sup> Banerji (1933:59).

<sup>34</sup> Thanks to W. Sailer for allowing me to use his photograph.

pot while the second deity is standing in a threatening manner, with hands in the *capēṭa mudrā* and the *tarjani mudrā*. (2.14) Her legs are raised and she is trampling a small Ganeṣa under her feet. Leoshko identified this aggressive deity as the Buddhist Tantric goddess Aparājītā, “the unconquered one” who is the destroyer of all the *māras*, or illusions.<sup>35</sup> Bautze–Picron noted that depictions of the earth deity as Aparājītā were often depicted on independent stelae at Nālandā, suggesting that a cult to that deity was popular in north-eastern India.<sup>36</sup>

During the Pāla period, Bodhgayā drew pilgrims from all over Buddhist Asia. These pilgrims bought images to take back home with them.<sup>37</sup> Votive tablets were popular as were steles representing the *aṣṭamahāprātihārya*, the set of eight scenes, which include the first four great episodes: the birth, the enlightenment, the first sermon and the *parinirvāna* and the lesser four episodes. These portable icons facilitated the transmission of ideas and styles of Buddhist art from north-eastern India to other areas of Buddhist Asia. Leoshko has also published a 12<sup>th</sup> century bronze from Nepal strongly influenced by northern Indian iconography.<sup>38</sup> Two small earth deities can be seen under the *bhūmisparśamudrā*. One is in the process of emptying out her pot of water or jewels. The other is rushing to help the Bodhisattva, with her head and arms flung back in a dramatic gesture.

Religious painting in Tibet and Burma during this period also reflects the influence of Pāla styles of iconography. 2.15 is a detail from a late 11<sup>th</sup> – early 12<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan painting. Bautze–Picron identified the small, sprite-like creature in the circle under the *vajrāsana* as the Aparājītā form of the earth deity, who came rushing to assist the Bodhisattva against Māra, and the threatening male figure next to her as a *krodha* (wrathful demon) or perhaps

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<sup>35</sup> Leoshko (1988:48-50).

<sup>36</sup> Bautze-Picron (1995/96:373-4).

<sup>37</sup> Leoshko (1988:41).

<sup>38</sup> Leoshko (1988:51).



the deity Yamāntaka.<sup>39</sup> Tibetan Buddhists were also familiar with the earth deity who made *añjali*: 2.16 is an image of a Tibetan *thangka* (n.d.) depicting the assault of Māra from the Bacot collection at the Musée Guimet, Paris.

Eighteen different images of the earth deity have been discussed in the previous paragraphs, and they all look different: male, female, kneeling, standing, running, trampling. The earth deity emerges from the earth or from a lotus, s(he) makes *añjali*, holds up vases of flowers, empties out pitchers of water, makes threatening and warning gestures, wears veils and beads, Chinese robes and Scythian tunics, jewelled head dresses and crowns. But none of these earth deities – except perhaps the one from Kizil – wrings water from their hair. Was the hair-wringing earth deity a product of “local genius,” perhaps an indigenous Southeast Asian deity who was incorporated into the story of the *māravijaya*?

Although I have not been able to find examples from India of hair-wringing earth deities specifically associated with the *māravijaya* episode, the gesture of hair-wringing is a well-known motif in Indian art.<sup>40</sup> Early Buddhist sites were profusely decorated with beautiful, half-naked females. These creatures are not ordinary women, they are minor divinities. The artists who decorated these sites depicted these divinities in various poses including one called *sadyaḥ snātā*, a woman who has just bathed (and is wringing out her wet hair). A railing from the Buddhist site at Sanghol, 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, shows such a figure (2.17).<sup>41</sup> The *haṃsa* or goose next to the woman has mistaken the water she wrings from her hair for pearls, or raindrops from a dark cloud, and is gobbling them up. The people looking down at her may be portraits of the donors who commissioned the railing. Other images of hair-wringing divinities, often with a *haṃsa* drinking the drops of water from her hair, have

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<sup>39</sup> Bautze-Picron (1995/96:373-4).

<sup>40</sup> Coomaraswamy (1927:65).

<sup>41</sup> Gupta (1985:26).

been found at Mathura, and at the southern sites of Vijayanagara and Hampī.<sup>42</sup> 2.18 shows an ivory carving, one of a set of figures that decorated the back of a throne. The ivories were found in Begram in Central Afghanistan but may have been made in Andhra Pradesh *ca.* 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE<sup>43</sup> Although much Buddhist art has been found at this site, the throne and its ivory carvings have not been specifically identified by art historians as “Buddhist.”

The next three images do not come from Buddhist contexts. The first (2.19) is from the 7<sup>th</sup> century rock carving at Māmallapuram, a Śaivite monument in the far south of India that depicts the story of the descent of the Ganges. In the cleft of the rock, where the water pours down, a figure of ambiguous gender is standing, receiving the water of the Ganges on a long tress of hair which (s)he is wringing out.<sup>44</sup> The next image, 2.20, from a 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century temple at Khajurāho, is not Buddhist either. Every surface and niche of this Hindu temple complex is covered with images of men and women engaged in sexual union, adorning themselves and playing. One figure is this beautiful *sura-sundarī* wringing water from her hair.<sup>45</sup> The last two images may be called “Buddhist” as they came from Nālandā. 2.21 is a door jamb carved with a female figure wringing water out of her hair. The second image (2.22), which has an inscription that dates the carving to the reign of Mahīpāla, mid-11<sup>th</sup> century CE, is also a door jamb from the great temple at Nālandā. Like the female in 2.21, this figure is also wringing water from a long tress of hair, but this is a male deity: there are no breasts and the jaw is masculine.

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<sup>42</sup> Gangoly (1943:9) noted that the motif of a *haṃsa* drinking the water wrung from the hair of a beautiful woman is a common motif of Vedic literature.

<sup>43</sup> Stone (1994:91), Rice (1965:127).

<sup>44</sup> Rodin, Coomaraswamy, Havell, and Goloubew (1921: plates 38, 45); see also Amado (1971:plate 15). The gender of this slender, graceful being is ambiguous but may (like 2.22) be male, although Zimmer (1955, 1:372, plate 277) identified the figure as the female deity Gangā, and noted her similarity to the Buddhist earth deity: “The coexistence in this harmonious art of the Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu forms is notable; notable, too, the firm continuity throughout Asia of its basic forms.”

<sup>45</sup> Deva (1986:108).

As these examples show, for centuries the niches, corners, gateways and railings of Indian temples, Buddhist or otherwise, have been decorated with beautiful deities called variously *yakṣī*, *sadyaḥ-snātā*, *madanakai*, *sura-sundarī* or *śālabhañjikā*. Scholars of Indian art have always been fascinated by these scantily clad females and have written extensively about the *yakṣī*.<sup>46</sup> The prototype of the image is a beautiful young woman standing next to a tree, raising her arm to bend down the tree's branch, which twines around her body (looking rather like a snake, a tail or a tress of hair) and bending one leg to kick the tree. The extension of the leg results in her body being twisted gracefully (*tribhaṅga*). In steles depicting the life of the Buddha, his mother Māyā is often portrayed as a *yakṣī*. Water goddesses depicted holding a *pūrṇakumbha* (a brimming vessel of water), being bathed by two elephants, holding lotus blossoms, and riding on the *makara* (an aquatic animal combining crocodilian and serpent-like attributes) are manifestations of this female divinity. Male guardian deities (*yakṣa*, *rakṣasa*) are also part of the genre; these were depicted as handsome and sinuous youths, or squat, muscular demons making threatening gestures and gripping weapons, and were carved on gates or doorjambs. These decorative divinities can be found at the early Indian Buddhist sites (Sañchi, Sanghol, Amaravati). By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., *yakṣī* and *yakṣa* were routinely incorporated into Buddhist and Hindu temples throughout Buddhist Asia.<sup>47</sup> The abundance of these images and the donative inscriptions associated with them indicates that they were popular subjects for pious donors, lay and ordained, to commission.<sup>48</sup>

The exact date of the arrival of the Buddhist earth deity in mainland Southeast Asia is unknown; no textual references to the witness of the earth deity earlier

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<sup>46</sup> Vogel (1925), Zimmer (1955), Roth (1957: 91-116).

<sup>47</sup> Viennot (1964).

<sup>48</sup> Zürcher (1995:7). In the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya* there are detailed rules and regulations proclaimed by the Buddha instructing artists how to paint *yakṣa* and where to place them in monasteries and temples.

than the 12<sup>th</sup> century have survived.<sup>49</sup> However, close geographical and cultural ties meant that religious and iconographical developments in India were soon reflected on the mainland.<sup>50</sup> A few Pyu and Mon images of the *bhūmisparśamudrā* can be dated before the 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the image remained rare in mainland Southeast Asia until the *bhūmisparśamudrā* became dominant in north-eastern India under the Pāla kings, 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>51</sup> As images of the Bodhisattva in *bhūmisparśamudrā* became more common, so did the earth deity.

In a post-colonial, post-orientalist, post-modern world, we can not assume that the Buddhist earth deity arrived in mainland Southeast Asia from India with all of her cultural and religious baggage intact. How did people in Southeast Asia understand the earth deity under the *bhūmisparśamudrā*? Did they envision an exotic Indian deity springing up at the command of the Bodhisattva? Or did they associate her with local territorial deities? Little is known about the Pyu today, but it is likely, as Wolters has argued, that some form of localization took place as Indian ideas and images merged into the pre-existing religious, social and political systems.<sup>52</sup> Also useful is Brown's suggestion that Southeast Asian Buddhist images are not "copies" of Indian models, but are "analogs" with their own form, organization and patterning: individualized responses to shared religious beliefs. Although the exact nature of the religious beliefs of the Buddhists of mainland Southeast Asia during the first millennium must remain a mystery, we do know that unlike Sri Lanka, where the gesture has apparently never been popular,<sup>53</sup> the *bhūmisparśamudrā* was an important symbol for the Mainland, where it has been replicated countless times in precious metals, stone, wood, clay stucco and cement.

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<sup>49</sup> Luce (1969:73-74), Rājakumār's "Quadrilingual Inscription" of 1113 CE records the ceremony of pouring the water of dedication and calling the earth to witness; see chapter 4 below for further discussion of this ritual and its relationship to the cult of the earth deity.

<sup>50</sup> Bhattacharya (1997:34).

<sup>51</sup> Brown (1988:71-72), Leoshko (1988:30).

<sup>52</sup> Wolters (1999:52).

<sup>53</sup> Pal (1984:156).

During this next section of the chapter I will present images of the earth deity from different regions of mainland Southeast Asia, starting with the kingdoms of Vesāli and Le-mro in Western Burma, or Arakan. Next I will present material from Bagan in Central Burma, and then from Cambodia during the Angkor Period. This will be followed by images from the Middle Period and finally the modern period. I am taking this somewhat cumbersome approach – a stratigraphy of the earth deity – in order to locate and compare some of the iconographical developments that take place across the mainland.

To date, the earliest images of the hair-wringing earth deity that have been found in mainland Southeast Asia are from the Western maritime empires of Arakan. Because of its position in the Bay of Bengal, Arakan has always played a pivotal role in the exchange of culture and religions between India and Asia. Pilgrims from Nepal, Tibet and China travelled on the land and sea routes through Arakan on their way to Bodhgayā and Nālandā. Arakan was also a transit point for Buddhists travelling from mainland Southeast Asia to Northern India. Figure 2.23 is of one of two steles discovered near the Urittaung Pagoda a few years ago during excavations for a meditation hut for the abbot. These steles have been dated *ca.* 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>54</sup> In the detail in 2.24, Vasundharā stands under the *vajrāsana* and wrings her hair. Another image of the earth deity was dated 9<sup>th</sup> century by Duroiselle who discovered it in the ancient Arakanese capital of Vesāli. Duroiselle described the figure as “Vasundharī or Mother Earth wringing her hair brought in a tress in front of her breast; this is, so far as I can remember, the oldest figure of this gracious goddess as yet found in Burma...[Vasundharī] is in a sitting posture; the breadth at the bottom is 3 1/2.”<sup>55</sup> Unfortunately as Gutman notes, “The present

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<sup>54</sup> P. Gutman, personal communication, September 7, 2001, notes that for centuries trade from India traveled up the Kaladan River, passing by the Urittaung Pagoda (the site of Mrauk U’s naval base) before continuing upstream to Vesāli-Mrauk U and on to central Burma.

<sup>55</sup> The image is mentioned twice in Duroiselle’s accounts of his tours of Arakan: (1922:19), and Duroiselle (1925:45).

whereabouts of the image is unknown, and no photograph appears to have been taken”<sup>56</sup> so there is no way to determine whether Duroiselle’s 9<sup>th</sup> century date for the image would still hold up. This early date is not impossible; today the site of Vesāli is littered with many ancient fragments of Buddhist images in *bhūmisparśamudrā* and its inhabitants must have known stories about the earth deity (2.25). In fact, ancient stories tell that the iconographical type of the crowned Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā* originated in Arakan when the Buddha and 500 *arahats* flew across the Bay of Bengal in 554 BCE to convert the people of Dhaññavatī to Buddhism. The king of the city, Candasuriya, asked the Buddha to leave a statue behind for the people to venerate and the Buddha agreed. The king had a statue cast in the exact likeness of the Buddha, a large crowned figure in *bhūmisparśamudrā* and dedicated the statue by pouring water and calling the earth to witness (2.26; the story of the statue is depicted in a series of modern reliefs at the Mahāmuni Museum).<sup>57</sup> This powerful statue called the Mahāmuni resided for many years in a shrine on Sirigutta Hill in the city of Dhaññavatī and played a central role in *rājābhiseka*.<sup>58</sup>

The Pāla style of Indian Buddhist iconography that characterized the iconographic program in Bagan’s Buddhist temples was transmitted from India via trade routes passing through the Le–mro kingdoms, located in modern Arakan east of the coast along the Le–mro River, on the land route to Bagan.<sup>59</sup> Images of Vasundharā were common; figure 2.27 shows a crowned Buddha image from the Le–mro period, presently in the Mrauk U Museum. The Buddha is missing its crowned head, but Vasundharā is carved on the image base, a recurring feature of the iconography of Arakan. The earth deity

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<sup>56</sup> Gutman (1976:260).

<sup>57</sup> Gutman (2001:33, 146-9) notes the influence of Sino-Tibetan iconography on the Mahāmuni image, probably due to the interchange of monks between Bengal, Arakan, and Tibet, a connection that began during the Le-mro period and peaked in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>58</sup> Gutman (1976:207).

<sup>59</sup> Gutman (2001:61-2).

also appeared in Bagan during this period. One very early image of Vasundharā wringing her hair appears on two identical votive tablets, figure 2.28, presently in the Bagan Museum; a detail of Vasundharā is shown in figure 2.29. These votive tablets were discovered in 1975 when the Buphaya *stūpa* (2.30) was tumbled into the Irrawady River by an earthquake. The tablets were found in the base of the *stūpa* by a team of Burmese archaeologists who excavated the site after the 1975 earthquake.<sup>60</sup>

Images of hair-wringing female deities, independent of the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, appear at several sites in Bagan. Figure 2.31 is painted on the walls of the Abeyadana Temple, built *ca.* 1090 at the beginning of King Kyanzittha's reign.<sup>61</sup> This faded painting is of a female divinity sitting in *ardhaparyāṅkāśana* (cross-legged, right knee raised, elbow of the right arm resting on the knee). In her right hand she grasps and pulls her hair away from her head down in front of her chest, and over her left leg. Several animals accompany her: a snake, a bird, and something that may be a *haṃsa* or a white horse. This small painting is part of a frieze of many images at the temple including *ṛṣi* clad in tiger skins, and male and female *bodhisattvas*. Figure 2.32 shows a female standing on a lotus, wringing her hair and accompanied by a flying owl.<sup>62</sup> The image is painted on a wall of monument 67, the Thabinnyu-hpaya in Sale, an area that developed during the late 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries as Bagan expanded southwards along the Irrawady River. A hair-wringing deity, also from Sale, adorns the pedestal of the cult image of monument 101. This image, published by Bautze-Picron, is clearly associated with the base of the *vajrāsana*, and is easier to identify as Vasundharā.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>U Aung Kyaing thought the tablet was Pyu, but Stargardt and Brown, personal communications, September/November 2002, while agreeing with the 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century date for the tablet, were less certain about a Pyu attribution.

<sup>61</sup> A drawing of this image can be seen in Luce (1969, plate 237 e).

<sup>62</sup> Thanks to W. Sailer for providing me with a drawing of the image.

<sup>63</sup> Bautze-Picron (2003:38-9, plate 171).

Two hair-wringing earth deities appear on one of the plaques at the Nanda temple, built by Kyanzittha *ca.* 1105 (2.33). The plaque, which has recently been gilded, shows the Bodhisattva in *bhūmisparśamudrā* as Māra's three daughters dance in front of him. On his right two small figures wring out their long hair. Careful examination of the two figures shows that one of the earth deities is a female but the second lacks breasts; this and other small details suggest the second earth deity may be male.<sup>64</sup> Another niche contains a plaque identified by Luce as Sujātā and her servant, but Raymond argues that the scene may show two earth deities, one bearing the pot and the other in *anjali*.<sup>65</sup> While it is possible that there were once many male and female Vasundharas at Bagan that have disappeared over the centuries as old paintings were whitewashed and Buddha images moved to new sites and reinstalled on new pedestals, it more likely, based on the few number of images that remain, that the earth deity was a minor, optional motif during this period.

There are no recognizable references to Vasundharā, or *nān gānhñ* Brah Dharaṇī as she is known today in Cambodia, in Cœdès' *Inscriptions du Cambodge*. However, many images of her have survived from the Angkor period. One of the earliest images (2.34) is a bronze image pedestal originally from Phimai, a Khmer outpost today located in Thailand.<sup>66</sup> A detail is shown in 2.35. The pedestal was first published by Woodward who, on the basis of the style of the earth deity's dress and the appearance of Māra's demon hordes, dated the base to the early 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>67</sup> Although the base was found in Suphanburi in 1913, it was probably made in Phimai, a provincial centre that was once part of the Angkorean empire.<sup>68</sup> The pedestal depicting the earth deity and Māra's army resembles the iconographical program of the

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<sup>64</sup> Luce (1969:170, plate 297b). Thanks to W. Sailer for noticing this detail.

<sup>65</sup> Luce (1969:117, *c.f.* 12, plate 296 b), Raymond (1998:117).

<sup>66</sup> This image was first published in Woodward (1979:72-83). Today it is in the Norton Simon Museum, L.A. County.

<sup>67</sup> Woodward (1979:76).

<sup>68</sup> Moore (1992), Dagens (1988).



Angkorean temple of Phimai, built during the reigns of King Jayavarman 6 (r. 1080–1107 CE) and his son Dharanīndravarman (1107–1112 C.E.) and consecrated in 1108 CE. Prasat Phimai was the first Angkorean temple to be decorated with a significant amount of Buddhist iconography, much of it dedicated to the cult of Vajrasattva.<sup>69</sup> The main images at the temple represent Vajrasattva dancing on cadavers that represent the four *māras* and the deity Hevajra and his eight *yoginīs* who destroy Māra. The crowned Buddha also appears, as does a *māravijaya* on a very worn lintel.<sup>70</sup>

2.36 is an illustration of the cruciform gallery known as Braḥ Bān (the hall of the Thousand Buddhas) at Angkor Wat; it indicates the position of the stele when it was first noticed by Cœdès in 1916.<sup>71</sup> While Cœdès believed the stele was contemporaneous with Angkor Wat, based on similarities between the multiple-armed Māra and depictions of Rāvana in the bas-reliefs at Angkor, the date and provenance of the work remains uncertain.<sup>72</sup> A series of small carvings of single and multiple earth deities can be found at Angkor Wat.<sup>73</sup> This temple was constructed by King Suryavarman II and dedicated in 1125 CE. The inscriptions and major reliefs that decorate Angkor Wat are usually considered to be Vaishnavite in orientation, and not Buddhist, but in Cambodia religion has never been a simple matter, and unidentified forms of Buddhism, usually intertwined with other forms of Indic religion, pose recurring problems for Khmer art history. Figures 2.37 and 2.38 are details of two pilasters leading to the cruciform gallery. The pilasters are covered with carvings of groups or triads of small figures interspersed with *kāla* heads and vegetation. Several of these triads refer to an unknown version of the

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<sup>69</sup> Dagens (1995:26).

<sup>70</sup> There are many female figures in the top register of the *māravijaya* lintel including one in *añjali*, but the stone is too worn to identify any deities.

<sup>71</sup> The stele is presently in the depot of Conservation Angkor.

<sup>72</sup> Cœdès (1916:121), Giteau (1967:136). Giteau dated the stele to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century. The multi-limbed Māra on the Khmer stele bears a striking resemblance to the Māra depicted on the 8<sup>th</sup> century monument Borobudur.

<sup>73</sup> Tranet (1996:plate 30a) published a brick incised with a hair-wringing female figure reported to be from Angkor Borei, but the provenance of this brick has never been securely established.

*māravijaya*; a little deity twisting her hair is flanked by two smaller deities, one in *añjali*, and the other, like Aparājītā, making the *capēṭa mudrā*.<sup>74</sup> The Buddha was chiselled away during the iconoclasm of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. These small carvings are decorative motifs and not major iconographical statements such as the Vaishnavite bas-reliefs of the *Mahābhārata* that dominate Angkor Wat. However, it is known that some form of Buddhism was active during the reign of Suryavarman 2 and these little images probably refer to stories about the life of the Buddha popular at that time.<sup>75</sup>

Figure 2.40 is a lintel from the temple Beng Mealea, located about forty kilometers east of the Bayon near Phnom Kulen. Boisselier dated Beng Mealea after 1125 CE but before the reign of Jayavarman 7 (1181–1218 CE). The Bodhisattva has been chiseled from the top of the lintel, but the earth deity has survived and confronts Māra while wringing out her hair. Māra's arrows have turned to flowers (perhaps a reference to Kāma).

There are many representations of the *māravijaya* dating from the reign of Jayavarman 7. A temple called Angkor Krauy constructed during the reign of Jayavarman 7 outside of the city of Angkor Thom has a fronton depicting the *māravijaya* (2.41). Flanked by two horses, the damaged earth deity can still be seen wringing out her hair, but the Buddha above her has been completely destroyed. The Buddhist temple of Ta Prohm at Angkor Thom, built by Jayavarman 7 and dedicated to his mother in 1186, incorporated at least three depictions of the earth deity into its stone walls.<sup>76</sup> On the east gate at Ta Prohm is a damaged lintel (figure 2.42). This lintel shows a simplified version of the *māravijaya*. The Buddha has been chiselled off the lintel but the Bodhi

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<sup>74</sup> Roveda (2001:221). The space where the Buddha should be in this carving (and in most of the other Buddhist reliefs at Angkor) was defaced during an iconoclastic movement against Buddhism that took place in the 13<sup>th</sup> c.

<sup>75</sup> Des (1996:142, plate 228) cites a lintel of the *māravijaya*, south doorway, third level of Angkor Wat, but I was unable to locate this in July 2000.

<sup>76</sup> The prominence and repetition of this episode at Ta Prohm suggests that it may have had a special significance for Jayavaman 7 (or perhaps his mother).

Tree is still visible. Directly under the *vajrāsana* is the earth deity wringing out her hair, and supported on the head of a *makara*. Māra is depicted on either side of her, mounted on a rearing horse. The stone is very worn but on the right side of the lintel, one of a pair of lions seems to be attacking a small figure kneeling on a lotus flower. In a gesture reminiscent of Pāla representations of Aparājītā, the figure raises a right hand in a threatening gesture. A photograph of a damaged *gopura* shows the second *māravijaya* at Ta Prohm.<sup>77</sup> The Buddha has been chiselled away, but the earth deity, flanked by Mara’s soldiers mounted on elephants, still wrings out her hair.

2.43 is of a large relief located near the east gate of Ta Prohm. The relief depicts an elaborate *māravijaya* in three registers. The top register shows a Bodhisattva, much damaged, flanked by flying *apsaras*. Directly under the throne of the Buddha, in the center of the relief, is a large earth deity, borne on a lotus blossom, wringing out her long hair, which she has drawn down in front of her chest with two hands clasped in *añjali*. She is surrounded by Māra’s warriors, who are mounted on elephants and horses and wave their weapons at the Bodhisattva. Underneath the earth deity in a third register a deity dances (Hevajra?) flanked by eight females who seem to be standing in reverence (*yoginīs?*). The dancing deity seems to be holding up another *vajrāsana* over his head with one hand. It is impossible to tell who is sitting on the *vajrāsana*, because it has been chiselled away.

Another *māravijaya* that seems to conflate the witness of the earth deity with the dance of Hevajra is that from Tep Pranam, a cruciform terrace upon which a Buddhist temple or *vihāra* once stood, built by Jayavarman 7 in Angkor Thom.<sup>78</sup> Figure 2.44 is a detail of a fronton from Tep Pranam. The earth deity is located between the two elephants of Māra directly below the *vajrāsana*.

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<sup>77</sup> I was unable to locate this *gopura* at Ta Prohm in July 2000, and it may be in storage. I have only seen a photograph (Rapport, #4640, 1938) stored in the pictorial archives at the National Museum.

<sup>78</sup> Photograph, National Museum, North Terrace, Tep Pranam, number C.119, C. 32,2.

(S)he is wearing a short kilt similar to that worn by Hevajra's *yoginīs*, and is shown in an active pose with the legs up, dancing or trampling. The hair, gathered on top of the head with both hands, is held like a weapon. No religious texts have survived from Angkor to help interpret these images.<sup>79</sup> But inscriptions and sculptures indicate that between the 10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries a cult to Hevajra was popular, and held in high esteem in the Angkorean regions.<sup>80</sup> The images from Prasat Phimai are among the earliest surviving visual representations of the cult of Hevajra outside of India; most of the images of Hevajra, his *yoginīs* (and the earth deity) can be dated to the late Bayon Period, a time when the cult seems to have had official status.

Brah Khan, a temple built by Jayavarman 7 in honor of his father, contains, like Angkor Wat, carved pilasters. 2.39 is a carving of the hair-wringing deity flanked by two horses. The area directly above the earth deity where the Bodhisattva should be sitting has been gouged out. The leaf-shaped area that encloses the carving bears a strong resemblance to the *babil*, a candle holder used to establish ritual boundaries that is often decorated with images of Braḥ Dharaṇī.<sup>81</sup> Another set of carved pilaster show a single earth deity wringing her hair; again the area directly above the earth deity has been damaged with a chisel. At Banteay Kdei, another Buddhist temple built by Jayavarman 7, there are *māravijayas* that include the hair-wringing earth deity. There are also carved images of small female figures that support the Buddha (now a gouged space) directly on their heads (2.45). These small females may be a form of earth deity; a worn lintel lying on the ground at Wat Nokor, Tonle Bati dating from the Bayon period shows the hair-wringing earth deity supporting a small meditating Buddha (with no intervening *vajrāsana*) directly on her head like a *caryatide* (5.12).

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<sup>79</sup> Cœdès (1954:195, 207, 241, 244). Several inscriptions demonstrate that a cult to Vajrasattva was established in Cambodia by the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>80</sup> Lobo (1997:71-78)

<sup>81</sup> Cœdès (1923:51), Porée-Maspero (1954:625), Au Chhieng (1974:137- 141). For further discussion of the *babil* and its relationship to the cult of the earth deity, see chapter 4.

Several bronzes identified as “chariot finials” that depict the hair-wringing earth deity have survived from the period of Jayavarman 7.<sup>82</sup> Figure 2.46, today in the collection of the Cleveland Museum, shows the earth deity wringing out her hair under the *bhūmisparśamudrā*.<sup>83</sup> She is wearing the brief kilt of a warrior or *yoginī*, and her legs are drawn up in a trampling or dancing gesture. The face of this deity is finely modelled, and she has a sweet smile. She is flanked by two club-wielding demons, perhaps a reference to Yamāntaka, the fearsome deity who bashes *māras*.<sup>84</sup> The second bronze, figure 2.47, now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, shows the hair-wringing earth deity, again wearing the brief kilt of the *yoginī*, with her legs drawn up as if dancing or trampling. The modelling of her face is crude, and the earth deity looks fierce rather than sweet. This earth deity is again flanked by club-wielding guardians and two multi-headed *nāgas*; directly over her head is a four-armed figure with a tall hat or crown, identified by the placard at Metropolitan Museum as Viṣṇu. A pair of bronze plaques from the late Bayon Period, also at the Metropolitan Museum, depicts a pair of female earth deities. These plaques were once part of a large altarpiece set up around a central Buddha image. Figure 2.48 shows the first earth deity borne on a lotus in *añjali*. Next to her is the elephant Girimekhala, and two demonic mahouts (*māras*?) who brandish weapons at the Bodhisattva. Figure 2.49 shows the second earth deity, again borne on a lotus. This time she seems to be wringing her hair onto the two demonic mahouts, who along with the elephant are cowering in submission, one making *añjali*.

While most of the images above are clearly linked to the events of the Enlightenment, there are other hair-wringing images from the Angkor period that were probably intended to represent “ordinary” *apsaras*. Figure 2.50 is a

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<sup>82</sup> The National Museum Volunteers (1987:28, fig. 34) describe a similar bronze depicting Vajrasattva as a *popil* (i.e. *babil*), the ritual candleholder mentioned above.

<sup>83</sup> Pal (1984:103, plate 45). Cleveland Museum, bronze, Cambodia, 12–13<sup>th</sup> c.

<sup>84</sup> See Bautze-Picron (1995/6:373-4) for the association between the earth deity and the *yamāntaka*.

beautiful relief from the temple Ta Som of young woman wringing her hair. Another similar image is from Wat Phu, in southern Laos (2.51). Like Prasat Phimai, Wat Phu was an ancient religious site appropriated by the Khmers during the Angkorean period as an outpost of empire. When the Khmers renovated Wat Phu, they adorned the new walls with many *apsaras*. These *apsaras* seem, like the *apsaras* at Angkor Wat, to have a decorative function; there is no particular reason to associate them with the story of the earth deity.

The *apsaras* has been an essential feature of Khmer temples since they were first constructed. One of the most striking features of these creatures is their hairstyle. As Brown wrote,

Although extremely varied, there are basically two arrangements. The hair may be exposed with a portion knotted into a long narrow rope that stands (with the aid of lacquer or an internal wire support?) straight above the head, or in two ropes that form large loops on each side of the head. The second headdress arrangement is to wear a crown that completely covers the hair.<sup>85</sup>

In addition to the graphic complexity of their hair-styles, the *apsaras* constantly fiddle or pull at their hair, or hold the long stems of lotus blossoms with a gesture very similar to that of hair-wringing. Figure 2.52 is a pair of *apsaras* from Angkor Wat. It is difficult to tell if the three are wringing out their long hair, or holding the stems of flowers or ribbons. There is no agreement among scholars today about the “meaning” of these *apsaras*, their outfits and elaborate hair-styles. However, it is clear that their grace, beauty, hair-styles and gestures had a strong influence on the iconography of the earth deity at Angkor.

To sum up, there seem to have been at least five different styles of earth deity depicted at Angkor. The first style is the “standard” version of the *māravijaya* known today throughout mainland Southeast Asia, in which the hair-wringing female earth deity stands near or under the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, and defeats

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<sup>85</sup> Brown (1987:7-10).

Māra's army. A second style is a triad of female deities: one in *añjali*, one in *capēta mudrā*, and one wringing out her hair. The triad seems to conflate the stories depicted in Pāla iconography with the hair-wringing episode known in mainland Southeast Asia. A third style associates the hair-wringing earth deity with the cult of Hevajra and his *māra*-destroying *yoginīs*. In the bronze "chariot finials" and the lintel from the Buddhist Terraces, the earth-deity is depicted as dancing or trampling on her enemies. In these images, the earth deity with the short kilt, raised legs and aggressive expression and posture seems almost masculine. The fourth style is that of a female earth deity who bears the *vajrāsana* or the meditating Buddha on her head. A fifth style is the Khmer version of a *yakṣī*, the *apsaras*, a beautiful female divinity independent of the *māravijaya*, and is portrayed on Khmer temples making graceful gestures, one of which is wringing water out her hair.<sup>86</sup> These iconographical variations suggest that between the 10<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries the Khmer knew many different stories about the earth deity.

The next part of this chapter is concerned with the Middle Period: the years after the demise of Bagan and Angkor until the Modern Period (usually understood as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Cambodia and Laos were colonized by the French, and Burma by the English).<sup>87</sup> During this period, Theravāda Buddhism became ascendant, and ancient Vaishnavite, Śaivite and Mahāyāna Buddhist iconography, texts, sites and legends were appropriated and reconstructed in accordance with Theravādin cosmology. While the term "Middle Period," like the "Middle Ages," suggests that not much happened until the arrival of the "Modern Period," the changing iconography of the earth deity suggests that these years were a time of religious and iconographic innovation, particularly in Mrauk U, the city founded by King Min Saw Mun in 1433 after the Le-mro kingdom fell to Burmese invaders. Mrauk U was established 45 miles from the coast up the Kaladan River with the help of the

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<sup>86</sup> Srivastava (1994:1).

<sup>87</sup> Thompson (1997:22-32).

Sultan of Gaur (Bengal). Over the next 300 years, Mrauk U augmented its considerable wealth derived from the fertile rice-growing plains of the Kaladan and Le-mro Valley with profits from the strategic control of foreign trade in the Bay of Bengal. Between 1530 – 1630, Mrauk U's navy, with the assistance of Portuguese mercenaries, dominated the Bay of Bengal. At one point, twelve provinces of Bengal were vassals of Arakan. Mrauk U was also able to control land routes into Burma. After 1630, Mrauk U's power slowly diminished until the country was sacked by the Burmese King Bodawpaya in 1784 and then colonized by the British forty years later.

For centuries, the Arakanese have been devout Buddhists, and its kings and queens competed to build Buddhist temples and Buddha images. The eclectic iconography of these temples and images, while today considered by most Arakanese as purely Theravādin,<sup>88</sup> was clearly influenced by Mrauk U's polyglot population, which included Chinese traders, European mercenaries and Bengali Hindus and Muslims, among others.

One of the most important buildings in Mrauk U is the Shittaung Pagoda, built by King Min Bin (also called Mong Ba Gree) in 1536 CE on Pokhaung Hill, north of the palace. The temple was built to commemorate the victory over Bengal. The Shittaung, said to be influenced by Gaur mosque architecture, is a temple cave built of thick sandstone. The temple site is filled with *stūpas* and relics. There are two inner chambers used by the king for initiation or meditation, surrounded by a wall decorated by six tiers of carvings. Around the wall, at the cardinal points, are set *sīmā* stones depicting the earth deity in both male and female form (2.58 – 2.64).<sup>89</sup> There are three female Vasundharās and two male Vasundharas. The female earth deities are independent, but two lesser female deities flank the male Vasundharas. These

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<sup>88</sup> San Tha Aung (1979:111).

<sup>89</sup> Both U Shwe Zan (1994:37) and Tun Shwe (1992:47), identify these images as *sīmā* although Gatellier (1993:120, figs. 21-22); Gutman (2001:98, fig. 100) and Raymond (1998:119-120, 124, figs. A and B) do not.



female attendants hold cups or vases (2.58 and 2.60 are details of the subsidiary deities carved on the sides of figure 2.59). One of the walls of the structure has recently been opened up to facilitate access by tourists. At present, there is no *sīmā* located at that cardinal point, and it is possible that a *sīmā* was removed during the renovations. If so, the missing *sīmā* may be the male Vasundhara with four arms (2.65) presently located in the Mrauk U Museum. Although not identified by its museum placard as a *sīmā*, this image, with its roughly dressed base for burial in the ground, resembles the five *sīmā* that guard the inner chamber of the Shittaung.<sup>90</sup> Flanked by cup-bearing assistants, this male deity wrings his hair and dances with upraised feet. He wears a short kilt like the Cambodian earth deity on the lintel from Tep Pranam.

Vasundharā also appears on pedestal bases such as the Anawma Image (1.2). The image was built in 1501 by Anawma, the princess of King Salinggathu. On the base of the Buddha's throne is Vasundharā wringing her hair in the mouth of a tiger (2.53). This style of elaborately decorated pedestal has its origins in the Le-mro period (1018–1404). Figure 2.54 is the Nan U Image, built by Nanatashi, the chief queen of King Thirithudhamma Raza (1622–1638). Like the Anawma Image, the pedestal is elaborately decorated with carved vegetation and small figures. Vasundharā (2.55) occupies her traditional position at the centre of the base of the Buddha's throne, but she is just one of many small images on the pedestals alongside a mother breast-feeding her baby (a common motif on these pedestals) and a territorial spirit called a *bilu*, a *yamāntaka*-like guardian figure grasping two sticks (2.56 and 2.57).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Modern *sīmā* in Arakan and Burma are cylindrical stone stakes with a lotus bud on top (4.11). They bear little resemblance to Thai, Mon and Cambodia styles of *sīmā* (4.9, 4.10, 5.15) or to the earth deity *sīmā* in the Shittaung; further research needs to be done into these variations.

<sup>91</sup> Gutman (2001:163, fig. 180).

Fig. 2.66 is a small bronze dating from the Mrauk U period, one of a large collection of similar bronzes in the Buddhistic Museum in the Mahakuthala Kyaungdawgyi (monastery) in Sittwe, the provincial capital of Arakan. Most of these pieces are unprovenanced because of the unsystematic way they are acquired. Apparently local people find these relics while working in their fields, and bring them to the *sayadaw* (abbot) of the monastery for safekeeping. These bronzes are typical of the Mrauk–U period, depicting the crowned Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā*, with a tiny female Vasundharā wringing her hair on the pedestal base.<sup>92</sup>

In conclusion, during the Mrauk–U Period the earth deity was common, portrayed as a tiny figure on stone and bronze pedestal bases, and as male and female deities on *sīmā* stones and/or decorative steles. Female Vasundharās are represented wearing long skirts and crouching on their knees while male Vasundharas are depicted with short kilts revealing legs drawn up in a dancing or trampling mode. These variations suggest that several traditions about the earth deity were current at Mrauk U.

The image of the earth deity also varied in Burma during the Middle Period. Some of these variations doubtlessly reflected the inflow of different Buddhist traditions belonging to the Arakanese, Mon, Shan, Thai and Khmer populations who often found themselves subject to Burmese overlords during this period.<sup>93</sup> Also during the Middle Period, Burmese Buddhism was characterized by ceaseless Buddhist reforms and sectarian disputes. Research has usually focused on issues such as the interpretation of the *Vinaya* regarding Buddhist ordination, and monastic dress (the “one–shoulder, two–shoulder” controversy).<sup>94</sup> It is perhaps surprising to find that the earth deity was also the subject of controversy from the time of the second Ava

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<sup>92</sup> Raymond (1995:469-501). This museum also contains pieces that demonstrate the close relationship between Arakan and Ceylon during this period.

<sup>93</sup> Skilled artisans and monks were carried back to Burma by the victorious armies as war booty along with images and texts.

<sup>94</sup> See for example Mendelsohn (1975).

Period (16 – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) until the present day. In 1922, Duroiselle noted the existence of two commentaries, the *Samanta-cakkhu-dīpanī* and the *Porānadīpanī* that concluded that because the legend of Vasundharā was not found in either the Pāli Canon, it could not be considered orthodox.<sup>95</sup> One of Vasundharā’s detractors was the late 16<sup>th</sup> century “bishop” Tipiṭakalaṅkāra, who had murals of Vasundharā wringing her hair at the Manosāra Caves near Sagaing rubbed out because the legend “was only a popular fancy.” The *Porānadīpanī*, another commentary, stated that Vasundharā was a figment of the popular imagination, and discussed the confusion about the gender of the earth deity.

