

A TALE OF ANGKOR WAT



A few days ago I became acquainted with an academic friend from Japan, in Sydney Australia. When she learned that I was from Cambodia, her eyes were shining bright with excitement. She exclaimed, “Wow, you’re a lucky person to belong to such a wonderful country! Last year I had a chance to visit Angkor Wat. And after seeing the beauty of that magnificent Angkor Wat, I lost all desires to marvel at any other monuments in the world!”

That friend’s comment was not the first one that I have heard from a foreign visitor to Angkor Wat. As for some of my Cambodian friends, they confessed to me of having similar first time experiences: that upon sighting the tops of Angkor Wat towers even from afar, they were gripped with a kind of exhilaration and nostalgic feeling that gave them goosebumps and made them want to laugh and weep at the same time. My first experience of visiting Angkor Wat was more than 15 years ago. The bus I was in just took a left turn and I was faced with this shimmering water of a vast moat that was casting the reflections of the lavish green trees and bushes at the far side bank. As if a magician had just flicked a wand, the glorious tops of Angkor Wat towers were suddenly floating up from behind the lush green trees and the glistening moat in which some hot pink water lilies were blooming cheerfully at the centre. I knew there were five towers, but at that moment, I could only see three of them and they seemed to keep rising into the clear blue sky that was also decorated by some pieces of pure white clouds. I was so awestruck by the views in front of me that I could only mutter to myself, “Ah, this must be the scene that **Preah Ketumealea** had seen when he was touring heaven!”



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Preah Ketumealea was one of the two main characters in the Cambodian legend that talks about the history of Angkor Wat. And here the tale goes.

Long, long ago, the Kingdom of Cambodia was ruled by a king named **Vongsa Osjar** who was known to have possessed such great power and gained much respectability from his people and the neighbouring countries. However, King Vongsa Osjar had one weakness: he had not been able to produce a son to take over his throne when he died. Since the old age started creeping upon him, the king got even more worried that he would die without a proper heir, and this would bring conflicts upon the kingdom as his relatives would fight over one another to become the next king.

Once again the king had turned to the Gods for mercy. He took the queen and the court mistresses as well as his ministers to a temple to pray to heaven for a son. One afternoon, when the king's convoy was on its way from the temple back to the royal palace, a bright ring of golden light appeared in sky. The ring of golden light was falling so fast towards the earth that made the people on the ground shouted in amazement and fear, "Look, a falling light! A falling light...!"

The ring of bright golden light fast descended upon the queen who was seating on top of an elephant's back. People were covering their eyes and screaming shrilly, fearing for the worst. A few seconds passed, the king's people peered upon their queen and saw her still sitting at the same spot but with serene smile on face, and there clinging from her neck was a beautiful garland of bright shimmering golden blossoms! Everyone kept looking at the queen with their jaws dropping for a long while before they found their voices and started cheering in rejoice. Ten months later, the queen gave birth to a handsome looking son. The little prince was given a name of **Ketumealea** which meant **The Garland of Bright Light**.

In another part of the kingdom, there was another family with another extraordinary incident. It started with a poor Chinese man named Lim Seng who found no future in his hometown and decided to set out an adventure to seek fortune in Cambodia. Upon arriving in the Kingdom of Cambodia, Lim Seng borrowed some money from a Khmer rich man to start his own business. Unluckily, Lim Seng's business did not go well. Within a short time, he lost everything and became a slave to that rich man from whom he borrowed money.

Lim Seng was about 50 years old. People called him Ta Seng which meant Old man Seng. Ta Seng lived alone in a small hut near a river bank. Ta Seng was quite an industrious man. Besides working hard in the rich man's orchard to pay off his debt, Ta Seng also built a little private garden next to his hut. In the garden he grew some vegetables that he liked eating and some beautiful flowers. Ta Seng tended his garden with so much care and compassion that it turned out to be such a gorgeous little site.

On that very day that the queen of Cambodia received a bright shimmering golden garland dropped from the sky, a group of six celestial ladies became restless and bored in heaven. These ladies decided to descend upon earth to find a place where they could splash and play in the water. And they found a perfect spot — a quiet beautiful corner of the river where nearby Ta Seng's hut and garden stood! At that moment, Ta Seng was busy working in the rich man's orchard which was quite far away from his home. He had no idea that there were five celestial ladies splashing gleefully in the river just at the bottom of his hut and that there

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was a young celestial lady by the name of Tipsoda Chan trespassing into his miniature garden. Tipsoda Chan was so mesmerized by the beauty of Ta Seng's plants and flowers that she lost herself completely in that little garden. When it was time to return to heaven, Tipsoda Chan quickly plucked six flowers to take back with her as a souvenir. It was not until she reached her home in heaven when she realized that she had committed a crime — she had stolen six flowers from Ta Seng's garden because she had taken them without asking his permission. Tipsoda Chan was stripped off her heavenly privilege and was sent to earth to serve her punishment as Ta Seng's slave for six years before she could return to heaven and live as a celestial lady one again.

