

A Khmer Quasi-Historical Legend: The Adventures of ព្រះគោព្រះកែវ , Continued

When we last left our two heroes (back in Chapter Three of this textbook), they were living in a magical palace in the forest. ព្រះកែវ's sweetheart, នាងពៅ , had just had her head lopped off by her father the king's guards as punishment for her indiscretion with ព្រះកែវ . Luckily for all involved, Indra (ព្រះឥន្ទ) takes pity on the princess and magically restores her head back to her neck and breathes life back into her body. After wandering in the forest for a while she is seen by ព្រះគោ , who gives her the same kind of fabulous royal clothes he gave his younger brother. Then he performs a marriage ceremony for the two.

Now, here's where the historical part of the legend comes in. It seems that the king of Siam has designs on Khmer land. So he challenges the king of Cambodia to a cockfight. If the Khmers lose, they must cede land to the Thais. The Thais put up their fiercest rooster, and the Khmers theirs, but alas, the Thai bird is victorious. Before giving up Khmer soil, the Khmer king asks for a rematch, which the Siamese king agrees to. The Khmer king then scours the kingdom for a suitable fighting cock with which to beat the Thai champion. ព្រះគោ hears of this and agrees to help. He transforms himself into a rooster and easily whups the Thai rooster. Of course, the Thai king then wants a rematch himself, but this time with elephants. Once again, ព្រះគោ uses his magic and this time changes into an elephant, and trounces the Siamese pachyderm.



All's not well that ends well, though, and the Siamese get suspicious. Their royal fortune teller discovers the existence of ព្រះគោព្រះកែវ—in particular ព្រះគោ, who

has within him all the mystical, scientific, artistic, military and literary knowledge that the Khmers learned from the Indians.

The Thai king then hatches a plot with his ministers and advisors to abduct ព្រះគោ for his own uses. Now you can start to see the large-scale metaphors in this tale, right? ព្រះគោ—or more accurately, the magic contained within him, which is in fact the third type of បុណ្យ្យ spoken of by the fortune teller who ព្រះគោព្រះកែវ's father consulted when his wife first related her dream to him—symbolizes all of the high knowledge that the powerful Khmer kingdom learned from Indian sources and put to use in their rise to ascendancy in the region.

The Siamese desire to usurp the Khmers as the premier *mandala* in the region is symbolized in this story by the their desire to acquire ព្រះគោ . This reflects the actual Thai desire to acquire all of the high knowledge of the Khmers, something they did with the sacking of Angkor in 1431, when they carted off most of the learned religious figures, artists, dancers, diviners, etc. to Ayutthya. After that, the Thais did in fact rise to a position of dominance in the region, rising well above the Khmers in almost every way, a state of affairs that continues to this day.

The Siamese plot to build the mechanical ox



So here's how all of this historical reality is played out in the story: the Thais decide to challenge the Khmers to an oxen fight next, knowing for sure that ព្រះគោ will be the Khmer combatant. But the Thais don't put an oxen of their own into the battle. They instead build a mechanical or robot ox, emboldened by their fortune teller's prediction that ព្រះគោ will soon meet with misfortune. Sure enough, the mechanical ox is too much for our hero, and rather than face defeat and capture by the Siamese (the match is being held on Thai soil), he yells for ព្រះកែវ and នាងពៅ to grab onto his tail, and off they go. Unfortunately, as the trio is flying over Cambodia, នាងពៅ loses her grip on ព្រះគោ 's tail, and falls to her death. Indra shows up again, this time not to bring her back to life but rather to turn her into a mountain, which is supposed to be in the province of កំពត .

ព្រះកែវ is of course distraught over the loss of his wife, but with the Thai army in hot pursuit, the two brothers must continue running—er, flying. The Thais pursue the duo all the way to the Khmer fortress of លង្វែក , which was for a time the Khmer capital (in real life). At that time, according to the legend, លង្វែក was surrounded by a thick grove of bamboo, which served as its major defense. Sol-

diers attempting to penetrate the bamboo forest, presumably, would have to move quite slowly, and would easily be picked off by Khmer soldiers guarding the actual fortress. The Siamese general got a brilliant idea, however. Instead of shooting cannonballs at the fortress, he had his men load their cannons with silver coins, and fired those into the dense bamboo cover. The Siamese army then retreated back to Siam. The residents of the city then rushed out into the forest and hastily chopped down all the bamboo in their rush to gather up the coins.

You guessed it, once the bamboo was gone, the Thai army returned, easily over-ran the fortress and captured ព្រះគោព្រះកែវី . Once again, this event echoes an actual historical occurrence, as the Thais really did overrun លង្វែក , in a significant battle in 1594. The larger significance of the *way* they manage to capture the fortress—and our two heroes—is an implicit accusation that the people of លង្វែក were not good Buddhists and only thought of and acted on their desire for impermanent riches. This lack of “right thought” and “right behavior” leads to the loss of the Khmers’ most precious resource—the knowledge contained in ព្រះគោ—which of course ultimately means their right and ability to dominate the region. This point is not lost on tellers of the oral version of the story, who invariably point out this “moral” when they get to the bamboo-cutting episode.