Who were these “bishops” noted by Duroiselle, and how did their treatises affect the iconography of Vasundharā? According to U Myint Aung, an artist and scholar resident in Mandalay, from the Pagan era until Ava 1 (1400 – 1650 CE) Vasundharā was portrayed as a female and located inside the *sīmā*, usually on the pedestal of the throne of the Buddha, or as an independent image, meant to be placed next to the Buddha image. To illustrate this, he showed me several bronze images predating the iconographical change (figure 2.71).<sup>96</sup> These small bronzes have lugs that fasten on to the base of a Buddha image. When the capital shifted to Amarapura during the second Ava period (16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century) images of Vasundharā were no longer located on or near the *vajrāsana*. Instead, they were moved outside the sacred space delimited by the *sīmā*, and often portrayed as male. U Myint Aung suggested that the change in the position and depiction of Vasundharā resulted from the new belief that Vasundharā was a figure of legend, or perhaps a *nat*: not really Buddhist. In addition, the fact that she was female meant that it was inappropriate for her to be in close contact with the hand of the Buddha. He referred me to the treatises of three *sayadaws* (abbot, or senior Buddhist monk

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<sup>95</sup> Duroiselle (1922:16).

<sup>96</sup> These bronzes are from the personal collection of U Win Maung.

who had been ordained for at least ten years) who lived between the late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries who discussed the “problem” of Vasundharā.

The first was Tipiṭakalaṅkāra, the monk who had the image of Vasundharā erased. Tipiṭakalaṅkāra was also known as the Taungpila Sayadaw (1578 –1651) and was active during the reign of King Tharlun (1629 – 1648). Originally from Prome, Tipiṭakalaṅkāra was a “one shoulder monk” who became famous when he debated Buddhist doctrine with other Buddhist scholars at the capital of Ava. Because of his erudition, Tipiṭakalaṅkāra was awarded the title of Taungpila Sayadaw, given a monastery at the capital and advised the king on matters of Buddhist doctrine. At the end of his life he took up forest life in the Tiriya Mountains near Sagaing.

A second monk associated with this controversy was Sayadaw Nyaung-gan, honored for his Buddhist erudition by King Bodawpaya (the Burmese king who sacked Arakan in 1784 and transported the Mahāmuni image to Mandalay).<sup>97</sup>

A third monk, known as the Monywe Sayadaw (1766 – 1834), was the abbot of the monastery of Monywe on the Chindwin River due west of Mandalay. Because of his reputation as a linguist and a Buddhist scholar, a monk named Siri Mala from the town of Monywa came and posed many questions to him. A disciple compiled their dialogue into a treatise called the *Sāmanta-cakkhu-dīpanī*, which was published in 1811. Monywe Sayadaw’s fame spread until it reached the ears of King Bagyidaw (r. 1819 – 1837) who requested him to come to the palace in Mandalay and answer his questions about Buddhism. Monywe Sayadaw’s answers pleased the king, and he was awarded the title *Indavajiralankara Siri Mahadhamma Rajādirājadaguru*, appointed the Royal Sayadaw, and established in a monastery in Ava. Section 62 of the *Sāmanta-*

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<sup>97</sup> Unfortunately I have not been able to locate any information about this monk, or learn his views on Vasundharā.

*cakkhu-dīpanī* is concerned with the authenticity of the earth deity episode.<sup>98</sup> Siri Mala of Monywa asked if the ancient legend of Wathundayi wringing out her hair is true, or if the generations of people who have gone to great expense to carve images of Vasundharā in the pagodas, on *stūpa*, *cetiya* and in cave shrines have been wasting their money. Siri Mala's query gives an indication of the scale of controversy about Vasundharā in Burma at that time:

And there are some who declare that looking at these images could lead to heresy. They say that such images should not be made and worshipped, as that could lead to later generations being misled. According to these words, people who have incurred financial expenditures in the hope of attaining the abode of the gods or attaining *Nibbāna*, appear to have committed a sinful deed by inadvertently having the figure of a goddess carved, which could lead to wrong views. I would also like to know whether Wathundayi did or did not wring out her tresses.<sup>99</sup>

Sayadaw Monywe answered by quoting the relevant passage in the Pāli *Apadāna Atthakathā* in which a non-personified earth responds to the *bhūmisparśamudrā* by crying

'I am your witness,' in a thousand voices, in a hundred thousand voices that overwhelmed Māra's soldiers. 'Oh Siddhat, you noble man, your alms-giving is indeed most noble!' and the words echoed and re-echoed.<sup>100</sup>

The Sayadaw then cited the relevant passage from the *Atthakathā Pasarasi Sutta*, which also contains a non-personified earth that responds to the *bhūmisparśamudrā* with a "great sound." Based on these passages, Sayadaw Monywe concluded that there was no textual support for the story that the earth goddess destroyed Māra and his army by wringing a flood of water from her hair.

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<sup>98</sup> *Sāmanta-cakkhu-dīpanī*, III, 62:161, is entitled "Whether Wathundayi wrung her tresses or not." The following quotations were translated from Burmese into English by Sao Hso Som.

<sup>99</sup> *Sāmanta-cakkhu-dīpanī*, III, 62:161.

<sup>100</sup> *Sāmanta-cakkhu-dīpanī*, III, 62:161.

The official exclusion of Vasundharā from the Canon meant that like the Sanskrit Buddhist saint, Upagupta, she was free to develop in unexpected ways. 2.69 is one of several votive plaques found when the Kyaik De–Ap relic chamber (Yangon) was exposed by a bomb in World War 2. Although Luce cites the discovery of only five votive tablets in the relic chamber, at least 30 identical votive plaques (presumably copies of the originals) are displayed today at the modern Bo–ta–htaung Pagoda that has been constructed on the site.<sup>101</sup> The eight scene votive plaque shows a small female Vasundharā in the center of the plaque directly under the Bodhisattva, kneeling and wringing two strands of hair. There has been some controversy over the dates of this plaque, which Luce tentatively dated 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>102</sup> But as Raymond notes, the small Vasundharā who kneels and wrings not one but two strands of hair bears a close resemblance to the earth deities on the bases of bronze Buddha images that have been securely dated to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it is more than likely that these plaques also belong to this period.<sup>103</sup>

Duroiselle first published one of these bronzes found in the ruined shrine of Natpallin at Bagan. The bronze (figure 2.67), which shows a small Vasundharā kneeling under a crowned Buddha on a *vajrāsana*, wringing two strands of hair, has a donative inscription dated 1643 CE.<sup>104</sup> There is little besides the two strands of hair to distinguish this image from the Mrauk U bronzes above. Figure 2.68 is the Hensley Buddha, published by Bailey and Lefferts, and dated 1628 CE by Lehman. Like the Natpallin bronze, the figure under the *vajrāsana* is wringing two strands of hair. But it seems to be male, has no breasts and is squatting, rather than kneeling, wearing a short breechcloth or kilt. The hand of the Buddha is touching a beehive–shaped pot, which could stand for Vasundharā’s jewel pot, or for the water of merit pot.

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<sup>101</sup> Luce (1985:163-4, plate 73).

<sup>102</sup> Luce (1969:13).

<sup>103</sup> Raymond (1998:113-127).

<sup>104</sup> Duroiselle (1927-8:126, plate 53e)

Lefferts identified the hair-wringing guardian figure under the Buddha as a *youkkhazou (rakṣasa)* or a “tree-nat.”<sup>105</sup>

This hair-wringing, male guardian figure may have originated in old traditions about male earth deities depicted at the Nanda temple (2.33) and at the Shittaung (2.59, 2.61, 2.65). Or it may represent the visual conflation of the male guardian *yamāntaka*, who holds his clubs or swords across his shoulders, with the female hair-wringing earth deity (see 2.57, 2.75).<sup>106</sup> The *nat*-like figure could have been substituted for Vasundharā as people learned that she was not part of the Pāli Canon. Although Vasundharā is not listed in any of the official lists of Burma’s *nats*, and was noticeably absent from the shrines at Mount Popa, it is possible that she is in the process of becoming a *nat*.<sup>107</sup>

During the Konbaung era, Vasundharā often appeared as part of a sculptural tableau, located outside the main sanctuary of the pagoda. This tableau is meant to represent the deities who witness pious donations. The chief figure is Indra, who records each donation by pouring water from a conch shell; additional figures include a scribe who writes the donation down, and one or more earth deities (male and female) who wring their hair. The tableaux were located outside the main sanctuary of the pagoda, and were meant to be a place where pious donors could pour water and formally commemorate their donations. Figure 2.72 is of a discarded hair-wringing Vasundharā presently

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<sup>105</sup> Lefferts (1995:3-8).

<sup>106</sup> Duroiselle (1914/15:54plate 34d). The rock caves of Powun-Daung, Buddhist temples constructed south of Monywa ca. 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries, are guarded by a pair of mysterious stone monsters who wring a long plait of hair, a possible conflation of Vasundharā and *yamāntaka*. Thanks to Anne-Mae Chew for alerting me to these figures.

<sup>107</sup> People in Burma told me that although Vasundharā was not “really” a nat, she was “princess of the nats.” And a *nat*-like figure of indeterminate sex who crouches on all fours and grasps its two plaits of hair can be seen for sale with the other *nat* figures in the stalls at the Shwezigon in Bagan and the Mahāmuni shrine in Mandalay (2.70). The stall attendant called the figure “Tangaro Natūū,” (my attempt at transliteration) but I have found no additional information about this creature.

in the depot of an archaeological museum near Monywa. These figures are no longer popular and becoming increasingly rare.<sup>108</sup>

The “twinning” of the earth deity becomes common during the Mandalay Period. Figure 2.73 is of a shrine on the periphery of the Mahāmuni complex guarded by twin (male) Vasundharas. The earth deity also appears in conjunction with a bell, meant to be rung in commemoration of pious donations, a recollection of the voice of the earth deity, compared in the *Nidānakathā* to a brazen bell of Magadha. A shrine on the periphery of the Mahāmuni consists of a big brass bell, a male Vasundhara, and Indra pouring water from his conch shell (2.74). Similar configurations involving earth deities and bells can be found at the Shwedagon and also in Dai wats in Sipsong Panna. A modern shrine on the edge of the main platform of the Shwedagon in Yangon (2.75) seems to be a tableaux made up of a male Vasundhara flanked by two *yamāntakas*, bearing clubs. This shrine receives a cult; devotees visit to light candles, make incense and floral offerings and pray.

Twin earth deities are also common on the main platform of the Shwedagon in Yangon. The base of the *stūpa* is surrounded by many small shrines containing images of the Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā*, flanked by guardian figures.<sup>109</sup> The guardians of five of these shrines are twin and independent male and female earth deities, wringing their hair (2.78–2.82).

A wooden carving presently in the National Museum in Bangkok but apparently from 19<sup>th</sup> century Burma is of a crowned Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā* with twin female Vasundharās underneath, wringing their hair (2.76). Twin female earth deities are not confined to Burma; although they seem to be uncommon in Thailand, they do appear at Wat Phra That

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<sup>108</sup> Again, I am indebted to W. Sailer, who told me about this form of the earth deity, and allowed me to use his beautiful photograph of this image.

<sup>109</sup> Moore, Mayer and U Win Pe (1999).



Haripunchai, Lamphun, where they guard the base of a Buddha footprint shrine, the Phra Putthabat Si Roi (2.77). As this area of Thailand was subject Burmese control between the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the presence of twin earth deities at Wat Phra That Haripunchai may show Burmese influence.

During this period of iconographical innovation, “classic” images of the female Vasundharā, kneeling by the *vajrāsana*, were still being manufactured. Figure 2.83 is of a lacquered wooden image presently located in the Bagan Museum.<sup>110</sup> The statue, dated by U Win Maung to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ava period, was originally placed on the floor in front of the main Buddha image.<sup>111</sup> Because of the high quality of the carving, it is likely that the statue was commissioned by a pious donor at a workshop in the capital of Ava, and then donated to the Shwezigon.<sup>112</sup> Vasundharā also appears painted on the walls of the Powun–Daung caves, a complex of Buddhist temples excavated into a hill near Monywa on the Chindwin River. Figure 2.84 shows her kneeling by the *vajrāsana* in Peya Kozu temple, grotto no. 478.<sup>113</sup> Figure 2.85 shows another mural from the caves. These paintings date from the Nyaung–Yan period (1597–1606).

Ethnic Tai people inhabit the Shan region around Lake Inle and further south in Tenasserim. Vasundharā can be seen painted on the walls of their wats, and on wooded doors and gateways. Figure 2.86 is of a wood carving in the 18<sup>th</sup> century pagoda in Bu Dalin Village, Monywa. A carved wooden Vasundharā, dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, can be seen at Wat Phra That Lampang Luang, near Chiang Mai on a *tung kradong* (“solid flag”) hanging at the rear of the

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<sup>110</sup> Noted in Duroiselle (1925:146, and 125, fig. D)

<sup>111</sup> According to U Win Maung and Thein Tun U, this piece was originally at the Shwezigon but at the turn of the century was moved to the archaeological depot at the Nanda temple by the Abbot, U Saindaw, for safekeeping. When the Bagan Museum was completed, this image of Vasundharā along with the other objects in the depot at the Nanda temple were moved to the new Museum.

<sup>112</sup> Karow (1991:123, fig. 102), 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>113</sup> Chew (1999).

Viharn Nam Tam (2.87). A more recent carved doorway at Wat Mai in Luang Prabang shows a similar facility with wood (2.88).

Buddhist temples in the Tai regions are traditionally decorated with stencils and lacquer. The next three stenciled images have recently been renovated – the paint is shiny and new – but the styles are traditional. Figure 2.89 shows a black and gold stencilled *māravijaya* at Wat Xieng Thong, Luang Prabang with a standing Vasundharā (note Māra’s flower-tipped arrows). Wat Baan Naxay in Vientiane has a simple stencilled image of a kneeling Vasundharā decorating the exterior plastered walls of the *vihāra*. (2.90). In Gaza (Sipsong Panna), red and gold twin Vasundharās in Chinese dress kneeling by the *vajrāsana* have been stencilled along the lower interior wall of the *vihāra* (figure 2.91).

Images of Vasundharā from Cambodia’s Middle Period are difficult to find. There are few paintings extant in Cambodia that are earlier than the 19<sup>th</sup> century: as they become faded or damaged by water, pious donors raise money to have them repainted or rebuilt.<sup>114</sup> The *prāsāt* of Wat Nokor, Kompong Cham, was built during the Bayon Period at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and its four frontons decorated with four scenes from the Life of the Buddha.<sup>115</sup> The survival of Bayon Period Buddhist iconography from the iconoclasm of the 13<sup>th</sup> century is unusual, and Giteau has argued that at least three of the frontons were destroyed after the death of Jayavarman 7, and then re-carved over the damaged surface when Wat Nokor was reconstructed and re-consecrated as a Theravāda Buddhist *vihāra* in 1566 CE. Therefore, the Vasundharā depicted in figure 2.92, kneeling in a niche under the *vajrāsana* over Wat Nokor’s main altar should be considered an example of Middle Period iconography.

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<sup>114</sup> Giteau (1998:21-31), and Nafilayan and Nafilayan (1997).

<sup>115</sup> Giteau (1967:137). The foundation of the renovated *vihāra* is commemorated by an inscription in Pāli and Khmer (K. 82).

Independent bronze images of the earth deity have survived from the Middle Period. Figure 2.93 is a bronze of the earth deity from Kompong Speu, 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>116</sup> This bronze, like a similar Shan bronze (2.94) would have been placed in front of or next to a Buddha image. Manuscripts from the Ayutthayan period, such as figure 3.2, depict Vasundharā standing in front of the *vajrāsana*. 2.95 is an unprovenanced wooden carving of Vasundharā, stored along with other damaged statues in a depot at Wat Phra That in Vientiane. Although this image is relatively recent, it is traditional in style and charming in its construction: in addition to her unusual bat-eared tiara, her hair is made from a plait of straw. In contrast, figures 2.96 and 2.97 show the modern styles that are gradually replacing traditional wood and bronze images of Vasundharā. These images are made of painted cement; cast in moulds, they are relatively inexpensive to purchase, and Buddhists all over the region are enthusiastically decommissioning the old, hand-made images (such as the charming Lao Vasundharā with the straw tress) and replacing them with modern images such as figure 2.96, a brightly painted cement Vasundharā from Wat Menghan, Sipsong Panna, and figure 2.97, a life-sized painted cement statue with eerie, fake diamond eyes, recently installed at the main altar of Wat Phnom in Phnom Penh.

By the late Middle Period, the iconography of the *māravijaya had* become standardized in Cambodia, Thailand and Laos. This is partly due to the promotion by powerful Thai kings of standardized forms of Buddhist texts such as the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, something that will be discussed further in chapter 3.<sup>117</sup> This iconographical standardization has continued into the present, partly because of the influence of Thai styles of Buddhism on the region, but also because of modern techniques of art production. Figure 2.98 shows a mass-produced postcard in the style of a Thai artist named Khru Phra Dewa. Fifty years ago, Khru Phra Dewa created a series of brightly coloured

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<sup>116</sup> Giteau (1967:125-140).

<sup>117</sup> The promotion of orthodox Buddhism by the Cakri monarchs is discussed in some detail in chapter 3.

images of the Life of the Buddha for lithographic production; these inexpensive images have been disseminated throughout Asia and beyond in the form of inexpensive posters, calendars, etc.<sup>118</sup> Although they seem garish in comparison to traditional styles of mural painting, people, especially in rural areas, consider these illustrations to be modern and realistic and commission artists to reproduce them in their wats.<sup>119</sup> Such influences have crossed national and religious boundaries in mainland Southeast Asia, and unified the iconography of the earth deity in unexpected ways. Figure 2.99 is a recent mural at the Shwedagon, 2.100 is a *māravijaya* decorating the walls of a *kuṭī* in Vientiane. A painting at Wat Athvea in Siem Reap (figure 2.101, recently painted by the resident monk–artist) reveals a similar aesthetic.

The standardization of the *māravijaya* and the image of the earth deity is a reflection of changes in methods of art production. In the past, the artists who decorated Buddhist temples were usually hereditary craftsmen, often attached to the court. Over the past century, artists trained at art schools located in urban areas have begun to supplant traditional craftsmen and monk–artists. These artists go from temple to temple with a photograph album of images they can reproduce, quoting a price per square meter.<sup>120</sup> The donors who pay for the work are usually older couples, or widows who want to make merit for themselves and family. Naturally conservative, they choose to sponsor images they remember from their youth. Although the subject is chosen by the donor, the style is left up to the individual artist. The models used to create sculptures and murals are other art works (and not Buddhist texts). Artists visit temples, museums and archaeological sites to look at images. They take photographs and carry around notebooks full of sketches. When called upon to do a commission, they use these visual archives to create an image. Less

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<sup>118</sup> I bought one of these posters in a Cambodian grocery store in Long Beach California in 1997.

<sup>119</sup> Inglis (1995:51-77). The phenomenon of commercially printed “god posters” in India has been the subject of much recent scholarship.

<sup>120</sup> In Thailand, the basic price for mural painting is 5000 Thai *baht* per square meter; in Cambodia the cost is US\$300 per square meter.

sophisticated and less-skilled artists are limited to reproducing the poster images of Phra Khru Dewa in garish acrylics, while more successful and talented artists create new masterpieces. And the *māravijaya* episode has remained a popular if challenging subject for artists and donors alike.

Figure 2.102 is from an image at Wat Buddhapadipa, a Thai wat located in Wimbledon, London. When the *uposathā* was built in 1982, Thai artists volunteered to come and paint its walls. One artist was Panya Vijnthanasarn who painted a *māravijaya* on the wall facing the main Buddha image.<sup>121</sup> When I asked Acharn Panya about this painting, he told me that he had been planning the details of a *māravijaya* that would include contemporary war imagery for ten years before the opportunity to paint at Wat Buddhapadipa came along. He submitted a draft sketch to the wat committee, and despite its controversial nature (Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, deploying nuclear weapons, number among Māra's soldiers) they agreed to his design (2.103). He painted the image in its traditional place in the *uposathā* – facing the main Buddha image – but the painting differs from traditional Thai art in its technique, color, fine details and dimensions. Despite all these innovations, the model he used for the earth deity was an Ayutthayan painting from Wat Suwannaram in Petchburi.

In Arakan, I asked sculptor Kyaw Tha Nyunt about a large Buddha statue he is working on that incorporates the earth deity in its base.<sup>122</sup> The statue is being constructed in parts; Vasundharā was carved separately, and will be slotted into the pedestal when the Buddha image is assembled in the pagoda. Kyaw Tha Nyunt told me that his Vasundharā is modelled after the Anawma image discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Before he began to work on the image, he made a sketch of the Anawma Vasundharā (2.53): the drawing he is

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<sup>121</sup> Acharn Panya presently teaches art at Silpakorn University in Bangkok.

<sup>122</sup> Kyaw Tha Nyunt, personal communication, July 29, 2001. The piece was commissioned by a wealthy donor for a Buddhist temple in Maung Ni Byin village, near Sittwe township.

holding in figure 2.104 is the working sketch he used while carving the sandstone. Like Acharn Panya, he explained that when he is commissioned to do a sculpture, he does not refer to religious texts. The donor tells him what to make, but the final creative decisions are his, based on his own ideas and on other images that he has seen.

In addition to commissioning works of art, donors with cash can go to the open market and purchase images to decorate their wats. Figure 2.105 is of a shop front of a bronze caster in Bangkok. The shopkeeper told me that the bronze image of Mae Thoranee displayed on the footpath is popular with customers, and sells for about \$4000 US dollars. Figure 2.106 of a production shed outside the École des Beaux Arts in Phnom Penh; in the foreground recently cast cement images of Braḥ Dharāṇī are drying in the sun. Figure 2.107 is of two finished images of the earth deity waiting for sale; the price is about \$300 US dollars. After drying, they are painted and their hair fitted with a water pipe so they can be used as fountains.

This chapter has presented a great jumble of images of the earth deity from all over Buddhist Asia: from India, Ceylon, Tibet, Mongolia, Arakan, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Sipsong Panna, Cambodia. The dates of these images range from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE to 2001. Despite the great distance and speed of this journey, I hope that I have made three points. The first is that Vasundharā travelled, along with many varied stories and ideas about the Enlightenment, to the Buddhist kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia from Northern India via the Bay of Bengal, probably in successive waves between the 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The second point is that she survived the demise of Sanskrit Buddhism, and was re-appropriated into Theravāda Buddhism. While she has generally flourished in the Theravādin environment, periodic redefinitions of Buddhist orthodoxy on the Mainland have resulted, from time to time, in the official

disapproval and suppression of the earth deity, most noticeably in Burma between the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a result of this suppression, her iconography has fluctuated wildly in Burma, while in the regions under Thai influence, the iconography of the earth deity has become standardized along with the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, a Life of the Buddha sponsored and promoted by the Cakri monarchs.

The final point is the persistence of the earth deity. Despite the disapproval of kings and *sayadaws*, donors have continued to find the earth deity an important religious symbol, and have continued to commission images of Vasundharā to adorn their temples. The importance of pious donors for the survival of particular forms of Buddhist iconography is sometimes obscured by official controversies over religion. But it is important to remember that at the same time Tipiṭakalaṅkara was erasing Vasundharā from the walls of a temple in Sagaing, pious donors were commissioning artists to paint her image in the Powun–Daung caves at Monywa. That the earth deity has survived iconoclasm, the demise of Sanskrit Buddhism, official censure by the Theravādin hierarchy, colonialism, war and even the ravages of the Cultural Revolution in Sipsong Panna, is testimony to her enduring value for Buddhists throughout mainland Southeast Asia.

### 3: The Earth Deity and the Biography of the Buddha

This chapter is about the information that can be found in Buddhist texts about the earth deity associated with the defeat of Māra at the time of the Enlightenment. The concept of an “earth deity” or “mother earth” can be found in most countries and cultures. In the previous chapter we have seen that the iconography of the earth deity is not fixed, and her identification can be problematic. It is equally difficult to identify “our” earth deity in Buddhist literature, where her role, character, number and gender fluctuate constantly. To further complicate matters, the textual material concerned with the Enlightenment is enormous, spanning centuries, continents and many cultures and languages as well as the different schools of Buddhism. As in the previous chapter on the iconography of the earth deity, I narrow the field of research by focusing on small units of text, stripped of their context. While limited, this method of text analysis builds up a glossary or “database” of information that can be used to identify changes and developments in the story of the earth deity.

In the first part of this chapter, I briefly outline the Buddha biographical tradition and the development of the *māravijaya* episode within that tradition. Then I present a selection of *māravijaya* passages from the biographies of the Buddha that include the earth deity. The second part of the chapter is concerned with *māravijaya* episodes that were composed outside of India and in languages other than Sanskrit and Pāli. My main focus here is the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, a biography of the Buddha found throughout Mainland Southeast Asia in which the earth deity plays an important role. In all of these texts, the earth deity episode follows a readily identifiable structure: in response to Māra’s challenge, the Bodhisattva recalls his good deeds during



his previous existences, he makes the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, the earth deity responds on behalf of the Bodhisattva, and Māra and his army are defeated. However, within this fixed structure, the earth deity changes constantly. In some texts the earth is personified, in others the earth is not personified. When touched by the Bodhisattva she may ring like a gong, thunder, cry out, jump for joy, quake, ride on a giant lotus, wring out her hair or spin and dance wildly. These variations cannot be arranged on a map or continuum, or ascribed to gradual elaboration over time. Instead, the earth deity changes like a chameleon, reflecting the changing beliefs and attitudes of Buddhist communities.

In a recent article, Hallisey encouraged students of Buddhism to “reconceptualize the Buddhist tradition in comparison with other transcultural phenomena.” In addition to determining the provenance of a particular text, we must also try to understand the technologies, practices, and institutions that have contributed to its survival (or disappearance).<sup>1</sup> Often there is not enough surviving information to explain for example why a text that was popular when Xuanzang visited India in the 8<sup>th</sup> century has since changed or disappeared. Fortunately, some of the changes that have affected texts containing the earth deity episode have been documented in Burma and Thailand. The rest of the chapter is about some of these changes and the reasons behind them.

The Buddha left behind no writings in his own hand, and the oral traditions preserved by his followers about his life and career were not written down for many years after his death. The development of a complete biography of the Buddha, describing his career from birth to death, was a slow process that took many centuries.<sup>2</sup> Lamotte divides the evolution of the biography of the Buddha into four periods. The first and most ancient phase identified by Lamotte consists of the sparse biographical references found in the earliest

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<sup>1</sup> Hallisey (1995:51-2).

<sup>2</sup> Lamotte (1988), Reynolds (1976), Bareau (1995:15).

*suttas* that were written down sometime after the *parinirvāna*.<sup>3</sup> The second phase of biographical development took place during the compilation of the Vinayas by the different schools, a process that began before the reign of King Aśoka. The third phase was the composition of popular “Lives” of the Buddha during the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries CE. Complete, life-to-death biographies of the Buddha do not appear until the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Common Era. While there has been disagreement with Lamotte’s categorization (such as his dates for the *parinirvāna*<sup>4</sup> and the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya*, a work that contains a complete biography of the Buddha) I have found his divisions are a useful way to present what is otherwise an unwieldy mass of information.<sup>5</sup> The biographical anecdotes contained in the Pāli Canon, in particular those found in the *Majjhimanikāya* in the *Ariyapariyesanā*, *Dvedhāvitakka*, *Bhayabherava* and *Mahāsaccaka* *suttas*, are believed by scholars to be early.<sup>6</sup> In these *suttas*, the Buddha refers during the course of a sermon to events that took place during his quest for enlightenment such as the distress of his parents at his going forth, cutting off his black hair, the names of two of his teachers, the successive stages of the Enlightenment, etc.<sup>7</sup> Supernatural special effects – such as Māra’s demonic army and the earth deity – are noticeably absent and the *māravijaya* is depicted as a psychological struggle against the obstacles to enlightenment (lust, greed, desire, etc.) that was resolved in the Buddha’s mind. The *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* tells us that the Buddha sat on an agreeable piece of ground near Uruvelā thinking “This will serve for striving” and then attained *nibbāna*.<sup>8</sup> The *Mahāvagga* in the Pāli *Vinaya-Piṭaka* states that the Buddha sat cross-legged for seven days at the foot of the Bodhi Tree

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<sup>3</sup> Lamotte (1988:13-15).

<sup>4</sup> Bechert (1991:1-21).

<sup>5</sup> Lamotte (1988:657) dated the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya* to the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> centuries.

<sup>6</sup> Lamotte (1988:649-650).

<sup>7</sup> Biographical fragments can be found in the *Ariyapariyasena* (M. 1, pp. 162-73, T. 26, no. 204, ch. 56, pp. 776b-778a) *Dvedhāvitajja* (M. 1., p. 117) *Bhayabherava* (M. 1, pp. 17-23; T. 125, ch. 23, pp. 665b-665c) and the *Mahāsaccakasutta* (M. 1, pp. 240-9) Another early biographical fragment is the *Catuṣpariṣatsūtrā*, (Dulva, 4, p. 52, sq., T. 1450, ch. 5, p. 124c sq.) and Kloppenborg (1973).

<sup>8</sup> Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli (1995:259).

“experiencing the bliss of freedom.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the *Mahāpadanā Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya* describes how the former Buddha Vipassī entered his dwelling place in a secluded spot and thought his way to Enlightenment: “And then, as a result of the wisdom born of profound consideration, the realisation dawned on him...”<sup>10</sup>

It must be remembered that although these *suttas* are ancient, they are not primary evidence about the Buddha. Rather, they reflect the culture and values of their (later) redactors.<sup>11</sup> We cannot conclude from the absence of the *māravijaya* episodes in the Pāli *suttas* that early Buddhists never personified Māra or the earth deity. In fact, Māra constantly appears throughout the earliest strata of the Pāli Canon like a malevolent ghost, taunting and tempting the Bodhisattva and the other members of the Sangha.<sup>12</sup> The *Padhānasutta* describes how Māra came to tempt the Bodhisattva when he was meditating on the banks of the Nerañjara River just prior to the Enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> Although no actual assault takes place, many of the elements of the rivalry between Māra and the Bodhisattva are foreshadowed in the narrative.<sup>14</sup>

Like Māra, the non-personified earth also appears as a literary motif throughout the Pāli Canon.<sup>15</sup> In an essay “The Earth as Swallower,” Horner writes that the predominant characteristic of the earth in the Pāli literature is its instability. The earth constantly quakes and trembles, and its surface rises and falls at the touch of a Buddha’s hand or foot. When people behave badly, the earth is unable to support the weight of their bad deeds. It splits open and

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<sup>9</sup> Horner (1982:1).

<sup>10</sup> Walshe (1987:212).

<sup>11</sup> Bareau (1963:91), Lamotte (1988:652), Schopen (1989: 100) and Tambiah (1984:116) have demonstrated, each in their own way, that the earliest *suttas* already show “tendentious patterning and mythologizing of the Buddha’s life and teaching.”

<sup>12</sup> See for example the *Māra Suttas*, Horner (1983:128-159).

<sup>13</sup> Ling (1962:148), Malalasekera (1974:615).

<sup>14</sup> The references to Māra are too numerous to cite here; see for example Ling (1962) who argued that the origins of the *māravijaya* episode lie in the *Padhāna-sutta*.

<sup>15</sup> Horner (1966: 151-159).

passes them down into the flames of Avīci Hell. And the earth is repeatedly described as *acetanā*, “incognizant, unconscious, un-volitional” although Horner remarks that

The earth therefore, though utterly indifferent alike to the lovely and the filthy things thrown on it (M. i, 423) seems to be endowed by popular tradition with some awareness of ‘world-shaking’ events in the life of man; and though it is difficult to determine whether it was regarded as more or less alive, whether cognizant or not, it could be regarded as an active agent. And not only active, but also co-operative in its power to mark astounding events by quaking and trembling, and in its power to forward the general interests of mankind by eliminating beings who might well be eliminated at the very time and place where this was most necessary.<sup>16</sup>

More information about the Buddha and the earth deity can be found in the Vinayas.<sup>17</sup> The biographical material in the Vinayas is fragmented rather than consecutive: anecdotes about a particular event in the life of the Buddha are used as a frame to introduce the formulation of an order or the imposition of a prohibition. The Vinayas of the different schools are also inconsistent in their content. The extant *Pāli Vinaya* does not contain the *māravijaya* episode while the biographical material in the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* is limited to an account of the Buddha’s funeral and the first two councils. The *Mahīśāsaka Vinaya*, collected in Sri Lanka by the monk Faxian ca. 340-420 CE, translated into Chinese by Buddhajīva and Zhu Daosheng, ca. 423-424 CE and preserved in T. 1421, *Mishasaibu huoxi wufen lü*, does not contain a *māravijaya* episode but does however contain an earth deity who announces the setting of the Wheel in Motion. The *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya*, a vast compendium of material, preserved in Chinese, Tibetan and Sanskrit, contains a complete biography of the Buddha including the witness of the earth deity during the *māravijaya*, which will be presented below.

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<sup>16</sup> Horner (1966:159).

<sup>17</sup> Bareau (1963:57-91).

Many theories have been put forward to explain the inconsistent content of the Vinayas. Frauwallner argued that all the Vinayas once contained an ancient and continuous narrative of the life of the Buddha, which he called the “old *Skandhaka*.” This biography was lost over time and the disconnected fragments found today scattered throughout the Vinayas are its remnants.<sup>18</sup> Lamotte and others have questioned Frauwallner’s hypothesis of an old *Skandhaka*, arguing instead that the biography of the Buddha developed independently from the Canon over a long period of time in response to the changing needs of Buddhist communities.<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of the Common Era, “incomplete Lives,” which featured a particular aspect of the Buddha’s career (Birth to Enlightenment, the First Sermon, or his final illness and *Parinirvāna*) began to appear. Examples of incomplete Lives preserved in Sanskrit are the *Mahāvastu*, which ends with the conversion of the three Kāśyapa brothers and the *Lalitavistara*, which recounts the life of the Buddha up until the setting in motion of the Wheel of the Law. The *Nidānakathā*, an incomplete Life preserved in Pāli, covers the period from the birth of Sumedha up until the donation of the Jetavana by Anāthapiṇḍika.<sup>20</sup> Many more incomplete Lives originally composed in Sanskrit have survived only in the Chinese *Tripitaka*.<sup>21</sup>

The incomplete Lives flesh out the sparse biographical material found in the *suttas*. Events such as the Buddha’s birth, his farewell to his horse and charioteer, and the Enlightenment are embellished and dramatized, perhaps reflecting the importance of such narratives for proselytizing and preaching to lay audiences. The *Jātakas* are often referred to in a convoluted narrative style: episodes in the life of the historical Buddha are explained as the result of

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<sup>18</sup> Frauwallner (1956:46).

<sup>19</sup> Lamotte (1998:653).

<sup>20</sup> Fausböll and Rhys Davids (1880), Jayawickrama (1990).

<sup>21</sup> Recent manuscript discoveries from Central Asia have recovered many of the original Indic versions; hopefully this process will continue.

his actions in former existence, in particular the time when Vessantara gave away his wife and children.<sup>22</sup> The *māravijaya*, with its dramatic confrontation between Māra and the Bodhisattva, was a popular subject. One early text, T. 184 or *Xiu xing ben qi jing*, an account of the early part of the Buddha's career from Dīpaṃkara's prophecy to the happenings in the first days after his Enlightenment, was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by the Sogdian monk Kang Mengxiang and two Indians, Zhu Dali (Mahābāla) and Zhu Tanguo (Dharmapāla) ca. 200 CE.<sup>23</sup> In the text, the Buddha responds to Māra's challenge by referring to his good deeds in his previous lives. Then, touching the earth with his hand, he said "She knows me!"<sup>24</sup> The giant earth answered with shudders and thundering noises, causing Māra and his followers to stumble and fall. Māra, defeated, fell flat on the ground. The earth is not personified in this text, but her roaring and shaking destroy Māra and his troops. The *Mahāvastu*, a long complicated work composed in Sanskrit, of uncertain date and provenance, but which identifies itself as the *Vinaya* of the Lokottaravādins contains not one but four "remixes" of the *māravijaya*.<sup>25</sup> As in the Chinese *Xiu xing ben qi jing*, the challenge, the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, a loud noise like a bronze vessel from Magadha being struck, and the quaking of the earth that routes Māra and his troops are all present in the *Mahāvastu*.<sup>26</sup>

The *māravijaya* in the *Nidānakathā* has many similarities to the *Mahāvastu* and the *Xiu xing ben qi jing*: the non-personified earth does not quake but makes a loud utterance that overwhelms Māra and his hosts:

[In response to Māra's challenge, the Buddha addresses the earth:]

...I have in this place no living witness at all. But not counting the  
 alms I have given in other births, let this great and solid earth,

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<sup>22</sup> Lamotte (1998:655).

<sup>23</sup> T. = *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (*Newly Revised Tripiṭaka Inaugurated in the Taishō Era*) published between 1924-1932, and consists of 100 volumes, incorporating 3,360 scriptures in Chinese and Japanese.

<sup>24</sup> Zürcher (1988:100). English translation by H. Hellendoorn.

<sup>25</sup> Prebish (1994:64).

<sup>26</sup> Jones (1952:284, 312-3, 354-355).

unconscious though it be, be witness of the seven hundredfold great alms I gave when I was born as Wessantara!”

And withdrawing his right hand from beneath his robe, he stretched it forth towards the earth, and said, “Are you, or are you not witness of the seven hundredfold great gift I gave in my birth as Wessantara?”

And the great Earth uttered a voice, saying “I am witness to thee of that!” overwhelming as it were the hosts of the Evil One as with the shout of hundreds of thousands of foes...<sup>27</sup>

The *Nidānakathā* is not part of the Pāli Canon but forms part of the introduction to the *Jātakāthakathā*. Authorship of the *Nidānakathā* is traditionally ascribed to Buddhaghosa, who is believed to have composed the text in Pāli ca. 5<sup>th</sup> century CE as a prologue to the Sinhalese commentary on the *Jātakās*. Frauwallner argued that the biographical material found in the *Nidānakathā* (including the *māravijaya* episode cited above) originated in the old *Skandhaka* and at one time framed the Pāli *Vinaya* until it was moved to its present position. Likewise, Jayawickrama argued that the material in the *Nidānakathā*, with its emphasis on the historical Buddha, should be considered representative of the earliest strata of Buddhism.<sup>28</sup> However, Lamotte argued that the *Nidānakathā* may have been modelled on the incomplete Sanskrit “Lives” circulating throughout Buddhist Asia during the first centuries of the Common Era, a hypothesis supported by similarities between the story of the earth deity in the Pāli narrative and the *māravijayas* preserved in the Chinese *Tripitaka*.<sup>29</sup>

Reynolds writes that these Lives of the Buddha, with their dramatic descriptions of the *māravijaya* and other events in the Buddha’s career, developed in conjunction with the popularity of pilgrimage sites during the

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<sup>27</sup> Fausböll and Rhys Davids (1880), see also Jayawickrama (1990:100-101).

<sup>28</sup> Jayawickrama (1990: xv): “Thus, it is abundantly clear that the *Nidānakathā*, taken as a whole, is earlier than these Buddhist Sanskrit works in contents and character, though chronologically it was written after them.”

