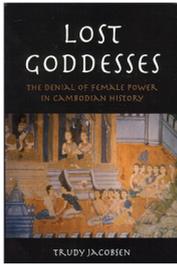


Cambodia



Trudy Jacobsen. *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History*

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Bibliography, glossary, index. ISBN-13: 978-87-7694-001-0.

TRUDY Jacobsen is a new scholar who has not hesitated to take on an enormous and complex subject. The virtue of her book is that it breaks new ground in the study of Cambodian women from the third century CE to the early years of the twenty-first century. This is also its limitation. It is a vast undertaking involving several disciplines and, as her title intimates, she has taken on the tricky problem of the relation of divine females to human ones.

I was intrigued by the recurring soft-focused statue of a female at the beginning of each chapter, who is later identified as Preah (holy) Neang (young woman) Dharani (earth). A key argument that Jacobsen makes is the connection of royal women to the earth and thus to particular political entities. She carefully digs through the geographical and historical records of the classical period in order to make the case for the important role of royal women in legitimizing, if not actually conferring, sovereignty. Their power to do so came through their royal ancestry (cognatic legitimation) and their connection to the land (58–59). The recurring image of Preah Nang Dharani would seem to be a reminder to the reader of the identification of royal women and the earth goddess; however, this goddess can only be traced back to the twelfth century (79) and therefore is not relevant to the earlier chapters.

In Chapters 2 and 3 she begins to unpack the meaning of goddesses in early Cambodia and to argue for their relationship to royal women. These are not the best chapters in the book as she cherry-picks images to make her point. Briefly, in Chapter 2 she argues that images of Hindu and Buddhist goddesses standing alone equal the social acceptance of powerful supernatural women, which she further equates with the autonomy of certain Cambodian queens beginning in the sixth century. Yet her autonomous queens are glossed over by the detailed descriptions given to the powerful male rulers they were connected to through marriage and/or parenthood. In Chapter 3 she tells us that starting in the ninth century, goddesses began to be depicted with their male counterparts and therefore had lost autonomy. Instead, they came to represent the ideal woman as a virtuous and obedient wife. A more convincing case, to my mind, could have been established by inserting a simple phrase in Chapter 2, such as “free-standing goddesses will disappear in a few centuries,” in order to explain why these statues are meaningful in this period and by providing a deeper context for the iconography. For example, what about their male counterparts? They are standing alone too, so how can this

be significant only for goddesses? What is the ratio of goddess to god statues in this period?

Chapter 4 chronicles the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries when Theravada Buddhism became dominant in Cambodian life and the *cbpabs*, collections of normative poems for human conduct usually written by monks (83), came to the fore. She argues that these were key texts used in the schools run by monks and later in state education as well (75). Jacobsen will rely heavily upon the *cbpabs* written in the nineteenth century as tools to constrain and domesticate Cambodian women. Her judgment, however, that Buddhism in Cambodia promoted gender equality is not well founded. The flaw in her use of literature is the same as the flaw in her use of iconography: she chooses this or that phrase without contextualizing the texts. Additionally, the fact that both women and men could earn merit has always been the case in Buddhism—it does not mean that Cambodian Buddhism gave women more equality. Everything she describes about gender in Cambodian Buddhism is true of all forms of Buddhism, so no special case can be made for Cambodian Buddhism spreading gender equality. Further, her argument for equality in Buddhist texts is sketchy at best. At the same time she avoids the much larger question of whether, and if so how, this so-called textual equality actually translated from the spiritual realm to the social world. How does her notion of spiritual equality tally with the absence of ordained nuns in Cambodia, as elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia? With the belief that women cannot achieve enlightenment?

Chapters 5 through 10 are much stronger. Jacobsen is clear-sighted on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which have better documentation than the earlier periods. She hits her stride by making a well-documented argument for “traditional” Cambodian culture having been formulated in the nineteenth century. She informs us that King Ang Duong (r. 1848–1859), and the kings who followed him, created laws that curtailed the earlier role of royal women in relation to sovereignty as well as privileged male interests. He also wrote stories that portrayed women as unfaithful temptresses (119) and favored a more conservative form of Buddhism. His misogyny was echoed in the court chronicles of the period that villainized several royal women and implicated women “as causal agents for events that led to upheaval and disharmony in the kingdom” (123). Additionally, a new *cbpab* was composed, the *cbpab srei*, or the *cbpab* for women. It makes the reputation of the family the responsibility of the wife, who must give her husband total obedience and never complain about any mistreatment (120). Meanwhile, the *Cbpab broh*, the *cbpab* for the conduct of men, was and is barely known among Cambodians of either sex (268).