The story sometimes ends there, but in many tellings it continues. In some versions, including a verse version published in the 1950s, copied from palm leaf manuscripts, ព្រះគោព្រះកែវី are first held prisoner by the Siamese but soon escape and return to Cambodia. The Siamese army pursues them again, and this

time they seek refuge among a herd of water buffalo. ព្រះគោ transforms both himself and his brother into ក្របី, and of course the Thai soldiers cannot tell them apart from the real ក្របី. Time for another ingenious Thai trick, of course. The Thais use a ព្រៃត្រី, a kind of rope made out of leather—in this case, water buffalo leather—to create a magical boundary or សីមា around the herd. The ordinary water buffalo have no problem with walking under (in some versions, over) the leather rope to get away from the soldiers, but ព្រះគោ and ព្រះកែវ can't pass under or over the rope, especially ព្រះគោ. If he did, he would lose his powers. Such taboos are common for those with magical powers in Khmer belief, as mentioned in Chapter Three. For instance, គ្រូខ្មែរ, traditional ritual specialists, are not allowed to walk under ស្លឹក trees, women's clothing hanging on a line, and various other things, lest they lose all their magic (សាបសិល្ប៍).

The Siamese were thus able to capture the pair. They took them back to Siam, where they imprisoned them in a fortress with seven successive sets of walls, under constant guard. And from that time until the present day, the legend holds, ព្រះគោ ព្រះកែវ are under control of the Thais. That is what has enabled the Thais to prosper while Cambodia continues a steady decline. Various other details are told in some oral versions of the story. One postscript is that ព្រះគោ ព្រះកែវ turn themselves to stone when they realize they can't escape from the Siamese, which supposedly limits the enemies' access to at least some of ព្រះគោ's powers. Related to this, some Khmers—although admittedly, it's not a large number—believe that it's possible for a Khmer to free the two magical brothers even today, if s/he can manage to enter the place where they're being held in Thailand, and

splash some soy sauce—some say vinegar—on the brothers! It’s easy to see the place that the tale continues to play in Khmer feelings of loss and anger over their current social and political place vis-à-vis the Thais, especially in light of the way history has played out with the Thai rise in power going hand-in-hand with the Khmer fall. ព្រះគោ also continues to loom large in the Khmer imagination, as reports come in from



time to time—and they’re duly covered by the newspapers—of rural people claiming to have seen ព្រះគោ . Some people even claim to own a cow or ox who is inhabited by ព្រះគោ ’s spirit and can perform healing of the sick and other acts. See the news photos on the next page.

Now you can enjoy a few passages from the story in Khmer, followed by a list of important vocabulary. Needless to say, come to class at SEASSI prepared to discuss your own feelings and impressions regarding this myth! Note: Intermediate students should read the English version of the first part of the ព្រះគោព្រះកែវ tale in Chapter Three (beginning on page 155) and skim the Khmer story excerpts in that chapter before attempting to read the excerpts below.

Excerpt # 1: ព្រះគោប្រែកាឡាជាសត្វមាន់ហើយឈ្នួរមាន់ស្បែក
 ព្រះកែវបានយករឿងនេះទៅប្រាប់បង ពេលនោះព្រះគោសុខចិត្ត
 ប្រែកាឡាជាសត្វមាន់ដើម្បីជួយដល់នគរទាំងមូល ។ ពេលដល់
 លើកនេះមាន់ខាងស្តេចខ្មែរឈ្នួរខាងស្តេចសៀម ធ្វើឲ្យស្តេច

Top and bottom, this page:
modern incarnations of
ព្រះគោ in Cambodia



សៀមខឹងយ៉ាងខ្លាំងហើយឆ្ងល់ថា៖ « ហេតុអ្វីបានជាមាន់ស្តេច
ខ្មែរមានមាឌតូចសោះអាចសម្លាប់មាន់គកដ៏ធំរបស់យើងដូច្នោះ ?
នេះប្រហែលជាមាន់ឫទ្ធិបារមីអ្វីហើយមើលទៅ ? » ស្តេចសៀម
មិនអស់ចិត្តក៏បបួលប្រជុំជំនុំម្តង ។

