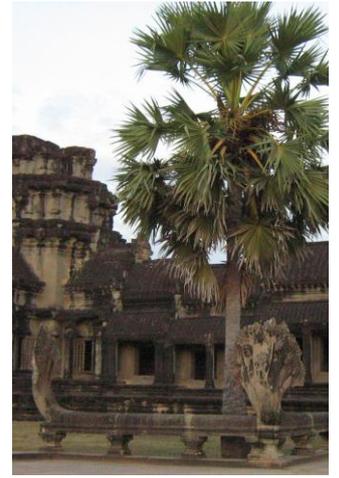


PREAH THONG - NEANG NEAK (Prince Thong and the Naga Princess)



Naga of Kompong Kdei Bridge



Naga of Angkor Wat

The images of nagas (the Khmer divine serpents) can be seen everywhere in Cambodia, ranging from the decorations or adornments of grand architectures, such as bridges and temples, to the ornaments of everyday objects, such as those used by the royal members as well as those that are used by the ordinary farmers.



Naga images as the adornments on the roof top of Buddhist temple (Wat Kompong Tralarch Leu)



Nagas adorning the seat of King Soriya Waraman II, 11th - 12th century



sickle

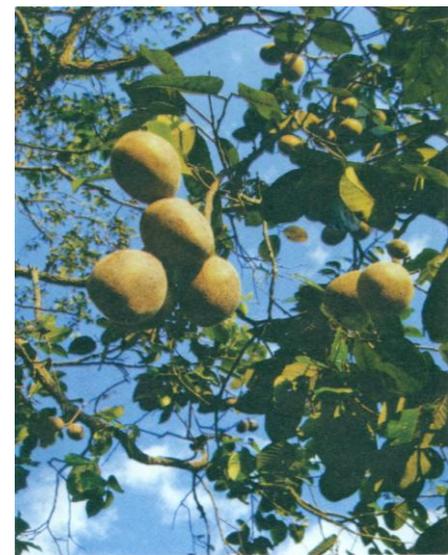
Preah Thong – Neang Neak (Prince Thong and the Naga Princess)

The presence of nagas, the mythical creatures, in the Khmer people's ways of life seems to date back to the time when the Khmer civilisation was initially formed. There is a legend telling the union of an Indian prince and a naga princess who were the earliest ancestors of the Khmer people. That legend is called **Preah Thong – Neang Neak** or **Prince Thong and the Naga Princess**. And here how the story goes.

Once upon a time, there was an Indian prince by the name of Preah Thong. One night a hermit appeared in his dream. The hermit told the prince that should he set sail to the east he would find a land that he could claim as his own and that land would later become a great and prosperous kingdom.

When he woke up, the prince started arranging a ship, equipping it with plenty of food and water supplies, and selecting soldiers and workers to join his adventure. When everything was done, the prince set sail to the east as he was informed in his dream. Several days passed. The prince's ship approached an island. Preah Thong gave an order for the ship to be moored and he got off to explore that island. The island was full of animals and vegetation necessary for supporting human settlement. But there were no other human inhabitants. Hence the prince decided to claim that island as his own and asked his people to build a settlement.

Sometime later, Preah Thong wandered around to explore the island on his own when he came upon a beautiful sandy beach. There was a sparkling river flowing gently and there was a grand Thlork (parinari) tree standing tall casting wonderful shade. Preah Thong decided to have a rest under the Thlork tree. He followed his gaze over the splendid scenery and he felt at peace and full of bliss. He decided to call his newly claimed kingdom Nokor Kauk Thlork (The Kingdom of Thlork). Before long, Preah Thong felt asleep under the Thlork shade. When he woke up, it was already late afternoon. The tide had risen and the most part of the beach was submerged under water except the area where he was sitting under the Thlork tree. Preah Thong did not dare to cross the water on his own to go back to his settlement, so he continued to sit under the tree, hoping that the next day the tide would recede and he could return to his home and his people.