<sup>29</sup> Lamotte (1998:600) was inclined to see the *Suttanipāta*, the Pāli *Khuddhakas*, and the *Mahāvagga* as Sinhalese adaptations of the popular Northern Sanskrit Lives of the Buddha.

post-Aśokan era. Local guides told the pilgrims visiting the sacred Buddhist sites of Northern India stories, which they took back to China and translated, creating new traditions. Although the essential structures remain the same, these *māravijayas* contain many novelties, perhaps because of the informal way they were originally transmitted. When the Chinese monk Xuanzang visited a *vihāra* in Northern India in 629 CE, he was shown a painting of the Tathāgata in *bhūmisparśamudrā* by a monk who then related the story of the *māravijaya*:

His right hand hangs down in token that when he was about to reach the fruit of a Buddha, and the enticing Māra came to fascinate him, then the earth-spirits came to tell him thereof. The first who came forward advanced to help the Buddha resist Māra to whom the Buddha said “Fear not!” By the power of patience he must be subdued!” Māra-rāja said, “Who will bear witness for you?” The Tathāgata dropped his hand and pointed to the ground, saying “here is my witness.” On this a second earth spirit leapt forth to bear witness. Therefore the present figure is so drawn, in imitation of the old posture of the Buddha.<sup>30</sup>

In this story, there are not one but two earth deities. Their gender is not specified in the Chinese text, but they are both described as active agents who spring from the earth to warn and help the Bodhisattva during his struggle against Māra. Although on one level Xuanzang’s story is just a tourist’s tale, it shows that stories about two personified earth deities were known in Northern India by this time.<sup>31</sup>

T. 187, *Fangguang da zhuangyan jing*, translated into Chinese by Divākara ca. 683 CE, is one of the independent Lives listed by Lamotte. It also tells of two earth deities. The text first recounts Māra’s challenge, the Buddha’s recollection of the merit he accumulated in his former lives and the

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<sup>30</sup> Beal (1968:121).

<sup>31</sup> Only a few of the *māravijayas* preserved in the *Taisho* have been translated into European languages; the following examples are not a conclusive list by any means. The *Bukkyo Daijiten* (1936) gives many references for “earth deity.” Translation into English, R. Giebel.



*bhūmisparśamudrā*. Then the earth deity sprang from the earth. As the text is composed in Chinese, the gender of the deity is unspecified, but it is described as adorned with jewels and bearing a vase made from the seven precious substances, full of flowers. The deity said:

I will bear witness to the fact that in the past the Bodhisattva practised the way of the sages for countless *kalpas* and will now succeed in becoming a Buddha. As for this adamantine navel of the earth of mine, other places all revolve but this ground does not move." [i.e. the *vajrāsana* is the still point in the turning world, the navel of the earth]<sup>32</sup>

As the earth deity spoke, a great earthquake shook the Trisāhasra worlds, and the hosts of Māra were routed and Māra was downcast and terrified. Then a second earth deity came and sprinkled cold water on Māra, ordering him to leave quickly before anything worse happens to him.

T. 190, *Fo benxing ji jing*, translated into Chinese by Jñānagupta, ca. 560-600, also preserves a story about two earth deities who carry vases of jewels and water. When Māra challenged the Bodhisattva, he touched the earth with his right hand, and recalling his former good deeds, summoned the earth deity. An earth deity of unspecified gender, adorned with precious jewels and holding with both hands a vase made of the seven precious substances, filled with all sorts of fragrant flowers, emerged from the earth from the waist up. Making *añjali*, it said:

O Exceedingly Great One! I will bear witness to you that I know you.

In ages gone by, a thousand *koṭis* of myriads of *kalpas* ago, you held alms giving ceremonies to all that came irrespective of rank.<sup>33</sup>

As the earth deity spoke, the Trisāhasra worlds shook in a terrible earthquake, and there was a great noise like the sound of a brass gong from Magadha. Māra's army withdrew in disarray and Māra fell down on the ground. A second earth deity appeared holding a bottle of cool water, and sprinkled the

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<sup>32</sup>T. 187, 594c14-595a7). Draft translation into English, P. Harrison.

<sup>33</sup> T. 190, 791a8-b25. Draft translation into English, P. Harrison/S. Clarke. Also translated in Beal (1985).

water over Māra, telling him to leave immediately and threatening him with further misfortune.

A collection of parables, “The Storehouse of Sundry Valuables,” current in Gandhara or Kaśmir during the 5<sup>th</sup> century and preserved in the Chinese *Tripitaka*, contains a *māravijaya* with one earth deity and a heavy bowl of water. When Buddha sat underneath the Bodhi Tree, Pāpiyān, the Devil King came to challenge him.<sup>34</sup> The Buddha responded with a truth vow, and touched the earth. An earth deity appeared, and making *añjali*, stating “I am your witness. Since this earth first existed, I have always been inside it. What you say, World-honored One, is true, not false.” Then the Buddha challenged Pāpiyān: “If you can move this water bowl, you can throw me into the sea.” But Māra and all his hosts could not move the water bowl. They collapsed and fell and were scattered like stars.

The *Lalitavistara*, an incomplete Life of the Buddha covering the period up until the First Sermon, also relates a story of two earth deities and a bowl of water used to sprinkle Māra. The *Lalitavistara* was popular, and many versions were disseminated through Buddhist Asia from Java to Mongolia.<sup>35</sup> Like the *Mahāvastu*, the text contains two episodes or “re-mixes” of the *māravijaya*. In the first episode, Māra challenges the Bodhisattva, who then utters a *gāthā*, and touches the earth, calling her to be his witness:

And as the Bodhisattva touched the great earth, it trembled in six ways; it trembled, trembled strongly, trembled strongly on all side.

Just as the bronze bells from Magadha ring out when struck with a

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<sup>34</sup> T. 203, *Za bao zang jing* (fasc. 7, vol. 4), was compiled and translated into Chinese by Tanyao, Kikkāya (Jijiaye) and Liu Xiaobiao in 472 CE. Translated into English in Willemen (1994:169-170).

<sup>35</sup> Today scholars rely on three editions of the *Lalitavistara*. The first two, published in 1877 and 1902, are critical editions and translations of 18<sup>th</sup> c. Sanskrit manuscripts found in monasteries in northern India and Nepal. Krom (1974) includes a translation of these two edited *Lalitavistaras* in his book.

<sup>35</sup> A Tibetan *Lalitavistara* from the Kanjur, originally translated from Sanskrit in the 9<sup>th</sup> c. by Jinamitra, Dānaśīla, Munivarma and Ye-śes-sde, was edited and translated into French by Foucaux (1847-8) and into English by Bays (1983).

stick, so this great earth resounded again when touched by the hand of the Bodhisattva.

Then the goddess of the earth that is in this world realm of the three thousand great thousands of worlds, the goddess named Sthāvarā, surrounded by a following of a hundred times ten million earth goddesses, shook the whole great earth. Not far from the Bodhisattva, she revealed the upper half of her body adorned with all its ornaments, and bowing with joined palms, spoke thus to the Bodhisattva: “Just so, Great Being. It is indeed as you have declared! We appear to attest to it. Moreover, O Bhagavat, you yourself have become the supreme witness of both the human and god realms. In truth, you are the purest of all beings.

Having frustrated the guile of Māra with these words, the great earth goddess Sthāvarā honored and praised the Bodhisattva and showed in several ways her own power, then with her following she disappeared.<sup>36</sup>

In the second remix of the episode, which is located right before the point at end of the chapter when the Bodhisattva reaches enlightenment, the earth is described as a non-personified noise or voice:

And the earth resounds like a vase of bronze.  
Having heard the sound,  
Māra is thrown on the ground  
And he hears these words:  
“Strike! Seize the ally of darkness!”  
Māra’s body is covered with sweat,  
All his splendor is gone;  
His face discolored, Māra sees old age overtake him.  
He beats his chest and cries out....  
(three stanzas follow describing the rout of his army)  
The goddess of the tree of wisdom, moved with pity,

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<sup>36</sup> Bays (1983, 2:481- 483).

Takes water and sprinkles the ally of darkness, saying:  
Arise quickly! Depart without delay.  
Thus does it come to pass for those who do not listen  
To the words of a spiritual teacher.<sup>37</sup>

In both these earth deity episodes, the essential structure of the story remains the same: the challenge, the vow, the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, the witness of the earth, and the defeat of Māra. However, the earth deity in the first passage is a personified female earth deity who rushes to the rescue of the Bodhisattva accompanied by a retinue of many excited earth deities. In the second passage the earth is not personified, but has a great voice that threatens Māra. The deity who sprinkles water on Māra is described as the “goddess of the tree of wisdom.”

Lamotte’s fourth category consists of complete, continuous birth-to-death biographies of the Buddha. These began to appear in northern and north-western India during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. An early complete biography is Aśvaghōṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, composed in Sanskrit verse and widely disseminated throughout Buddhist Asia.<sup>38</sup> Another *Buddhacarita* from the same period, a complete biography composed by Saṃgharakṣa in Gandhara, no longer exists in Sanskrit but was translated into Chinese by Saṃghabhadra and preserved in T. 194, *Sengqieluocho suoji foxing*. Neither of these *Buddhacaritas* mention the earth deity.

A complete biography of the Buddha, T. 193, entitled *Fo ben xing jing*, or “The Sūtra of the Original Acts of the Buddha,” was translated from Sanskrit

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<sup>37</sup> Bays (1983, 2:508-509).

<sup>38</sup> Lamotte (1998:656). Versions of the *Buddhacarita* have survived in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese. Although the earth deity is not named in the *Buddhacarita*, the text refers to the “navel of the earth’s surface,” described as “endowed with all supreme glory,” the only place “able to bear the force of his [the Bodhisattva’s] meditation;” a few sentences later, Māra is threatened and sent away by an unspecified “invisible being,” see Cowell, (nd:146), Johnston 1978.201 and Schotsman’s (1995:236) word-for-word translation of the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa.

into Chinese by Baoyun, 427 – 449 CE.<sup>39</sup> As in the other *māravijayas*, Māra challenged the Bodhisattva, who recalled his good deeds in the past as Viśvaṃtara and makes the *bhūmisparśamudrā*. An earth deity emerged from the ground, crying out:

I witness! I witness! On this earth you have made great sacrifices. Your fame is supreme and extends everywhere. You are also called the giver of much gold and horses beyond number. Frequently you have fed this earth its fill of food, and filled the world with the rain of seven jewels. In this place your gifts of the head extend to the thousands, in some places you have given away yourself and your wives, in this place you have cut your skin, in this place your flesh, in this place your blood, in this you have broken your bones. On this ground you have given innumerable bodies, renouncing the world and various bodies, without recompense. Now the earth is bearing witness in return. The earth will quake and emit a loud noise.

The Trisāhasra world quaked in six ways, striking down King Māra and his troops. ... The earth deity with rejoicing in its heart was quaking continuously. The Bodhisattva then addressed the earth deity, saying "All species movable and movable depend on you. Please settle down, do not move, and bear all this. I am the refuge of all those without refuge. You have borne countless evil people [then variously described]... Having conquered these ones bear with me a while, and I will eliminate the burden of all sufferings."<sup>40</sup>

The earth deity in this text is personified, and emerges from the ground in response to the summons of the Bodhisattva, but the destruction of Māra and his army is caused by quaking and loud noises similar to the story found in the *Mahāvastu* and the *Nidānakathā*.

The *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya* has been preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations and in Sanskrit manuscripts found in Central Asia. It contains a

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<sup>39</sup>T. 193, 4:76 a11, the earth deity (*dishen*) first mentioned at 4:76a13.

<sup>40</sup>T. 193, 4:78b4-23, draft translation, P. Harrison.

complete biography of the Buddha that includes the *māravijaya* episode and an earth deity in the *Samghabhedavastu*. In the Gilgit *māravijaya*, when Māra challenges the Bodhisattva, he responded with a reference to his past good deeds, and made the *bhūmisparśamudrā* with his adorned hand. Thereupon, a female earth deity split the earth and emerged, made *añjali*, and said:

‘Pāpiyan, it is as the Lord said.’ Upon hearing her words, Māra Pāpiyan became silent, downcast, having drooping shoulders, devoid of splendor, brooding.<sup>41</sup>

Here the earth deity has a feminine gender. When she emerges from the ground and witnesses for the Bodhisattva, Māra loses all his desire to fight. The *Samghabhedavastu* preserved in T. 1450, tells a similar story. When challenged by Māra, the Bodhisattva raised his hand adorned by all the signs, pointed to the earth, and said:

‘This shall bear witness to me that I have for three kalpas performed sacrifices ... That I am not in vain, it is true, not false. It shall itself be a witness to me.’ At that time the earth deity gushed forth from the earth, made the *añjali* and said ‘Evil one, it is so, it is so. It is as the Lord has said, it is true and not false.’ And when the deity said this at that time King Māra felt shame and remained silent, crestfallen, discomposed, aggrieved...<sup>42</sup>

The earth deity in the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya* is personified, and aggressive towards Māra. The “Lord of Darkness” is abashed and undone by the testimony of a personified earth deity, rather than terrified by the quaking and loud noises made by an inanimate earth.

There is an ancient tradition that the Buddha opposed the adoption of a sacred language such as Sanskrit to transmit the Dharma, and instructed his followers to teach using their own languages.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps because of this, when the first Buddhist inscriptions began to appear during the Aśokan Period and for the

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<sup>41</sup> Gnoli (1977:114, line 18 – p. 115, line 7) draft translation, P. Harrison.

<sup>42</sup> T. 1450,12:123a 18 – 123 11, draft translation, P. Harrison.

<sup>43</sup> Nattier (1990), Lamotte (1988:610).

next two centuries, a variety of local Prakrits were used.<sup>44</sup> But the Buddha's "vernacular rule" was never followed consistently, and by the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE Buddhist literature was being composed in Sanskrit as well as the Prakrits. When Buddhism spread throughout Asia, this literature was translated at first into Chinese and then later into the languages of Central and Southeast Asia.

The successful transmission of a textual tradition into a new language and culture depends on many different factors such as the availability of manuscripts for acquisition, the rigors of transportation and storage conditions, the skills of the translator. Equally important are the attitudes and beliefs of the text's audience that determine whether a text is localized into the culture, or rejected as irrelevant.<sup>45</sup> As Assaviravulhakarn and Skilling put it, the Buddhist Canon is not just an "inert collection of manuscripts or books," rather it is a "living thing," a "storehouse" for the ideas and beliefs of both the redactors and audience.<sup>46</sup> While we know nothing about the Indian composer of T. 184 (*Xiu xing ben qi jing* cited earlier in the chapter) and very little about the Sogdian translator Kang Mengxiang, the text's availability, selection, translation and eventual preservation in the Chinese *Tripitaka* tells us (among other things) that the Buddhists in Northern India and China who transmitted and received the story were comfortable with Enlightenment stories that contained an aggressive, noisy earth deity who helped the Buddha defeat Māra. This has not always been the case at other times in other countries.

Many biographies of the Buddha, written in Pāli, were compiled in Sri Lanka from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE onwards. Reynolds has divided these biographies into

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<sup>44</sup> Nattier (1990). First to appear were the Aśokan inscriptions in a form of eastern or Magadhī Prakrit. Next, with the advent of Nikāya Buddhism, the Pāli Canon appeared in a composite Prakrit known as Pāli, and early Mahāyāna materials appeared in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit.

<sup>45</sup> Hallisey (1995:51) conceptualises Buddhism as a 'translocal' tradition as well as dependent on local conditions for the production of meaning. He calls for scholars to investigate the extent to which the production and survival of a text is both dependent and independent of the audiences which receive it.

<sup>46</sup> Assaviravulhakarn and Skilling (2002:1).

two categories: narrative biographies like the *Nidānakathā*, primarily concerned with relating the story of the Buddha's life, and biographical chronicles like the canonical *Buddhavaṃsa*, the later *Cariyāpiṭaka* and the *Mahāvamsa*.<sup>47</sup> The chronicles systematized the biography of the Buddha.

Major events – the Great Departure, the cutting off of the hair, the Enlightenment, the subsequent seven day meditation under the Bodhi Tree – are portrayed as an inevitable series of events that occur in the lives of all the Buddhas on their way to Enlightenment. Details of the genealogy of the Buddha are carefully recounted, and his visits to Sri Lanka and the cult of his relics are linked to the sacred topography of the island. Although they must have been familiar with the story – for it appears in the earlier *Nidānakathā* if not elsewhere – the *theras* responsible for compiling these important chronicles chose not to include the witness of the earth deity, preferring instead a simpler, de-mythologised interpretation of the Enlightenment:

At Uruvelā, in the Magadha country, the great sage, sitting at the foot of the Bodhi-tree, reached the supreme enlightenment on the full-moon day of the month Vesākha.<sup>48</sup>

There are Sinhalese biographies that describe the witness of the earth deity, but they belong to a later period. One is the *Jinacarita*, a poetical work composed by Medhamkara who wrote during the reign of Bhuvaneka Bāhu 1, 1277– 1288.<sup>49</sup> Like the *Nidānakathā*, the *Jinacarita* contains a vivid description of the assault of Māra and a non-sentient “*na santī ti sacetanā*” Earth, who emits “hundreds of sounds like thunder” when touched by the *bhūmisparśamudrā*. Another text, the *Samantakūṭavaṇṇanā*, composed in Pāli during the 13<sup>th</sup> c., tells how when challenged by Māra, the Buddha pointed to an inanimate but beautiful “Lady Earth” saying:

‘Having quaked at my every act of giving, honouring, and the rest, from birth to birth, why are you silent today?’ The beautiful

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<sup>47</sup> Reynolds (1976:50-1).

<sup>48</sup> Morris (1882), Geiger (1964), Horner (1978:8).

<sup>49</sup> Minayeff (1886).



earthwoman, making a deep sound as if saying 'I am a witness!' danced immediately as far as the (encircling) ocean-bed. Raising great waves like ocean waves, Earth quaked six times and spun around like a potter's wheel.<sup>50</sup>

In the *Samantakūṭavaṇṇanā*, the wild dancing of the earth deity terrifies the army of Māra and causes them to flee in disarray. In 18<sup>th</sup> century Kandy, murals were painted depicting the *māravijaya* complete with a female earth deity holding a vase filled with flowers, and waving a warning hand in the air (see figure 3.2).<sup>51</sup> The iconography at Kandy and the association between "Mahī Kantavi" and the vases of water filled with coconut flowers used during *paritta* rituals means that Sinhalese traditions about a vase-bearing female earth deity exist (although I have been unable to locate published versions).

The teachings of the Buddha appeared in mainland Southeast Asia during the first few centuries CE. The exact dates and nature of this early contact are not fully known, but for the first millennium, there seem to have been many Buddhist sects and schools in the region, including the Pāli Buddhism of the Sinhalese *theras*. After Buddhism was extinguished in India, Buddhists in mainland Southeast Asia turned to Sri Lanka for authoritative texts and ritual, and by the 14th c. CE, Sinhalese Theravāda Buddhism became dominant.<sup>52</sup> Buddhist texts were brought from Sri Lanka to monastery libraries in Burma, Thailand and Cambodia where they were treasured, studied and copied, and local authors used Sinhalese models to create biographies and chronicles written in Pāli and the vernaculars of mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Hazlewood (1986:243-245).

<sup>51</sup> Cone and Gombrich (1977:plate 1a), Holt (1996:plate 13).

<sup>52</sup> Generally speaking, the Theravādins retained Pāli as their sacred language while other schools "sanskritized" their literature. But as Assaviravulkaharn (1990:154) has pointed out, "A few lines of inscription in Pāli or Sanskrit cannot assure us that Buddhism in the area where it is found was Theravāda, Sarvāstivāda or Mahāyāna, unless it is supported by other evidences."

<sup>53</sup> Morris (1882) describes the close connection between Burmese monks and the Sinhalese wats during the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

One example is the Thai *Jinakālamālī-pakaraṇam* (“Sheaf of garlands of the epochs of the conqueror.”)<sup>54</sup> The text, written in Pāli in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. by a Thai monk named Ratanapañña, justifies the pre-eminence of the Sinhalese sect in northern kingdom of Lānnā, and glorifies the local rulers who supported the sect. The *Jinakālamālī-pakaraṇam* contains a reference to the defeat of Māra, but there is no earth deity:

the Great Being, even before the sun had set, at eventide, routed Māra together with his hosts...and at the hour of day-break he realized the knowledge of Omniscience endowed with all the attributes of Enlightenment.<sup>55</sup>

A “Cambodian *Mahāvamsa*,” composed in Pāli and written in Khmer script, shows how seriously local authors took the Sinhalese chronicles; the Cambodian author compiled material taken from the *Mahāvamsa*, the *Buddhāvamsa* and the *Thūpavamsa* (a Sinhalese chronicle concerned with the relics of the Buddha) and created a “new” text.<sup>56</sup> The *Mālāṅkāra-vatthu*, a Burmese biography of the Buddha said to be based on Sinhalese models, was written in 1798 by the Dutiya Mai-thīh charā tō Rhañ Kavi during the reign of King Bagyidaw (r. 1819-1837).<sup>57</sup> It was translated into English and published in two versions, the first in 1852 by Chester Bennett, an American Baptist Missionary,<sup>58</sup> and the second by Paul Bigandet (1813-1894), the Vicar-Apostolic of Ava and Pegu under British colonial rule.<sup>59</sup> As Bennett translates the story, when the Bodhisattva was challenged by Māra (here called Mah-Nat), he made the *bhūmisparśamudrā* and said:

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<sup>54</sup> B. Chrystal, personal communication, May 5, 2003, The *Jinamahānidāna*, another popular Siamese biography of the Buddha current between 14 – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries contains a *māravijaya* episode but no earth deity.

<sup>55</sup> Jayawickrama (1968:39-40).

<sup>56</sup> Hardy (1897-1907:61-69), Norman (1983:140).

<sup>57</sup> Braun (1991:46-48) notes that Bigandet’s translation is based in part on another biography of the Buddha, the *Tathāgata-udāna-dīpanī*, written by *sayadaw* Dī-pai-yaṇṇ Siridhammābhilaṅkāra in 1772 when he was in his 37<sup>th</sup> year of ordination. No English translation of this text exists but according to Saya Thiha Setkya Soe Myint (2002) the *Tathāgata-udāna-dīpanī* refers to the witness of a male form of the earth deity known as “Wathondare.” Translation from Burmese into English by Sao Hso Som.

<sup>58</sup> Bennett (1852).

<sup>59</sup> Bigandet (1880).

‘O earth, will you bear witness to my forty-nine great offerings when in the state of Wa-than-dria?’ When he thus inquired, the earth replied as if in a hundred thousand voices, which thrilled through the whole army of Mah-Nat, ‘I will bear witness to the offerings made at that time.’ When the earth uttered the voice, the elephant Ge-re-may-ga-a, on which Mah-Nat rode, bent its knees, and worshipped the prince. Mah-Nat, finding all his efforts unavailing, fled to his own country of Wa-tha-wut-tee, and his army fled in every direction, not any two of them taking the same road. In their haste to depart, some left their head-dresses, clothes and ornaments, behind them in the way.<sup>60</sup>

While the Sinhalese chronicles had an important influence on the Buddhist literature of mainland Southeast Asia, the flow of information between the two regions went both ways. The *Mahāvamsa* reports that during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when Sinhalese Buddhism was rent by heresy and sectarianism, the king Vijayabāhu asked the ruler of Pagan, Aniruddha, to send Burmese monks to restore the *upasampadā* and to recite the *Tripitaka*.<sup>61</sup> Again in 1729, Buddhism was effectively extinguished in Sri Lanka for two decades after the last remaining Buddhist monk died.<sup>62</sup> In 1750, the Sinhalese King Kittisirirājasīha (r. 1746 – 1781) sent a mission to Ayutthaya requesting that a chapter of monks be sent to re-establish Buddhist ordination in Sri Lanka. The Siamese monks arrived in Kandy in 1753 and conferred the *upasampadā* on hundreds of Sinhalese monks.<sup>63</sup> In addition to the *upasampadā*, Buddhist images and texts, including biographies of the Buddha that contained the earth deity story, were brought from Siam.<sup>64</sup> Figure 3.1, which shows a hair-wringing earth deity, is from an Ayutthayan Period illustrated manuscript of

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<sup>60</sup> Bennett (1852:84).

<sup>61</sup> Norman (1983:12).

<sup>62</sup> Bizot (1984: 21).

<sup>63</sup> Bizot (1984: 57-8).

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion of textual transmission between Ceylon and Siam during this period, see Filliozat (1997:95-114) and von Hinüber (1988:185-212).

the Life of the Buddha that was brought to Kandy at some time in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>65</sup>

Although texts containing the hair-wringing episode may have been present in Sri Lanka, the story apparently never “caught on.” It could be (and has been) argued that the reason why such stories never localized in Sri Lanka is because they are not “authentic” or “canonical.”<sup>66</sup> But the boundaries of the *Tripitaka* are sometimes not as clearly defined for practicing Buddhists as they are for the *bhāṇakas* and Buddhist scholars.<sup>67</sup> Even in the most conservative Theravāda Buddhist societies, ancient texts are not automatically preserved, and the survival of a particular textual tradition is dependent on current beliefs and local circumstances.<sup>68</sup>

One local circumstance that affects the continuity of textual traditions is the way religious manuscripts are produced. The materials traditionally used for Buddhist manuscripts in mainland Southeast Asia – palm leaves – are very durable and when carefully stored away, protected by their cloth wrappings and cords, can last for centuries. But when they are used often, or exposed to climate or insects, the palm leaves wear out in a few decades and must be constantly re-copied to survive. Commissioning the re-copying of a Buddhist

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<sup>65</sup> Ginsburg (2000:65) This Ayutthayan period illustrated manuscript, identified by Ginsburg simply as a “Life of the Buddha,” was taken to Ceylon from Siam in unknown circumstances and then acquired in Kandy by a British collector in 1819; it is presently in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Herbert (1993:12-15) writes that the illustrated Burmese Lives of the Buddha in British collections are part of the *Mālāṅkara-vatthu* genre. But the two *parabaiks* that Burney acquired sometime between 1790 and 1837 show a kneeling, hair-wringing deity indicating some familiarity with the *Paṭhamasambodhi*.

<sup>66</sup> Malalasekera (1974: 614) wrote “that this account of the Buddha’s struggle with Māra is literally true, none but the most ignorant of Buddhists believe, even at the present day.”

<sup>67</sup> Hallisey (1995:43) writes that there has been a “productive elective affinity between the positivist historiography of European Orientalism and Theravāda Buddhist styles of self-representation.”

<sup>68</sup> Hallisey (1995: 51). Here, Hallisey urges students of Buddhism to explore the technologies, practices, and institutions necessary for the circulation and preservation of a text and how local conditions affect the meaning of a text.

text is a meritorious act, and the Sangha and pious donors collaborate to select and maintain those texts essential for their community's Buddhist rituals and sermons.<sup>69</sup> An inscription in the margin of one Khmer *Paṭhamasambodhi* proudly commemorates such a donation: "Keñ Bū Dī, retired, and his wife Nāṃ Sim have given this manuscript of the *Brah Paṭhamasambodhi* in 2477 BE to the monks to be preserved for the posterity of the Path."<sup>70</sup>

This system of religious patronage and text production works well in times of peace, but quickly breaks down during times of social instability. In the constant cycle of decay and renovation that is the history of mainland Southeast Asia, palm leaf manuscripts can disappear quickly, leaving few traces behind, and the survival of particular textual traditions is often a matter of chance.<sup>71</sup> During the recent civil war and revolution in Cambodia, Buddhist temples were a target for destruction, and many ancient manuscripts – as much as 95% of pre-war holdings – were lost or damaged.<sup>72</sup> Since then, Cambodians have laboriously reconstructed their temples, repaired and donated new Buddha images, and restocked their monastic libraries. However, the new texts are not the same as the old. Traditional techniques of palm leaf manuscript production are presently in a state of decline in Cambodia, and have been largely replaced by modern printing technologies. The Buddhist texts most readily and inexpensively available today for pious donors to purchase and present to monastery libraries are reprints of Khmer translations of Thai and Sinhalese texts made by Buddhist reformers Chuon Nath and Hem Chieu before the war. As a result, in less than two and a half decades the reformed Buddhism so successfully resisted by Cambodia's traditional

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<sup>69</sup> Hundius (1990:30-1) discusses the merit derived from the donation of manuscripts as well as the social aspects of donation procedures in northern Thailand.

<sup>70</sup> Becchetti (1991:55-59).

<sup>71</sup> J. Filliozat, personal communication, November 2000; an abbot in Wat Thmei, Kang Meas, in Kompong Cham, hid the contents of the monastic library from the Khmer Rouge; although he died, the manuscript collection remained intact until its chance discovery during roof repairs in 1999.

<sup>72</sup> O. de Bernon, personal communication, August 1996.

Mahānikāya Sangha for more than a century has disappeared almost by default.<sup>73</sup>

The speed and scale of this recent change provides some perspective onto the mysterious events that led to the total disappearance of Sanskrit texts that once supported the non-Theravādin forms of Buddhism popular during the Angkor Period. While we know little about the religious and social changes that rendered the Mahāyāna and Tantric texts “obsolete” – the ravages of war and climate? sectarian conflict? – we do know that by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century pious Buddhist donors were commissioning the inscribing of palm leaf manuscripts in Pāli.<sup>74</sup>

Political leaders are also an important factor in the survival or disappearance of textual traditions. One of the important roles of a Buddhist monarch is the re-establishment of Buddhism in the wake of war or similar national crises, and a major preoccupation of Siam’s Chakri monarchs was the restoration and purification of Thai Buddhism in the aftermath of the sacking of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767. To this end, boatloads of manuscripts were collected from monasteries in the north of Thailand and taken to Bangkok to use in the restoration of the Buddhist scriptures where a committee of learned monks reviewed them. Some of these manuscripts were translated from Northern Thai and placed in the royal archives, or collated and edited into new recensions, but many others – duplicates, or perhaps deemed inauthentic? – have disappeared without a trace.<sup>75</sup> The Burmese King Badon (1781-1819) had all the ancient inscriptions in his kingdom collected, and ordered a

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<sup>73</sup> In 1979, a few months after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese, the abbot Ven. Ken Vong, of Wat Saravann in Phnom Penh, began to gather manuscripts from the desecrated monasteries and libraries in Phnom Penh; his collection formed the core of the FEMC archives.

<sup>74</sup> P. Dokbukaeo, personal communication, November 8, 1999. The earliest surviving palm leaf manuscripts in the region date from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>75</sup> According to Hundius (1990:18) some of the manuscripts from Lānnā were recopied in *kham* script and included the royal archives, but the fate of the rest is uncertain.

committee of monks to sort through the inscriptions, determine their authenticity, and make copies for posterity. When the committee found “mistakes” they revised the texts, altering the spelling and the contents. As Pe Maung Tin put it,

There are, thus, broadly speaking, three groups of [Burmese] inscriptions: the original inscriptions which Bodawpaya did not copy, and the true copies, and the second versions which he made of the original inscriptions he collected...<sup>76</sup>

Likewise, the Cambodian *Royal Chronicles* report that in 1845 when the new king Ang Duong came to the throne he found that Cambodian Buddhism was obscure and weak.<sup>77</sup>

Braḥ Pād Saṃtec Braḥ Hariraks Rāmā Issarādhipatī [King Ang Duong] brought together his councillors and decreed: ‘We must send a minister to Cam Klav, the king of Siam, and ask him to establish the *Tripitaka* as well as the Dhammayutika sect with Mahā Pān [as the new *sangharāja*] in the Kingdom of Cambodia, to conserve and protect the Buddhist religion and to magnify and glorify it.’<sup>78</sup>

The absence of a Cambodian *Tripitaka* during this period reflected the heterodox nature of Cambodia’s ancient Buddhism as well as the fact that a complete set of the *Pāli Canon*, painstakingly inscribed on palm leaves, is an expensive investment, something that few Buddhist communities can afford. It is only since the recent civil war and revolution that printed sets of the *Tripitaka* have been readily available in Cambodia’s monastic libraries.<sup>79</sup> These volumes are treated with great pride and reverence, but this does not

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<sup>76</sup>Pe Maung Tin (1960:x-xi).

<sup>77</sup>For the story of the imposition of orthodox Theravāda Buddhism on Cambodia under the French, see Bizot (1976:18).

<sup>78</sup>Becchetti (1991:47).

<sup>79</sup>The first volume of the Khmer script Pāli *Tripitaka* was published at the end of the 1930’s, the last at the end of the 1960s. In 1995 the Japanese Sotoshu Relief Committee (JSRC) distributed 1200 copies of the complete Khmer *Tripitaka* throughout the country.

mean that they are used very often.<sup>80</sup> More important for most monks and their devotees are spiral-bound notebooks filled with the complicated word diagrams called *yantra* and astrological formulas, and bundles of worn palm leaf manuscripts used regularly for rituals and sermons. These texts, often stored on personal altars where they are propitiated with candles, incense and flower offerings, constitute what has been called the “ritual” or “practical” canon: the texts that are actually used in the ritual life of a Buddhist community.

McDaniel has explored what he calls the “practical vernacular canon” of Northern Thailand and Laos. Much of the practical vernacular canon consists of texts composed in the *nissaya* genre; the two Burmese Lives of the Buddha presented above, the *Mālālaṅkara-vatthu* and the *Tathāgata-udāna-dīpanī*, are termed “*nissaya*” as are many of the Siamese and Lao *Paṭhamasambodhi* listed in Filliozat’s catalogues.<sup>81</sup> According to McDaniel, although the word *nissaya* is usually glossed as “translation,” these texts are almost never word-for-word translations of Pāli originals.<sup>82</sup> Rather, they are original compositions using two languages, Pāli and the vernacular, written in the sacred script of Northern Buddhism called *tham*.<sup>83</sup> In most cases, the Pāli framework of the text has little relationship to the vernacular prose, and serves to enhance the sacred quality of the text and demonstrate the erudition of the author. The grammar is often non-standard, and the narrative is not continuous: events are described more than once, and certain aspects are emphasized while other seemingly more important aspects are ignored. As McDaniel explains, the

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<sup>80</sup> Few monks in Cambodia were fluent enough in Pāli read and compose in that language, and even their skills were sometimes not up to “Western” standards. Hardy (1897-1907:68) complained bitterly about the “clumsiness” and “contorted style” of the Cambodian *Mahāvamsa*, concluding that: “It is very carelessly written by one who shows himself but imperfectly acquainted with the Pāli language. One feels oneself constantly tempted to make corrections...”

<sup>81</sup> Braun (1991:46-48). Braun notes that these two biographies are actually new compositions with Pāli verses interspersed through the mainly Burmese text.

<sup>82</sup> The word *nissaya* is sometimes glossed as “translation” but actually means “that on which anything depends” or “support.”

<sup>83</sup> McDaniel (2000:32).



repetition, haphazard exegetical methods, lack of allegiance to the Pāli source texts and incompleteness mean these manuscripts are of little use for constructing critical editions and accurate historical stemma, but they do provide a snapshot of the basic parameters of Buddhist thought in particular communities at a given time.<sup>84</sup>

McDaniel's exposition of the *nissaya* genre is relevant for the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, the biography of the Buddha that has been part of the "practical vernacular canon" of mainland Southeast for many centuries. Like the *nissaya* texts described by McDaniel the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, especially when written in the vernacular, is often repetitious, decorated with non-standard Pāli and containing emphases and innovations absent from any known Pāli source text. Despite this evidence of originality, the *Paṭhamasambodhi* has been characterized as a "late and unoriginal work" containing materials "borrowed from the *Nidānakathā* of the *Jātakāṭṭhakathā*, *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Mahāparinibbānasutta* of the *Dīgha-nikāya*."<sup>85</sup> Although the writers of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* were doubtlessly familiar with the Sinhalese biographical tradition, the text's relationship with Sri Lanka is not clear. A *Paṭhamasambodhikathā* is cited in the *Gandhavaṃsa* as having been composed in Sri Lanka, but to date no Sinhalese *Paṭhamasambodhi* has been found, and the attribution may reflect the Burmese author of the *Gandhavaṃsa*'s belief that all ancient texts originated in Sri Lanka rather than its actual provenance. In fact, the age and geographical spread of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, its narrative structure and the inclusion of episodes foreign to the (extant) Pāli biographical tradition present in the *Divyāvadāna* has led some scholars to wonder if the text, or at least some part of it, owes more to the Sanskrit Lives of the Buddha than the Sinhalese Theravāda biographical

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<sup>84</sup> J. McDaniel, personal communication, May 13, 2003.

<sup>85</sup> Saddhatissa (1981:180), Jacob (1996:49). Reynolds (1976:52) wrote that "the *Nidānakathā* remained a standard for all subsequent Theravāda Buddha biographies;" von Hinüber (1996:180) wrote "Both versions are largely based on older material and contain little that is original. Neither version seems to be known outside Southeast Asia."

tradition.<sup>86</sup> While the theory that the *Paṭhamasambodhi* is a remnant of the Northern Sanskritic Buddhism once practiced in the region is interesting, there is not much evidence for this either.

Skilling has described the *Paṭhamasambodhi* as a “genre of texts” all sharing the same name but not necessarily encompassing the same material.<sup>87</sup> In addition to a biographical narrative, a “*Paṭhamasambodhi*” can be a *nissaya* used for pedagogical purposes, a four-part sermon, a cremation book, a poem or even a script for dramatic performances. Filliozat, who has catalogued many *Paṭhamasambodhi* in European and Asian libraries, divides the text after Cœdès into three recensions.<sup>88</sup> The modern recension, is dated post-1845 and consists of twenty-nine chapters. It is a more-than-complete biography of the Buddha, recounting events from the marriage of his parents until the eventual disappearance of the Dhamma. The second recension, called “ancienne” by Cœdès, was probably compiled during the Ayutthayan Period. It is a complete biography between fifteen and twenty chapters in length, beginning with the marriage of the Bodhisattva’s parents and ending with the distribution of the relics. The oldest recension consists of nine or ten chapters culminating with the Enlightenment.<sup>89</sup> Cœdès hypothesized that the oldest recension was composed in the northern Thai kingdoms between the 14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>90</sup> He believed a Lao text in nine chapters stored in the Royal Library of Copenhagen, Gaudelius 68 (Laos 78) while not itself ancient (the colophon is dated 1812) was the latest of successive copies and represented the form of

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<sup>86</sup> Denis (1977), Rawin (1993) and D. Swearer, personal communication, August 1999.

<sup>87</sup> Assavaviravulhakarn and Skilling (2002:2).

<sup>88</sup> Cœdès (1968); J. Filliozat, personal communication, November 1997.

Laulertvorakul (2003) divides the *Paṭhamasambodhi* into two broad categories; the early “incomplete” Northern Thai recensions that describe the life of the Buddha up until the Enlightenment and the later “complete” recensions that include the *parinirvāna*.

<sup>89</sup> Hundius (1990:17) notes that at the time Cœdès was working in Bangkok, there were apparently no manuscripts in the Vajirañāna library in Bangkok in the Northern Thai scripts, only copies in *kham* script were available.

<sup>90</sup> Cœdès (1968:222).

this ancient Life of the Buddha.<sup>91</sup> The fact that the oldest extant palm leaf manuscripts of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* come from Northern Thailand and Laos, and like Gaudelius 68 have nine or ten chapters, and recount the life of the Bodhisattva until the Enlightenment, supports Cœdès' theory.<sup>92</sup>

While it is always difficult to be sure about the age of a palm leaf manuscript — is the date in the colophon accurate, or is it a copy of an earlier document? — the existence of an ancient *Paṭhamasambodhi* tradition in the north is significant for this study of the earth deity episode. Both Cœdès and Lualertvorakul believe that the original *Paṭhamasambodhi* was composed in Pāli in Northern Thailand and subsequently translated into the vernaculars. The existence of hair-wringing earth deity iconography at Angkor, Bagan and Arakan means that older versions of the *māravijaya* episode, if not the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, must have also existed in Sanskrit although they will probably never be found. It is safer to argue that the Northern Thai authors were reworking a very old well-known story in the language of their day.