Excerpt # 2: នាងពៅធ្លាក់ដល់ដីហើយបាត់បង់ជីវិត

ព្រះកែវនាំនាងពៅនេយ្យតោងកន្ទុយបងហើយព្រះគោហោះរឹង
ចេញទៅ ធ្វើឲ្យផ្អើលអស់ទាំងខ្មែរទាំងសៀមតាមមើល ហើយ
ស្តេចសៀមនឹកចង់បានព្រះគោយ៉ាងខ្លាំង ក៏នាំពលទាហានដេញ
តាមចាប់ ។ ចំណែកនាងពៅ តោងកន្ទុយព្រះគោយូរ ៗ ទៅ ក៏
ធ្លាក់ចុះមកដី ព្រះកែវឃើញដូច្នោះក៏លែងដៃចុះមកតាមនាងពៅ
។ ពេលធ្លាក់ចុះមកដល់នាង
ពៅបានផ្តាំព្រះកែវឲ្យរត់ចេញ
ទៅ ព្រោះពួកសៀមតាម
ជាប់មកពីក្រោយ ហើយនាង
ក៏ដាច់ខ្យល់ស្លាប់មួយ



នាងពៅធ្លាក់



រំពេច ។ ព្រះកែវរត់ចេញទៅ ឯព្រះគោដឹងថាបួនធ្លាក់ចុះក៏ចុះ
មកតាម ជួបនឹងព្រះកែវក៏នាំគ្នារត់គេចពីពួកសៀមជានិច្ច ។

Excerpt # 3: សៀមប្រើល្បិចឯបន្ទាយលង្វែក

ព្រះគោនាំបួនហោះគេចទៅដល់បន្ទាយលង្វែក មានព្រៃឫស្សីដុះ
យ៉ាងក្រាស់ព័ទ្ធជុំវិញ ក៏នាំគ្នាលាក់ខ្លួនពួននៅទីនោះ ។ ស្តេច
សៀមបានឲ្យហោរាទាយដឹងថាព្រះគោនៅទីនេះ ក៏លើកគ្នាមក
តាម តែចូលមិនរួចដោយមានព្រៃឫស្សីច្រើនពេក ក៏រកល្បិចយក
ប្រាក់ដួងមកច្រកក្នុងកាំភ្លើងបាញ់ចូលព្រៃឫស្សីនោះ ហើយ
ត្រឡប់ទៅវិញ ។ ពេលក្មេងឃ្វាលគោមកដល់កន្លែងនេះ រើស
បានប្រាក់ដួងនៅតាមគុម្ពឫស្សី ក៏នាំគ្នារត់ទៅប្រាប់ឪពុកម្តាយ
ធ្វើឲ្យអ្នកស្រុកនាំគ្នាមកកាប់ឆ្ការព្រៃដើម្បីយកប្រាក់នោះ ។ មិន
យូរប៉ុន្មាន ឫស្សីទាំងនោះត្រូវខ្ទេចខ្ទីរអស់ ។

Excerpt # 4: ទាហានសៀមចាប់ព្រះគោព្រះកែវបាន

សៀមបានលើកទ័ពមកម្តងទៀត ពេលនោះព្រះគោព្រះកែវប្រែ
កាឡាជាសត្វក្របី ហើយដើរចូលក្នុងហ្លួងក្របីដើម្បីបន្តពួកសៀម
។ ស្តេចសៀមបានយកព្រៃស្បែកក្របី ព័ទ្ធជាសីមាជុំវិញហ្លួង
ក្របីដើម្បីចាំមើល ។ ក្របីទាំងនោះលោតរំលងព្រៃត្រវត់បាត់អស់
នៅពេលពួកសៀមដេញវាយ តែព្រះគោនិងព្រះកែវមិនព្រម
លោតរំលងព្រៃត្រក៏ឈរនៅស្ងៀម ព្រោះខ្លាចសាបសិល្ប៍មន្តវិជ្ជា
ផ្សេងៗ ។ ពួកសៀមចាប់បានវាយដេញ ហើយយកទៅដាក់ឃុំ
នៅក្នុងស្រុកសៀមបាត់ទៅ ។

ព្រះគោព្រះកែវ , prisoners in Thailand



ព្រះគោព្រះកែវ Vocabulary

ប្រែកាឡា to magically transform

ជល់ to fight (chickens, elephants, etc.); usually refers to the entire event at which betting takes place on the fight as well

មាឌ size

មាត់គក large rooster used in cockfighting

មិនអស់ចិត្ត “he hadn’t yet given up trying”

រឹង as fast as possible; at top speed

មួយរំពេច instantly

ជានិច្ច always; continually

ល្បិច trick; ruse

ប្រាក់ដូង silver coins

ច្រក to load

គុម្ព clump of trees; bush

លើកទ័ព to raise an army

បន្លំ to disguise; counterfeit

ព្រីត្រៃស្បែក leather rope

សីមា magical or holy boundary

សាបសិល្ប៍ to lose one’s magical powers, usually because of breaking a taboo

មន្តវិជ្ជា magic knowledge or powers

ដាក់ឃុំ to put in prison