Thlork (parinari) tree

Night fell. The full moon was casting brilliant beams on the water. Preah Thong was sitting quietly by himself when suddenly the surface of the water began to ripple. In no time, a group of people emerged from under the water. Preah Thong was so astonished by this strange sight. He quickly moved to hide behind the Thlork tree and continued to watch the procession of men and women accompanying a young beautiful lady, rising from the water. The procession was moving to where the Thlork tree was standing. When they reach the tree, the newcomers dropped their weapons, silverware, food and drink that they carried with them on the ground, and they rushed to roll on the sand. They were playing merrily without the knowledge that they were being watched.

Preah Thong – Neang Neak (Prince Thong and the Naga Princess)

For Preah Thong, as soon as he set eyes upon the young lady's face, he was head over heels in love with her. So he stepped out of his hiding place. With a brave face, graceful manner and eloquent words, Preah Thong approached the young lady. Though surprised, the young lady was patient and showing her politeness by allowing the prince to introduce himself as he requested. Preah Thong was also surprised to learn that the young noble lady was no body less than the daughter of Sdech Neak (the king of the naga world). The princess' name was Neang Neak. At every full-moon night, Neang Neak often came to visit the island with her maids and servants. They often took the form of human beings and had fun all night long before they went back to their under-water-world.

The prince and princess fell for each other as if they were destined by fate. The princess agreed to take Preah Thong to her under-water-kingdom to introduce him to her father. Neang Neak told the prince to hold onto the hem of her body garment. So off she went, with Preah Thong towing behind, passing through the land and water, descending onto her palace in the naga world.

After hearing the proposal from Preah Thong, Sdech Neak had no objection. He happily offered his daughter's hand to the human prince. Sdech Neak threw a big wedding celebration for his beloved daughter and Preah Thong. The wedding lasted three days and three nights. When the wedding ceremony was done, the naga king arranged a grand procession to accompany the newlywed couple to return to human land because Preah Thong could not live in the under-water-world for long. The king then used his magic power to suck up water around Kauk Thlork island. A magnificent land suddenly emerged upon which Preah Thong and Neang Neak started to build their Nokor Kauk Thlork kingdom and lived together happily ever after. It all began with the couple, Preah Thong and Neang Neak, and a long line of decedents was formed and developed for thousands of years. These people are known as the Khmer.

In the past, Khmer wedding ceremonies, which were called **Apeah Pipeah**, lasted at least three days and consisted of two parts. The first part "Apeah" started with a procession accompanying the groom to the bride's home, followed by several steps of ceremony. Then the second part "Pipeah" started with a procession accompanying the newlywed couple to the groom's home. This custom resembled the way that Preah Thong was accompanied to Neang Neak's home before the newly wedded prince and princess returned in a grand procession to Preah Thong's settlement.

In the present days, although a Khmer wedding involves only the procession of the groom and his relatives and friends to the bride's place, and the traditional ceremony concludes at the bride's place, Khmer people still call their wedding ceremony Apeah Pipeah. Also before the wedding ceremony comes to an end, the Ajar (the master of ceremony) and/or the parents often ask the groom to hold onto the tail of the bride's garment (please see the picture below). And then the bride would lead the groom into the bedchamber that has been nicely arranged for the couple's honeymoon. At this moment, the wedding band would perform the song Preah Thong Tong Sbai (Preah Thong holding onto the garment). There are two types of lyrics of this song.