Tipsoda Chan was grief-stricken, but was willing to serve her time as a slave to a human. She descended upon Ta Seng's hut at dusk and begged the old man to take her as a slave. At first Ta Seng tried to shoo her away, saying that he was so poor to even keep himself alive that he could not afford to feed another mouth. But Tipsoda Chan was pleading with the old man to let her stay with him by promising that she would be working hard to feed herself and to look after him as well. Eventually, Ta Seng gave in and let Tipsoda Chan stay in that little hut with him and help him with his work.

Captured by her beauty and gratified by her good behaviour, Ta Seng fell in love with Tipsoda Chan and asked her if he could take her as his wife. Seeing that Ta Seng was a poor but a kind-hearted gentleman, Tipsoda Chan also fell in love with the old man. She agreed to be his wife. So the pair lived like a married couple in that little hut with the magnificent miniature garden on that quiet corner of the river bank. To help Ta Seng make money to pay his debt, Tipsoda Chan raised silkworms and did silk weaving. She was able to produce beautiful pieces of silk garment that she asked Ta Seng to take and sell at the village market. Tipsoda Chan's garment was highly demanded at the market because it has extraordinarily beautiful colours and patterns. Within a short time, Tipsoda Chan did not just help Ta Seng make enough money to pay all his debts and bought his freedom from slavehood but she also help him make money to buy big pieces of land and build a grand new home. Ta Seng became a rich, happy man.

Tipsoda Chan also bestowed Ta Seng with another great gift. She bore him a son. That little boy was born with a special talent. From a very early age, as soon as he learned to pull himself up into a sitting position, the little boy's favourite games were drawing pictures on the sand and building sand castles surrounded by the sand walls and moats. Seeing her son having such extraordinary talent in creative arts and building castles, Tipsoda Chan gave her son a name as **Pisnokar** which was the title for the heavenly engineers of the arts in architecture.

When Pisnokar was five years old, Tipsoda Chan had served her six years punishment as a slave to Ta Seng. With sadness, Tipsoda Chan revealed her true identity to her husband and asked his permission to take Pisnokar to live with her in heaven. Ta Seng was grief-stricken, but he did not try to object his wife's request. Tipsoda Chan's took Pisnokar with her and flew back to her home in heaven. Ta Seng was so heartbroken that he could not bear to stay in Cambodia any moment longer. He sold all his businesses and properties, took all the money and boarded a ship returning to his hometown in China.

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When they reached heaven, Tipsoda Chan took her son to pay homage to Indra, the King of Heaven, and requested his permission to let Pisonkar stay in the land of celestial beings. Indra could see that the little boy possessed great talent in creative arts and architecture, but he also knew that the boy could not stay in heaven permanently because his part of human being would not be suitable to inhabit in the sacred land of the Gods. However, Indra liked the boy enough to let him stay temporarily with his mother and allow him to learn more skills from the heavenly experts in creative arts and architecture.

Several years passed. Preah (A title to address a noble person) Ketumealea had grown to be a strong, handsome young man. One day, Indra was missing his former son, Preah Ketumealea, whom he had sent from heaven to earth as an answer to King Vongsa Osjar's constant prayers for a son. Realising that Preah Ketumealea was going to become king of Cambodia in the very near future, Indra went down to visit the palace of King Vongsa Osjar, and revealed the truth to the human king and prince. Indra offered to take Preah Ketumealea to have a short visit and a brief education in heaven as a gift before he became king of Cambodia. Preah Ketumealea accepted Indra's offer with great delight.



Preah Ketumealea was so fascinated by the beauty of the heavenly people, arts, and architecture that he was reluctant to leave the land of the Gods when it was time to return home to earth. Indra tried to cheer his ex-son up by telling him that the prince would not return to earth alone. Indra sent for the son of Tipsoda Chan, Preah Pisonkar, and ordered the young man to accompany Preah Ketumealea to return to Cambodia. Indra also reminded the two young men to make good use of what they had learned in heaven to make Cambodia a grander country.