The following three excerpts are from a late 15<sup>th</sup> century Pāli manuscript from Lampang, an 18<sup>th</sup> c. Northern Thai manuscript from Chiang Mai and an undated Thai *khün* manuscript, all part of Cœdès' ancient recension. The Pāli *Paṭhamasambodhi* was found at Wat Lai Hin, Lampang Province, and is dated 1479 CE by the colophon.

tadā Vasundharā vanitā bodhisattassa sambhānurabhāvenu attānaṃ  
sathāretuṃ asakkonti pathavitaldatā uṭṭhahitvā itthisāmaṭṭatāviya  
bodhisattassa puratto ṭhatvā tāta mahāpurisa ahaṃ tava  
sambhāraṃ jānāmi tava dakkhiṇodakena mama kesā aliyanti  
ahaṃ te tadā sakkhīti virāvasatena virāvasahassena  
virāvasatasahassena mārajāle avattharamanāviya unnaditā attano  
kese parivattetvā visajjhesi tassā kesato udakaṃ patitaṃ yathā

<sup>91</sup> Cœdès (1966, 91-93).

<sup>92</sup> A. Lualertvorakul, personal communication, December 2002, also von Hinüber (1996:180) who describes two Northern Thai *Paṭhamasambodhi* from Wat Lai Hin (Lampang) dated by their colophons 1574 and 1592 CE.

ga(ñ)gā sotavatti taṃ mahāpurise sudinnante siddhattha mahādānaṃ  
uttamadānanti vessantarajāne samasantediyaḥayo janasatiko  
Girimekhalahatthi jaṇukena pakkhalitvā paṭiṭṭhāpi māraparisā disvā  
palāyisuṃ uttakamevanatthi sattagajacāmarādu nicethava...  
nicapahāya mukhasamukhadisāhi yeva palāyisuṃ

Then Vasundharā Vanitā unable to withstand the force of the  
accumulated (perfections) emerged from the surface of the earth and  
stood before the Bodhisattva. I know that the perfections are  
accumulated by you. Your waters of donations are overflowing my  
hair. I am your witness she roared a hundred a thousand a hundred  
thousands in *māra's* snare/ arrayed rose up also she grasped her hair  
and twisted the water fell down flowing like the Ganges  
River...Girimekhala the elephant slipped and fell. The assembly of  
*māras* fled in all directions of the compass...<sup>93</sup>

The next *māravijaya* is from a palm leaf manuscript from Wat Khan  
Kaew in Chiang Mai, dated 1834 CE.<sup>94</sup> It was translated from Northern  
Thai into Central Thai and published by Bampen Rawin:

The Bodhisattva stretched out his hand and said “Oh Great Earth,  
you were a witness when I made great gifts. You know that there  
were no other witnesses. In my past existence as Vessantara I made  
gifts of my children, wife, possessions, treasure, elephants, horses,  
female slaves, male slaves and the 700 things.” The Bodhisattva said:  
“Nang Thoranee is the lord of the place and she cannot resist the  
power of the great merit of the Bodhisattva.” Nang Thoranee said “I  
know about your great good deeds. My hair is full of the donative  
water from your past gifts. This shows that I am a witness for you,  
Lord.” So Nang Thoranee spoke. And she cried out a hundred times,  
a thousand times, ten thousand times, a hundred thousand times

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<sup>93</sup> Many thanks to Paul Harrison and Anant Lualertvorakul for assistance with this translation.

<sup>94</sup> Rawin (1993). Acharn Bampen used two manuscripts from Wat Khan Kaew, one dated CS 1196 and the other dated CS 1197, as well as microfilm # 85 13.0 #001-007, SSRI archives, Chiang Mai University, for his translation.

overwhelming the soldiers of Mara with an enormous thundering noise. Then Nang Thoranee took her hair in her hand and made water flow down from her hair; it flowed like a great river.<sup>95</sup>

The undated Tai *khün* manuscript, from the private library of Anatole Peltier, tells us that after being challenged by Māra, the Bodhisattva recalled his previous generosity as Vessantara and pointed his right hand at the earth.

Then the ruler of the earth appeared in the beautiful form of Nang Thoranee. She rose out of a chasm in the earth, and went to stand in front of the Bodhisattva, and she said this to the Bodhisattva: “Oh Great Lord, Oh Great Lord, I know the great merit of the Great Lord Bodhisattva who gave all the gifts in that existence, more than 100, more than 1,000, more than 10,000, more than 100,000 right up to the present time. When you were born as Prince Vessantara, you gave the Great Gift of 700 Objects for which my hair will be the witness. You gave those gifts, so I should be the witness for you at this time.” As for Nang Thoranee, when she has spoken these words, she roared loudly with a great noise, it was as if it would overwhelm Māra and his army together with the noise of 100, 1,000 and 100,000. The lady unrolled her hair and the drips of water represented the gifts of the Lord Bodhisattva. So water flowed from the hair of Nang Thoranee, it flowed from the ends of the hair of Nang Thoranee. It flowed onto the earth like a great river...<sup>96</sup>

There are too many variations in these Northern Thai texts for them to be word for word translations of an older Pāli text such as that from Wat Lai Hin. But the essential structure of the earth deity episode remains constant: Māra’s challenge, the Bodhisattva’s recollection of his good deeds in a previous life, the emergence of the female earth deity from the ground, and finally her aggression towards the *mārasenā* in the form of loud noise as well as the catastrophic flood that she wrings from her long hair. The variations – such as the transformation of the Tai *khün* earth deity into a mass of stone as big as a mountain – do not affect the essential structure of the text, and should as

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<sup>95</sup> Rawin (1993:73-4).

<sup>96</sup> Translation from Northern Thai to English by J. Crocker.

McDaniels suggests be understood as a “translocal literary device” used by the Northern Thai authors to express local values, religious beliefs and practices.<sup>97</sup>

Cœdès based his critical edition of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* on Siamese and Cambodian manuscripts of 15 – 20 chapters, written in Pāli, and dated from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This recension was a complete biography of the Buddha from his birth to the *parinirvāna*. Cœdès believed that additional material was added to the Northern Thai recension to make it a complete biography, probably during the Ayutthayan period. Cœdès was particularly interested in the hair-wringing episode in this recension, and published it twice, first in 1916 and again in 1968, right before his death. His interest stemmed in part because of its anomalous nature: although there was no precedent for the hair-wringing motif in the canonical literature the story was clearly very ancient and widespread across the peninsula (except in Burma). In this Pāli text, when challenged by Māra, the Bodhisattva touches the earth and recalls his previous good deeds.

Tadā Vasundharā vanitā bodhisattassa sambhārānubhāvena aṭṭānaṃ  
sandhāretum asakkontī paṭhavitalato uṭṭahitvā itthisāmaññātāya  
bodhisattassa pūrato ṭhatvā “tāta mahāpurisa ahaṃ tava sambhāraṃ  
jānāmi tava dakkhiṇodakena mama kesā alliyanti idāni  
parivattayissāmi” ti vadantī viya tāvad eva attano kese parivattitvā  
visajjesi. Tassā kesato yathā gaṅgodakaṃ sotam pavattati. Yathāha  
pasāretvā mahāvīro cakkalakkhaṇarañjitaṃ. Erāvaṇasadisoṇḍaṃ  
pavālaṅkurasadisa Vasundharāvanitaṃ taṃ dassesi sākyapuṅgavo  
sandhāretuṃ asakkontī palāyiṃsu. Girimekhalapādā pana  
pakkhalitvā yāva sāgarantaṃ pavisanti chattadhajacāmāradīni  
obhaggavibhaggāni pātāni ahesuṃ. Acchariyaṃ disvā mārō  
savimhayabahulo. Yathāha pāramitānubhāvena mārasenā parājitā.  
nikkhandakadhārāhi sakkhikese hi tāvade disodisaṃ palāyanti  
vidhaṃsetvā asesato ti

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<sup>97</sup> McDaniel (2000:156).

Then the Earth, unable to withstand the accumulation (of perfections) of the Bodhisattva emerged from the earth's surface in the likeness of a woman and stood in front of the Bodhisattva. "Dear Great Man, I know that you have fulfilled your obligations, my hair is overflowing with your donative libations and I will wring it out." Speaking as if she were animate, she grasped her hair and twisted. The water collected in her hair fell down flowing like the Ganges River.

Thus he said: Having extended my hand marked with the signs of the wheel, resembling the horn of Erāvana, like a ram made of coral the Great Man, the Bull of the Śakyas touched the Earth. Unable to resist his appeal, she rose up before him in the form of a woman, and twisted her hair, from which flowed a flood like the Ganges River. The army of Māra was not able to withstand the flood, and was routed. The feet of Girimekhala slipped and he fell into the ocean. The parasols, standards and fly-whisks broke and fell. Seeing this disaster, Māra was filled with astonishment. Thus he spoke: 'The power of the perfections of the Bodhisattva prevailed over the army of Māra, and the torrents of water pouring from the hair of his witness have completely dispersed them and sent them flying in all directions.'<sup>98</sup>

FEMC 79, a palm leaf manuscript in Khmer in 16 chapters commissioned for the library of the Buddhist Institute in 1954, tells the same story: when Māra challenges the Bodhisattva, he recollects his previous sacrifices, all marked by donative libations, and calls "Nān Sundharavanitā, the *rākṣa* of the earth" to be his witness.

Thereupon the Buddha reached down and grasped Nān Gaṅhīn Braḥ Dharaṇī so she could witness for him against the *mārasenā*. Having a good heart and being satisfied, she came and testified in many ways. Then he called Nān Sundharā-vanitā to come and be witness. Nān

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<sup>98</sup> Cœdès (1999:150).

Vasundharā emerged [from the earth] saying ‘I am a true witness.’ Nān Vasundharā heard the words of the holy Bodhisattva calling her and in the form of a beautiful woman, she rose up from the surface of the earth, having a satisfied mind, and agreed to be his witness.

‘O Pavitra, [Pavitra = rhetorical term, referring to the “pure” listener] the Holy Buddha attained the perfections and performed virtues too numerous to count, and moreover he poured the holy water onto my hair’ and she squeezed her hair, and made the water flow out and down onto the surface of the earth. All the heavens heard when Nān Sundharā agreed to be the witness. And she twisted the water from her long hair and the water fell down on the surface of the earth in all directions and flowed like the waters of the great ocean, and went in the ten directions. Māra’s army had to swim in miserable conditions. The elephant Girimekhala and Lord Māra collapsed and sank down. They couldn’t float on the water and were washed away on a wave. Oh Pavitra, Lord Māra the king, who had an evil heart and came from a vicious race, left quickly when he found that his power was not equal to the *pāramī* of the Buddha...<sup>99</sup>

Again, the Khmer text is not a translation of the Pāli. The Khmer text is longer and more repetitive. The Pāli inserts a reference to the adornments on the Bodhisattva’s hand that is absent from the Khmer. But both the Pāli and the Khmer versions cover the same ground: they are constructed around Māra’s challenge, the Bodhisattva’s vow, the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, the emergence of the earth deity and her defeat of Māra with the water that she wrings from her hair. The “ancienne recension” of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* underwent considerable change when it was doubled in length and made into a complete biography of the Buddha, the earth deity episode has remained constant and follows the 15<sup>th</sup> century text from Wat Lai Hin closely. One difference is that the Pāli text does not seem to refer to the roaring of the earth deity; her aggression towards Māra is limited to her testimony and the flood of water that she wrings from her hair.

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<sup>99</sup> English translation, E. Guthrie and J. Marston.



It is recorded that in 1844 the Thai king Rāma 3 was unable to find a “complete” version of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* and requested Paramanujita Jinorasa, a member of the Thai Royal family and the abbot at Wat Chetuphon in Bangkok, to create a new recension of this work. Paramanujit (religious name Suvanṇaramsī) collected all the manuscripts of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* he could find, and in 1845 CE published a new *Paṭhamasambodhi* in Thai and Pāli in twenty-nine chapters that covered the marriage of the parents of the Bodhisattva to the disappearance of the Dhamma. The ninth chapter is the *māravijaya*. When challenged by Māra the Bodhisattva pointed his finger to the earth recalled his perfections and addressed the earth deity:

My dear sister, from the time I started to accumulate the thirty *pāramī* until I came into existence as a human being called Vessantara, I have given away my dear son and daughter together with the 700 offerings. Here at this moment I have no witness, no *sāmana* or Brahmin is here, so I can only take you as a witness. Why do you remain there and not come out to be my witness? Mae Thoranee could not remain unmoved but came out by means of the Bodhisattva’s merit. She emerged from the earth in the form of a young woman and stood in front of the Bodhisattva and said: “Enlightened One, I recognize the merit you have received in past lives, and I am going to give the water from my hair and pour it onto the ground, the Enlightened One will understand what I do.” She then poured water from her hair and the water flowed like a river and flooded the surface of the earth until it was like the ocean....<sup>100</sup>

Although the 1845 recension contains much new material, Paramanujit was content to leave the earth deity alone and her episode is essentially the same as the Northern Thai and the Khmer texts.

The next recension of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* at the hands of the Dhammayut Sangharāja Patriarch Sā eliminated the earth deity episode from the text

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<sup>100</sup> Translation into English, J. Crocker.

altogether. Patriarch Sā, or Somdet Phra Saṅgharāja Pussadeva (b. 1803 – d. 1899) was an important figure in 19<sup>th</sup> c. Siamese Buddhism. He was the first abbot of the newly founded Dhammayut temple Wat Ratchapradit, located in Bangkok and had close connections to the royal family. Patriarch Sā composed a “*Paṭhamasambodhi* Sermon” to be read at the royal wat during the sixth lunar month during the ceremony of Visākha Pūjā. In his sermon, there is no Māra or earth deity, and the Enlightenment is described as an experience that took place entirely in the Buddha’s mind.<sup>101</sup> In addition to his “*Paṭhamasambodhi* Sermon,” Patriarch Sā also published a full length *Paṭhamasambodhi* that first appeared in a serialized form in the Buddhist journal *Thammachaksu* and is still widely available today. This is an abbreviated, demythologized account of the life of the Buddha, in which many supernatural events have been eliminated or reinterpreted as allegories.

Sā’s *Paṭhamasambodhi* was edited and republished as the first section of the *Thammasombat* in Bangkok Era 124 by Vajirañāṇa, a member of the royal family, the *saṅgharāja* of the Dhammayut sect, and a leading Buddhist intellectual of his time.<sup>102</sup> There are no demon hordes in Vajirañāṇa’s revision of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, but the Bodhisattva’s final struggle for enlightenment is portrayed as an allegory. There is a reference to the *mārasenā* and a male earth deity called “Braḥ Bhūmi Phra Phag” appears in the text.<sup>103</sup> Vajirañāṇa’s autobiography provides some explanations for his innovations. In this work, translated by Reynolds, the prince-*saṅgharāja* characterized himself as “the kind of person who did not believe in everything” and recounted how as a young student he had difficulty believing in supernatural stories such as the *māravijaya*. He described how with maturity and further study, he eventually came to realize that certain stories he

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<sup>101</sup> P. Skilling, personal communication, May 24, 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Reynolds (1979). The *Thomasamphot* seems to have been an official handbook for the Dhammayut sect.

<sup>103</sup> *Paṭhamasambodhi* (1990:55, 56).

had once rejected as false, such as the Buddha's victory over Māra, were actually an "allegory of the power of the Buddha's mind."<sup>104</sup>

The *Paṭhamasambodhi* has continued to be a source of inspiration for modern Thai authors such as Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa (1906-1993) an important interpreter of Buddhism based in Wat Suanmok in Chaiya. During his lifetime, Buddhādāsa published five different studies of the life of the Buddha. In these influential works, he reinterpreted the life of the Buddha, drawing heavily on the Pāli *suttas* and western Buddhological sources. Buddhādāsa's account of the Enlightenment is even more abbreviated than Sā's and Vajirañāṇa's, and there is no earth deity.<sup>105</sup> The desire to demythologize Buddhism and rid its texts of supernatural beings such as the earth deity is not unique to modern Thai Buddhism. Similar concerns with textual authenticity called the earth deity's relationship with the Bodhisattva into question, and may have contributed to the mysterious disappearance of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* from Burma's monastic libraries and archives.

In 1922, Duroiselle wrote that the *Paṭhamasambodhi* "seems to be rare if at all extant in Burma, for I have not been able to procure a copy, and monks do not seem to have heard of it." Today this text is still not obtainable in Burma; in 2001 when I asked for a copy in bookstores and libraries in Rangoon and Mandalay, I was told that the text was a Mahāyānist work, and could only be found in Thailand. Guillon has argued that the reason why the *Paṭhamasambodhi* is unknown in Burma is because it is a Mon text, and was banned by the Burmese along with all things Mon after the fall of Pegu in 1757. In support of his theory, Guillon found a Mon poem called the *Lik Sidhat*, the "Poem of Sidhattha" dated 1798 CE that belongs to the *Paṭhamasambodhi* genre, and contains a hair-wringing Vasundharā.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Reynolds (1979:30).

<sup>105</sup> D. Swearer, personal communication, September 1999.

<sup>106</sup> Guillon (1987).

While there is no doubt that Mon culture was savagely repressed by the Burmese, Guillon has overstated his case. Despite centuries of repression, Mon *Paṭhamasambodhi* are not rare; both Halliday (a missionary to the Mons of Burma and Thailand at the turn of the century), and more recently Filliozat, have documented the existence of Mon *Paṭhamasambodhi* “in both prose and verse, the latter in a somewhat abridged form.”<sup>107</sup> More to the point is that the existence of hair-wringing earth deity iconography throughout central Burma, the Shan states, Tai Buddhist areas and Arakan demonstrates a longstanding familiarity in the region with a text like the *Paṭhamasambodhi* (although perhaps under a different rubric<sup>108</sup>) up until the Mandalay Period. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this Burmese *Paṭhamasambodhi* with its personified hair-wringing earth deity had disappeared and been replaced by biographies like the *Mālālaṅkara-vatthu* and the *Tathāgata-udāna-dīpanī*, modelled on the *Nidānakathā* and describing a non-personified earth.<sup>109</sup> The circumstances that lead to the disappearance of the earth deity story have been documented in (at least) two sources: entries in the *Royal Orders of Burma* dating from the reign of King Badon, and the discussions of Monywe Sayadaw and Sri Mala of Monywa recorded in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century treatise, the *Samanta-cakkhu-dīpanī*.<sup>110</sup>

King Badon, also known as Bodawpaya, usurped the Burmese throne on February 11, 1782 and ruled for 37 years, dying June 5, 1819.<sup>111</sup> Throughout his reign, King Badon showed an active interest in Buddhist scholarship, and the *Royal Orders of Burma* are a rich source of information about the official

<sup>107</sup> Halliday (2000:91), J. Filliozat, personal communication, November 2001.

<sup>108</sup> Denis (1977:156, 138), noted a reference to a *māravijaya-sutta* (*yathā māravijayasutte vuttaṃ/comme il est raconté dans le Māravijaya-sutta*) in the *Lokapaññati*: “Nous ne voyons pas à quel sūtra il est fait allusion ici; peut-être s’agit-il d’un sūtra conservé en sanscrit (mais jamais reçu en pāli) et aujourd’hui disparu.”

<sup>109</sup> Denis (1976) notes that in 1830 a committee of Burmese scholars was charged with revising the Chronicles to make them more authentic, and in the process decided to eliminate the legend of Māra and Upagutta because it was not in the Canon.

<sup>110</sup> *Samanta-cakkhu-dīpanī* (1991). The passages were translated from Burmese into English by Sao Hso Som.

<sup>111</sup> Than Tun (1988, 7:vii-xvi).

actions he took to ensure the authenticity of Burmese Buddhism. As Sinhalese Buddhism was in a state of decline during this period, King Badon looked towards “Majjhimadesa” for authentic Buddhism. At various times he sent missions to Northern India to obtain Buddhist texts, and earth from under the original Bodhi Tree (which was deposited under a *bodhi* tree in Burma). He sent funds to reconstruct derelict Buddhist temples in Bodhgayā, and at one point investigated the possibility of sending a Burmese army to re-establish Buddhism in Northern India. In Burma, his main interest was to promote authentic Buddhism and discourage unorthodox practices and teachings. To this end, he commissioned the copying and distribution of copies of the *Tripitaka* throughout Burma, instituted a new system of royally sponsored monastic examinations,<sup>112</sup> established schools to train Buddhist missionaries, and appointed a supreme guardian of the Burmese religion.

King Badon’s relentless search for textual authenticity caused considerable disruption to the Burmese Sangha and to the continuity of Burma’s textual traditions. From the *Royal Orders* we learn that in 1785 he appointed an editorial board of learned monks to check his new copies of the *Tripitaka* against existing manuscripts. The discrepancies discovered by the editorial board lead the king to doubt the authenticity of the Sinhalese Pāli texts that were the source of the *Pāli Daw* (Burmese *Tripitaka*). On March 22, 1807 the king requested learned monks to go over the *Pāli Daw* to see who was responsible for the interpolations or misinterpretations and find out why such things been ignored by generations of scholars. In 1807, 1810, 1811 and 1812 the king invited monks and learned men to attend a series of conferences to discuss these matters. In 1809, a debate over the authentic way to wear monastic robes grew into a rebellion that the king forcibly put down.<sup>113</sup> Dissident monks were forcibly disrobed, beaten and sent to prison, while

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<sup>112</sup> Than Tun (1988, 7:viii): any monk who failed these exams was forced to disrobe along with his teacher, and a tattoo was marked on their ribs to signify their failure.

<sup>113</sup> The ancient “left shoulder” and “two shoulder” controversy appeared among the Thai and Cambodian Sangha as well as the Burmese, Bizot (1975), Mendelson (1975) and Reynolds (1973).

others went into hiding, or were killed. Many religious texts were lost or destroyed during this uprising, and there was great confusion. It is in this atmosphere of religious upheaval that the *Samanta-cakkhu-dīpanī*, a treatise on Buddhist texts that will be discussed below, was written.

Shortly before his death, the King had his ideas about Buddhism compiled into a work entitled *Bodaw Hpaya Ayu Wada* “King Badon and His Attitude on Buddhism” that was entered into the *Royal Orders* on May 23, 1818.<sup>114</sup> The king’s remarks span subjects as diverse as the four *dhātu*, the role of meditation in the pursuit of *nirvāna*, and the authenticity of the traditional *māravijaya* episode. It is recorded that King Badon thought the story of Māra and his army and Vasundre (the male form of the name) “is all rubbish.” The king complained that

It is just silly talk to say that for *pāramī*, the man who would become a Buddha had had his head being cut off or eye being taken out or leg and limb being mutilated in order to give them to anyone who came to ask for them. Allowing oneself to be killed in that way is also murder and if murder would lead a man to the enlightenment, there would be many many more Buddhas who were once hunters and fishermen. And if the Buddha was so generous before in giving things away, he would not refuse his seat under the tree for Māra. Nor would he ask Vasundre to help him against Māra.<sup>115</sup>

As Than Tun writes,

This reformation is a very interesting and important episode in Burma because the king himself tried to start the reformation and [although] he was correct in most cases, he failed to achieve his aims. The opposition he met was immense though tacit. When he started his attempts to change the religious beliefs and practices or to ignore the later innovations by going back to the prescriptions given in the religious texts supposed to be original and therefore most

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<sup>114</sup> King Badon’s note on religion can be found in Than Tun (1987, 6:19-30).

<sup>115</sup> Than Tun (1987, 6: 21-22).

authoritative the monks only said that they follow teachers who could trace their lineage to the Buddha.<sup>116</sup>

After the King's death in 1819, the Burmese Sangha was allowed to re-establish its traditional authority over Buddhism, and some of the King's more radical reforms were forgotten.<sup>117</sup> However, influential monk-scholars like Monywa Sayadaw continued to teach that the earth deity episode was inauthentic as it could not be found in the canonical literature.<sup>118</sup>

Despite the disapproval of Kings Badon and Bagyidaw and their Sayadaws, images of the earth deity wringing her hair have persisted in Burmese religious art. This anomaly means that the "problem" of the earth deity is still a subject for discussion among the Burmese. In a recent article in the magazine *Yaung-byan*, the author argues that the episode in which the earth deity wrings her hair must be a recent as the story is not present in the Pāli Canon, and goes on to explain the motif as the product of the artistic imagination.

When reverence and faith combine with the good intentions of artists, outstanding works of art are born. These can still be seen in the murals of the Ava Era Taung-bi Library or Repository of Buddhist Scriptures, and in other paintings and sculptures of the Konbaung era, as well as in those of the present era. In the field of Buddhist art and culture, it is accepted that paintings and statues have certain connotations, and the image of the god Wathondre is accepted, with delight, as the representation of the triumph of good over all manner of obstacles, by those who perform the virtuous deed of commissioning them.<sup>119</sup>

In conclusion, in this chapter I have divided the Lives of the Buddha into two categories. The first are those in which the *māravijaya* is described as an interior psychological struggle in the mind of the Buddha. The second

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<sup>116</sup> Than Tun (1988, 7:vii).

<sup>117</sup> Than Tun (1988, 7:x).

<sup>118</sup> Section 61 of the *Samanta-cakkhu-dīpanī* (1991) entitled "Whether Wathundayi wrung her tresses or not." Translation from Burmese into English by Sao Hso Som.

<sup>119</sup> Saya Thiha Setkya Soe Myint (2002).

category describes the *māravijaya* as a literal assault by demons on the *vajrāsana*, which is guarded by the earth deity (who can be either personified or non-personified). While working with the second category of texts, I have demonstrated through mindless repetition that although the earth deity can be considered an “optional” part of the enlightenment story, when she does appear, the episode has a consistent structure: Māra’s challenge, the recollection by the Bodhisattva of his past good deeds, the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, the testimony of the earth deity, and the defeat of Māra and his army.

While it is usually assumed that texts, especially complicated narratives like the Life of the Buddha, began simply in the past and became more elaborate as time went by, this rule does not work for the *māravijaya* or the earth deity episode. As we have seen, some of the earliest Pāli *suttas* contain simple and abbreviated descriptions of the Enlightenment, but recent lives of the Buddha, such as those composed by Buddhādāsa in Thailand, are equally short and sparse. On the other hand, the earliest, extant Lives of the Buddha preserved in Chinese contain earth deity episodes, and the story continues to be reworked by artists and writers in popular Buddhist culture today. It is impossible to establish a firm date for the appearance of the earth deity episode in the Buddha biographical tradition; it is only possible to state that she has been a constant motif in Buddhist literature since the first *suttas* were written down.

It is surprising to find evidence that the earth deity, a minor and optional character, has stirred up so much controversy, and that both Buddhist monks and scholars have, in the pursuit of orthodoxy, felt the need to edit the episode from their ancient textual traditions. Perhaps the real surprise is that despite all the fuss and revision, the earth deity has survived to the present day. In the next chapter, I will argue that her survival is due to the important role she plays in Buddhist practice and ritual.



#### 4: Performative Texts and the Earth Deity

In the previous chapter I divided the earth deity episode found in the biographies of the Buddha into three “essential actions:”

- a declaration by the Bodhisattva of the good deeds he has performed in his former lives
- summoning the earth deity
- the defeat of the *mārasenā* by the earth deity

This chapter is about the texts that Buddhists use when they re-enact or perform these three actions during religious rituals and practice. Most of the texts – donative inscriptions, *sādhana*, *paritta*, *khuet*, *yantra*, *mantra* and site consecration texts – are used in contemporary religious practice but have roots in ancient Indian culture, and it is difficult if not meaningless to try to establish dates or places for their earliest appearance. Instead, my goal is to trace the parameters of beliefs and practices about the earth deity by connecting a wide variety of textual traditions in time and space. The starting point on this trajectory is the Bodhisattva’s response to Māra’s challenge in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Life of the Buddha, T. 184 (*Xiuxing benqi jing*):

I have served many Buddhas, and constantly given to others  
my precious possessions, my clothes and my food;  
my reward has been built up, through love and discipline, higher than  
the depth of the earth – this enables me to be free of worry.<sup>1</sup>

The Bodhisattva makes a similar statement in the *Lalitavistara*:

I have freely made hundreds of millions of offerings. I have cut off  
my hands, my feet, my eyes, and my head as gifts for those who  
wished them; ardently desiring the deliverance of all beings, I

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<sup>1</sup> Zürcher (1978:100). English translation, H. Hellendoorn.

distributed house, riches, seeds, beds, garments, gardens and parks to all who asked.<sup>2</sup>

In both of these texts, when the Bodhisattva enumerates the good deeds he has performed in his previous existences, he is performing a truth act or truth statement (*satyakiriyā*). A truth act is an ancient concept with Vedic origins that Burlingame defined as “a formal declaration of fact, accompanied by a command or resolution that the purpose of the agent shall be accomplished.”<sup>3</sup> A truth act has two parts: the formal declaration of fact, and the command, resolution or prayer that the purposes of the agent be accomplished. An example often given in the extensive literature on the truth act is that of the prostitute Binḍumatī, who declares that she has serviced all her paying customers equally well. Because of the truth of her statement, she is able to command the Ganges River to flow upstream. Truth acts are used in many situations. They can be an instrument of rhetoric in which the speaker makes a truth statement and attributes benefits to himself and his allies while threatening his rivals.<sup>4</sup>

In Cambodia and Thailand, truth acts are often performed during judicial procedures, with the accused calling on Mother Earth as witness as a last resort. A Thai *khlong* poem composed by poet Sri Pramoj during the reign of King Narai (1656-1688) illustrates this genre of truth act. One of the king’s favorites, Sri Pramoj, was exiled to the provinces for indiscretions at court. Despite his protestations of loyalty to the king, he was executed by the local governor. It is said that Sri Pramoj scrawled this *khlong* in the sand just before his death:

Let the earth (*dharaṇī*) here be my witness (*phayān*).

I am the disciple (*śiṣya*) of a master (*ācāry*).

If I have done wrong and my lord executes me, I am content.

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<sup>2</sup> Bays (1983, 2: 480).

<sup>3</sup> Burlingame (1917: 429).

<sup>4</sup> Thompson (1998: 141).

If I have not, and he destroys me, let this sword turn back against him.<sup>5</sup>

Donative inscriptions often take the form of a truth act: a list of the goods donated and pious deeds performed followed by blessings and curses upon those who support or fail to support the donation.<sup>6</sup> Often in such inscriptions, the earth is summoned as a witness and/or there is a reference to donative libations. The action of pouring water on the ground has been associated with Buddhist donation since Anāthapiṇḍaka's donation of the Jetavana to the Buddha shortly after the Enlightenment. Vessantara also poured water every time he made a gift (4.1) Implicit in the act of pouring donative libations is the belief that the earth deity is the ultimate recipient (or receptacle) of the water. As Mitra writes:

in Ancient India ... before making gifts of lands or villages, it was incumbent upon the would-be donors thereof to propitiate or worship the spirit or goddess — the Earth-goddess or Earth-mother — who presides over the subject matter of the donations...the best way of propitiating or worshipping her would be to pour out water from his own hands or from a pitcher upon the ground— in short to offer a libation to her.<sup>7</sup>

The earth is informed of pious donations by poured water throughout mainland Southeast Asia from Arakan in the west (4.12)<sup>8</sup> Laos and Northern Thailand to the east,<sup>9</sup> Cambodia in the centre<sup>10</sup> and north in Sipsong Panna. (4.13) In Burma, this practice dates back at least to the Bagan period. An inscription dated 1242 CE, records the dedication of land, garden and slaves

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<sup>5</sup> Cooke (1980:433). I have used Cooke's word-for-word translation here as his final translation gives "sand" for *dharanī*.

<sup>6</sup> Such inscriptions can be found in Duroiselle (1921) and Pe Maung Tin and Luce (1932–1959).

<sup>7</sup> Mitra (1918:337).

<sup>8</sup> San Tha Aung (1979:75): "We have a tradition, which is observed to this day to close a meritorious ceremony by the donor dropping droplets of water from a cup while the presiding monk offers prayers for the merit done in front of a witness."

<sup>9</sup> Peltier (1988:35–6).

<sup>10</sup> Cœdès (1953: 164–9).

and the building of three monastic buildings by a pious widow.<sup>11</sup> During the dedication ceremony, the donor “poured the water of dedication calling upon the Great Asuntariy to bear witness” and shared her merit with her mother, father and deceased husband. Than Tun, who translated the passage, stated

This is the only reference to Vasundharā in the old Burmese inscriptions and therefore it will not be too far from the truth to say that calling on her to bear witness as Gotama did when Māra attacked him is exceptional.<sup>12</sup>

But the “Quadrilingual Inscription of Rājakumār” also records that King Kyanzittha called the earth to witness in 1113 CE,<sup>13</sup> and Fräsch reports two more inscriptions from the twelfth century in the *Inscriptions of Burma* that invoke Vasundharā in volume 1, pl. 106, line 9: “I made the big earth Basundari my witness” and volume 3, p. 284a, line 10: “I called the big earth as a witness.”<sup>14</sup>

Manuscripts record and illustrate elaborate donative ceremonies formalized by pouring of libations onto the ground, performed by Burma’s kings and queens during the Konbaung Period (1783 – 1857).<sup>15</sup> Sculptural tableaux depicting Vasundharā can be found in Burmese temples such as the Shwezigon in Bagan (4.3) where donors perform dedicatory ceremonies and pour water. Bigandet and Duroiselle recorded the donative formulas used by lay donors at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on such occasions: after propitiatory offerings (flowers, candles, incense, food) were made, the earth deity was summoned (“Let Wasundhaye, the Guardian of the earth, be a witness”) and water was poured on the ground.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Inscription #L259 was first published by Duroiselle (1921:40), a translation in Pe Maung Tin (1936:54), and a photograph is in Luce and Pe Maung Tin (1939-1959, 2, plate 145).

<sup>12</sup> Than Tun (1955:255-7).

<sup>13</sup> Luce (1969:73-4).

<sup>14</sup> T. Fräsch, personal communication, March 22, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert (1988:89-100).

<sup>16</sup> Bigandet (1911:90), Duroiselle (1922:16).

In the previous chapter, we have seen how the earth deity responds to the summons of the Bodhisattva: she quakes, rings like a bronze bell, springs from the earth, makes *añjali*, wrings out her hair, etc. But why is the earth compelled to respond to the Bodhisattva's truth act? Thompson has described the truth act as speech act of great power.<sup>17</sup> Like a *mantra*, a truth act compels who ever is called upon – the Ganges River or the Earth Deity – to perform certain actions. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* when Sītā is falsely accused of unfaithfulness to Rāma, she goes to a lake and declares: “Mother Earth, if my mind was never, even in a dream, fixed on any other than my husband, may I reach the other side of the lake.”<sup>18</sup> Upon hearing Sītā's truth act, the earth goddess appeared and carried Sītā to the other side of the lake. In T. 184, the Bodhisattva commands the earth to recognize him while making the *bhūmisparśamudrā*:

And with the power of wisdom he then stretched his arm  
and said, touching the earth with his hand "She knows me!"<sup>19</sup>

and the great earth is compelled to quake in response. Likewise, in Paramanujit's Thai *Paṭhamasambodhi*, the Bodhisattva declares:

From the time I started to accumulate the thirty *pāramī* until I came into existence as a human being called Vessantara, I have given away my dear son and daughter together with the seven hundred offerings. Here at this moment I have no witness. No *sāmana* or Brahmin is here, so I can only take you as a witness. Why do you stay there and not come out to be my witness? Mae Thoranee [mother earth] could not remain unmoved but came out by means of the Bodhisattva's merit...<sup>20</sup>

Expressions such as “the power of wisdom,” “the thirty *pāramī*” and the “seven hundred offerings” are all references to the Bodhisattva's accumulation of the “perfections” or *pāramī* in his previous existences. *Pāramī* are among the attributes of a Buddha, like webbed fingers or golden skin. *Pāramī* can

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<sup>17</sup> Thompson (1998:12).

<sup>18</sup> Brown (1940:39).

<sup>19</sup> Zürcher (1978:100). English translation, H. Hellendoorn.

<sup>20</sup> Paramanujit (2503:181).

also be achieved by anyone who single-mindedly pursues their role in life. When Binḍumatī, the pious widow in Bagan, or the faithful Sītā fulfil their roles (prostitute, donor, wife) they, like the Bodhisattva, achieve perfection (*pāramitā*). In the *māravijaya* episodes cited above, the Bodhisattva's state of perfection is not just something he feels smug about, it is a tangible source of power that can be unleashed on Māra in self-defense: *pāramitānubhāvena tadā mārasenā parājitā* (thereupon the army of Māra was defeated by the power of the perfections).<sup>21</sup>

Since the beginning of Thailand's written history, *pāramī* has been an essential attribute for temporal as well as spiritual leadership and kings with a great accumulation of *pāramī* are compared to *bodhisattvas*. The king's *pāramī* is a force that can bring victory in battle and prosperity to the kingdom; conversely the lack of *pāramī* can bring military defeat, epidemics, famine. The ostentatious displays of merit-making performed by Thai kings, and more recently by Thai politicians, can be understood in part as an attempt to demonstrate personal stocks of *pāramī* and hence the legitimate right to rule. Rory and others have argued that the performance and recital of religious texts such as the *Vessantara Jātaka* and the *māravijaya* episode at public religious ceremonies (events usually sponsored by kings or community leaders) were important methods of transmitting the "raw political theory" of *pāramī* in Thai society.<sup>22</sup>

The association between *pāramī* and "real-time" power is not unique to Thailand. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sinhalese life of the Buddha, the *Samantakūṭavaṇṇanā*, the Bodhisattva sends an army to fight Māra's demons. These warriors are the personifications of the *dasapāramī* but they are not abstract concepts; they have ferocious grimaces, bulging biceps and terrible weapons and fight like zombies while "the Conqueror remained seated and

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<sup>21</sup> Cœdès (1999: 150).

<sup>22</sup> Rory (1996:17-9).

with His fiery energy made Māra's army despondent.”<sup>23</sup> In Cambodia, the *pāramī* are also conceived of as supernatural entities able to guard Buddhism from harm. The *pāramī* are installed (*pratiṣṭha*) into Cambodian Buddha images during the rites of consecration (*buddhābhiseka*); from this vantage point they keep the *vihāra* and its surroundings secure from evildoers.<sup>24</sup> The *pāramī* are given the names and characteristics of Hindu deities, local terrestrial spirits, the elements, and historical personages (deceased kings and princesses, famous warriors and notable ancestors). They receive food and cult offerings that are placed in front of the central Buddha image in the *vihāra* every morning, and can communicate with their human devotees during mediumnic rites of possession performed in the *vihāra* in front of the Buddha image.<sup>25</sup>

The cult of the *pāramī* has been enhanced in Cambodia by an association with the supernatural beings called *brāy*, the spirits of women who have died in violent or tragic circumstances.<sup>26</sup> While *brāy* are generally understood as belonging to a non-Buddhist, or animist spirit world, there are “Buddhist *brāy*” who take up residence in Buddha images, the *bodhi* trees in monastery grounds, *cetiya*, racing boats and other structures associated with the Buddhist *wat*. They are fiercely territorial, easily offended, and capable of performing malevolent deeds against those who transgress against them or the religion. Anthropologist Ang Choulean's informants reported an equivalency between the *brāy*, the *pāramī* that guard Buddha images, and the Buddhist earth deity *nāñ gañhññ* Braḥ Dharaṇī, also thought to dwell in (or immediately underneath) the *buddhapallanka*.<sup>27</sup> Often the image of Nāñ Dharaṇī is carved or painted on the base of Buddha images, a visual representation of the

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<sup>23</sup> Vedeha (1986:36-7, stanzas 337-360).

<sup>24</sup> Bizot (1994:114).

<sup>25</sup> Bizot (1994:121).

<sup>26</sup> Porée-Maspero (1954:628).

<sup>27</sup> Ang (1996:121). The names used by Ang's informants reveal this ambiguity: “*brāy braḥ pāramī*,” “*bray pallank*.”

conceptual alignment between the earth deity, the personified *pāramī* and the *brāy*.