Lyrics 1:

*Oh my dear Preah Thong please put out your right hand and hold onto me firmly
While I'm getting ready
I'm standing in the front and you're standing behind
While I'm getting ready
And please don't you worry.*

*I'm going to lead you,
Passing through water and land
Please don't you worry, my husband
We've arrived at my home.
I've nicely arranged our bedchamber,
Adorning it with blooming flowers.*

Lyrics 2:

*Oh my dear Preah Thong please hold onto the
hem of my garment
Please follow me as we're entering our bed-
chamber
See, I've got everything arranged nicely
The mat, the pillow, the betels, the cigarettes,
I've got everything ready
To welcome you, my love.*

*See, I've arranged our bedchamber so nicely
I've got everything ready
The silverware is brimming with food and fresh fruit
Please don't you worry, my love
Please open your mouth and take this fruit from my hand.*

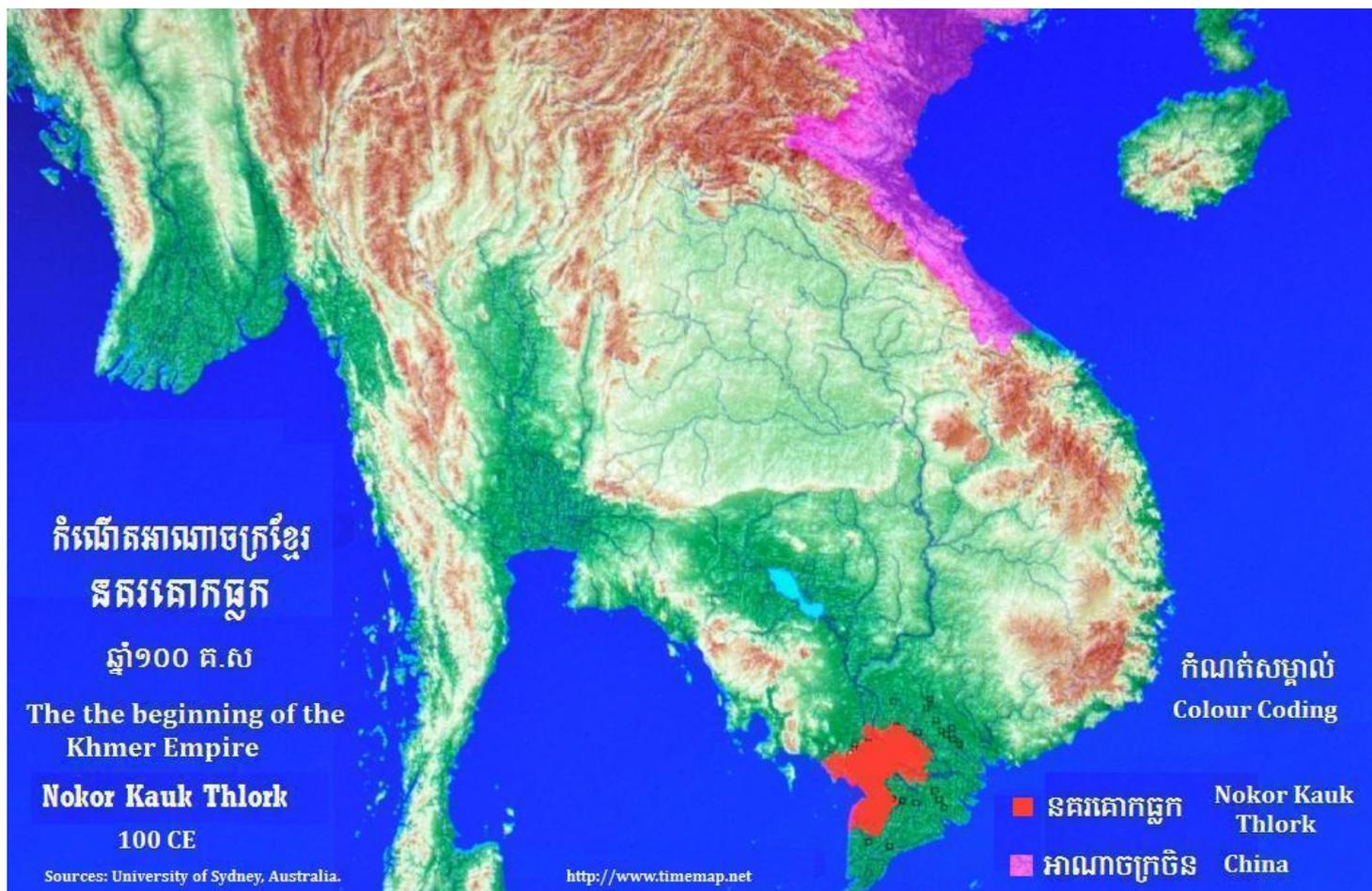
*The night is extending
The dew is falling
The cold wind is blowing
Your hands are cuddling me.*