Chapter 7 is devoted to the colonial period beginning in 1863. According to Jacobsen, under colonialism the rights of women of all classes were limited in several ways. To begin with, the French did not understand the complicated roles of the palace women and continually sought to reduce their numbers. They took over the court dancers, simplifying classical Cambodian dance to suit European tastes. The French education system in Cambodia was primarily designed to prepare students for jobs in industry or domestic service (169) and to disseminate French ideals. An educated elite reacted against French colonialism by returning

to traditional values, as reflected in the *cbpabs*, especially the *Cbpab srei*, which were viewed uncritically, thus codifying the “traditional” status of women without scrutinizing the actual historical roles of Cambodian women. This is a fascinating unpacking of history that is reminiscent of so many cultures where the status of women has fluctuated time and again and where pre-colonial “cultural values” were imposed on women. These ideas held sway into the Cambodian nationalist movement. During the post-colonial period, lip service was paid to the liberation of Cambodian women to work and be educated, but the actual opportunities were scarce and women’s education still revolved around the *cbpabs*.

Women remained the custodians of “traditional” Cambodian values right through the Civil War, even though they were mobilized into military units. This was seen as a necessary but temporary step due to the unusual conditions of war. With the fall of Phnom Penh the women mobilized under the Khmer government continued to function, and women’s work expanded to factories. Women and men lived apart—even married couples, children were taken from mothers as soon as they were weaned, and sexual impropriety on the part of women meant arrest, torture, and death.

As their power became entrenched, men in leadership positions reverted to having more than one wife, while urban girls were given to rural war heroes as brides. Throughout it all, traditional views of women as nurturing and domestic continued. Women were given the job of caring for the children removed from their birth mothers, or they were nurses and cooks. Any government offices they held were associated with women’s work and women with such positions owed them to the high ranks of their husbands. Jacobsen is quick to point out here and in Chapter 6 that in the supernatural realm female spirits and goddesses were still believed to have great power, loosely suggesting that a thread of female power survived in Cambodia from that of the early free-standing goddesses. But that thread is tied to a questionable argument for the autonomy of these early goddesses.

Little changed for women with the Vietnamese invasion and after their withdrawal many people believed the reconstruction of Cambodia meant a return to traditional values for women. Despite the promises made to women in the 1993 Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, women were still held in the vice of embodying traditional Cambodian culture, especially by wearing traditional clothing. Any deviation from this idea “is considered threatening the stability of Cambodian culture” (259). Jacobsen has succinctly documented the fact that very little changes for women no matter who rules or what kind of government is established—self-definition is never on the agenda.

The underlying problem that holds women in its grip is that once a woman ceases to be a good woman (*srei krup leakkhana*) she becomes a bad woman (*srei aht leakkhana*) (264)—which can occur by rape or being sold into the sex trade as a child, or working in a bar or in another part of the entertainment industry—and she can never be redeemed. Her bad karma is often the excuse proffered when they are abused and even when good women are abused by their husbands. But isn’t the same said of men who have bad luck? Actually, it is another example of Buddhist gender equality, as is merit; no special case can be made for women that cannot

be made for men. Once again, here is a place where comparing female and male karma might have strengthened her argument. The same is true of her belief that Buddhist nuns are greatly respected and have proven to be successful, independent politicians. Jacobsen does not mention that nuns are not equal to monks in prestige nor does she discuss the absence of women's ordination. Despite whatever lip service may be paid to them, nuns are clearly not separated from the status of all other women.

Chapter 11 contains very good analyses of female sex workers and their male patrons, both domestic and foreign. The sex tours of foreigners and the participation of expats in the Cambodian sex industry demonstrate that this is not a Cambodian or Southeast Asian problem; masculinity is the problem. Jacobsen comes close to saying this, especially in her use of Pierre Bourdieu's work, and having done so would have made a strong chapter even stronger.

Chapter 12 is a summary of the preceding chapters where she attempts to put the emphasis on the positive power of women in the supernatural realm, a proposition she has hinted at here and there throughout the book. I do not doubt that this is the case, but I fail to share her belief that this is where "we should look for the empowerment of women in Cambodia" (289). From the title, *Lost Goddesses*, to the presence of the same goddess image at the opening of each chapter, I was waiting for a revelation of their meaning. I expected this chapter to be that revelation, which it is not. The author needs to mount an argument for her belief that divine women are empowering for actual, living women, which she does not, and I do not think anyone can. For example, goddesses have been and remain ubiquitous in India and their cults are dominant, which did and does very little for the social status of actual women.¹ Somewhat like Jacobsen's analysis of Cambodian goddesses in the earlier chapters, she needed more time to think through the relationship of actual women and divine women.

Trudy Jacobsen shows great promise as a scholar. This is a book that needed to be written and I am grateful for the necessarily broad palette she has presented of Cambodian woman's history. I hope in a future work she will revisit the relationship of divine females to human females, as well as the realities of Buddhist nuns' status in relation to that of Buddhist monks.

NOTE

1. A classical study of gender in relation to Hindu goddesses and social reality is Lynn Bennett's *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

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