To illustrate the murky boundaries between these supernatural forces, Ang relates the legend attached to Vihāra Thom, a Buddhist temple in Srok Sambaur, Kratie province. The temple was built by the grieving father of a princess, Krapum Chhouk (Lotus Bud), who died tragically after being swallowed by a crocodile. According to tradition, 100 virgins were sacrificed and buried under the temple's 100 support pillars during construction so they would become *brāy pāramī*, and form the retinue of the deceased princess (who herself became a *pāramī*). Whenever the abbot left the monastery, it was said that he could not travel in a car because there was not enough room for the 100 *brāy* who always accompanied him. Instead he had to go on foot or be driven in a large bus.

The sacrifice and burial of virgins, pregnant women (and even pregnant cats) under the foundation pillars of religious buildings, city gates and bridges to act as guardians is widespread practice in the region.<sup>28</sup> Although usually glossed as “pre-Buddhist” or “Animist,” such practices have interacted with Buddhism for centuries and cannot today be understood separately from Buddhism. There is in fact a conceptual similarity between the interment of a female (mother or virgin, human or feline) under a foundation pillar and the story of the earth deity and the *bhūmisparśamudrā*.

The *bhūmisparśamudrā* is the posture in which the Buddha is seated cross-legged, right arm pendant over the right knee. The right hand has the palm turned inward and all the fingers are extended, almost touching the ground. The *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* describes the *bhūmisparśamudrā* as a “late” *mudrā* as it does not appear in the Pāli literature, but it is probably more accurate to say that the *mudrā* appeared at the same time as the Lives of the

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<sup>28</sup> Chandler (1974:207-222), Quaritch Wales (1931:304-5), and Wright (1990:43-53).



Buddha during the first two centuries CE.<sup>29</sup> The 2<sup>nd</sup> century T. 184 mentions the *bhūmisparśamudrā*: “touching the earth with his hand.”<sup>30</sup> The *Mahāvastu* relates that upon Māra’s attack the Bodhisattva struck the ground with his “bright and webbed” right hand. The world quaked six times and there was a fearful roar “As if a man should take and beat a clear-sounding vessel of metal, just so did the whole world resound when the Bodhisattva struck the earth.”<sup>31</sup> The *Lalitavistara* also describes the *lakṣaṇa* that adorn the hand of a Buddha as well as the *bhūmisparśamudrā*:

With his right hand, which had on its palm the design of a conch, a banner, a fish, a vase, a svastika, an iron hook, and a wheel: this hand which had the spaces between the fingers joined by a membrane; which was beautifully adorned with fine softly polished fingernails the color of red copper; which had the graceful form of youth; which during innumerable *kalpas* had accumulated great masses of virtue; with this hand he touched all parts of his body and then gently touched the earth.<sup>32</sup>

In these texts, the Buddha’s adorned hand acts like a lightning bolt. Gathering together the power of his perfections, he conducts the power through his hand and discharges it into the earth. This magical power is what compels the earth deity to respond (quake, ring like a bell, spring from the earth) to the summons of the Bodhisattva. Here, the *bhūmisparśamudrā* can be compared to the *vajra* or the *kīla*, the magical weapon that is driven into the earth to bring the phenomenal world under control. There are countless versions of this ancient and universal myth. This paraphrase of a version cited by Mayer in an article on the Tibetan *kīla* or *phur-ba* tells how Indra, the Wielder of the Thunderbolt, slew Vṛtra the first born of the *nāgas*:

In the beginning, there was darkness and chaos, and nothing in the universe was fixed or stable. The great *nāga* Vṛtra crouched on top of the mountains, holding the waters of heaven captive in his giant

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<sup>29</sup> Malalasekera (1977, 3: 83).

<sup>30</sup> Zürcher (1978:100). English translation, H. Hellendoorn.

<sup>31</sup> Jones (1952, 2: 282, 313).

<sup>32</sup> Bays (1983, 2: 482).

belly. Indra challenged Vṛtra to battle and threw his thunderbolt at the *nāga*. Vṛtra was slain. Transfixed by Indra's *vajra*, all creation flowed forth from his belly, restoring life to the universe.<sup>33</sup>

The idea that there is a huge serpent or *nāga* – deep in the centre of the earth, floating in the cosmic ocean or crouching on top of Mount Sumeru – that causes chaos and instability and must be controlled before creation can begin, is one of the fundamental principles of Indian cosmology, and is reflected in Indian religious architecture. Kramrisch has described the ancient process of preparing a site for the construction of an Indian temple: first a diagram or *yantra* is drawn the ground, organising the site and defining its boundaries.<sup>34</sup> Next, oblations and offerings are placed in a pit dug in the ground to propitiate the ruler of the earth – an entity simultaneously conceived of as a masculine deity, ophidian in nature, and the feminine earth – who must also be firmly established (*pratiṣṭhā*) within the *maṇḍala*.

Buddhists have employed ancient Indian rituals for their site consecration rituals from an early date. We have already seen that the earth deity was called to witness the donation of the Jetavana by Anāthapiṇḍaka soon after the Enlightenment. Likewise, it is known from archaeological finds and from canonical sources that *kīla* were used to mark the location of boundaries, thresholds, gateways, and pillars.<sup>35</sup> During the Pāla Period, the *kīla* evolved from being a simple stake or peg into a ritual weapon used in Tantric Buddhist rituals, reaching a pinnacle of sorts in its apotheosis as Vajrakīla, a wrathful deity who leads his initiates to enlightenment through the subjugation of all obstacles. During the same time period, the role of the earth deity was enhanced and she acquired both cult and iconography. Many *sādhanas* were composed during the Pāla Period describing her appearance and prescribing her worship.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Mayer (1990:5).

<sup>34</sup> Kramrisch (1976).

<sup>35</sup> Boord (1993:3), de Silva (1981:63-4).

<sup>36</sup> Bhattacharyya (1928, 2: nos. 213-216). See also Bühnemann (1999).

The *Kriyāsaṃgraha*, composed by Niḥsaṃga Acārya Śrī Kuladatta around the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, prescribes a complex series of visualizations, actions and dances that re-enact the *māravijaya* during the construction of *vihāra* and *stūpa*.<sup>37</sup> During these rituals, Vasundharā is invoked, asked for permission to use the site and installed as its guardian. The officiant takes on the identity of Vajrasattva, and bounds the site by the insertion of *kīla* around the periphery, ridding the area of all impurities and adverse forces. A variety of gods and local deities are named, including a *nāga* king whose location under the ground of the *maṇḍala* must be determined, and must be propitiated at that spot. Skorupski concludes that the rituals of the *Kriyāsaṃgraha* represent the latest phase of Indian Buddhism a time when “The absorption into the Buddhist fold of, and interaction with, the indigenous spirits and gods have reached their climax”<sup>38</sup> and “various aspects of Buddhist doctrine such as the factors of enlightenment (*bodhi-pakṣika*) or the attributes of the Buddha” are transformed into powerful entities leaving “no clear demarcation between gross matter and the refined levels of existence”.<sup>39</sup>

A *sādhana* from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, the *Vasundharādhivāsana-vidhi* (part of the *Vajrāvalī-nāma-maṇḍalopāyikā* of Abhayākaragupta) gives instructions on how to summon and install the earth deity in a *maṇḍala*.

After that, having sat in the middle ground of the fragrant *maṇḍala*, produce Vasundharā from the letter *vaṃ*. Having imagined three *huṃs* in the middle of the lunar disc in the palm of right hand, with the tip of the finger with three strikes of the ground and sending forth rays from the letter *huṃ*, arousing the form of the *jñānasattva* of the goddess Pṛthivī. Having a heart fixed on joy, yellow in color, gentle, wearing white robes, having various adornments, grasping a golden pitcher and making the *abhaya mudrā* with each of the two hands,

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<sup>37</sup> Skorupski (1998).

<sup>38</sup> Skorupski (1998:195).

<sup>39</sup> Skorupski (1998:196).

having one face. Standing in front, having worshiped her with “guest water” and so on, revering her with great fervor: “*Om*, come, come, great goddess Pṛthivī, mother of the three worlds, filled with all jewels, adorned with gems, having the sound of bracelets and anklets, worshipped by Vajrasattva.” And taking this water fulfill the deeds performed in this *maṇḍala hṛm̐ hīm̐ hīm̐ hīm̐ hum̐*, saying “*svāhā*” three times, let the deity be installed in the container for invocations. “You, goddess, are the witness to all the Buddhas and Saviors with regard to the stages and perfections. As the power of Māra was broken by the protector of the Śākyasimha, having myself defeated the forms of Māra, I will draw the *maṇḍala* again and again.” Having recited this, the deity should install.<sup>40</sup>

In both these texts, the practitioner in pursuit of Enlightenment imitates the Bodhisattva: he performs the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, summons the earth deity from below the earth and installs her in the middle of his *maṇḍala*: the *vajrāsana*, “the navel of the earth.” Likewise, in the *māravijaya* episodes containing a personified earth deity, her physical relationship with the earth’s surface and the *vajrāsana* is carefully described. Another feature is the emphasis on the adorned earth deity, her intimate relationship with the riches hidden under the earth. T. 190 reports that when the Bodhisattva pointed to the earth, the earth deity, adorned with precious jewels and holding with both hands a vase made of the seven precious substances, filled with all sorts of fragrant flowers emerged from the surface of the earth and manifested itself from the waist up in front of the Bodhisattva’s seat.<sup>41</sup> In the *Lalitavistara*, the goddess of the earth “adorned with all her ornaments” surrounded by her retinue of a hundred times ten million earth goddesses, emerged from her waist up through the surface of the earth “not far from the Bodhisattva.”<sup>42</sup> The same emphasis on location can be found in Paramanujit’s *Paṭhamasambodhi*:

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<sup>40</sup> Bhattacharyya (1981,1:70-95). Abhayākara Gupta was active during the reign of Rāma Pāla, 1084-1130 CE. Also Boord (1993: 66-7).

<sup>41</sup> T. 190, *Fo benxing ji jing*, 791a-b25, draft translation, S. Clarke.

<sup>42</sup> Bays (1983, 2:480).

“Then the beloved Earth ... emerged from the earth’s surface in the likeness of a woman and stood in front of the Bodhisattva...”<sup>43</sup>

Like the biographies of the Buddha, site consecration rituals containing these ideas about the earth deity spread along the Silk Road and the Southern ocean routes to wherever Buddhist temples were constructed. Tibetan chronicles describe the importation of the cult of Vajrakīla from Nālandā in the 8th century CE, associated with the establishment of the first Buddhist monastery of bSam-yas/Sam-ye by the Indian monk Padmasambhava. According to ancient traditions, Padmasambhava was plagued by local spirits and demons and had to subjugate them with *vajra* dances and the insertion of *kīla* before Buddhism could be established in Tibet and the first Buddhist temple constructed.<sup>44</sup> Such rituals can be interpreted in many ways: manuscripts found at Dunhuang compare Padmasambhava’s struggles against Tibet’s indigenous demons to Śākyamuni’s subjugation of Māra, and Indra’s battle with Vṛtra.<sup>45</sup> Similar consecration rituals are still performed during the construction of temples, domestic buildings and sand *maṇḍalas* in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and in Tibetan diaspora communities in India, Switzerland and the United States.<sup>46</sup> While different environments and local circumstances have inevitably meant change in construction practices and associated rituals, the earth deity is still invoked and installed in the centre of the *maṇḍala*, the site bounded and purified with *kīla* and *vajra* dances, and local deities including a *nāga* must be propitiated with offerings deposited into holes dug in the ground. Less is known about the transmission of Indian site consecration rituals into Southeast Asia, but archaeologists studying the foundations of the great stone temples of Angkor and Java and Sri Lanka have found evidence of elaborate consecration rituals involving *maṇḍalas*,

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<sup>43</sup> Paramanujit (2503:181). English translation, J. Crocker.

<sup>44</sup> Waddell (1971:266, footnote 2).

<sup>45</sup> Boord (1993), Mayer and Cantwell (1993:2-16).

<sup>46</sup> Bantor (1993:3-12), Brauen (1997), Cantwell (2000), van Dyke (1997), Wongmo (1985).

remain under the ground are “de-sacralized,” and the terrain purified as a group of monks go from square to square, reciting the stanzas prescribed in the *Mahāvagga*.

During the second night, the Buddha images are consecrated and the *māravijaya* is recited and/or performed in front of the main Buddha image. Giteau found that details of the performance changed depending on the resources of the sponsor and the availability of local talent, but usually consisted of two adult men (played by *ācār* or monk) who performed the roles of the Buddha and Māra, and the *kūn devatā*, (*kūn* =“child”) young boys and girls dressed in their best clothes and wearing paper crowns. The boys played male roles (the *lokapāla* and *mārasenā*) and the girls played female roles (Sujātā, the three daughters of Māra, Taṇhā, Rāgā and Aratī, and the earth deity, *nāṅ gaṅhī*).

The *Pchañ Māra*, the text recited during the consecration of the Buddha images, provides information about the earth deity that is lacking in the Khmer *Paṭhamasambodhi*. The beauty of the earth deity is emphasized and she is dressed like a great queen, “adorned with a diadem, with flawless earrings, of great beauty in diamond and lapis lazuli of shining brilliance.” After emerging from the earth seated on a magnificent golden lotus, she prostrated herself in front of the Bodhisattva, reassuring him “O Great and Precious Lord, take it easy! I will myself defeat that lying Māra, who is a dishonest thief, audacious, violent, ignorant of good and evil...” Then she turned on Māra: “Eh! Eh! Stupid Māra, fat and jealous, the Buddha has...made countless libations...Eh! Eh! Māra, see clearly that I am the witness.” After this verbal assault, she twisted the water from her hair to combat the forces of Māra. “They became terrified, running wildly... and Māra lost his judgement. And Māra repented and worshipped the Buddha.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Giteau (1969:35).

boundary markers and propitiatory deposits in the earth.<sup>47</sup> And several Cambodian inscriptions of Cambodia from the late 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (during the reigns of Jayavarman 5 and Suryavarman 1) commemorate ceremonies performed during the renovation and installation of Buddhist images and the construction of Buddhist monasteries in which the Tantric deities Vajrasattva, Vajrapaṇi and Trailokanātha were invoked.<sup>48</sup>

An inscription from Bagan during the reign of Kyanzittha (1077 – 1113 CE) describes the consecration rituals performed at the time of the construction of the Nanda temple. The rituals were performed under the direction of the Thera Shin Arahan, said to have come from Thaton, the Mon capital.<sup>49</sup> While this inscription is not a consecration text, many of the procedures it documents parallel those described in the *Kriyāsaṃgraha*. Before construction began, the site was formally bounded and purified by Buddhist monks reciting *parittas* around the circumference of the building site. A grid was laid out over the site, local deities (including a *nāga* living under the ground) were propitiated, and a golden peg was inserted into the ground. When holes were dug to receive the building's support posts, the Mahāthera and his retinue of monks propitiated the holes with lustrations of water poured from conch shells and made deposits of gold, silver and copper leaf as well as goods and food such as mats, vessels and rice. There is controversy about the form of Buddhism promulgated by the Mon Mahāthera Shin Arahan, but most scholars agree that iconographical program followed in Bagan originated in northern India, and the use of Indo-Tibetan consecration Tantric rituals in Bagan seems logical. More surprising are the parallels between the *Kriyāsaṃgraha*, the *Vajrāvali* and the consecration rituals practiced today in Cambodia and Thailand, if only because they occur in cultures that have been Theravāda Buddhist for many centuries.

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<sup>47</sup> Dumarçay (1989:23). de Silva (1981:73), describes a *parittamaṇḍapa* bounded by *kīlā* that was built by Nissāṅkamalla (1187-1196) in Polonnaruva.

<sup>48</sup> Cœdès (1954:207, 241, 244).

<sup>49</sup> Luce (1969:67-71).

Terwiel has researched house building texts found throughout Southeast Asia that instruct the ritual officiant how to determine the position of a rotating *nāga* who lives underground.<sup>50</sup> Terwiel describes the rituals performed when a house is built in Central Thailand in some detail. After the construction site is selected and carefully cleared and levelled, the ritual officiant blesses the site and propitiates local spirits identified by Terwiel as “Phra Phumm, Phra Thoranii and Krungphali.” Offering trays are set on a stepped altar shaded by an umbrella. One tray is triangular in shape and the other is square with a circle inside; the triangular container is placed on the altar and the square one is placed on the ground. The trays have nine compartments filled with rice, peas, sesame seed, bananas, etc. The officiant walks around the building site, and inserts sticks into the ground where the house’s support posts will be buried. Trays made from a slice of banana trunk are set upon the sticks, and offerings for “Phaya Nak,” the lord of the *nāgas*, is placed on each of these trays. The holes for the posts are carefully positioned in relationship to the position of Phaya Nak under the soil because the posts must be inserted into the serpent’s belly rather than his head or tail. As soon as the first hole is dug, the square bamboo tray with the nine compartments is deposited in the hole along with incense, alcohol and coins, gold leaf, etc. This hole is the most important, but the rest of the holes may also receive offerings.

Similar rituals are performed in Northern Thailand<sup>51</sup> and in Cambodia<sup>52</sup> where it is also believed that any time the earth is disturbed – during agriculture, the construction of wells or dams, and during secular as well as religious construction projects – the local deities must be informed and propitiated. Three deities under the ground who must be propitiated: Kron Bali, a male

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<sup>50</sup> Terwiel (1985).

<sup>51</sup> Davis (1984).

<sup>52</sup> Porée-Maspero (1962:5-6), Porée-Maspero (1961:179-251, 548-628, 883-929), Giteau (1971:103-23, 124-136 & plates, 116-117).



demon with ophidian characteristics,<sup>53</sup> Braḥ Bhūmi, the masculine form of the earth deity, and Braḥ Dharaṇī/Nang Thoranee, the female earth deity who wrings out her hair. There is a certain confusion about the identity and character of these deities, something that can be seen in the offering tray called a *bae* that is placed in the ground for the demon Kroṅ Bali. The *bae* is triangular in shape and is known as “boar’s snout,” and contains a painted image of the earth deity. Figure 4.4 shows a *bae* used at Wat Arun in Siem Reap province in 2000; the earth deity has been moulded from dough, and painted.<sup>54</sup>

There are many parallels between the Khmer and Thai house building rituals and the Indo-Tibetan texts cited earlier in the chapter. Terwiel has argued that this is because they had a common source: an architectural treatise from Orissa that he believed was transmitted by itinerant pandits into the Mon cultures of mainland Southeast Asia sometime between the 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.<sup>55</sup> Terwiel’s theory of an East Indian origin for these rituals seems possible. But his (and Davis’) assertion that the diverse cultures of Southeast Asia adopted such rituals because they contained *nāgas* is somewhat less convincing. While the significance of the *nāga* for mainland Southeast Asia cannot be denied and will be discussed in further detail in chapter 5, both Davis and Terwiel (like many scholars of post-colonial Southeast Asia) underestimate the effect that centuries of contact with Buddhism has had on the inhabitants of the region. It is just as likely that Indo-Tibetan Tantric site consecration rituals were adopted in Southeast Asia because of their association with the powerful Buddhist monarchs who have controlled the people, the land and its resources for so many centuries.

In mainland Southeast Asia, as elsewhere in the Buddhist world, the boundaries or *sīmā* of Buddhist temples are established and marked by

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<sup>53</sup> Giteau (1969:25)..

<sup>54</sup> Thanks to Ang Choulean for allowing me to use this photograph.

<sup>55</sup> Terwiel (1985:221-4).

elaborate rituals.<sup>56</sup> There are many rules about *sīmā* in the Vinayas and commentaries, prescribing what they can be made of and rules for their placement.<sup>57</sup> As Chung and Kieffer-Pülz wrote,

the *karmavācanās/kammavācās* for the determination of the *sīmā* belong to those formulae which have been essential from the very beginning of Buddhism right up to the present. Perhaps only those for conferring ordination (*upasampadā*) on a novice are of comparable importance.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the antiquity and canonicity of these regulations, there are many anomalies in the *sīmā* traditions of mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>59</sup> Most noticeable is that the eight carved stone markers called *bai sīmā* or *slik sīmā* (*bai* and *slik* are the Khmer and Thai words for “leaf”) placed at the cardinal and inter-cardinal points around the *vihāra* are not the *nimitta* but are just markers. The actual *nimitta* are roughly dressed stone balls that are buried under the ground; these are called *ruh* or “roots” and the *bai sīmā* are then planted in the earth directly above them. A second, though less noticeable, anomaly is the use of a ninth marker called the *sīmākil* that is buried in the centre of the consecrated space. This ninth marker is considered the most important *sīmā*; it is larger than the other stones, is buried deeper and its hole receives more propitiatory offerings (gold leaf, money, libations) before the stone is placed in it. Although in Cambodia there is no marker for this stone, it is always located directly in front of the main Buddha image and marks the “navel” of the *vihāra*.<sup>60</sup> In central Laos, a *bū sīm* (“*sīmā*-navel”) is set above the ground to clearly mark the ninth *luk nimit* buried underneath.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> M. Lorrillard, personal communication, July 18, 2002, remarked that the regional variation in Mainland Southeast Asia between the form of *sīmā* and their rituals would be a fruitful topic for research.

<sup>57</sup> Bizot (1988:87).

<sup>58</sup> Chung and Kieffer-Pülz (1997:17).

<sup>59</sup> Kieffer-Pülz (1997:141-153).

<sup>60</sup> Porée-Maspero (1961:615).

<sup>61</sup> M. Lorrillard, personal communication, July 18, 2002.

Each *sīmā* is associated with a particular deity (for example Kubera) or Buddhist saint (Sāriputta, Mogallāna); the *sīmākil* is associated with the god Indra, and is also called the *inthokel* (*indrakīla*). A legend explains that when the god Indra learned that the Buddha had authorized his disciples to place the *sīmā* at the eight cardinal and inter-cardinal points, he asked if he too could be in charge of a *sīmā* and was allocated the central *sīmā* in the middle of the *vihāra*.<sup>62</sup>

In Cambodia, the consecration of a new (or renovated) Buddhist *vihāra* is an undertaking that lasts for three days and nights and includes both the imposition of *sīmā* and the consecration of new Buddha images. Families and individuals come in large numbers from surrounding areas to participate, camping on the site “to hold the cardinal points” for the duration of the proceedings. The performance of rituals addressed to the *sīmā* stones and the Buddha images are interspersed with the chanting of liturgies and sermons by the monks, and there are many opportunities to make merit through the offerings of food and other necessities to the monks in residence at the wat.

Before the ceremonies begin, a fence called the *rājāvātī* is built out of bamboo sticks around the *vihāra*. Altars are constructed next to the fence for the *devatā*, and the usual offerings made. In the east, an altar with three levels is erected for Kroñ Bali, the demon of the underworld. These altars are attended by *ācār* (*ācārya* = teacher or non-ordained ritual officiant) throughout the three days. The ceremonies begin with a triple *pradakṣiṇa* around the temple, the devotees carrying the *sīmā* stones, wrapped in cloth, anointed with gold leaf and perfumed water, and suspended from poles by woven slings (4.8). After they have circumambulated the *vihāra*, the stones are placed in front of the main Buddha image. The floor of the temple is carefully divided into squares using long bamboo strips about two feet square; after this grid is set up, the temple is off limits. During the night, any old *sīmā* stones that might

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<sup>62</sup> Porée-Maspero (1958:64) and Giteau (1969:12, 45).

The dramatization of Buddhist texts has been a feature of Cambodian religious expression since the pre-Angkor period through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was reported that monks were paid to chant the *Mahājātakas* and the *Braḥ Mālatī* “beating time on the ground with the big fans that they held in front of them. Some of them danced in the style of the theatrical representations of the *Yike...*”<sup>64</sup> One of the earliest reports of the performance of the defeat of Māra was made by Leclère in his detailed description of the events surrounding the consecration of the Wat Braḥ Kaev, located in the grounds of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. He described a pantomime that took place during the night in which “Little children assume the role of divine angels (*théwadā*) who witness the proceedings.... The monks recite the defeat of Mara.”<sup>65</sup> During the 1940’s and 1950s Porée-Maspero found the *pchañmāra* is played by young girls and boys, or by the royal dancers, during the ceremonies called *aphisek Preah*, where an image of the Buddha is consecrated at the end of the rainy season, or at the time of the incineration of a monk or a prince, or the consecration of a pagoda.<sup>66</sup> In 1952, when a Sri Lankan delegation brought Buddha relics to Phnom Penh, the relics were installed on the main altar of Wat Braḥ Kaev, while awaiting the completion of the *stūpa* that would hold them, and the royal dance troupe performed the *māravijaya* in front of the main altar in honour of the relics.<sup>67</sup>

While such performances of the *māravijaya* seem to have been traditional, by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhist reform movements reminded Cambodians that one of the ten precepts, obligatory for monks and often observed by devout laypeople, is an injunction against watching dramatic performances, and a series of decrees passed by the Ministère de l’Interieur et des Cultes forbade monks to participate in performances in Buddhist

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<sup>64</sup> Bizot (1976:6).

<sup>65</sup> LeClère (1917:251). Adhémard LeClère (1853-1917) was an administrator of the French Protectorate in Cambodia and an amateur ethnographer who wrote valuable descriptions of Cambodia during the years of the Protectorate.

<sup>66</sup> Porée-Maspero (1961:923-924).

<sup>67</sup> Cravath (1985, 1:224, 345).

temples.<sup>68</sup> As members of the Sangha became familiar with Huot Thath's 1932 translation into Khmer of the regulations for the imposition of *sīmā*, consecration rituals, particularly in urban areas, were modified and reformed in accordance with the *Mahāvagga*. By the late 1960s, Giteau found that many elements considered non-Buddhist, such as the propitiation of Kroñ Bali, were often omitted from *sīmā* rituals.<sup>69</sup> However, the *māravijaya* is still read and performed in rural areas such as in the village of K Beng Kpuos in Kompong Chnang province. The *wat* of K Beng Kpuos was badly damaged during the Civil War and Khmer Rouge period and was renovated during the mid-1990s. During the renovations, a couple donated money to construct a *cetiya* to hold their parents' remains, a *kuṭi* for the monks, and to purchase several Buddha images. The sponsors had the consecration ceremony videotaped to show friends and relatives in New Zealand, and I was fortunate to be given a copy. The two-hour long videotape, made by a Khmer cameraman whose business is the recording of such ceremonies, is a presentation of the highlights of an event that unfolded over several days and nights.

The most noticeable feature of the videotaped performance is the relaxed and informal atmosphere: rather than being a solemn occasion, the audience never stops talking; when they are paying attention to the events rather than their neighbour, they are shouting directing advice to the performers or to the *ācār*. Blaring music and the beating of gongs punctuates the action. Most charming are the *kūn devatā* (4.5). They take their roles seriously but at the same time are children: one young girl who plays the temptress Rāgā is overwhelmed by the microphone, and must be prompted by the Buddha to say her lines; the boys who make up army of *māras* stand in a motley line, wiggling, grinning and pulling their ears as Māra challenges the Buddha for his throne. When Braḥ Dharaṇī flings water on the *mārasenā* (4.6) the troops fall to the floor in a lolly scramble as a tray of sweets is set out as a reward for the young actors.

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<sup>68</sup> Bizot (1976:12).

<sup>69</sup> Giteau (1969:3).

On the third morning of the consecration ceremonies, the *sīmā* stones are “dressed” in a *saṃbat’ hol* (a traditional garment wrapped around the lower body). Then the cords suspending the *sīmā* stones over the holes are cut by men wielding mallets and large knives, an event choreographed to drumbeats, and the stones dropped into their holes. After the stones are set in the holes, the drums summon all the devotees to come and push the earth back into the holes, and the *bai sīmā* are planted on top. The strips of bamboo that made up the grid are gathered up and used to weave protective belts, and the cotton thread linking the Buddha images is gathered to make necklaces and belts of invulnerability. When all is finished, the *ācār* sprinkles the pagoda, images, texts, monks and participants with blessed water, and the *babil*, a ritual candle holder, is “turned” or passed hand to hand around the periphery in a final binding of the site, and the ceremonies are finished with cries of “*sādhu*.”

The complex assortment of rituals performed during temple consecration has been described by Giteau and others as a “double cult:” the remnants of ancient pre-Buddhist beliefs about stones and human sacrifice interacting with the *sīmā* prescriptions set down in the Vinayas.<sup>70</sup> Art historian No Na Paknam in his study of Thai *sīmā* styles proposed

that the demarcation of Buddhist holy ground with stone slabs, rather than with some other kind of permissible marker, is derived from an earlier proto-historic, or pre-historic, megalithic tradition indigenous to the area...the menhir was brought to the monastery.<sup>71</sup>

Although cults involving large stones and offerings into holes dug in the ground may seem to be the remnants of a pre-Buddhist time when bloodthirsty earth deities demanded human sacrifices, a little digging uncovers what appears to be a complex Buddhist history. Beautifully carved stone steles,

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<sup>70</sup> Giteau (1969:4-5) noted that by the late 1960s, the rites to Kroñ Bali, and other practices such as the hair and blood offerings were often suppressed, probably due to increasing familiarity with the canonical prescriptions for *sīmā* imposition.

<sup>71</sup> No Na Paknam (1981:60-1), *Condominas* (1952:359-392).

dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, have been discovered in regions that were part of the Mon kingdoms, and art historians believe that these steles are the antecedents for the *bai sīmā* that have been popular in Cambodia, Thailand and Laos since the Middle Period. However, there is no evidence that these steles were originally placed around Mon *vihāras* with the same ritual function as the *bai sīmā* today. Despite the importance of Pāli language Buddhism for the Mon people, the Mon *sīmā* are not “canonical;” as Kieffer-Pülz demonstrated, the *Pāli Vinaya* does not prescribe this type of stone marker. The late appearance of *bai sīmā* in Cambodia, after the ascendancy of Sinhalese Theravāda Buddhism in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, would seem to indicate a Sinhalese source for the *sīmā* cult.<sup>72</sup> However *bai sīmā* are not found in Sri Lanka.<sup>73</sup> To further confuse matters, the *sīmā* used in Burma today (4.11) look different than the *sīmā* typical of Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand (4.10).<sup>74</sup> In short, there has been considerable variation in the boundary markers used in mainland Southeast Asia over the centuries. In addition to stone *sīmā* stones, Buddhists establish their sacred boundaries with golden *kīlas*, wooden pillars, ritual dances, cotton string and by turning the *babil* around the periphery of the site.

Despite the changing form of the *nimitta*, the earth deity has always been present during Buddhist consecration, and is contacted by striking, dancing or digging into the ground. This concept is as old as the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, and may have been spread throughout Asia by pilgrims like Xuanzang, who was shown three holes near the Sanghārama of Anāthapiṇḍaka. Locals told the Chinese monk that the three holes were formed when the angry earth opened

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<sup>72</sup> Bizot (1988:113). Although no *bai sīmā* have been found in Cambodia that pre-date those established around the Buddhist Terraces of Angkor Thom in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, there are references to unspecified *sīmā* in a 10<sup>th</sup> century inscription in Cœdès (1954:218-223).

<sup>73</sup> Kieffer-Pülz (1997:141-153) noted that *sīmā* stones appeared in Sri Lanka during the Polonnoruva period (1017-1235) but these are true *nimitta* rather than markers.

<sup>74</sup> As Bizot (1988:14) points out, variation in *sīmā* styles and rituals may signal different *nikāya* affiliations.

up under the enemies of the Buddha (Devadatta, the Brahmācārins who murdered the courtesan Sundarī, and Ciñcamani who claimed to be the Buddha's mistress) and sent them directly to hell. Xuanzang described the holes as "unfathomable in their depth; when the floods of summer and autumn fill all the lakes and ponds with water, these deep caverns show no signs of the water standing in them."<sup>75</sup>

The Vasundharā holes that can be found in Buddhist temples in Arakan belong to this set of beliefs about the earth deity's role in consecration.<sup>76</sup> These holes are located directly in front of the main Buddha image, in the same spot that the *sīmākīlā* is located in Khmer, Thai and Lao temples. During the Mrauk-U Period, 15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the king informed the earth deity of his new royal status by depositing specially minted coins and libations into this hole as part of *rājābhiseka*.<sup>77</sup> The holes are often covered up when temples are renovated and their floors retiled, but a Vasundharā hole can still be seen in the Lokamanaung Pagoda built in 1658 by Sandathudamma Raza (r. 1652-1674) outside the western walls of Mrauk U (4.12).<sup>78</sup> Vasundharā holes also appear in Dai *vihāras* in Sipsong Panna (4.13).<sup>79</sup> Again, the main hole is located directly in front of the main Buddha image. A small kettle of water is located next to the hole for people to use when they consecrate their vows with poured water. In some temples, additional lustration holes are located next to the

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<sup>75</sup> Beal (1968:7, 9).

<sup>76</sup> Gutman (1976:207) and Raymond (1998:113-127). According to the temple caretaker at the Lokamanaung, July 2000, today anyone can toss coins or bank notes, or pour water into the Vasundharā hole when they need to ask for help, good luck, or wealth.

<sup>77</sup> San Tha Aung (1979:71).

<sup>78</sup> In August 2000, I could not find the Vasundharā hole mentioned in several guidebooks in the old Mahāmuni shrine on Sirigutta hill, north of the ancient city of Dhaññavatī.

<sup>79</sup> I. Yanatan, personal communication, November 28, 2002. After 1949, and again during the Cultural Revolution, Dai (Tai) Buddhism was suppressed. Recently the Chinese authorities have relaxed prohibitions on religious activity, and the Dai people have returned to their temples again for ordination, and to repair and redecorate them. Many of the floors of the Dai temples I saw in Sipsong Panna had been recently tiled, and the Vasundharā hole replaced by a small terracotta vessel to catch the donative libations, see figure 4.2.



building's support pillars, suggesting that there is a cult to the pillars of the *vihāra*, perhaps similar to the cult addressed to the central pillars of a house, or the *lak muang* (city pillar) also known as *inthakin*.<sup>80</sup> These *nimitta* receive a cult because of their essential role in the Buddhist practitioner's search for enlightenment. The fact that the earth deity is depicted on *sīmā* stones and *babil* in Cambodia, shown in figures 4.7, 4.9, and 4.10, can be understood as a visual representation of this concept.

Once again, we return to the earth deity episode where in T. 184 we learn that after the earth roars:

Mara and his followers stumbled and fell, and King Māra himself, disappointed and beaten, kneeled as in stupor and fell flat on the ground. Māra's host became terrified then, and in their panic they fled for many a *yojana*, nor cast a look in any direction, when they saw the Buddha like the king of rays. Some flew over the ground in their chariots, like clouds rumbling in the sky. Like elephants floundering in the sea, so were all stricken hosts.<sup>81</sup>

The Tibetan *Lalitavistara* tells us that

Hearing the voice from the earth,  
The deceiver and his army, terrified and broken,  
Begin to flee. Like foxes in the woods  
Who hear the lion's roar,  
Like crows at the fall of a clump of earth,  
All suddenly disappeared.<sup>82</sup>

The *Paṭhamasambodhi* relates that

The power of the perfections of the Bodhisattva prevailed over the army of Māra and the torrents of water pouring from the hair of his witness have completely dispersed them and sent them flying in all directions.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> P. Dokbukaeko, personal communication, October 15, 1999.

<sup>81</sup> Zürcher (1978:100). English translation by H. Hellendoorn.

<sup>82</sup> Bays (1983, 2: 483).

<sup>83</sup> Cœdès (1968).

Many of the rituals addressed to the earth deity are requests for her to expel evil spirits and bad fortune.<sup>84</sup> Davis described a Northern Thai ritual performed at New Year (April 13-14) at an altar constructed from bamboo at the crossroads.<sup>85</sup> Offerings of betel leaves, areca nuts, molasses, rice, bananas, incense, etc. were placed on trays made from banana wood and arranged on the bamboo arms of the shrine. There was an offering tray for each of the deities: the earth deity's offering was placed on the ground, Indra's on the top of the altar, and the tutelary deities of the cardinal directions and their henchmen (called the "nine destroyers") were arranged on the altar's central arms. The earth deity was awakened by the ritual officiant, and asked to disperse the demons and bad fortune from the village with a formula translated from Northern Thai by Davis:

Verily Mother Earth, all-knowing preserver of this world, you are the ultimate source, the supreme goddess...your name is Regal Lady Dharaṇī. Holy Mother, are you awake or are you sleeping? Have you left this place or are you still the all-knowing preserver of this world?

[The exorcist strikes the earth three times and continues]

I raise my palms in homage to the Mother Earth, the supreme source and origin of the very earth itself. At the time when the Lord Buddha first achieved enlightenment and ascended His sacred throne, the evil-hearted Māra and his host of cohorts supplicated the manifold celestial beings to assist them in Māra's struggle to throw the Enlightened One from His throne in Jambu. The celestial ones mustered their troops but were loath to attack one of such merit and goodness, and Māra and his henchmen were left alone to carry on the battle with the Prince of Bliss. Just then the lady named Dharaṇī came up to pay homage to the Lord Buddha. You tousled your wind-tossed tresses. You tugged on your flowing locks, and a torrential flood of water rushed from your hair, engulfing the black-hearted

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<sup>84</sup> Premchit (1992:187); the ritual of *nam hua*, pouring water on the head is another. Many thanks to Dr. Premchit for discussing Mae Thoranee with me in Chiang Mai, Loy Krathong 2000.

<sup>85</sup> Davis (1984:99, 104-106).

Māra and his evil cohorts, who had to break and flee in the face of your power. At this time I have a million slices of areca and a hundred thousand betel leaves in the palm of my hand to offer in remembrance of our debt to you. I beg to take refuge in the merit of the holy mother. I have brought offerings in supplication to the holy mother that she will think on those who pay her homage.<sup>86</sup>

This Northern Thai ceremony with its eloquent invocation of the earth deity can be understood like the *Kriyāsaṃgraha* and the dance of Padmasambhava as the re-creation of the *māravijaya* in the *maṇḍala* of the village: the *bhūmisparśamudrā* is performed and the earth deity summoned, propitiated and installed; as a result, misfortune and demonic spirits are dispersed in all directions.

Hansen has described the worship of Thoranee performed in a domestic compound in an outlying neighbourhood of Chiang Mai near Wat Ku Khom.<sup>87</sup> The earth deity's altar was a small block of wood on the east side of the main house where offerings of incense, flowers and sometimes dishes of food were placed. During New Year celebrations, a special altar to the earth deity was constructed from sticks of wood on the bank of a stream running through the family compound, a location that intersected the centre line of the compound. Offerings of fruit, rice, tobacco, candles and incense were arranged in six small baskets woven from banana leaves. A basket was placed on the top of the altar for Indra, on the four arms of the altar for the *lokapāla* and on the altar's base for Thoranee. A ritual specialist from the wat was invited to the compound to invoke the earth deity and ask for her help over the coming year.

These rituals described by Davis and Hansen that take place in the domestic sphere belong to a genre of northern Thai texts called *khuet*. Davis defines the word *khuet* as “taboo” or “evil.”<sup>88</sup> People who commit *khuet* risk bringing

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<sup>86</sup> Davis (1984:115).

<sup>87</sup> Hansen (1990:1-21).