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Soon after he returned home, Preah Ketumealea was crowned king of Cambodia. In no time, the new king ordered Preah Pisonkar to start building Angkor Wat Temple, by copying the arts and styles of a heavenly palace of which Preah Ketumealea was so fondly admired. Preah Pisonkar had done a great job in building the temple for the king, with a superb design and magnificent carvings. The building complex was so grand and perfect that there was no other temples on earth could surpass its beauty, size, and style of architecture. Preah Ketumealea was so satisfied with the wonderful work of Preah Pisonkar that he showered the half-human, half-celestial architect with abandon of praises. The king also ordered more temples and irrigation reservoirs to be built throughout the vast empire, making Cambodia a more prosperous, powerful country in which the Khmer people were enjoying good living and trading with people from around the world.



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Several years passed. One day, Preah Ketumealea asked Preah Pisonkar to take 200 kilograms of iron from his royal warehouse to create the most powerful weapons. After three months of hard work, Preah Pisonkar returned to the king with a tiny single sword whose blade was even thinner than a rice-blade. When he was told that 200 kilograms of iron was only enough to make such a tiny sword, Preah Ketumealea was so disappointed and angry. The king accused Preah Pisonkar of stealing his iron, for he could not believe how so much iron could be wasted on such a tiny single sword. Upon receiving the king's accusation and insult in front of other ministers at the royal court, Preah Pisonkar was also very upset and angry. He pulled himself up and announced that he no longer had any desire to work for the Khmer King, and that he would rather go to his father's homeland, China.

Preah Pisonkar turned and walked out of the royal court, dragging the sword face down behind him. Wherever Preah Pisonkar dragged his sword across, whether it was a wooden floor or stone floor, the sword cut through the floor as if it cut through a piece of jelly. When passing a jar full of water, Preah Pisonkar wielded his sword vertically across it. The jar was still standing and holding the water as if nothing had happened to it. It was until someone touching it that the jar suddenly fell apart, spilling water onto the ground. When passing a huge tree, Preah Pisonkar wielded his sword horizontally across its trunk just once. The tree was still standing as if nothing had happened to it. It was until someone touching it that the tree fell crashing onto the ground. The words of amazement and admiration of the most powerful sword reached the royal court in no time. The king sent his men to get Preah Pisonkar and the sword back. But no-one could find that great architect. Some people reported seeing Preah Pisonkar reaching the port where he broke the sword in two and toss it into the river before he boarded a ship heading for China. Since then no-one has seen or heard of the where about of Preah Pisonkar again.

However, the name of the grand architect has remained deep in the Khmer people's heart from the past till present. Whenever they arrange to build something, the Khmer never forget to give offerings and prayers to Preah Pisonkar - commemorating the name, spirit, and power of the grand architect, and asking for his blessing for success, happiness, and prosperity.



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Above, is a story of how the temple of Angkor Wat came into existence, which has been told in the Khmer legendary tale. However, based on the records of Khmer history and archaeology, Angkor Wat was built by the Khmer priest-architects and workers under the command of King Sorya Varman II.



Some historians believed that Sorya Varman II was a usurped king. He seized the throne and made himself king after he killed his uncle King Thoranindra Varman I. Sorya Varman II became King of the Khmer empire when he was only 14 years old. His reign was probably from 1113 to 1150 CE.

Sorya Varman II was believed to be a very powerful king. His first great achievement was to reunite the Khmer kingdom which was once divided into two parts (one part was under the ruling of King Thoranindra Varman I, while another was under the ruling of King NoRipatindra Varman) to become one empire. His second greatest achievement, that remains a glory until the present day, was the grand construction of Angkor Wat Temple.



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Angkor Wat was believed to be built as a final resting place for the great king Sorya Varman II. When he died, Sorya Varman II resumed his post-mortem name as Boroma Vishnu Loka, which meant that he had chosen God Vishnu as his deity or guardian. Angkor Wat was also built to honour God Vishnu.



Today, Angkor Wat has been regarded as a magnificent and the largest religious architecture in the world (based on the record of Guinness Book). It has also been documented as the world heritage site by UNESCO (to learn more about this information please go to: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/668>).

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Thousands of tourists from all around the world are flooding the complex of Angkor Wat everyday from dawn to dusk to marvel at the divined beauty and heavenly designs.

Perhaps, thanks to Preah Ketumealea and Preah Pisonkar we, the mortals, have a chance to cross a path to have a peek at what life could be like in the land of Gods.