The groom (Preah Thong) holds onto the garment of the bride (Neang Neak)

The Khmer people believe that Kauk Thlork was the first kingdom of Cambodia. Now Kauk Thlork is just the name of a district in Takeo province.

The above legend shares a similarity with the historical tale of the beginning of the Khmer Empire. This historical tale is known as **King Kaodinya and Queen Soma** or **King Hun-tean and Queen Liu-Yee** (the names called by the Chinese historical recorders of Khmer history). And here the historical tale goes.



The map showing the cape of Jroy Sovanna Phoum and the early Kauk Thlork kingdom

Around the 1st century CE, there was an exiled prince of the South India kingdom. That prince was known as Preah Kaodinya because he was a great warrior who had a superb skill in archery. However, the Chinese record of the Khmer history gave him a different name, Hun-tean. Prince Kaodinya gathered his men to board a ship and left his country, Inthapatbori, by sailing to the east. Some time passed, the prince's ship arrived at a cape (which has been called by the Khmer as Jroy Sovanna Phoum or the Cape of the golden land; and known to the rest of the world as the cape of Indo-China). Seeing the beautiful landscape of the cape and a huge river (the Mekong) connecting to the sea, Prince Kaodinya ordered his crew to steer the ship up the river to explore the inner land. And soon enough the ship was approaching an island in the middle of the river. At that time, the island was called Koh Kauk Thlork and it was being occupied by a group of tribal people whose leader was a woman known as Soma. However, the Chinese record of the Khmer history gave her a different name, Liu-Yee.

Upon receiving the news that there was a ship of strangers approaching her territory, Soma quickly organised her troop and set out on boats with the intention to fight against the intrusion of the strangers to protect her island.

The fighting between the locals and the newcomers broke out on the water and continued for a while until Preah Kaodinya shot out his arrow and it hit and broke the boat of Soma. The tribal leader was so terrified by this incident that she fled back to her settlement.



Soma, the leader of Koh Kauk Thlork tribe

Preah Kaodinya and his troop quickly chased after the retreating opponents. The newcomers captured Soma and seized control of her island. Prince Kaodinya fell in love with the island as well as the island's leader. So he negotiated a truce. The deal was settled. Preah Kaodinya became the king with Soma as his queen, together they ruled the kingdom of Nokor Kauk Thlork. Their territory expanded over the rest of the cape of Jroy Sovanna Phoum.

Although Preah Kaodinya brought along the Indian customs and belief, and cultivated them over the people of Nokor Kauk Thlork, the residents of this kingdom still liked to follow the old custom of regarding women or mothers as the important figures in the family as well as the whole society. The word for woman or mother is **Maeh** in the local language. Perhaps, due to that practice of respecting Maeh, the people of Kauk Thlork kingdom were known as the **Ka-Maeh**. Through the thousand years of language evolution, the word Ka-Maeh must have been evolved and changed to **Khmer**.



Preah Thong – Neang Neak (Prince Thong and the Naga Princess)

It is true that the Khmer ways of life are influenced by the culture, languages, beliefs, and arts from India. However, the Khmer cleverly adopted Indian culture and synthesized it with their existing one to create a unique culture of their own. Khmer culture has a quality which is as noble and superb as of any civilized nation in the world.



The four photos above were taken from the walls of Angkor Wat temple, reflecting the artwork and civilization of the Khmer in the 11th - 12th century.