<sup>88</sup> Davis (1984:285).

calamity upon themselves and their families, and must perform rituals to undo the *khuet* (“*kae khuet*”).<sup>89</sup> A Lānnā *khuet* text, the “ Tamra Ban Mae Thoranee,” has been published in a recent collection of Lanna rituals and prescribes the worship of Thoranee in order to alleviate *khuet* and ensure good fortune. Like Terwiel’s rotating *nāga* texts, the *Tamra Ban Mae Thoranee* provides diagrams and instructions for determining the position of the earth deity who sleeps under the ground, rotating daily. The diagrams show that on Sunday her head points to the East, Monday to the Southeast, Tuesday to the South, Wednesday to the Southwest, Thursday to the West, Friday to the Northwest and Saturday to the Northeast. Devotees are instructed to offer Thoranee a stalk of bananas the length of one hand, four balls of cooked rice, sugar cane, betel nut, cigarettes and pickled tea leaves. Then they should dig a hole in the ground the depth of a hand in the direction of her head (not her feet) and holding eight small candles and four yellow flowers and making *añjali*, awaken the earth deity by calling her name, pounding the earth three times, and using his formula:

Please come and enjoy the offerings and food that we have brought to worship you. We ask you to protect us while we are on the earth. Grant us happiness and help us avoid suffering, for example the danger of robbery, demons, fire, flood, depression, all evils, bad animals, cruel animals, etc. Don't let us experience any harm. Protect our children from bad spells and ghosts. Please don't let us want for anything. Protect our livestock, for example elephants, horses, cows, buffaloes and all the big and small animals that we care for. Please protect our houses, bless our fruit trees. Preserve us from dangers and disasters with the wind and water. Bless us with happiness and long life for 120 years.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Examples of *khuet* are the construction of a domestic dwelling in the fork of a road, sitting on a doorstep (a position that is neither inside nor outside) transitional points in the lunar calendar, or the period of time right before or after sunset, when it is neither day nor night.

<sup>90</sup> Yāṇasambano (nd:131-133). Translation by E. Guthrie with help from W. Eunpinichpong.

While *khuet* texts are a literary genre specific to Northern Thai culture, they are also related to the *paritta*, *mantra* and *dhāraṇī* used by Buddhists everywhere to deter misfortune and bring good fortune.<sup>91</sup> In her study of Sinhalese *parittas*, de Silva notes that when a new house is built, the performance of an all-night *paritta* ceremony is considered as being most auspicious because it will drive away the malevolent spirits inhabiting the site.<sup>92</sup> In this ceremony a temporary pavilion called the *pirit mandop* (*paritta maṇḍapa*) is usually erected in the patron's house. Depending on the wealth of the sponsor, a *paritta* ceremony can be an elaborate and expensive undertaking in a pavilion filled with offerings, decorations, chanting monks, musicians and guests, or it can be a simple ceremony in the middle of the living room. But the space must be marked by a grid of strings, bounded by eight vases of coconut flowers, and its centre marked by a construction called the *indakīla*. De Silva compared the *pirit maṇḍapa* to the navel of the earth, the only spot that could not be assailed by Māra's army.<sup>93</sup>

A *paritta* common to both Thailand and Cambodia is the *Mahādibbamanta-paritta*, first published by Jaini in 1965.<sup>94</sup> The *Mahādibbamanta* is a compilation in corrupt Pāli of *gāthas* concerning the *buddhapādā*, the ten *pāramī* and the Buddha's victory under the Bodhi tree, the constellations and the zodiac, the *devīs* of the eight cardinal directions and a collection of *paritta* and *mantra* for protection in battle, counteracting the magical devices of the enemy, gaining health, good fortune and wealth. Jaini was told by the abbot of Wat Unnalom in Phnom Penh in 1961 that the *Mahādibbamanta* was a "Mahāyānist" text, perhaps dating from the Angkorean period, and was no longer in use. While he thought it unlikely that the text was Mahāyānist, Jaini found the verses addressed to the earth deity "*jaya jaya pathavī*" the most remarkable feature of the *Mahādibbamanta*: "Not only is she given

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<sup>91</sup> Walshe (1987:471-478).

<sup>92</sup> de Silva (1981:35).

<sup>93</sup> de Silva (1981:76).

<sup>94</sup> Jaini (1965: 61-80) and Sadhatissa (1981:178-197).

precedence over the Buddha...but she is placed almost at the beginning of our text.”<sup>95</sup> Jaini was incorrectly informed that the text was no longer in use; a group of monks at Wat Suan Dok in Chiang Mai told me that the *Mahādibbamanta* was routinely recited in Central Thailand during cremation rituals when the bones were gathered from the pyre and washed, and believed to be efficacious for healing the broken bones of the living.<sup>96</sup>

The invoking of the earth deity at the beginning of a *paritta* is not as unusual as Jaini believed. I heard a similar *paritta* recited during a healing ceremony for a Cambodian woman suffering from severe asthma. The ceremony took place in the living room, in front of a makeshift altar set up on the floor. The usual offerings (rice, tobacco, cakes, flowers, candles, incense, a pig’s head, boiled chickens) were set out on a mat. Family and friends gathered around a makeshift altar on their knees and hands were clasped in the *saṃbaḥ* (pronounced “sompeah,” the Khmer equivalent of *añjali*). A candle was lit and the overhead lights dimmed. Next, the lay officiant (an older man who had once been ordained as a monk) began to recite from memory a dedicatory formula that seemed to be an almost incoherent jumble in Pāli and Khmer of invocations to a long list of Hindu deities, the cardinal directions, the previous and future Buddhas, Buddhist saints, etc. His recital was interrupted almost immediately by onlookers who insisted that he stop because he had omitted the name of the earth deity from his opening stanzas; one of the participants explained to me that because the earth deity was there at the beginning of all things, she must always be invited “first” or she will be offended and the ritual would not be efficacious.<sup>97</sup> The officiant duly started over again, this time inviting *nāṇ gaṇhīṇī* Braḥ Dharaṇī at the very beginning of his prayer. When he finished, there was a collective cry of “*sādhu sādhu*” and a sense of relief as the demons and evil spirits believed to be causing the woman’s asthma

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<sup>95</sup> Jaini (1965:71); see footnote 2.

<sup>96</sup> Personal communication, Monks at English Class, Wat Suandok, September 2, 2000.

<sup>97</sup> Long Thorn, personal communication, December 13, 1996.

were expelled. The lights were turned on and normal conversation resumed as scraps of food were collected from the offerings and placed on a plate, which was doused with whiskey. Incense sticks and candle were inserted in this pile of offerings and then the plate taken outside by the woman's son and placed on the ground in the northeast for the consumption of the spirits of the cardinal directions.

While this invocation was recited by a lay person in a suburban house in Australia without the ritual trappings of the Buddhist temple — no monks, no *wat*, no palm leaf manuscripts — it sheds some light on the *Ṭika Bāhuṃ* and the *Sahassa Bāhuṃ*, non-canonical texts commonly found in monastic and domestic libraries instead of the *Tripitaka*.<sup>98</sup> Like the *Mahādibbamanta-paritta*, the *Ṭika Bāhuṃ* recalls the exploits of the earth deity at the time of the Enlightenment. The *Bāhuṃsahassa*, a *paritta* included in a text called the *Gihipattipati* (*Manual for Householders*) does not refer to the earth deity, but its first stanza describes the Bodhisattva's defeat of Māra's hundreds and thousands of soldiers whilst sitting on the jewelled seat (*ratanapallaṅka*) under the Bodhi Tree.<sup>99</sup>

*Gāthās* are a related genre of earth deity text. In many of the biographies of the Buddha, prose passages are interspersed with verses, or *gāthās*. When Māra admits defeat in the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, he does so with a *gātha*:

*pāramitānubhāvena mārasenā parājitā nikkhantudakadhārāhi sakkhikese  
hi tāvade disodisaṃ palāyanti vidhaṃsetvā asesato ti.*<sup>100</sup>

In addition to being literary devices, *gāthās* can be magical spells, or words of power (like the truth acts described at the beginning of the chapter). An example of this is the use of the *Gāthā Phra Mae Thoranee* in Thailand today. This *gāthā* is very popular at the present time: people recite the words when they need protection from bad fortune, and to increase their stock of good

<sup>98</sup> Saddhatissa (1981:178-197; 190-191).

<sup>99</sup> Sour (1997).

<sup>100</sup> Cœdès (1968).

fortune. One version of the *gāthā*, said to be composed by Khru Ba Siwichai, is published in the *Yot Phra Kaṅṅi Tripiṭaka: Kham Wai* or the “Final Section of the *Tripiṭaka*, Words of Worship.”

***Gāthā Mae Phra Thoranee***

*Tassā kesī sato yathā gangā sotaṅ pavattanti  
mārasenā patittātuṃ osaka gomato palāyimsu  
pārimānubhāvenā mārasenā paraḷitā  
disodisaṃ palāyanti viṭhaṃsenati asasato*

Another version is inscribed on a brass plaque on the base of the Thoranee shrine in the Sanam Luang in Bangkok, and printed on cards that are given to devotees visiting the shrine.<sup>101</sup>

***Gāthā Phra Mae Thoranee***

(Say the name three times and then stop)

*tassā bhassito yaka [sic]<sup>102</sup> gangā  
sotaṃ pavattanti  
mārasenā patithathantu  
osaka gomato palayimsu  
parimanubhāvena mārasenā  
paraḷita disodisaṃ  
palāyanti vīḍaṃseti  
assato-- la la -- sādhu*

Despite the many misspelled words, both of these *gāthā* have been composed from the text of the earth deity episode of the *Paṭhamasambodhi*.<sup>103</sup> The

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<sup>101</sup> This shrine is discussed in detail in chapter 6.

<sup>102</sup> Thai “th” is easily confused with “k” and so on. Such mistakes occur when the person transliterating into Thai is unfamiliar with Pāli.

<sup>103</sup> The composers of the *gāthā* seem to be familiar with Paramanujit’s edition of the *Paṭhamasambodhi* rather than the older northern Thai *Paṭhamasambodhi*, which lacks the “*pāramitānubhāvena*” *gāthā*, A. Lualertvorakul, personal communication, June 27, 2003.



highlighted words below have been plucked out from the original text and reformulated into “words of power.”

**Tassā kesato**<sup>104</sup> **yathā gaṅgodakaṃ sotam pavattati.**

*Yathāha pasāretvā mahāvīro cakkalakkhaṇarañjitaṃ.*

*Erāvaṇasadisoṇḍaṃ pavāḷaṅkurasadisam*

*Vasundharāvanitaṃ taṃ dassesi sākyapuṅgavo*

*Sandhāretuṃ asakkontī* **palāyiṃsu.**

*Girimekhalapādā pana pakkhalitvā yāva sāgarantaṃ pavisanti*

*chattadhajacāmāradīni obhaggavibhaggāni pātāni ahesuṃ.*

*Acchariyaṃ disvā māro savimhayabahulo.*

*Yathāha* **pāramītānubhāvena mārasenā parājitā**

*Nikkhantudakadhārāhi sakkhikese hi tāvade*

**Disodisaṃ palāyanti vidhaṃsetvā asesato ti.**

The process of turning a recently published text into a *gāthā* is a fascinating and complicated subject that needs further research. But here I will focus on the words and phrases considered important by the composers of the *gāthā*. First is the idea of the massive stream of water “like the Ganges River in flood” *yathā gaṅga sotam pavattati* that the earth deity wrings from her hair. Second is the idea that this flood caused Māra’s soldiers to run away: “*palāyiṃsu.*” Third is the concept that the *mārasenā* were conquered by the power of the *pāramī* of the Bodhisattva, a concept that associates the earth deity with the supernatural force of the *pāramī*. And finally the dispersal of the *mārasenā* in all directions: “*disodisaṃ palāyanti vidhaṃsetvā asesato,*” in short the overwhelming impression is that the earth deity protects the individual as well as the site, and disperses any demons, ill luck, evil spirits foolish enough to enter her terrain. The concepts expressed by these *gāthās* are

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<sup>104</sup>This word *kesato* is misspelled in both *gāthās* (*kesi sato* and *bhassito*, respectively) but I believe the composers thought they were expressing the idea of “streaming from the hair like the Ganges River” and that that is how the phrase is understood by devotees.

graphically illustrated by Bizot in his collection of photographs of “earth deity *yantra*” from Cambodia.<sup>105</sup>

*Yantra* are texts that are not meant to be read, recited or even understood. Despite their non-sense, these assemblages of letters, images and part-phrases are immensely powerful graphical symbols able to protect those who wear them inscribed on their clothes and amulets, or tattooed on their skin.<sup>106</sup> Bizot writes that these *yantra* are drawn during a state of meditative trance by the *grū yantr*. They are worn as protective devices to war or whenever there is danger. The earth deity forms only a small proportion of the entire design; there are many other deities and magical “Pāli” words written in the religious script used in Cambodia and Thailand on the cloth. These cloths and shirts are very valuable, especially those drawn by renowned *krū*, and they are carefully protected by their owners, receiving a cult (candles, flowers, incense, prayers) There are stories about people trying to steal *yantras* to diminish the invulnerability of rivals and to gain invulnerability for themselves. 4.14 is a detail of a *yantra* scarf dating from the Civil War period drawn by Grū Arun Rasmei, Kompong Chnang.<sup>107</sup> In one corner the earth deity is wringing *āksar mūl* (sacred letters) out of her hair. Kings as well as soldiers used this form of protection. Bizot also published a *yantra* shirt belonging to King Ang Duong (r. 1842-1859).<sup>108</sup> On the bottom half of the shirt, the earth deity is wringing out her hair under the image of a meditating Buddha; they are both surrounded by geometrical drawings, sacred words and letters. King Ang Duong would have worn this shirt to protect himself during warfare and assassins. Similar

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<sup>105</sup> Some of Bizot’s photographs of *yantra* have been published in Becchetti (1991). There is a similar tradition of earth deity *yantra* in Thailand, Laos and Burma, but they are mostly unpublished and need further research.

<sup>106</sup> There have been several recent excellent studies of Khmer and Thai religious tattoos (a form of *yantra*) by Bizot and von Hinüber (1994), Becchetti (1991), Bizot (1981) and Lagirarde (1989).

<sup>107</sup> Becchetti (1991:14-15, photo 10).

<sup>108</sup> Bizot (1981:185, photo 3).

shirts belonging to the Chakri monarchs can be seen in the National Museum in Bangkok.

*Yantra* also serve as religious tattoos. These are very similar in appearance and purpose as the *yantras* drawn on cloth and paper, but are the preserve of men who use them as protection against the physical dangers encountered during warfare (or banditry). When the precepts are followed, and the deity or supernatural power invoked by the tattoo is properly propitiated, such tattoos will confer invulnerability on the wearer, protecting the flesh from knives, bullets, and other physical hazards encountered during armed warfare. Young men typically have themselves tattooed when they enter the military or during preparation for a battle. 4.15 shows the tattoo of the earth deity on the arm of a Khmer man born in Battambang but now living in Australia. He recalled that when he became a soldier, his parents took him to a famous *grū sac* (“skin guru”) who lived in a cave in the mountains in Battambang.<sup>109</sup> Before receiving his tattoos, he had to prepare himself by meditating and praying, and the *grū* taught him the appropriate rituals of propitiation and moral behaviour necessary to honour the deity tattooed on his arms.<sup>110</sup> This informant has never questioned the power of his tattoos; as he pointed out, he survived the civil war, the Khmer Rouge regime, flight to a refugee camp and the hazards and stresses of resettlement in New Zealand, something he attributed to the power of *nān gaṅhīn* Braḥ Dharanī.

In conclusion, in this chapter I have explored the cult of the earth deity through a wide variety of what I have called “performative texts,” texts that are “used” rather than “read” in religious rituals and practice. Often these

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<sup>109</sup> This informant fought with the Khmer Issaraks.

<sup>110</sup> J. Marston, personal communication, 10 November 1996 concerning fieldnotes from an interview with Sam Ros, a 66 year-old Khmer man, born in Battambang, who presently lives in the United States. Because *nān gaṅhīn* is *borisot* (*parisuddha*, “pure”), the disciplinary requirements needed to wear a tattooed image of her are stringent, and few ordinary people are able to abide by them; apparently the tattoo of Hanuman is less demanding.

rituals and practices — the burial of virgins under pillars, throwing coins into holes, tattooing the skin to prevent bullets and knives — seem “primitive” or indigenous. However, many of the anomalies in these rituals parallel those practiced elsewhere in Buddhist Asia: Indra’s primal act is remembered in the name of the *indrakīla*, located at the navel of the earth in front of the main Buddha image. *Maṇḍalas* are imposed upon the site, which is then purified by chanting monks. The deities of the cardinal points are propitiated at altars set up around the periphery, holes are dug in the ground, and offerings placed within to propitiate the *nāga* lords of the underworld. As usual, the earth deity has only a small role to play in the proceedings, but she is always present, and her deeds at the time of the Enlightenment are re-enacted during the rite of *buddhābhiseka*. In short, the consecration rituals practised in mainland Southeast Asia, like their Indo-Tibetan counterparts, are a “great *maṇḍala* of action,” with many actors cleansing and purifying the site, establishing the boundaries around it and subjugating all obstacles to enlightenment.<sup>111</sup> In the next chapter I will explore the influence of local myths and beliefs on the earth deity.

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<sup>111</sup> Schrempf (1999:199).

## 5: Stories about the Earth Deity and *Nāga*-Protected Buddhism

In Phnom Penh, located in the middle of a busy intersection near the Psar O’Russey, there is a statue-fountain of the earth deity wringing her hair. (5.1) Cambodians identify this figure as *nān* Romsay Sok, the heroine of a popular folk legend who also wrings her hair. (5.2) A large cement crocodile crouches at the feet of the statue – a character absent from the *māravijaya*, but central to the story of *Romsay Sok*.<sup>1</sup> As there is no identifying plaque on the fountain, the confusion between the earth deity and Romsay Sok is perhaps understandable.<sup>2</sup> However, Cambodians often confuse the two women: they will point to the earth deity in depictions of the *māravijaya* on Buddhist temple walls and identify her as “*nān* Romsay Sok.” And mural paintings of the *māravijaya* usually depict a crocodile at the feet of the earth deity, mauling one of Māra’s soldiers with its sharp teeth (5.3).

Many Buddhist traditions were lost during Cambodia’s recent civil war and revolution, but the confusion between Romsay Sok and the earth deity cannot be explained by the turmoil of the past few decades. There is a longstanding fascination in Cambodia (and in neighbouring Thailand and Laos) with crocodiles, the elements of earth and water, and women with powerful hair, a fascination that finds expression in creation myths, cosmological treatises and religious rituals, as well as popular romances like *Romsay Sok*. In this chapter I will be focusing mainly on legends, stories and related rituals from Cambodia’s Angkorean past, the Middle Period and contemporary society. Despite my Cambodia-centric viewpoint, I do not want

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<sup>1</sup> Giteau (1975:24). The crocodile first appears at the feet of the earth deity in paintings of the *māravijaya* in Ayutthayan art.

<sup>2</sup> Architects H.E. Vann Moly Vann and Hor Lath confirmed that the statue is the earth deity, commissioned by Phnom Penh mayor Tep Phon in the early 1960s.

to imply that the hair-wringing heroine is a Cambodian creation. Although I believe she has a special significance for Khmers, similar traditions are associated with the earth deity wherever she appears. These stories and traditions help explain how Vasundharā metamorphosed from her insignificant role in Indian texts and iconography into the hair-wringing, crocodile-taming instigator of cosmic floods in mainland Southeast Asia.

Often the stories describe the origins of Cambodia, or purport to be records of the earliest history of the region. Such claims in themselves are no proof of antiquity, but one question to be asked is whether these stories are “indigenous,” preserving in ‘l’emmêlement des thèmes légendaires, le souvenir d’anciens mythes.’<sup>3</sup> While at first glance, tales about crocodiles and women with powerful hair may look “indigenous,” similar stories can be found throughout Asia. And although many of these stories are “localized” – containing references to specific individuals or to local geographical features – they also belong to the world of Indian mythology, sharing a common framework and pantheon in which local and Indian elements are inextricably intermingled. There are no easy answers waiting for us in this chapter. As O’Flaherty wrote:

The more myths one encounters, the more basic themes seem to be reinforced; no matter what direction one sets out in, one is drawn back again and again...just as Alice found herself always walking back in at the door of the Looking Glass House no matter what part of the magic garden she had hoped to reach.<sup>4</sup>

Two Indian myths with information about the earth deity are the *Varāhāvatāra* and the *Trivikrama*. Like many other aspects of Indian religion, the myths arrived in mainland Southeast Asia at some unspecified time in the past, and were adopted by the local inhabitants. Although these souvenirs of Cambodia’s Hindu past may seem remote and irrelevant, their characterization

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<sup>3</sup> Porée-Maspero (1962-9:121- 123)

<sup>4</sup> O’Flaherty (1975:12).

of the earth has influenced the development of Vasundharā. In one version of the *Varāhāvatāra*,

Viṣṇu in his Boar aspect was playing in the waters of the cosmic ocean.<sup>5</sup>

When he saw the earth in the water, he lifted her up on his tusks. He set her afloat on a lotus leaf and stroked her with his snout, spreading and dividing her body into mountains and continents.<sup>6</sup>

Śaivite versions of the myth depict Viṣṇu in a less favourable light, emphasizing the Boar's passion for rooting in the earth and creating chaos rather than his creative nature.<sup>7</sup> Both Śaivite and Vaishnavite variants of the myth were known in Cambodia. There are a number of Angkor period inscriptions that compare the monarch who overcomes his enemies and saves his kingdom to the Boar who saves the earth who clings to his tusks.<sup>8</sup> Depictions of the Boar appear in Khmer art from the latter half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century through the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In 1956 Giteau published four of these including a Bayon-style figure of the boar holding an earth deity in his arms. (fig. 5.4)<sup>9</sup>

The Boar may have been popular during the Angkor period, but his legend is not as well-known today as the Vaishnavite myth, the *Trivikrama*, or “three steps,” in which Viṣṇu in the form of a dwarf conquers the world. In the Indian story, the *asura* king Bali obtained sovereignty over the three worlds through his sacrifices. The dwarf Viṣṇu asked Bali for permission to have three steps' worth of space. Bali agreed, and Viṣṇu covered the earth and heavens in two giant steps, and with his third step exiled Bali to the underworld. Again, inscriptions and iconography demonstrate that by Angkor period Cambodians were familiar with the Vaishnavite version of the myth (5.5).

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<sup>5</sup> O'Flaherty (1975:184).

<sup>6</sup> O'Flaherty (1975:186-187).

<sup>7</sup> Porée-Maspero (1961:918).

<sup>8</sup> Cœdès (1951, 3: 50, 101) Cœdès (1937, 1:44, 119) Cœdès (1937, 1:211).

<sup>9</sup> Giteau (1956:234-239).

During Cambodia's Middle Period,<sup>10</sup> the story was recast into a Buddhist context:

In the beginning there were two crocodile brothers, Kroṅ Bali and Braḥ Bhūm Rāj, who played together in the cosmic ocean, stirring up a storm up with their thrashing tails.<sup>11</sup> The churning of the waters by their tails produced a scum which condensed and hardened into the earth. When the first Buddha Padumuttara went to achieve his enlightenment, he asked the elder crocodile, Kroṅ Bali, for the amount of earth he could cover in three steps. Bali agreed, and the *devatās* were witness to the agreement. The first two steps that Buddha Padumuttara took covered the world up to the heavens, and Kroṅ Bali was driven from the earth's surface. Admitting defeat, he sent his brother Braḥ Bhūm Rāj to the Buddha to ask for food. The Buddha established a cult to Kroṅ Bali, decreeing that whenever people celebrate a festival, or disturb the earth by building or agricultural work, they should first make offerings to Kroṅ Bali. If neglected, he will beat the earth with his tail, causing chaos and bad fortune.

In the Cambodian legend, Viṣṇu has been transformed into the Buddha, but he still outwits Bali with his three giant steps, and the earth is still described as being created from the chaos of primordial waters. The important change is Bali: he is no longer an *asura* but a crocodile king who rules the murky boundaries between the water and dry land. In the story, the words *nāga* and crocodile are used interchangeably: Kroṅ Bali is described as a *nāḥ*, "*nāga*" as well as a *krapoe*, "crocodile."<sup>12</sup> Although the Buddhist version of the story

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<sup>10</sup> Thompson (1997:22) The Middle Period spans the five hundred years between the fall of Angkor and the establishment of the French Protectorate.

<sup>11</sup> Porée-Maspero, (1962, 1:103): *kroṅ* is an old Khmer title meaning "King" or "Queen." See also Pou (1992:104-105) and Vickery (1998:188-189) In the *Pchañ Māra*, Giteau (1969:84, line 77 et sq.), Māra is referred to as "Kruṅ Mār."

<sup>12</sup> Chuch Phouen, École des Beaux Arts, Phnom Penh, told me the story of the two crocodile brothers in 1998, and explained the close association between the crocodile, the *nāga* and the *makara* in Khmer culture. Viennot (1964:14-15) notes that the *makara*, a "monstre marin" closely related to the *nāga*, is always the vehicle of the river goddess Gaṅgā. Davis (1984:203): "The assimilation of archaic crocodile cults to the cult of the *nāga* is a common phenomenon in Indianized Southeast Asia."



seems to be a development that took place during the Middle period, the association of Kroñ Bali with the crocodile dates back at least to Angkor period.<sup>13</sup> When the story of the three steps is portrayed in Angkorean sculpture, the form of a giant crocodile – Kroñ Bali – can often be seen under Viṣṇu’s foot (in 5.5, the earth deity Bhūdevī can be seen holding a lotus for Viṣṇu to step onto) or at the bottom of the scene (5.6).<sup>14</sup>

Another myth known during the Angkor period was the story of the descent of the Ganges. Once the ascetic Agastya had swallowed up all the water and there was a terrible drought on earth. The celestial river, Gaṅgā, was persuaded to descend from heaven to relieve the suffering. To prevent the weight of the mighty river from shattering the earth as she descended from heaven, Śiva was entreated to bear Gaṅgā on his head. Śiva’s matted hair, piled high on his head, took the force of the descent of the water, and allowed it to flow gently down to the ground, restoring fertility and balance to the earth.<sup>15</sup> Again, the motifs of the destruction and recreation of the earth by a cosmic flood are explored, intermingled this time with (Śiva’s) matted locks of hair. There is some confusion between the earth deity and Gaṅgā among Khmer people today as figure 5.8 demonstrates. The image shows a casket in the main hall of Wat Unnalom that held the remains of a senior monk prior to his cremation during New Year, April 1994.<sup>16</sup> The brightly painted casket has been adorned with an image of *nāñ ganhñ* wringing out her hair; a legend under the hair-wringing divinity identifies her as Mae Gaṅgā (mother Ganges).

Cosmological treatises also contain information about the earth deity. In 1899 one of Cambodia’s early ethnographers, Adhémard Leclère, published a translation of two such works, the *Braḥ Dhamma Chhean*, and the *Trai Bhet*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Porée-Maspero (1969:917), Giteau (1965:126), Moore and Siribhadra (1992:308).

<sup>14</sup> Porée-Maspero (1969:605), also Giteau (1969:26).

<sup>15</sup> Zimmer (1974:113-115).

<sup>16</sup> In Cambodia and Thailand corpses, especially those of senior monks and royalty, are often held in caskets and not cremated for months, see Keyes (1975).

<sup>17</sup> Leclère (1899:35).

According to the *Braḥ Dhamma Chhean*, at the beginning of time the sun created the four elements: the earth (identified in the text as *nān gaṅhīn*) the water, the fire, and the air. When he made the body of the earth deity, Braḥ Dharaṇī, the parts of her body (head, arms, legs, etc.) were placed so they corresponded to the cardinal directions. Human beings were then created out of the dirt that constituted the body of Braḥ Dharaṇī. The *Trai Bhet*, part of the introduction to the Khmer *Rāmāyaṇa*<sup>18</sup> describes the genesis of the personified elements, including the earth deity, from primordial chaos.

When LeClère did his research at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such cosmological treatises were common in monastic libraries throughout Cambodia and neighboring regions. Although these rather dry texts were not used ritually or preached in sermons, they were considered sacred, and were studied by monks. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of Buddhist reform movements meant that they were held to be less than authoritative. Today, many Cambodians believe that treatises such as the *Trai Bhet* contain “Brahmanical” rather than “Buddhist” ideas, and by and large they have not been re-copied, and are no longer studied. Despite their current unpopularity, some Khmers are still familiar with concepts expounded in these works. A mural in the modern *vihāra* at Wat Nokor, Kompong Cham (5.7) portrays the four personified elements: Braḥ Dharaṇī represents the element earth but also wrings water from her hair while the element representing water, Braḥ Kankā (Gaṅgā), clutches a lotus flower. Cœdès (and de Bernon) date the *Trai Bhet* to the 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, noting that along with the *Rāmaker* (the Khmer *Rāmāyaṇa*) the text is a valuable example of a genre of Cambodian religious literature that has almost disappeared.<sup>19</sup> The *Trai Bhet* gives some insight into the ideas held about the earth deity during the Cambodia’s Middle Period, and sheds some light on the connection between the earth deity and the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*.

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<sup>18</sup> de Bernon (1994:79-95).

<sup>19</sup> de Bernon (1994:79-95).

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, yet another Indian legend that contains information about the earth deity, arrived on the mainland “early.” Khmer inscriptions dating from 6<sup>th</sup> century CE mention the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and many Khmer temples are covered with beautiful sculptures of the Vaishnavite version of the story.<sup>20</sup> During the Middle Period, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was recomposed as a *Jātaka* in which Rāma is one of the previous incarnations of the Buddha.<sup>21</sup> In Cambodia, this is called the *Rāmker*; similar versions are known in neighbouring regions.<sup>22</sup> As usual, the earth deity has only a minor role in the story, and the first reference to her is indirect. The name “Sītā” means “furrow;” Sītā was born when her adoptive father, King Janaka, turned up the infant in a furrow while plowing the earth. Thus the earth is the mother of Sītā, and Sītā is in some sense an earth deity herself.<sup>23</sup> However, there are other explanations of Sītā’s origins.<sup>24</sup> One version tells that Sītā’s parents were the demon Rāvana and his wife. When they heard a prophecy that their newborn daughter would destroy them, they buried her in a field; King Janaka discovered her when he ploughed the field. In other versions, water and earth are confused and Sītā floats into the narrative, seated on a lotus on a raft on the river close to where the king was ploughing a furrow. Variants of the story tell how the infant Sītā was put into an earthenware pitcher or a silver chest, and cast into the water or buried in a field. Sometimes King Janaka finds her floating in the water, or alternatively a kindly old ascetic finds her and raises her as his daughter.<sup>25</sup>

The earth deity next appears in the story when Rāma, his brother Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā have been banished into the forest. When Rāma rushed off to shoot a deer, Sītā insisted that Lakṣmaṇa follow his brother. Lakṣmaṇa, reluctant to

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<sup>20</sup> Martini (1940:285-295), Finot (1910:155-161 and plates XIV-XVI), Cœdès (1911:170-220).

<sup>21</sup> Pou (1980:20),

<sup>22</sup> Singaravelu (1980:31-47) The *Rāmāyaṇa* is known as the *Rāmakien*, and in Northern Thailand/ Laos as Phra Lak Phra Lam.

<sup>23</sup> Sītā is also associated with Śrī Lakṣmī, and with the fertility of the earth.

<sup>24</sup> Bulcke (1952).

<sup>25</sup> Sahai (1996:19).

leave Sītā unprotected, first begged the earth deity to protect Sītā in his absence. In the Lao version, Lakṣmaṇa folded his hands respectfully and addressed the Earth Goddess:

Be it so! Be it so! O earth goddess of this slave! Now I beg to entrust nān Sītā to you. I beg you to protect nān Sītā. Do not let tigers, bears, jungle-spirits and criminals harm and menace nān Sītā!<sup>26</sup>

After Lakṣmaṇa left, Rāvana arrived and tried to seize Sītā. At first he was unable to shift her from the ground because the earth deity held her firmly, and every time he touched Sītā, his body heated up as if it was on fire. Meanwhile in the forest, Lakṣmaṇa explained to his brother that he has left Sītā under the protection of the earth deity. Rāma scoffed at the earth deity, expressing doubt in her ability to protect Sītā. Hearing this the earth deity was offended, and withdrew her protection from Sītā. Rāvana was suddenly able to seize Sītā and flew away with her. At the end of the story, after an attempt by Rāma to reconcile with Sītā, she called on her mother, the earth, to take her back.<sup>27</sup> The earth opened up and Sītā plunged down into the kingdom of the *nāgas*. Welcomed by the *nāga* king (her grandfather?) Sītā lived in the underworld happily ever after.

The same landmarks or motifs keep reappearing as we walk back into the Looking Glass House. Sītā (like the earth deity in the *Varāhāvatāra* and the *Trivikrama*) is born from both earth and water: she emerges from a furrow, is enfolded in a lotus, floats on a raft, or is enclosed in a pitcher or casket and cast into the waters. Her adoptive father can be either a king or *ṛṣi* (premonitions of the story *Romsay Sok* to follow). The earth deity is described as the mother of Sītā and a powerful but easily offended guardian, able to protect her daughter from the demon Rāvana (a divinity that Rāma was unable to conquer without the assistance of an army of monkeys and men). This earth deity can open a route to the underworld and is closely associated with *nāgas*.

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<sup>26</sup> Sahai (1996:158).

<sup>27</sup> In the Lao version, Sītā negotiates a reconciliation with Rāma, and does not need to escape to the underworld.

Peltier has studied a cycle of stories about *Nang Phom Hom*, “the lady with perfumed hair.”<sup>28</sup> A Lao version begins with the adventures of a beautiful lady named Nang Sītā.<sup>29</sup>

Nang Sītā went into the forest with her attendants. She got lost and spent the night alone in the forest. When she woke in the morning, she was thirsty and drank water from a puddle made by an elephant’s footprint. She made her way back home safely, but became pregnant because the puddle of water had contained the urine of an elephant king. Nang Sītā gave birth to female twins, Nang (“lady”) Phom (“hair”) Hom (“fragrant”) and Nang Pheung Pheng. One day the girls set off into the forest to search for their father, the elephant king. The elephant king made the two girls walk on his great tusks to see if they were really his daughters. Nang Pheung Pheng fell off the tusk and was trampled to death, but Nang Phom Hom [like the earth deity of the *Varāhāvataṛa*] clung to his tusk and passed the test successfully. The elephant king acknowledged her as his daughter, built her a palace on top of a pillar, and showered her with riches. But she missed her sister and she was lonely.

One day while washing her hair in the river, three hairs floated away in the water. In a distant kingdom a prince, Thao Bangkuet, was washing in the river and was drawn to the fragrant hairs. Attracted by the scent, he searched for Nang Phom Hom. The two fell in love, and had two children, a boy and a girl. Eventually they decided to return to Thao Bangkuet’s palace. After many adventures, Thao Bangkuet managed to mistake an ogress for his wife and brought her to his palace instead of Nang Phom Hom. The children ran away to find their mother, who was hiding in the forest. Thao Bangkuet finally realized that he had been duped by the ogress, had her executed, and went to search for his wife. But Nang Phom Hom, deeply offended by her husband’s stupidity, refused to return to Thao Bangkuet, or listen to his apologies. Her children conspired to capture her by knotting her long hair to a tree, and Thao Bangkuet was finally able to convince her of his remorse. Nang Phom Hom

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<sup>28</sup> Peltier (1995). Peltier dates these stories to 18<sup>th</sup> century. A similar version, *nān Sak Ap*, “lady with fragrant hair” is known in Cambodia.

<sup>29</sup> Peltier (1995:30-31).

forgave him and they lived happily ever after.

In a Tai *khün* version of the story from Chieng Tung the same motifs –*nāgīs*, the underworld, magical hair –are reworked into a new story:

A poor orphan prince was lowered into a chasm in the earth in a basket to catch a runaway chicken. When he arrived in the land of the *nāgas*, he fell in love with a beautiful *nāgī* with fragrant hair, Nang Phom Hom. They got into the basket and signalled to be pulled up to the surface of the earth. Nang Phom Hom suddenly recalled that she had forgotten her magical sword, and sent her husband to get it. While he was away on the errand, the basket containing Nang Phom Hom was pulled to the earth's surface. Everyone came to see the beautiful woman with the fragrant hair, including the evil king (who had disinherited the orphan prince). The evil king fell in love with Nang Phom Hom and wanted to marry her, but [like Sītā's abductor, Rāvana] every time he tried to touch her, he was burned as if by fire. In the meantime, the prince had to fight Nang Phom Hom's father, the *nāga* king, and all the ogres of the underworld with the magical sword before he could return to the surface of the earth. After winning his way above ground, he then had to kill the evil king to retrieve Nang Phom Hom. Victorious, the orphan prince and Nang Phom Hom became the rulers of the land.

The popular romance mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, *Romsay Sok*, is a variant of the story of a lady with powerful hair. The story is associated with a mountain range in Battambang, today part of north-western Cambodia. During his mission to Cambodia and Siam in 1885, Auguste Pavie heard the story of *Romsay Sok* recounted by Cambodian and Siamese villagers. In addition to oral forms of the story, Pavie found manuscripts of *Romsay Sok* in monastic libraries written in Khmer and Siamese (but not Pāli). The version of the tale summarized below was recorded and published by Pavie.

Once there was a merchant's son named Rājakoḷ who went to study with a wise hermit. This hermit had a beautiful daughter by the name of Romsay Sok that he had found in a lotus flower. Rājakoḷ and Romsay Sok fell in love and married. Before they departed for Rājakoḷ's home, the hermit gave his

daughter a magical hair jewel. Later, while away from home on business, Rājakol met a beautiful woman named *nān* Mika. *Nān* Mika's constant companion was a tame crocodile named Athon that she raised from an egg like her own son. Rājakol and Mika became lovers, and *nān* Mika bore Rājakol a son. Rājakol left in his boat, telling *nān* Mika that he was going on business, but actually planning to return to his first wife, Romsay Sok. *Nān* Mika, learning of his deception, sent her crocodile Athon after Rājakol. Rājakol, terrified of the vengeful crocodile, threw cages of chickens and ducks overboard to sidetrack Athon. The beast ignored the poultry and started to attack the ship (5.9).

In the meantime Romsay Sok, who had been watching for her husband's return, saw Rājakol's peril and used her magical hair jewel to turn the water into dry land. The crocodile became Phnom Krapoe ("Crocodile Mountain"), the cages of poultry became Phnom Trung Moan ("Chicken Cage Mountain") and Phnom Trung Tea ("Duck Cage Mountain"), and the upturned boat became Phnom Sambou ("Boat Mountain") (5.10). To avenge the defeat of her crocodile, *nān* Mika gathered an army and challenged Romsay Sok to battle. The fight went against *nān* Mika and she was captured, tortured and dismembered. Recalling the Boar's creation of the topographical features of the earth, *nān* Mika's head became Phnom Kbal ("Head Mountain"), her intestines became Veal Ceñcram Poḥ ("Plain of the Chopped-up Intestines") and so on.<sup>30</sup>

Porée-Maspero recorded six versions of *Romsay Sok* from the Battambang region, noting that the story was also known in the neighbouring areas of Siam and Laos.<sup>31</sup> The story is still popular in Cambodia, and was made into a film sometime during the late 1980s–early 1990s, and is readily available in videotape format in markets in Phnom Penh.<sup>32</sup> The movie clearly links the earth deity with the character Romsay Sok. The opening shot shows the statue fountain in the Psar O'Russey, and when Rājakol's ship is in danger, *nān*

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<sup>30</sup> Pavie (1903). These stories belong to the Middle Period.

<sup>31</sup> Porée-Maspero (1962-1969:151).

<sup>32</sup> Director: Kong Bun Chhoeun. There is no date given on the film's credits.

Romsay Sok invokes *nān gaṅhīn* Braḥ Dharaṇī to help save her husband. There are changes in the movie: *nān* Romsay Sok is described as a disciple of the earth deity, who teaches her how to wring her hair and transform water into dry land. *Nān* Mika's name has been changed to *nān* Māra. She lives on an island with the hermit and with Athon, the crocodile, who can transform himself into a handsome young man at *nān* Māra's command. *Nān* Māra raised Athon from an egg, and the relationship between the two is that of mother and son.<sup>33</sup> Rājakol, although still a weak character, is overcome by remorse at *nān* Māra's death, and the final scene shows him walking away from *nān* Romsay Sok, bearing his mistress' corpse in his arms. This movie is a fascinating example of how ancient stories and motifs are continually being reworked into new formats.

An oral variant of the story, recounted by a sixty year-old Cambodian man originally from Battambang but presently living in the United States, was recorded in 1996.<sup>34</sup> Although familiar with the story of the *māravijaya*, the informant did not use the name “*nān gaṅhīn* Braḥ Dharaṇī” for the hair-wringing earth deity, instead calling her *nān* Romsay Sok. He told this story about the origins of *nān* Romsay Sok:

Once Romsay Sok lived at Kok Thlok, the place where Cambodia was originally formed. In those days there was no dry land, and all of Cambodia was covered with water. Romsay Sok ran away from Kok Thlok in a boat, and was pursued by a crocodile. Eventually the boat stopped in Battambang at the place now called Phnom Sampou. Romsay Sok let down her hair, which caused the mass of water to become dry land. The boat became Phnom Sampou and the crocodile became Phnom Krapoe.

His version of the story of Romsay Sok refers to a cycle of stories about a roaming Brahmin prince, called Kauṇḍinya or Braḥ Thong, who on his travels

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<sup>33</sup> Stories about a woman who raises a crocodile or a serpent from an egg are often heard in the region; one story tells that Śiva's wife Bhāgavatī Umā, who found a crocodile egg and when it hatched raised the reptile as her own son. Another legend is about *nān* Kanrei, a woman who took a serpent for a lover, and as a result of their union laid eggs that hatched into many different species of snakes.

<sup>34</sup> J. Marston, personal communication, November 1996.



fell in love with an aboriginal princess, the daughter of a *nāga* king. The two married, and Braḥ Thong ventured into the underground realm of the *nāgas* to prove himself worthy of his bride. As a wedding gift, the *nāga* king drained the waters from the earth to provide dry land for his son-in-law to rule. The newly-weds lived happily ever after, and their numerous offspring became the new inhabitants of the region.

The story of Braḥ Thong and the *nāgī* is ancient; references to it appear in 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. Chinese accounts of mainland Southeast Asia, and in Cambodia's earliest inscriptions dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Khmer kings carefully traced their lineage back to Cambodia's founding couple.<sup>35</sup> Chinese official Zhou Daguan, who travelled in Cambodia 1296-7, recorded a variant of the story of a *nāgī* princess who ruled the kingdom: the King must spend the first part of every night with her; if he neglected her or she failed to appear, the kingdom was in danger.<sup>36</sup> The romance of the Brahmin prince and the *nāgī* still has great importance for Cambodian culture today. Many of the rituals and the traditional wedding music that constitute the three-day marriage ceremony recall the story of this primal couple.<sup>37</sup> The ceremony in which the bride's teeth are ritually filed and lacquered black is said to be a reference to the removal of the *nāgī* princess' venomous fangs before her marriage to Braḥ Thong (today, the bride's teeth are rinsed with coconut juice).<sup>38</sup> Another ceremony in which the bride leads the groom, who must grasp the end of her scarf, to the nuptial chamber recalls how Braḥ Thong had to clutch the *nāgī*'s tail in order to safely enter the earth's surface on their trip to the underworld).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cœdès (1911:391-393).

<sup>36</sup> Pelliot (1903:248-303).

<sup>37</sup> Porée-Maspero (1950:247).

<sup>38</sup> Lewitz [Pou] (1973:243-328). Long Tbol, personal communication, August 11, 1988, explained that because "serpents are venomous, their teeth must be removed first before being able to live with human."

<sup>39</sup> Long Tbol, personal communication, August 11, 1988, "the marriage rite in which the groom follows the bride, holding onto the end of the scarf of the bride – i.e., the tail of the *nāgī* – is said to refer to the legend of Braḥ Thong – Neang Neak."

Bubbling away under the surface of the story of the marriage of Cambodia's primal couple is a "grande tradition orale" that reaches from India to Dunhuang. One of the oldest recorded versions is from the Vedas: an *apsara* named Adrika was cursed by Brahma to be a fish.<sup>40</sup> While swimming in the Yamuna River, the *apsara*-fish was impregnated by the semen of King Uparicara and gave birth to human twins. The king adopted the boy, but rejected the girl because of her foul, fishy odour, and she was abandoned on a raft in the river. An *ṛṣi* found her and pulled her from the water. He used his magic to free her from her fishy odour, and she bore him a child. Another variant from the Chinese *Tripitaka* tells about a man who found the long hair of a *nāga's* daughter in a bird's nest. He was so entranced by the hair that he went to search for the beautiful longhaired *nāgī*. After many trials he married her, and the couple became the king and queen.<sup>41</sup> In Burma, the Buddhist saint Upagupta is said to be the product of a similar marriage between a fish-woman and a *ṛṣi*.<sup>42</sup> The story of the romance of Hanuman and Macchadevi the mermaid, part of the *Rāmāyaṇa* known in Tamilnadu, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, is another variant.

Cœdès located the origins of the story of the union of the Brahmin prince and the *nāgī* in the literature of the court of the Gaṅga-Pallavas.<sup>43</sup> Przulski argued that origins of the legend were Austroasiatic rather than Indian, the product of an ancient maritime culture that associated fertility, abundance and power with the waters.<sup>44</sup> He saw the union between a woman who is half-aquatic animal and a human prince as the essential motif unifying all the stories. Porée-Maspero believed the stories explored themes of the eternal struggle between men and women, the sun and the moon, the forces of "sécheresse" and "humidité." Although the legends were cloaked in Indian mythology, Porée-

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<sup>40</sup> Przulski (1925:265-284)

<sup>41</sup> Chavannes (1962:64).

<sup>42</sup> Strong (1992:220).

<sup>43</sup> Cœdès (1911:391-339).

<sup>44</sup> Przulski (1925:280).

Maspero thought the underlying and ancient conceptions, especially those relating to the giant *nāga* under the earth, were Chinese in origin.<sup>45</sup> More recently, Gaudes argued that the “decisive folkloristic motif” of the story is the necessity for communication between humans and the *nāgī*, the true ruler of the land: “Such notions surely are indigenous and not imported from India.”<sup>46</sup>

Davis thought that the myths about the *nāgī* emphasize her descent from the (male) *nāga* king, “the symbol of autochthony, of the land, and of territorial prerogatives – and not the fact that she is female.”<sup>47</sup> He criticized Przyluski and Porée-Maspero for relying too heavily on the myths “without taking into account the contexts in which the symbol is actually used and conceived by living people” Although Davis himself believed, based on his fieldwork in Northern Thailand, that the cult of the *nāga* was primarily associated with phallicism, virility and rain-making, he also recognized that Northern Thai myths – like the myths of all peoples – fuse and unify concepts which are opposed in ritual and secular behaviour.<sup>48</sup> Similarly Strong, discussing a cycle of legends that connect the Buddhist saint Upagupta to the *nāga* world, suggested that the value of such “mythic elaborations” lies not in their provenance but in the way they can mediate two sides of a paradox.<sup>49</sup>

Stories about *nāgī* princesses with magical hair can be understood (on one level at least) as a discourse about the identity and gender of the earth deity her association with the land and the water, her connection to the local gods of the soil and her relationship with Hindu deities and the Buddha. This discourse reflects the religious concepts that accompanied the earth deity as well as the local belief systems she encountered when she arrived on the mainland: the Hindu, “indigenous” and Buddhist beliefs current in the region. In the first part of this chapter, I suggested that the character of the

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<sup>45</sup> Porée-Maspero (1969:721).

<sup>46</sup> Gaudes (1993:348).

<sup>47</sup> Davis (1984:205).

<sup>48</sup> Davis (1984:292-293).

<sup>49</sup> Strong (1992:33).

Enlightenment earth deity was enhanced by ideas found in myths such as the *Trivikrama* and the *Varāhāvatāra*, (and probably the descent of Gangā as well) – all stories current on the Mainland during the Angkor period. Less is known about indigenous beliefs, although inscriptions, sculptures and legends attest to the importance of powerful princesses and crocodilian *nāgas* for the region’s inhabitants.

The Buddhism associated with Braḥ Dharaṇī when she first arrived on the mainland is also a mystery. For want of a better name Woodward has called it “Ariya Buddhism,” arguing that in the absence of textual information “Ariya Buddhism must be defined by iconographical traits.”<sup>50</sup> The primary iconographical trait of Ariya Buddhism was the *bhūmisparśamudrā*. The gesture appeared on the mainland in Pyu and Mon art as early as 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, where the primary reference seems to be the moment when the historical Buddha defeated Māra at Bodhgayā. But in Ariya Buddhism, the *bhūmisparśamudrā* took on a new importance. Temples were decorated with large, independent images of the *bhūmisparśamudrā* that seem to be the focus of a cult, or with repeated representations of the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, sometimes replicated into infinity, references to Buddhological concepts that have not yet been definitively identified by scholars. Woodward, Brown and others have argued that the importance of the *bhūmisparśamudrā* on the mainland between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE is evidence of close contact with Northern Indian Buddhism during a time when the site of Bodhgayā and the events of the Enlightenment were imbued with great religious significance.

As we have seen in chapter 2, images of the earth deity wringing her hair under the *bhūmisparśamudrā* first appeared on the mainland in Arakan at Wethali. She can be found at Phimai and Pagan but appeared more often in Khmer art during the reign of Jayavarman 7. The contexts in which she appeared associate her with the iconography of Ariya Buddhism. An example

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<sup>50</sup> Woodward (1997:115-116).

is figure 2.43, a bas-relief from Ta Prohm. Angkor Thom, a temple built by Jayavarman 7 *ca.* 1180. The bas-relief is a depiction of the *māravijaya*: the earth deity, wringing her hair, dominates the centre while Māra's troops attack on either side. On the register underneath Braḥ Dharaṇī is dancing Hevajra accompanied by eight female figures. The space above the earth deity presumably once contained the Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā*, although it is impossible to tell for certain: like most of the images of the Buddha at Angkor, the carving was damaged during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. One Buddha from the same period that escaped destruction can be seen on a lintel, at Ta Prohm, Tonle Bati (5.12). He is in *dhyānamudrā* and appears to be sitting directly on the earth deity's head; a second lintel from the same site shows the Buddha in *dhyānamudrā*, sitting on a *nāga*, whose form recalls representations of the serpent *kuṇḍalinī*. It is interesting that the earth deity does not seem to have been a target of the iconoclastic chisels of the 13<sup>th</sup> century; she often survives, supporting the empty space where the Buddha once existed.<sup>51</sup>

During this same iconographic time frame (10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) the image of the *nāga*-protected Buddha also became prevalent throughout the Khmer territories from the Silver Towers (modern day Binh Dinh in Vietnam) to Haripuñjaya (modern day Lampang in Thailand). The image – the Buddha meditating within the coils of a giant serpent, whose hood shelters the Buddha's head – refers to an episode that took place at Bodhgayā six weeks after the Enlightenment: the Buddha was sitting in meditation under the Bodhi Tree when a heavy rainstorm began. The *nāga* king Mucalinda, one of the Buddha's first devotees, sheltered the meditating Buddha from the rain so he could continue meditating undisturbed.<sup>52</sup> Like the *bhūmisparśamudrā* (and the earth deity) the *nāga*-protected Buddha first appeared on the mainland depicted on Pyu and Mon artefacts. The Mucalinda Buddha also featured on votive tablets and stone plaques illustrating the major events of the life of the

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<sup>51</sup> Braḥ Dharaṇī's association with the Hindu earth deity of the *Varāhāvatāra* and *Trivikrama* protected her from anti-Buddhist iconoclasm.

<sup>52</sup> Bareau (1963:104) discusses the *nāga* Mucalinda.

Buddha, which were widely distributed throughout Buddhist Asia including the Mainland.<sup>53</sup> Later, iconographic changes associated with Ariya Buddhism placed the *nāga*-protected Buddha in new contexts that make little reference to the rainstorm at Bodhgayā. One such image is a late 10<sup>th</sup> century *caitya* from north-western Cambodia that depicts a *nāga* protected Buddha in *dhyānamudrā* on one side; the Buddhist, Tantric deities Vajrin, Lokeśvara and Prajñāpāramitā are depicted on the other three sides.<sup>54</sup> Bas-reliefs from Phimai, an 11<sup>th</sup> century temple in a Khmer provincial capital located today in north-western Thailand, show the *nāga*-protected Buddha being worshipped by devotees, or carried in a procession. Many small bronze images have survived from this period that place the *nāga*-protected Buddha in a triad along with Avalokiteśvara and Prajñāpāramitā.<sup>55</sup> The main cult image of Jayavarman 7 was a huge *nāga*-protected Buddha, located at the centre of the capital of Angkor Thom under the central tower of the Bayon (built *ca.* 1190).

These *nāga*-protected Buddhas were often depicted with open eyes, bare-breasted (no monastic robes), sporting a moustache and adorned with royal regalia, characteristics that reflected their association with kingship rather than the historical Buddha.<sup>56</sup> The *nāga* heads that rear up over the head of the Buddha resemble the blossoming branches of the Bodhi Tree that sheltered the Buddha at the time of Enlightenment, infusing the traditional symbols of Buddha, tree and snake with additional meaning “until all finally come together in an image of unique depth and focus.”<sup>57</sup> During the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, the *nāga*-protected Buddha was joined with the *bhūmisparśamudrā*:

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<sup>53</sup> Vogel (1915), Woodward (1997/98) and Bautze-Picron (1999). The Mucalinda Buddha is shown in plaques that depict the seven stations, episodes that occurred at Bodhgayā during the 6 weeks following the Enlightenment

<sup>54</sup> Lobo (1997:242-244). These monuments were apparently erected at the four compass points to mark off a sacred precinct; the difference between these *caitya* and *sīmā* is not clear to me.

<sup>55</sup> Krariksh (1981-1982), Lobo (1997:311)

<sup>56</sup> Mus (1928). The adorned Buddha is king as well as ascetic.

<sup>57</sup> Lobo (1997:273). Lobo has speculated that the image of the Buddha sitting in meditation as the serpent rears above his head may refer to the practice of yogic techniques that lead to enlightenment.

in these images, the Buddha is shown seated on the snake in *bhūmisparśamudrā* rather than *dhyānamudrā* (5.11).<sup>58</sup> It can be argued that the conflation of the several Bodhgayan events into one image – the defeat of Māra and the Mucalinda episode – shows a strong association for the Khmers at least between the events of the Enlightenment and the cult of the *nāga*.

As Tucci and others have noted, the cult of the *nāga* has often been used to “domesticate” Buddhism into local cultures throughout Asia. *Nāgas* are easily offended, and resent the presence of intruders within their closely guarded boundaries. However once converted to Buddhism, they become the Buddha’s fiercest guardians. The prime example of this is the *nāga* Mucalinda, who found the meditating Buddha under the Bodhi Tree in his territory, and became his first devotee. Cohen, who worked on the cult of the *nāga* at the Buddhist caves in Ajanta, wrote:

The creation of a specific place for the worship of local guardian deities such as *nāgas* or *yakṣas* is the physical means through which localization occurs. The establishment of a shrine (or monastery) is the precondition for a stable and predictable exchange relationship in which offerings are reciprocated through, at the very least, the proximity and presence of the worshiped. Localization contributes to domestication: the Buddha and the monks are meaningfully placed within a society when whatever is most particular to that society is placed within their monastic space.<sup>59</sup>

For the Khmers, the Buddha was “meaningfully placed” within the protective shelter of the *nāgī*, “la mère de la Nation.” The *nāga*-protected Buddha, the profusion of *nāgas* carved on temples, and references to *nāga/nāgī* in the inscriptions are all visual expressions of this notion. While it is difficult to know what such a cult may have entailed in the past, a recent report from a village in the province of Kandal provides insight into contemporary beliefs.<sup>60</sup> The villagers believe a python living near their village contains the spirit of

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<sup>58</sup> This innovation apparently occurs only in Khmer and Khmer influenced art.

<sup>59</sup> Cohen (1998:381).

<sup>60</sup> *Phnom Penh Post*, 11/12, June 7 – 20, 2002.

*nān* Pov, a legendary heroine whose father turned her into a snake to release her from bad karma. Offerings (incense, candles, pig's heads, rice, the *pin peat* orchestra) are regularly made in front of the python's hole, and ceremonies are held in which a spirit medium, who claims to receive the spirit of *nān* Pov in her body, relays communications between the serpent-woman and the villagers. The villagers lustrate the serpent with perfumed water and collect this water to drink, believing that such water has been imbued with special properties that will improve their karma and bring them health and prosperity. They ask the serpent to protect their village and the nation from thieves and bad fortune. And they believe that those who eat pythons or sell them for their meat and valuable skins, will be punished not only this life but the next as well. Such beliefs are common in rural areas, where snakes (and their saurian relatives, the crocodiles) are both feared and venerated.<sup>61</sup> It is significant that these serpents, despite Davis' assertions about phallicism and virility, are often associated with the feminine, and there is much lore concerning their desire for sexual intercourse with human males, and their prodigious egg-laying abilities.<sup>62</sup>

The perfumed/malodorous/long/powerful hair of the *nāgī*, mentioned repeatedly in the stories above, forms a further link between the Buddha, the cult of the *nāga*, and the earth deity.<sup>63</sup> There is abundant literature on the symbolism of hair, particularly with regard to Asian religions.<sup>64</sup> Briefly, long, uncontrolled hair is understood to represent uncontrolled sexuality; braided or short, controlled hair represents restricted sexuality; and shaven or absent hair is associated with celibacy, asexuality and even with castration.<sup>65</sup> Another belief is that hair is an impure substance or a bodily excretion; something to be "gotten rid of," especially after it has been cut off.<sup>66</sup> These ideas are illustrated

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<sup>61</sup> Porée-Maspero (1961:591).

<sup>62</sup> Thierry (1985).

<sup>63</sup> Finot (1911:34)

<sup>64</sup> Strong (1998:80).

<sup>65</sup> Leach (1958:147-164).

<sup>66</sup> Olivelle (1998).



in the story of the young Śākyamuni, who was described as having a luxuriant head of well-dressed long, black hair, a symbol of his privileged life as a prince and his social status as a householder. When he left home to become a religious ascetic, his first action was to cut off his long hair, an act that symbolized his abandonment of householder life for a life of religious asceticism.

In an essay entitled “Magical Hair,” Leach wrote that a particular hairstyle, such as Śākyamuni’s shorn head, is a personal symbol of loss or renunciation of family and home as well as a public symbol of religious asceticism. Olivelle on the other hand argued that such an understanding is too limited: hair is a polygenetic symbol, with meaning coming from a multiplicity of sources. In certain circumstances, a particular hairstyle –like the Gorgon Medusa’s writhing snake hair –can become a symbol so powerful that it takes on meaning of its own. In the case of the earth deity, I argue that her long hair, the volume and size of which recalls a large, black snake, clearly associates her with ophidian symbolism, and all that entails in Buddhist Southeast Asia. Obeyesekere has written a monograph *Medusa’s Hair* about the long, snake-like locks of a group of (mostly female) religious ascetics in Sri Lanka. Through fieldwork (interviews, participation in religious rituals and observation) he established a set of common circumstances that engendered the matted locks of the ascetics:

- 1) the experience of rejection or loss of sexual love in their personal lives
- 2) a compensating intensification of their relationship with god (or with the Buddha) typically expressed by orgasmic shaking of the body during an ecstatic experience
- 3) the god’s reward for renouncing *eros* for *agape* with the gift of matted locks of hair which emerge from the head.

Although many of the matted-haired ascetics Obeyesekere studied were Buddhist, he associated their locks of hair with the Hindu practice of

repressing or harnessing sexuality by means of yogic practices used to arouse *kunḍalīṇī*, the serpent within. The relationship with god was sublimated and indirectly expressed by the eruption of matted locks of hair from the head and the locks of hair were a fusion of symptom and symbol: the “sublated penis of the god.” However, he could not find one informant who consciously identified their matted hair with male genitalia. Instead, the ascetics were proud of their hair, which they sometimes described as resembling the hood of a cobra, or as “snake hair.” Obeyesekere concluded that the meaning of hair is locked into personal emotional experiences that must be unraveled through acquaintance with the ascetics themselves rather than through *a priori* assumptions.

The matted, frizzy locks of the religious ascetics described by Obeyesekere bear little resemblance to the earth deity’s sleek, watery tress, but the ascetic hairstyle and Obeyesekere’s ideas both provide insight into Braḥ Dharaṇī. As the female personification of the elements of earth and water, she represents both the forces of fertility and destruction: in other words, uncontrolled female sexuality. When called upon to be the witness for the Buddha, she is described as shaking uncontrollably, a parallel to the orgasmic shaking of Obeyesekere’s female ascetics. According to the stories about the witness of the earth, it is this shaking (or quaking or roaring or flooding) of the earth that results in the destruction of Māra. Thus, in one sense the snake hair of the earth deity, like the snake hair of Obeyesekere’s female ascetics, can be understood as the manifestation of the power of Śākyamuni, harnessed through his ascetic practices, and channelled indirectly through Braḥ Dharaṇī.

Such a conception of the hair-wringing earth deity may have existed in the past, but it is certainly not part of orthodox Theravāda Buddhist belief today, a religion that idealises “Remoteness, serenity, asexuality” and teaches that hair and women (like *nāgas*) have no role to play on the Quest for

Enlightenment.<sup>67</sup> However, as Andaya and others have noted, “varied and sometimes conflicting images” often challenge and undermine mainstream belief and practice.<sup>68</sup> If we call to mind the scene in which Gautama cut off his hair in order to become a religious ascetic (figure 5.13) we can see that his “hair-cutting” gesture resembles the earth deity’s hair-wringing gesture. In fact, the two images have been conflated by at least one *yantra* artist working during the Cambodian civil war period.<sup>69</sup> ( figure 5.14) In a further contradiction of the rules that stipulate that the heads of Buddhist ascetics be shaved bald, the Buddha’s head is always portrayed as covered with a crop of luxuriant black curls; in fact his snail-shell curls are among the special characteristics of a Buddha. Although his hair was said to have always remained two finger widths in length, never requiring cutting – a symbol of the extinction of his passions – somehow it multiplied, furnishing Buddhist shrines all over the world with countless hair relics.

Texts, legends, iconography and religious practice demonstrate that despite the Buddha’s best efforts, his hair (like the *nāgas* and the women in his life) refused to be abandoned and followed him throughout his life and career. A perhaps unexpected aspect of this is the close relationship between the Buddha and women’s hair. Figure 5.15 is a Mon *sīmā* stone, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries which shows Bimbā, the Buddha’s wife caressing or rubbing the Buddha’s feet with her long hair. The stone illustrates an episode from the life of the Buddha when he returned to his hometown some years after achieving Enlightenment. During the visit, he had a private audience with his wife Bimbā, during which she washed and dried the Buddha’s feet with her long hair.<sup>70</sup> This intimate act of Bimbā’s is echoed in Northern Thai traditions in

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<sup>67</sup> Obeyesekere (1981).

<sup>68</sup> Andaya (2002).

<sup>69</sup> Bechetti (1991).

<sup>70</sup> D. Swearer, personal communication, September 2001. Swearer, who translated *Bimbā Bilāp* from a Northern Thai text preserved in Chiang Mai in the SSRI microfilm archives, 1799, noted that the gesture is reminiscent of the *Dīpaṅkara-Jātaka*.

which a bride wipes her husband's feet with her hair as part of the nuptials. As Davis commented: "Given the respect accorded the head and the negative values associated with the feet, a more explicit declaration of subservience can hardly be imagined."<sup>71</sup> While this observation is true, Anatole Peltier explained to me that such an act can be understood as an expression of great physical intimacy.<sup>72</sup> I suggest that such acts are also a reference to the way that women, like the earth deity who upholds the *vajrāsana*, support their husbands, fathers, brothers and sons in their pursuit of liberation.

A further example is the religious act of hair sacrifice by Buddhist lay women. The offering of hair can be a simple vow made in front of a Buddha image to cut off one's hair if a boon is granted. When the boon is fulfilled, the woman crops or shaves off her hair, and offers the severed locks along with incense, candles and flowers to the Buddha image.<sup>73</sup> In a more elaborate ritual, documented in a sixteenth century Khmer inscription, the shorn hair is burnt into ash and the ash mixed into the lacquer that is used to coat a Buddha image. The sponsoring of the re-lacquering of Buddha images is a meritorious act in itself; the addition of a woman's hair sacrifice to the lacquer substantially increases her merit.<sup>74</sup> A third example is the sacrifice of hair during the consecration of a new *vihāra*. After the holes are dug for *sīmā* (boundary) stones and before the stones are deposited, devotees throw offerings of small valuables such as coins, jewellery and gold leaf into the holes; some women cut off their hair and throw the tresses into the holes.<sup>75</sup> Pious laywomen in Northern Thailand also weave long strands of their hair

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<sup>71</sup> Davis (1984:67).

<sup>72</sup> A. Peltier, personal communication, November 8, 1999.

<sup>73</sup> Porée-Maspero (1985:23).

<sup>74</sup> Lewitz [Pou] (1972:110), translated IMA2, a late 16<sup>th</sup> century inscriptions inscribed in the gallery known as Braḥ Bān' on the first level of Angkor Wat. This inscription is by a queen mother named Mahākalyāṇavatī Śrīśujāta who came to Angkor to sacrificed her "superb hair" in order to obtain ashes with which to make a black lacquer (*kmuk*) to coat Buddha statues that she had donated and consecrated.

<sup>75</sup> Porée-Maspero (1958:67).

into the cords that are used bind the sacred palm leaf manuscripts.<sup>76</sup>

Obeyesekere's ecstatic female ascetics with their snake-like hair, Cambodia's snake cults, the story of Bimbā, and the tradition of hair-sacrifice: all these are examples of how heterodox ideas – indigenous or otherwise – have informed the Theravāda Buddhism practiced in mainland Southeast Asia. As promised, there have been no easy answers in this chapter. Earth has been confounded with water, the *bhūmisparśamudrā* with the *nāga*-protected Buddha, the *māravijaya*'s heroic quest for enlightenment with the romance between a prince and a girl with a pet crocodile. Even one of the most basic concepts of Buddhism – that hair is an impediment to salvation, something that must be cut off and abandoned – has become a way for Theravāda Buddhist women to physically touch the Buddha. To sum up, it seems that when the Enlightenment earth deity arrived on the mainland from northern India, she found fertile soil. Ariya Buddhism, with its glorification of the *bhūmisparśamudrā* and the cult of the *nāga*, provided the earth deity with an important role as the powerful guardian of the Buddha's *vajrāsana*. As guardian of the *vajrāsana*, she was associated with the *nāga* who also protected the meditating Buddha, and by extension, with the *nāgi* princess who is the mother of the nation. The survival of the earth deity during the shift to Theravāda Buddhism, a time when other more important female deities such as Prajñāpāramitā and Tāra were abandoned, probably owes much to her association with the cult of the *nāga*, a cult accepted by Theravāda Buddhists because of its association with the historical events of the Buddha's life.

Brah̄ Dharaṇī is still around today, a potent force still associated with the *nāga*, with the elements of earth and water. She is still believed to be the protector of the Buddha as well as the individual, the guardian of the nation as well as the king. An independent deity, she commands her own cult, while always maintaining her close relationship with the Buddha. In the next chapter

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<sup>76</sup> Phaitun Dokbukaeo, personal communication, November 1999.

we will look at the modern cult of Braḥ Dharanī, focusing on developments in Cambodia and Thailand during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But before we leave Romsay Sok and her crocodile behind, I want to give one final example of the confusion between the two women and the *nāgī*.

Figure 5.16 is of the political logo of the Neang Neak Neary Party (“Miss Snake Lady”). This political party was founded by a Cambodian woman named Sokhoeun Duong. Duong, born in Cambodia in 1942, was fortunate to be living in the United States when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge in 1975. She opened the Angkor Wat restaurant in San Francisco, and became a prosperous businesswoman.<sup>77</sup> Like many overseas Khmer, she returned to Cambodia in 1989 after the departure of the Vietnamese, eager to participate in Cambodia’s redevelopment. She formed the Neang Neak Neary Khmer, sometimes translated as the Cambodian Womens’ Party, and fielded candidates in five constituencies in Prey Veng, Takeo, Kandal, Kompong Cham, and Phnom Penh during the national elections in 1997. Her platform stressed the empowerment of women, Buddhist values, environmentally sound, sustainable development and national self-reliance. In an interview in the *Cambodian Daily Times*, she explained: “The ideals are embodied in [the] party’s logo, which portrays Rum Say Sok, an earth spirit from Khmer mythology, as a young woman with water flowing from her hair.” The Neang Neak Neary party polled only 594 votes in Phnom Penh, too few to win a seat in Parliament. Like many overseas Khmer who returned to take part in the country’s elections in 1993 and 1997, Duong and her Westernised, feminist platform were out of touch with the social and political realities of Cambodia today. However, as we have seen in this chapter, Duong is not the first person to confuse the earth deity with Romsay Sok and as we will see in the next chapter, she is not the first person to exploit the image of the earth deity in an attempt to access political power.

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<sup>77</sup> *Cambodian Daily Times* (1998:12)

## 6: The Contemporary Cult of the Earth Deity

This chapter is concerned with the contemporary cult of the earth deity, a cult that manifests itself, for the most part, outside the traditional boundaries of the *sīmā*. This cult has many similarities to the nationalist religious cults that have recently emerged in South and Southeast Asia addressed to the Hindu deities Hanuman, Bhārat Mātā (“Mother India”) and the Thai monarch Rāma 5. One of the first tasks of this chapter will be to identify some of the features of these new cults that are relevant for understanding the earth deity’s contemporary cult. Next, I will describe the statues, political logos and mediumnic activity that constitute the earth deity’s contemporary cult in Cambodia and Thailand.

Over the past few decades there has been a proliferation of “nationalist” religious cults in South and Southeast Asia that seem to come into being in response to political and social change. Some of these cults are media creations, such as the pan-Indian cult to the goddess Saṅtoṣī Mā, a cult that first appeared when a movie about the goddess was released in 1975.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the popular Thai cult to Rāma 5 (also known as Chulalongkorn, r. 1868-1910), which seems to be tailored to suit the needs of urbanized, middle-class Thais flourished during the 1997-8 collapse of the Thai economy. The cult to Hanuman has a venerable lineage that can be traced back many centuries, but took on new life after the *Rāmāyaṇa* appeared in serialized form on Indian television in 1987-8.<sup>2</sup> Babb has argued that the media (print, movies, television) has standardized and disseminated a limited number of key

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<sup>1</sup> McKean (1996:250-280) and Hawley (1996:1-28). Bhārat Mātā and Saṅtoṣī Mā became known through the media and their use as political vehicles for militant Hindu nationalist parties.

<sup>2</sup> Babb (1995:14) writes that Ramanand Sagar’s serialization of the *Rāmāyaṇa* for Indian television was a “watershed” in the history of the epic.

religious symbols and images throughout South Asia, creating a shared national identity that transcends traditional cultural and social boundaries.<sup>3</sup> In the same book, Wadley argued that the universal availability of religious images in the form of printed posters, movies and television programs has fostered a “democratic devotionism, a populist piety, of extraordinary proportions in the present age.”<sup>4</sup> This media-nourished piety is not dependent upon particular temples, geographical location, or religious specialists; busy devotees are able to devise their own rituals and calendars of worship, something Wadley calls “omnipraxy.” Likewise, Lutgendorf has described the deities worshipped by urban, cosmopolitan Hindus as “multi-purpose,” and their temples as “non-sectarian, one-stop, full-service.”<sup>5</sup>

If new deities such as Santoṣī Mā or Rāma 5 have emerged in response to the changing needs of Asia’s urbanized societies, how do we understand the new cults to ancient deities, such as that addressed to the monkey god Hanuman? Once a *yakṣa*, a minor iconographic motif who guarded the deity Viṣṇu in his incarnation as Rāma, today Hanuman is conceived of as the “pre-eminent personal deity of the Kāli Yuga,” and his devotees compete among themselves to build ever larger monuments and statues in his honor.<sup>6</sup> Babb and others have observed that subordinant, less powerful deities are generally represented as smaller than powerful, independent or active deities, an observation that is relevant for the earth deity as well as Hanuman. In Indo-Tibetan iconography, the earth deity is usually depicted as a tiny figure on the base of the *vajrāsana*, firmly under the control of the *bhūmisparśamudrā*, a reflection of her minor role in the Enlightenment. In contrast, in mainland Southeast Asia the earth deity is often depicted as equal in size to the Bodhisattva (2.46), she plays an aggressive role in the defeat of Māra (2.44) and can be found as an independent image as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century (2.93).<sup>7</sup> Such iconographical

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<sup>3</sup> Babb (1995:16-17).

<sup>4</sup> Wadley (1995:37).

<sup>5</sup> Lutgendorf (1994:244).

<sup>6</sup> Lutgendorf (1994:217).

<sup>7</sup> “Independent” is a relative term here; this bronze was probably intended to be placed in front of a Buddha image.



traits are usually glossed in terms of the opposition between the male and female principles: “When the feminine dominates the masculine the pair is sinister; when male dominates female the pair is benign;” equality in size is the resolution of this duality.<sup>8</sup>

A valuable tool for understanding changes in the earth deity’s size and status is Linrothe’s three phase typology of the iconography of “subsidiary” divinities that he calls *krodha-vighnāntakas*.<sup>9</sup> Linrothe argues that iconographical developments in the *krodha-vighnāntaka* parallel the apotheosis of the destruction of the obstacles to enlightenment in Esoteric Buddhism. During the early stages of Esoteric Buddhism *ca.* 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, the *krodha-vighnāntakas* were mere side-kicks, vague figures with few distinguishing characteristics. To express their lesser status, artists portrayed them as much smaller than the *bodhisattvas* and deities they attend. During the 8<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Phase Two *krodhā-vighnāntakas*” begin to emerge alongside Esoteric Buddhism. Their status as independent deities, able to destroy the obstacles of their devotees, is reflected by their size: they are as large as the *bodhisattva* they attend, and they have their own attributes and/or attendants. Phase Three *krodhā-vighnāntakas* appear in the late 10<sup>th</sup> – early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this late stage, these deities (Heruka, Hevajra) have left their *yakṣa* origins far behind, and are depicted as independent deities in their own right.

As the earth deity became established in mainland Southeast Asia, she seems to have followed the path prescribed by Linrothe for Phase Two *krodha-vighnāntaka*: an active and independent deity, dedicated to destroying the obstacles to Enlightenment. After Esoteric Buddhism disappeared in mainland Southeast Asia, the story and cult of the earth deity, like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, were appropriated by Theravāda Buddhism and used to express a “theology of politics and a symbology of otherness.”

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<sup>8</sup> Babb (1970:142), see also Marglin (1982:298-315).

<sup>9</sup> Linrothe (1999).

In a provocative article on the political use of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in India, Pollock noted although the story of Rāma is ancient, the cults to Rāma did not flourish until the 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries when much of India was under the control of the Sultanate and Hinduism was under threat. Pollock argued that such cults were fostered by the Hindu elite, and the *Rāmāyaṇa* promoted as a “privileged instrument for encoding or interpreting the political realities of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.” The *Rāmāyaṇa* was chosen over the many other martial epics available because of its “demonization of the Other ... those who stand outside this theologically sanctioned polity.”<sup>10</sup> Pollock concluded his article by positing a relationship between the *Rāmāyaṇa*-inspired political semiotics of the 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century and the contemporary cults to Rāma that encourage sectarian violence against Indian Muslims.<sup>11</sup>

Using the same symbolism, the *māravijaya* has served as a political vehicle for the Buddhist nations of mainland Southeast Asia for many centuries, portraying the king as the Bodhisattva and anyone who threatened the king or the nation as Māra, an evil being who could be destroyed without compassion. Such a metaphor was used in a Thai chronicle describing King Naresuan's famous victory over the Burmese Uparājā in 1593: the Burmese ruler is represented as Māra and Naresuan as the Bodhisattva.<sup>12</sup> A memoir written in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Princess Narintharathewi compared the victory of Rāma 1 over the then-reigning King Taksin to the Bodhisattva's defeat of Māra.<sup>13</sup> Murals of the *māravijaya* from the Ayutthayan Period often depict the hordes of Māra as the rapacious Europeans who were vying with each other to colonize Thailand along with neighboring Vietnam, Cambodia and Lao

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<sup>10</sup> Pollock (1993:281).

<sup>11</sup> Pollock (1993:261); in this article Pollock refers specifically to events such as the pilgrimage by the leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party to Ayodhyā in 1990 and the destruction of the mosque built at Rāma's birthplace by Hindu militants in 1992, events accompanied by bloody sectarian riots across India.

<sup>12</sup> Chutintaranond (1992:92).

<sup>13</sup> Passage cited and translated by Jory (1996:97).

(6.1).<sup>14</sup> Similar images and metaphors inform Cambodia's national and political consciousness: a contemporary depiction of the *māravijaya* painted in 1989 in Wat Bo, Siem Reap depicts the hosts of Māra as French soldiers with white skin and luxurious auburn moustaches (6.2).

The role the earth deity has played in this political symbology can be glimpsed in an 18<sup>th</sup> century Cambodian chronicle describing the invasion of a Cham army during the reign of King Gaṅkhat.<sup>15</sup> Before the battle, King Gaṅkhat prayed to *nān* Braḥ Dharaṇī to give him victory against the Cham invaders. That night he dreamed that the earth deity appeared before him and told him: "Be without fear: you will win a brilliant victory over your enemies." The *Chronicle* then relates that the next dawn, when the king led his army to confront the enemy, Braḥ Dharaṇī transformed herself into a serpent and went running before the king; upon seeing this sign, the astrologers predicted a victory for the Cambodian king.

At the end of the previous chapter, I wrote that one of the political parties in Cambodia's national elections of 1997 was called the Neang Neak Neary party ("Miss Snake Lady"). The logo of the party was the earth deity wringing water from her hair, an image identified by the party's founder Duong Sokhoeun in an interview as "the earth spirit Rumsay Sok."<sup>16</sup> The party's feminist and nationalist platform failed to attract voters and Duong was unable to gain a seat in parliament. However, this is not the first time that the image of the earth deity has been used as a political symbol in 20<sup>th</sup> century Cambodian politics. In September 1947, a political party called the Khmer Renovation Party was launched by high-ranking civil servants Lon Nol and Nhiek Tioulong and a member of the royal family, Sirik Matak. The party was known popularly as the *gañhīn ganak pak[s]*, the "Gañhīn Party" (pronounced

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<sup>14</sup> See for example, Ringis (1990: plates 15-16).

<sup>15</sup> Cœdès (1918:15-28, 25-26).

<sup>16</sup> *The Cambodia Daily*, July 20 1998.

“Kongheng”) because it had as its logo an image of *nān gaṅhīn* Braḥ Dharaṇī wringing water out of her hair.<sup>17</sup>

The Gaṅhīn Party was conservative and pro-monarchist, and addressed nationalist issues that concerned many Cambodians at that time: independence from the French, the loss of Kampuchea Krom to Vietnam, the need to preserve Cambodia’s territorial integrity and protect the country from invaders, and the need to increase the Khmer population. Although the party was popular in the provinces, especially in the recently invaded regions in the Northwest and Kampuchea Krom, it performed poorly during the elections of 1947 and 1951, and Lon Nol was unable to gain a seat in parliament. When he left the civil service to join the military in 1953, the party was disbanded. Throughout his career as a civil servant, politician and military leader, Lon Nol promoted nationalistic projects such as the negotiations between the French and Thailand for the return of the north western regions of Battambang and Siem Reap to Cambodian control and Sihanouk’s “Croisade Royale pour l’Indépendance” from the French. Although conservative and a strong supporter of the monarchy, in March 1970 Lon Nol deposed Prince Sihanouk in a *coup d’état*, made himself head of state, and led Cambodia into devastating civil war.

There is some evidence that Lon Nol had deep misgivings about his role in the coup, and believed that the stroke he suffered in February 1971 was a punishment for his betrayal of the oath of fealty to the Cambodian monarchy.<sup>18</sup> However, Lon Nol publicly justified his actions by arguing that Sihanouk was a traitor who had allowed North Vietnamese troops onto Cambodia’s sacred soil. His speeches and publications emphasised the religious aspect of the war: crimes against the Sangha, the destruction of

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<sup>17</sup> Long Tbol, personal communication June 11 and November 13, 1996. Long recalled that his uncle, with whom he lived in Battambang, was a supporter of Lon Nol and the Gaṅhīn Party. See also Chandler (1991:57), Headley (1977:116).

<sup>18</sup> Long Tbol, personal communication, November 13, 1996; Thong Thel, personal communication, December 9, 1996.

Buddhist wat, and the occupation of the temples at Angkor by Vietcong and Khmer communist forces that he called the *thmiḷ* or the hosts of Māra.<sup>19</sup> Cambodians were exhorted to drive these non-believers out of the country in a *campan̄ sāsanā* or "holy war."<sup>20</sup> During the Republican Period, 1970-1975, the earth deity appeared again, this time on war propaganda posters depicting the *māravijaya* (6.3).<sup>21</sup> In the poster, the Bodhisattva (meditating serenely in *dhyānamudrā*) is being assaulted by Māra and a horde of demons dressed as Vietcong soldiers, riding on tanks and brandishing automatic rifles. The earth deity stands at the base of the Bodhisattva's throne, wringing a deluge of water from her long hair to drown the demons. A huge white crocodile crawls at her feet. The caption underneath the poster reads "the *thmiḷ* are Māra and will be annihilated."

A young Khmer art student designed the poster for a contest sponsored by the U.S. embassy.<sup>22</sup> Thousands of these posters were printed in full colour, and distributed free of charge throughout the country on the Buddha's Birthday in May 1971 to commemorate the consecration of the Śākyamuni *stūpa* in Phnom Penh. Monks, politicians, soldiers, and civilians attended the ceremony, one of many held at this site during the war. Religious rituals took place, and the Cambodian people were exhorted to fight a religious war against the *thmiḷ*.

Figure 6.4 is of a military badge, also from the Civil War period, that features the image of the earth deity wringing out her long hair.<sup>23</sup> She is standing flanked by two ornate letters in Khmer script. They make the syllable BA, which means in this context: "to support, or to protect." The combination of the image of earth deity and the letters create a powerful *yantra* capable of

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<sup>19</sup> Long Tbol, personal communication, also Lon Nol (1974) and Headley (1977:317).

<sup>20</sup> Lon Nol (1970).

<sup>21</sup> This poster was first published in black and white in Bizot (1981). Many thanks to Bizot for providing me with a colour print of the poster (6.3).

<sup>22</sup> Bun Heang Ung, personal communication, October 14, 1997, a cartoonist and former art student at the École des Beaux Arts, recalled fellow art student Ngeth Sim and two teachers designing the poster.

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to F. Bizot for the black and white print (6.4).

protecting its wearer from harm. The top phrase on the badge, *saccā baṇṇarāy ghlāṃṇī mīōṇ*, the “marvellous truth/vow of Khleang Moueng” a patriotic general and necromancer who swore a magical oath (*saccā*) that he fulfilled by jumping into a pit full of swords, turning into a ghost, raising a ghost army, and defeating an army of invaders who threatened Cambodia. The next phrase, “Mon-Chenla-Kok Thlok,” is a reference to Lon Nol’s racial and historical theories about the “Mon-Khmer” people he believed were the original inhabitants of the ancient kingdom of Chenla in the mythical land of Kok Thlok. The bottom line on the badge reads: “soldier of the small regiment number 425.” The badge was worn by an elite regiment of the Republican army formed by Lon Nol in 1970 to fight in an ill-fated military campaign known as Chenla I.

Lon Nol was born in 1913 of Khmer Krom parents in a rural village on the Khmer-Vietnamese border. Like most Khmers of his age and background he was a devout Buddhist, who put his faith in astrologers and in occult practices. After his first stroke in 1971, an astrologer told him that his illness was caused by the way he disturbed the *nāga*, which lay along the shore of the Mekong River. The head of this *nāga* was located at Lon Nol’s Chamcar Mon residence (previously occupied by Prince Sihanouk); its body lay under the Royal Palace and its tail at Wat Phnom, the hill that overlooks Phnom Penh. In order for Lon Nol to recover from his stroke, the astrologer advised him to chop the *nāga* up into pieces. Accordingly, Lon Nol ordered an army unit, escorted by an armoured tank, to bulldoze a piece of land in the front garden of the Chamcar Mon palace, cutting the *nāga*’s head off. The unit and tank then arrived at the east gate of the Royal Palace and marched right through the grounds and out the west gate. This action was intended to chop the *nāga*’s body in two.<sup>24</sup> Next, the tank and army unit made their way to Wat Phnom, where they destroyed the *nāga*’s “tail” (a balustrade made from cast concrete in the form of *nāga* tail, a common Khmer design) that bordered the steps to

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<sup>24</sup> Long Tbol, personal communication, November 1996. Long, at the time a private secretary to Oum Samouth, Minister of Culture, witnessed with amazement Lon Nol’s destruction of the *nāga* in 1972.

the temple on top of the Phnom. In another display of traditional beliefs, Lon Nol diverted army helicopters from the battlefield during the height of the Civil War to sprinkle sand that had been blessed by monks around the perimeters of Phnom Penh; this sand created a sacred boundary around the city that the Khmer Rouge would not be able to cross.

To ensure that the soldiers of the Republican army were supplied with enough “occult science” to fight their religious war, Lon Nol had monks and *grū yantr* (religious masters who specialised in the art of creating *yantras*) working around the clock producing and consecrating *yantra* scarves and amulets for the war effort.<sup>25</sup> Lon Nol’s reliance on long-haired goddesses, apocalyptic religious texts, printed scarves, tattoos and amulets made little sense to his American advisors. As the Republican Army lost battle after battle, Lon Nol’s military commanders also lost confidence in the General.<sup>26</sup> However inadequate a leader Lon Nol may have been, the belief in the magical efficacy of amulets, tattoos, *yantras* and *mantras* is still common among soldiers in the region.<sup>27</sup> The image of the earth deity inscribed into the flesh as a tattoo or on *yantra* shirts is particularly popular with soldiers because she is believed to provide very strong protection.

In addition to tattoos and *yantras*, most soldiers in mainland Southeast Asia wear garlands of amulets around their necks into battle.<sup>28</sup> During an attack, they often place their most potent amulet in their mouth, to partake more thoroughly of its protective power. Amulets are believed to contain the supernatural power of the figure they depict or represent, a power that must (like a Buddha image in a *vihāra*) be formally established or consecrated in

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<sup>25</sup> Bechetti (1991).

<sup>26</sup> Sutsakhan (1980:149-50).

<sup>27</sup> Bizot (1981). See also Bechetti (1991), de Bernon (1998), Lagirarde (1989). Meyer (1971:90) reported that in 1970 two Thai generals were sent from Bangkok to Phnom Penh bearing “military aid:” a handful of yellow and red *yantra* scarves.

<sup>28</sup> In 1997, when a friend heard that his son was to be drafted into the Cambodian army, he bought several expensive amulets, and took them along with his son to the most powerful monk he knew for consecration.

the amulet during a consecration ceremony.<sup>29</sup> After their consecration, amulets receive a cult: when they are taken off at night, they are placed on an altar, or in front of a Buddha image, and offerings of candles and incense may be made. Certain activities (sex, bathing, using toilets) are proscribed while wearing amulets as it is believed that the supernatural power animating them will be offended and depart. Figure 6.5 is an amulet depicting *nān gānhīn* carved from a pig's tooth, and sheathed in a silver casing.<sup>30</sup> When consecrated and worn by someone who respects the Buddhist precepts, amulets depicting *nān gānhīn* are said to provide strong protection from bullets, knives, and attack by evil people.

In fact, merely invoking her name can save an individual from disaster. A young soldier recruited by the Khmer Rouge to fight the invading Vietnamese army in 1978 recalled being under fire and seeing his friends dropping dead all around him. In terror, he poured a handful of dirt on his head and prayed to *nān gānhīn* to protect him from the bullets of the enemy. He survived, and today attributes this fact to the help of the earth deity. Another informant recalled that when her village in Kompong Spoeu was bombed by American B52s, her father gathered the family together in a ditch, and sprinkled soil on their heads, praying for mother earth to protect them. The prevalence of such beliefs in all levels of Cambodian society means that the image of the earth deity is instantly recognized and understood wherever it appears. The “baggage” attached to the earth deity – her associations with the Buddha and the *nāga*, with water and the earth, with sacred boundaries, with the destruction of enemies – can be readily employed by kings, politicians and the military.

At the beginning of chapter 5, I discussed the image of a statue-fountain of the hair-wringing earth deity located in the centre of a traffic roundabout near the Psar O’Russey in Phnom Penh (5.1, 6.6). This statue was built in the early

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<sup>29</sup> Tambiah (1984), Souyris-Rolland (1951:175-187).

<sup>30</sup> I bought this amulet of *nān gānhīn* in Phnom Penh in 1998 from a silversmith near the National Museum; it has never been consecrated or worn.



1960s during a frenzy of urban renewal in preparation for an official visit by Charles de Gaulle for the Asian Olympic Games in 1966. Sihanouk wanted de Gaulle and the rest of the world to see a beautiful, modern and independent Cambodia, and embarked on a building spree. In addition to his own projects, he mobilised the mayors of the provincial capitals to launch their own urban beautification projects. H.E. Vann Moly Vann, at that time an architect involved in the construction of the nearby Olympic Stadium complex, recalled that the Mayor of Phnom Penh, Tep Phon was responsible for the erection of the fountain statue of the earth deity;<sup>31</sup> similar statues of the earth deity were constructed in other provincial centres (6.7).<sup>32</sup>

The Phnom Penh fountain statue is located in an island in the middle of a major traffic intersection. Although the garden around the statue is well maintained, the statue has recently been repainted and offerings of flowers and incense are regularly placed at the deity's feet, the constant traffic noise and pollution from vehicle exhaust are unpleasant, and few devotees spend time there. However, during the Civil War period (when there were fewer automobiles) the statue was the focus of mediumnic activity.<sup>33</sup> A newspaper article from 1972 reports that a well-known medium became possessed and perched for hours on the statue, dancing and singing on the head of the crocodile while holding onto *nān gañhīn*'s tress of hair. A crowd gathered to hear her, blocking traffic in all directions, and finally the police were summoned to take her away.

Another older image of the earth deity is located in a shrine in Bangkok at the intersection of Rajadamnuern and Rajini Roads at the foot of the Phipoplila Bridge on the northeast corner of the Sanam Luang (6.9) In addition to being

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<sup>31</sup> Interview, HE Vann Moly Vann, June 24, 2000. The minister explained that the Khmer statue fountain and logos of the earth deity were not "copied" from Thailand, rather the similarities between Thai and Cambodian images of the earth deity stem from their shared Buddhist heritage.

<sup>32</sup> Statues of *nān gañhīn* were also constructed during this period in the provincial towns of Kratie, Sihanoukville and Kompong Thom (The date 1989, incised on the base of the Kompong Thom statue (6.7) records its most recent renovation).

<sup>33</sup> *Koh Santapheap*, January 4, 1972.

in the heart of Ratanakosin Island, near the Royal Palace, the site of the shrine is adjacent to the City Pillar shrine.<sup>34</sup> This statue of the earth deity, known as Mae Thoranee, is also a water fountain and receives a cult: devotees come to the site and buy offerings (candles, incense, marigolds) (6.10) and scarves from a nearby stall that they place on the statue (6.11). They pray for good fortune or recite the *Gāthā Phra Mae Thoranee* inscribed on a plaque on the base of the statue (6.12). They drink the water that streams from the statue's hair into a basin in front of the statue, and catch the water in bottles to take away. In addition to preventing sickness, the water from Thoranee's hair is believed to prevent traffic accidents when sprinkled on cars.

The statue fountain was built by Samdech Phra Sri Patcharindhara Boromarajinatha to commemorate her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. The queen, also known as Saovapha, was the favourite wife of king Rāma 5, and the mother of Rama 6 and Rama 7. She was born in 1863, and died in 1919.<sup>35</sup> The fountain was constructed after the death of Chulalongkorn in 1910 when the Queen Mother was resident in the Pya Tai Palace and her son, Vajiravudh, was on the throne. Saovapha enlisted her sons and brother-in-laws to help design and construct of the statue fountain at a cost of 16,437 *baht*. Archives preserve a letter from the queen to the Minister of Defence of Bangkok, general Phraya Yamaraja containing her instructions for the consecration ceremonies on the 27th day of the ninth month of December BE 2460 (1917):

Tomorrow I will make merit on my birthday by voluntarily performing a meritorious act. I have donated my own wealth to have the statue of Nang Phra Thoranee, who is the remedy for disease, cast and established at the foot of the Phan Phipoplila. The statue is now ready to be consecrated, and I ask that the merit for the fountain be reassigned for the sake of all sentient beings, to be a gift for the public good, to assuage thirst, to heal sickness, to alleviate heat and

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<sup>34</sup> Quaritch Wales (1931:302-3). The City Pillars, or *lak muang*, are also called *inthakīlā*, usually transliterated from Thai as *inthakin*. These pillars, discussed briefly in chapter 4, are located in the centre of the city or *muang*, and receive a cult.

<sup>35</sup> Smith (1947). Smith was the Queen's personal physician; his book is in part a biography of Saovapha.

to increase health according to the great solicitude of the triple  
gems....

—signed Saovapha<sup>36</sup>

This dedication, in which Saovapha documents her meritorious deeds, asks for the merit to be shared among all sentient beings, and refers to the pouring of water, is a Truth Act.<sup>37</sup> It does not really explain why Saovapha decided to place a statue fountain of Thoranee on this site, but at that time most Bangkok residents took their water directly from the Chao Phraya River, resulting in illness and death from water borne diseases, especially in plague years.<sup>38</sup> In 1909, a year before his death, King Chulalongkorn ordered the construction of Bangkok's first water treatment plant, which was completed on November 4, 1914.<sup>39</sup> This water plant would have provided the pure drinking water that flowed from the pipe in Thoranee's hair. In this region where one of the ancient epithets of the earth deity in both Thailand and Cambodia is *mcās' dik dī*, "lord of water and earth,"<sup>40</sup> oaths of fealty are consecrated by the pouring and drinking of sacred water, and the control and provision of water is a primary responsibility of the ruler of the land. This confluence of earth, water and government underlies the use of the image of Thoranee for the logos of the water departments of the municipalities of Bangkok (6.13). It is perhaps not surprising to find a similar logo on badges worn by Phnom Penh's water treatment department workers and on the gates to Cambodia's Ministry of Hydrology (6.15)

A similar logo of Thoranee was adopted by the Thai Democratic Party (in Thai "Pak Prachatipat") for the party's seal when it was established April 6, 2489 BE (6.14). This logo has symbolised the Party through many election campaigns and is instantly recognizable throughout Thailand. A special program commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Thai Democratic Party

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<sup>36</sup> Oudumaphra (BE 2527:454-455); translation, E. Guthrie.

<sup>37</sup> Burlingame (1917).

<sup>38</sup> Smith (1947) described the havoc wreaked in Bangkok by water-borne disease.

<sup>39</sup> van Beek (1995:164).

<sup>40</sup> Bauer (1992).

broadcast on national television in the late 1990s explained why the image of the earth deity was chosen. In 1946, when Seni and Kukrit Pramoj and the other founding members of the party were drafting the party's constitution in Pramoj's law office on Rajadamnoern St. they realised they needed a logo for the new party. They looked out the window for inspiration and saw Saowapha's Thoranee fountain on the Sanam Luang. It was decided that this image, which emphasised the importance of earth and water for Thailand, together with the Pāli motto *saccam eva amatavaca* "truth is indeed the undying word," symbolised the values of the Party.<sup>41</sup> As the Secretary of the Democratic Party wrote in his autobiography:

It was agreed that the symbol for the Thai Democratic Party would be the figure of Nang Thoranee squeezing out her hair, a figure that has the meaning of cool shade, abundance and the happiness that emanates from the earth.<sup>42</sup>

These ideas about a benevolent earth deity, the restorative powers of water and the centrality of truth expressed by the founders of the Thai Democratic Party and in Queen Saovapha's dedication were important symbols for Thai politics during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Thailand became embroiled in the Second World War and the war in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the earth deity's wrathful nature became important in Thailand's political symbology.

Although Thailand was never colonised, during the second world war the power of the Thai monarchy was at a low ebb, Thailand was occupied by foreign invaders, and Bangkok was bombed. During this period, the statue of Thoranee was not maintained, and it became dilapidated and spoiled. Thieves vandalised the statue and stole the water pipes, and the water in the fountain dried up. In 1957, when General Sarit Thanarat took over leadership of the country, he ordered that the Thoranee statue be renovated.<sup>43</sup> The worn paint

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<sup>41</sup> *Samyutta Nikāya* 452- 5.1.189.

<sup>42</sup> *Sotthisankrām* (2527:94). E. Guthrie, draft translation.

<sup>43</sup> General Sarit Thanarat's military regime lasted from September 1957 until his death December 1963.

was scraped off the statue and it was regilded; water pipes were reconnected to the water supply and the fountain flowed like before. Electricity was installed in the statue to illuminate and beautify the interior of the shrine at night. The surrounding area was landscaped, trees and a decorative hedge were planted, and footpaths and fountains of gushing water were built in a circle surrounding the statue.<sup>44</sup>

Since Sarit Thanarat's renovation of the fountain on the Sanam Luang, there has been a close relationship between Thoranee and the Thai political right, a relationship that paralleled that of the Cambodian General Lon Nol and *nāṅ gaṅhīṅ* Braḥ Dharaṅī, and stemmed from the same cause: the concern for national security as the conflict in Vietnam War escalated and spread throughout Southeast Asia. Alarmed by the destruction of the Sangha in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge, the Thai Sangha formed an alliance with the Thai Military, and left-wing political groups (including the Thai Democratic Party) were accused of being communists. The politics of this period are too complex to discuss in detail here, but because of its strategic location between the Royal Palace, Thammasat University, Wat Mahāthāt (the headquarters of the right-wing monk Bhikkhu Kittivuttho) and the Democracy Monument, the fountain statue of Thoranee witnessed many scenes of political protest. In 1973, 1976, and again during the military coup in 1991, fierce battles between right wing activists, the military, and student protesters were fought in front of the statue fountain on the Sanam Luang. In the political discourse of this era, Nang Thoranee was believed to be the ferocious defender of Thai Buddhist nationalism and communists and student activists were condemned as *tmiḥ*, the forces of Māra.<sup>45</sup>

During this period of political instability, many statues of Thoranee were erected by local authorities in Thailand and even in Laos (6.8).<sup>46</sup> While I have

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<sup>44</sup> *Phak Kruang*, 21 August, 2542.

<sup>45</sup> Kittivuttho (1976).

<sup>46</sup> Guillon (1987:144). The statue-fountain was constructed by the municipality of Luang Prabang in 1973 on the site of a monument to the war dead of 1914-1918.

found no official statements or evidence that these statues were constructed as “anti-communist” symbols, it is evident from fieldwork that many people associate these statues with the dispersal of the enemies of the nation. Figure 6.16 is a statue-fountain of Thoranee located in a shrine in the centre of the provincial capital of Khon Kaen in north-eastern Thailand. The shrine, which is adjacent to the shrine of the City Pillar, is surrounded by a high fence with a big gate; the enclosure also contains shrines to the *phi* (local spirits), the seven stations of the Buddha and various other statuary including a Chinese dragon. In addition to the statue-fountain, there is also a subsidiary statue of Nang Thoranee that also receives a cult (6.17). The statue-fountain is closely modelled after the one on the Sanam Luang: the Khon Kaen earth deity kneels enclosed in a four-sided cage, and her tress of hair conceals a water pipe that empties into a basin in front of the statue. However, the appearance of the statue is very different from the one on the Sanam Luang as it has been painted red and gold, giving the shrine a “Chinese” rather than “Thai” appearance. There are several dedicatory inscriptions at the site commemorating the original construction of the statue in 1980, and subsequent renovations and improvements to the site (such as the electification of the shrine in 1987). A red plastic plaque set in front of the main image has the *Gāthā Phra Mae Thoranee* (discussed in chapter 4 above) inscribed on it in golden letters (6.18).

The first time I visited this shrine was during Thai New Year, April 14, 1998. At that time the shrine had recently been repainted, and the atmosphere was vibrant. Because it was Thai New Year, there was a continual procession of people paying their respects to Mae Thoranee, laying their offerings of candles, incense, and wreaths of yellow marigolds in front of the main image and at the subsidiary shrines on the site. Many people bought their offerings from a stall run by the shrine’s caretaker. This woman told me that the shrine was established in 1980 by the governor of Khon Kaen. She told me that because of the power of Mae Thoranee, communists had been driven out of the Northeast, and Buddhism had prevailed in the province.

On December 15, 2002 I visited the shrine again. The shrine seemed run-down, and the atmosphere was depressing with only a few devotees in evidence. Thoranee's red and gold paint had become shabby, the grounds were unkempt, the water in the fountain's basin was stagnant, and the shrines to the *phi* had disappeared. I spoke with three women who came to worship at the shrine. The first woman told me she was a second-hand dealer from out of town. She had heard that Mae Thoranee can give good luck, and had dropped by to see the shrine and ask Thoranee for help with her business. Next, I asked an elderly woman and her middle-aged daughter why they had come to the shrine. The daughter told me she and her mother had come from the neighbouring province of Korat to sponsor a traditional dance ceremony in front of the City Pillar for her mother's health. While the primary focus of their visit was the City Pillar, they decided to also pay their respects to Mae Thoranee and ask for her blessings.

The run-down state of the grounds and the fact that the few devotees worshipping at the shrine were from out of town suggested that all was not well with Mae Thoranee's cult in Khon Kaen City. Further research revealed that for several years, the medium in charge of the shrine, Manop, had been embroiled in a legal battle with the municipality of Khon Kaen. I was fortunate to be able to hear both sides of the controversy from the medium Manop, and from an informant familiar with the city's court case. In addition to explaining the city's side of the controversy, this informant kindly interviewed the original donor of the shrine, the previous mayor of Khon Kaen province, on my behalf.

The caretaker at the shrine had given me the address of the medium Manop, and I went to his home in a quiet neighbourhood on the outskirts of Khon Kaen City. Signs on the exterior of his house (6.19) advertised Manop's name, telephone number and profession ("Medium to Phra Mae Thoranee"). Manop is middle-aged, and has a young wife (the caretaker I saw working at the

shrine in 1998) and a child. He told me that before he became a medium, his name was Naran Ning and he worked as a reporter. He has been the official medium for Mae Thoranee for over twenty years; this is his full-time activity. One large room in his house is set up a shrine where he receives clients; because of his reputation as a successful medium, Manop also travels to assist clients outside of Khon Kaen. Manop asked me to take a photograph of him in front of the shrine (6.20), a hodge-podge of images and statues of various deities including (but not exclusively) Thoranee, and ritual paraphernalia (conches, drums, bells, tridents, etc.).

When I asked about the history of the Thoranee shrine, Manop recalled that in the late 1970s there was political instability in Northeastern Thailand. Students from the failed uprising of 1976 had “gone to the jungle” on the eastern borders of Thailand, and at least two villages in Khon Kaen, Sri Boon Reung and Krah Nuan, had gone *sii chompu* (“pink in color,” i.e. communist.) The Khmer Rouge had been pushed out of central Cambodia into the jungles on the borders of eastern Thailand (not far from Khon Kaen City) by invading Vietnamese soldiers. Thousands of Khmer refugees had poured into Thailand to escape the conflict, and Thai soldiers were deployed along the border to maintain security. The then-governor of Khon Kaen, Chamnan Pocchana, had the difficult task of keeping the communist insurgents under government control and restoring political stability to the province. The governor’s wife went to see the medium Manop, and asked him for help to make Khon Kaen peaceful again. Manop suggested that she ask the governor to build a shrine to Thoranee in the middle of the city so she could drive away the communists and bring peace to the province. Fundraising for the project began, and a well-known local artist was commissioned to design the statue. The statue of Thoranee was constructed out of cast cement in a site at the back of the City Hall. On September 4, 2524 BE, the completed statue was inaugurated at the City Hall and then transported by truck to the site of the shrine. The official installation of the statue took place on September 5, 2524. Soon after the



statue was installed, the communists disappeared from the region without any fighting.

The governor's wife invited Manop to come to take care of the shrine as a full-time job, but at first he refused. After several requests he agreed to take the job, and has been the official medium for Thoranee since 1981. He has a legal contract with the city that gives him the right to rent the site of the shrine. He paid 10,000 *baht* for the contract, and pays a monthly rent of 1,500 *baht* for the shrine, and an annual payment of 1,700 *baht* for insurance. Manop complained that now the city wants to break the contract with him and move the shrine to a new site; he has had to go to court to enforce his contract with the city.

When I asked my informant to explain Manop's legal battle with Khon Kaen City, he told me that when Khon Kaen was first established, the City Pillar was located near a hill with a natural spring. The Thoranee shrine is located at the base of this hill, and the source of the water that flows from her hair is the water from this spring. This site is located at the intersection of the old main road (Khlung Road) and two other main roads, the Nam and the Lang and used to be at the centre of Khon Kaen City (and by extension, the centre of the province). A few years ago, a new highway called Mittaphap Road was built through the city, creating a new city centre. Ever since the new highway was built and the City Pillar displaced from its position as the centre of the city, the spring water that once flowed from Thoranee's hair has dried up. Also, many people believe that the reason why the water from the spring that used to feed Thoranee's hair has dried up is because the earth deity has been offended by Manop's personal behaviour, and has abandoned the site. They accuse the medium of breaking the precepts by misusing the money donated at the shrine and having sexual relations with young women. To resolve these problems, the mayor of the city has proposed a plan to move the City Pillar to a new site at the new centre of the city. At the same time, the shrine to Thoranee will be moved so it is once again adjacent to the City Pillar. The plans for the new

shrines have been drawn up, but there is some popular opposition to the move, and the lawsuit involving Manop has not yet been resolved.

My informant telephoned Chamnan Pocchana, the governor of Khon Kaen province between 1979-1983, and now retired in Bangkok to ask some questions for me about the history of the shrine.<sup>47</sup> The former governor confirmed that the shrine was built September 5, 1980 on the site of a natural spring at the foot of the hill. The cost of the statue and shrine was 150,000 *baht*. There was no government money available for the construction of the shrine, and the funds came from private donations. The Thoranee statue-fountain was one of two monuments that he sponsored while governor of Khon Kaen; the second was a statue of General Sarit Thanarat, “the father of the people during disturbed times,” that was erected at the bus station. The designer of the statues was a well-known artist known as Mahā Surakhom.

The former governor stated that there was no connection between the Khon Kaen Thoranee statue fountain and the Thai Democratic Party or its logo. When asked why he chose to build a shrine devoted to Mae Thoranee in the city centre, Chamnan made no mention of “driving out communists.” Instead he explained that he was following the example of the Mae Thoranee fountain in Bangkok by creating a peaceful landscape in the middle of Khon Kaen, providing water to the people, and alleviating heat.

Chamnan is aware of the legal battle between the medium Manop and the city, and is unhappy about the recent changes that have taken place at the shrine. Originally he described the statue as “clean,” and recalled that lotuses used to grow in the basin of water collected from her hair. But now the water is stagnant, the statue has been painted with red and gold paint, devotees apply lipstick and makeup to the image’s face,<sup>48</sup> and the whole shrine looks cheap.

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<sup>47</sup> The informant wishes to remain anonymous.

<sup>48</sup> In Cambodia and Thailand, images that are the object of mediumnic cults are often “made up” regularly with cosmetics, sprayed with perfume and draped with clothing by devotees.

He hoped that the legal problems concerning the shrine can be resolved quickly, and the medium removed.

Although the former governor did not mention Communists as his reason for establishing the shrine in Khon Kaen, it is clear that during the 1970s and 1980s many people attributed the disappearance of communism in the region to the power of Thoranee. Today, however, Thoranee's devotees come to ask for help with their business, or to bring them good fortune. Over the past decade, the threat of communism has receded to be replaced by a new threat: the colonisation of the Thai economy by foreign investors and the IMF. On July 2, 1997, Thailand experienced the total collapse of its economy and on August 20, 1997 Thailand accepted a "rescue package" of US \$17.2 billion from the IMF. This loan stemmed the free-fall of the Thai *baht* and restored financial stability to the country, but also committed Thailand to harsh economic reforms imposed by the IMF. On November 15, 1997 the Thai Democratic Party headed by Chuan Leekpai, was elected to bring the country out of the financial crisis.<sup>49</sup> During Chuan Leekpai's term of office (1997-2001) the symbol of Nang Thoranee was again thrust into the public consciousness. The Thai Democrat Party Headquarters located on 67 Set Siri Road, near the Railway Station in Bangkok, was renovated and a new shrine to Thoranee was built (6.21). The party's home page on its web site ([www.democrat.or.th](http://www.democrat.or.th)) is illustrated with pulsating blue graphic representation of Thoranee. Figure 6.22 is of a cap worn by Party members during the election campaign; the front of the cap has a badge of the earth deity wringing out her hair and the side has the signature of Chuan Leekpai.

Despite the Democratic Party's reputation for honesty and financial prudence, the government quickly became unpopular as the stringent economy measures imposed by the IMF caused unemployment to rise and wages to fall. There was much social distress as people lost their homes and livelihoods, businesses failed and Thai banks were sold to foreign financial institutions.

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<sup>49</sup> Sharma (2002:1-35).

The press was full of criticisms of Chuan Leekpai and his party for failing to protect Thailand from foreign investors, and for allowing the IMF free reign in the Thai economy. Figure 6.23 appeared on the cover of the current affairs periodical *Madichon*.<sup>50</sup> Like all political cartoons, there are many subtexts. <sup>51</sup> Relevant for this paragraph is the suggestion that Chuan Leekpai, depicted here dressed up like Thoranee, has prostituted himself and Thailand to the IMF. Other articles in the press complained that the government was betraying both Thoranee and the motto of the party: *saccam eva amatavaca*:

Unfortunately this party doesn't seem to react or even keep their motto. They have her only for the badge on people's shirt or jacket- so where is the meaning?

And

Every single inch of the land belongs to Phra Mae Thoranee, the one who this party respects. So Chuan Leekpai, don't keep quitting, don't just sit and watch. Whether Phra Mae Thoranee assists or not depends on your decisions, Chuan Leekpai, Phra Mae Thoranee must be encouraged to rescue the nation.<sup>52</sup>

Widespread dissatisfaction with the Thai Democrat Party culminating with the rejection of Chuan Leekpai's coalition government in the January 2001 election. However, there seems to have been no rejection of Thoranee herself. On the contrary, her cult seems to have been enhanced by Thailand's economic woes. A series of articles in the newspaper *Siam Rath* reported that although Thailand was bankrupt and foreign countries were trying to take over her economy, there is gold in the ground in Lopburi. This gold is usually hidden, can only be used in times of great need, and can only to be used for the whole nation, not for individual wealth. These newspaper articles expressed hopes that soon Thoranee would open up the gold mine, pay the country's debts, and make Thailand rich again so the country will not be a slave to foreigners.

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<sup>50</sup> *Madichon* (2542: front cover).

<sup>51</sup> Thanks to L. Gabaude for helping me interpret this cartoon.

<sup>52</sup> *Madichon*, September 27, 2542, translation, K. Aphaiyong.

During the height of Thailand's financial crisis, a Thai-Chinese millionaire named Sia Chaleurn<sup>53</sup> established a company named The Thoranee Asset Mining Company to search for Thoranee's gold mine in Lopburi, located on land owned by the military. Sia Chaleurn had heard about the gold mine when Thoranee spoke to him through a medium named Ratana Maruphikat. The medium Ratana, who began being possessed by Thoranee when the economic crisis began, wrote a popular book called *A Message from the Spoiled Earth* (6.24). In this book she explained that she had been asked to broadcast the news to the Thai nation that

Phra Mae Thoranee will come back to get rid of bad people and clean and renew the country and to invite Phra Sri Ariya to become the 5th Buddha. Now the world will be a happy and peaceful and plentiful place with good relationships, kindness, human rights, harmony and equality.<sup>54</sup>

The association between mediumnic activity and the cult of the earth deity is not unique to Thailand. Bertrand has written about a Cambodian medium with a special relationship with the earth deity. This medium, identified by Bertrand as "Mrs. T" lives in a small flat near one of the main markets in Phnom Penh with her husband and two children. Her career as a medium began at the end of the Pol Pot Period when she became very ill with high fevers, dreams and visions that were due to visitation by *pāramī*. In her flat, Mrs T receives students and patients in front of an altar to the Buddha, flanked by a large golden statue of the earth deity (6.25). Her primary *pāramī* relationship is with *nān gañhīn*, who never possesses her, but communicates with her, and protects her from evil spirits. She is possessed by several other *pāramī* and uses her mediumnic powers to help sick people (I saw her go into a trance and treat a woman with an abscessed tooth and badly swollen jaw).

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<sup>53</sup> Sia Chaloeurn's main business is a sausage manufacturing company based in Khon Kaen that exports food all over Asia.

<sup>54</sup> Marutphitakasa (BE 2542:cover)

She also teaches individuals recently possessed by *pāramī* how to "open the way" for possession by dancing, movement, and speech.

Bertrand, who has studied the recent proliferation of *pāramī* cults in Cambodia, writes that it is difficult to say to what extent these cults are a new phenomenon as quantitative data for the pre-war period is lacking.<sup>55</sup> However the distress and social disruption caused by civil war and revolution on Cambodia has been well-documented, and Bertrand argues is responsible for the large increase in numbers of people who are regularly possessed by *pāramī* or who consult mediums. In circumstances of rapid social change, when traditional sources of wisdom are absent or have failed, the mediums and *pāramī* can provide meaning and structure for the individual's social and political life. Although Thailand has not experienced the terrible cultural destruction that Cambodia has been subjected to, rapid urbanization in combination with the social dislocation caused by the financial crisis of 1997-1998 seem to have encouraged mediumnic activities addressed to Thoranee.

In this chapter I have presented a bewildering assortment of images, political logos and mediums, images and activities that belong to the secular world, outside of the boundaries of the Buddhist wat, and described them as the contemporary cult addressed to the earth deity. I have suggested that this cult of the earth deity mutates constantly. These mutations are often the result of conscious efforts by kings and political leaders to harness the symbol of the earth deity to military campaigns and nationalistic political agendas. However, the fact that the earth deity chooses to communicate directly to her devotees using mediums and trance means that her cult remains unpredictable, and is in the final analysis, independent of political control. In the next and final chapter, I will attempt to bring the earth deity's image, text, myth and cult back together in a conclusion for this dissertation.

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<sup>55</sup> Bertrand (2004).

## 7: Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that many different stories, images and rituals about the deeds of the Buddhist earth deity at the time of the Enlightenment emerged in India during the first centuries of the Common Era in conjunction with the biography of the Buddha. These stories, images and rituals were then disseminated, along with Buddhism, throughout Asia during the first millennium of the Common Era, probably in successive waves, but most definitely from northeastern India, during the Pāla period.

The combination of the Buddhist earth deity and the hair-wringing gesture seems to be unique to mainland Southeast Asia. While it is possible that the hair-wringing Buddhist earth deity was part of the mysterious Buddhism associated with the Mon and Pyu Buddhist kingdoms on the Mainland, there is at present no hard evidence – texts or examples of securely provenanced hair-wringing iconography – to confirm this. However, the gesture of hair-wringing appears very early in Indian Buddhist iconography, associated with the *yakṣī*. Future research in the Chinese and Tibetan Canons and in the vernacular Buddhist literature of mainland Southeast Asia will doubtlessly uncover new versions of the earth deity's story; it is entirely possible that one of these texts may contain a reference to the hair-wringing gesture.

The earliest texts found in mainland Southeast Asian that refer to the Buddhist earth deity are inscriptions from 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century Bagan that summon Vasundharā, “the Great Earth,” with poured water to be a witness to oaths and donations. There are many images of hair-wringing earth deities from Arakan, Bagan and Angkor that date from the same period. In addition to iconography depicting Vasundharā as a witness to the Bodhisattva at the time of the

Enlightenment, there are also images that link the earth deity to forms of Buddhism usually glossed as Mahāyānist and Tantric. In these images, her role is aggressive: along with Hevajra, she acts to defeat the *māras*, or the obstacles to enlightenment. Other images of the earth deity from this period show that many different stories and beliefs about the Enlightenment were current in the Buddhist kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia.

Despite her association with pre-Sinhalese forms of Buddhism, Vasundharā survived Mainland Southeast Asia's transition to Theravāda Buddhism during the 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. I argue that there are several reasons for her survival when more important Buddhist deities such as Hevajra and Prajñapāramitā disappeared. First is Vasundharā's ready assimilation into ancient traditions about water and earth, the *nāgī* princess who is the mother of the nation and the *nāga*/crocodile. A second and related reason is her association with the cult of the *nāgā*-protected Buddha, something that was also incorporated into the new Theravāda Buddhism at this time. And third is the important role she plays in Buddhist consecration rituals, rituals that continued to be used during the foundation of Buddhist temples even after Sanskrit Buddhist texts and rituals were superseded by Pāli. And finally, the incorporation of the hair-wringing episode into the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, a Life of the Buddha composed in Pāli in the Lānnā kingdoms during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This text was disseminated in both Pāli and the vernaculars throughout mainland Southeast Asia and eventually became the “standard” Life of the Buddha in the region.

With a secure role in the *Paṭhamasambodhi*, the iconography of the earth deity became standardized in areas under Thai influence during the Middle Period. However, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhist reform movements led to official disapproval of the earth deity in Burma. Burmese monarchs and *sayadaws* criticized the episode as unorthodox, and her story was removed from the Burmese Canon. As a result, her iconography varied during this period. Although she was too popular with her devotees to disappear entirely, she was



often excluded from her position under the *vajrāsana*, her gender, attributes and number varied, and she was confused with Burma's local divinities.

Similar concerns for Buddhist orthodoxy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have affected the earth deity's cult and iconography in Thailand (and to a lesser extent, Cambodia). Today, in addition to her traditional location under the *vajrāsana*, the earth deity can be found independent of the Buddha: statues of Vasundharā wringing her hair dominate the centre of towns, she is tattooed on soldiers' arms, carved on amulets, and summoned by mediums in trance. Like a divinized *krodha-vighnāntaka*, she is worshipped for her ability to defeat enemies – Burmese invaders, Vietcong, even foreign investors and the IMF – and protect the nation.

One thing missing from this dissertation is a discussion of the relationship between Vasundharā and the Great Goddess. Certainly, she is closely allied with the forces of nature: the ruler of earth and water whose vehicle is the *nāga*/crocodile, a mythical ancestress who must be appeased by the king (or these days by the state) without fail. When respected and propitiated, this omnipotent deity can protect the Buddha, temples, houses, wealth, agriculture, good fortune, an individual's private body, and by extension, the national body, from attack or invasion by external forces. With a twist of her hair, Vasundharā halts the forces of chaos and dissolution, and sets the world to rights again. As Tucci wrote, in the earth deity “we are confronted by a structure, unstable because alive, and never completed, an archetypal possession of all mankind.”<sup>1</sup> However, I believe that to understand the history and cult of Vasundharā in mainland Southeast Asia it is important to always remain aware of the Buddhist connection, and to bear in mind that no matter how far she travels, her field of action is always the site of the Enlightenment.

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<sup>1</sup> Tucci (1954 : 355)

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