

## Book of Abstracts

# Visualizing Ancient Histories

Symposium organized by the PURANA project  
November 14, 2024 – November 15, 2024  
Leiden University

Funded by the European Research Council

## Program

Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> November

Location: Leiden University, Herta Mohr 1.30 ([Witte Singel 27a, Leiden](#))

8:30-9:00 Coffee and Welcome

9:00-9:15 Opening Remarks

9:15-10:45 Morning Session 1: Inscribing Hindu Myth and History on the Land

- Elizabeth Cecil—Visual Ecologies of the Puranic Past
- Vera Lazzaretti—Of Goddesses and Mosques: Heritage, Repatriation and Violence in Hindu Nationalist India

10:45-11:15 Coffee Break

11:15-12:45 Morning session 2: Text and Image in Early Modern South Asia

- Lennart Bes—Pictures and Politics: South Indian Visual Materials as Reflections of Political Changes, 16th-18th Centuries
- Ayelet Kotler—Mythical and Historical Time in the Author Portraits of the Persian Puranic Translator Anandghan 'Khwush' (fl. 1790-5)

12:45-13:45 Lunch Break

13:45-15:15 Afternoon Session 1: Illustrating the Past in Manuscript and Print Cultures

- Joel Bordeaux—The Kāśī-Khaṇḍa in Early Indian Woodblock Prints
- Forough Sajadi—The Illuminated Manuscript of Jāmāsp the Sage: The Crossroads of Art, Politics, and Ancient History

15:15-15:45 Coffee Break

15:45-17:15 Afternoon Session 2: Foundational Myths and Memory in Southeast Asia

- Marijke Klokke—Appropriation and Subversion: 'The Churning of the Ocean' at the Bayon Temple (Cambodia) and Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Thailand)
- Artist Samboleap Tol's Presentation of her Exhibition—The Cosmic Tortoise: I feel like my ancestors have left me a 1000 voicenotes to decipher

18:30 Dinner for speakers at Sumatra House (Nieuwe Beestenmarkt 3a, Leiden)

## Friday 15<sup>th</sup> November

Location morning sessions: Leiden University, Huizinga 0.06 ([Doelensteeg 16, Leiden](#))

Location afternoon sessions: Leiden University, Lipsius 1.48 ([Cleveringaplaats 1, Leiden](#))

8:30-9:00 Coffee

9:00-10:30 Morning Session 1: Re-enacting and Rewriting the Past

- Verena Meyer—Memories of Defiance: Narrative, Heritage, and Resistance to Java's Islamization
- Saran Suebsantiwongse—The Swing Ceremony: Puranic Symbolism, Political Ideology and Royal Legitimacy in Thai Culture

10:30-11:00 Coffee Break

11:00-12:30 Morning Session 2: Restitution and Heritage-Making

- Roshan Mishra—From Mandirs and Monasteries to Museums
- Alicia Schrikker—Reading Weapons: The Layered History of Lewke's Cannon

12:30-13:30 Lunch Break

13:30-15:00 Afternoon Session 1: History-Making and Performance Traditions (I)

- Naresh Keerti—Aesthetic and Synaesthetic: Early Modern Experiments in South Indian Music
- Arya Adityan—Hybrid Bodies and Ritual Practices: A Study of the Visual and Ritual Worlds of Hybrid Deities in South Asian Art

15:00-15:30 Coffee Break

15:30-16:15 Afternoon Session 2: History-Making and Performance Traditions (II)

- Elena Mucciarelli—Blood, Puffed Rice, and Tender Coconut: A Premodern Malayali Recipe for a Holy Shade

16:15-16:45 Closing Discussion

17:00 Drinks for all participants at Barrera (Rapenburg 56, Leiden)

# Hybrid Bodies and Ritual Practices: A Study of the Visual and Ritual Worlds of Hybrid Deities in South Asian Art

Arya Adityan

This presentation explores the depiction of non-human and more-than-human figures in South Asian art, with a focus on hybrid forms drawn from Hindu literature. Through a comparative analysis of sculptural depictions and their ritual contexts, it highlights the Tulu ritual Bhūtakola and its hybrid deities, emphasizing the visual and performative significance of masks and accessories, such as breastplates, used in the ritual. Grounded in fieldwork in European and American museums as well as secondary ethnographic materials, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the intersection of artistic imagination and ritual practice, as well as the challenges and opportunities of displaying these complex forms in museum settings.

Arya Adityan is a Ph.D. student in the department of Religion at Florida State University. Her research focuses on the indigenous traditions of South India through the study of regional oral narratives, performances, ecologies, and material culture. She is a guest researcher in the European Research Council PURANA project.

## Pictures and Politics: South Indian Visual Materials as Reflections of Political Changes, 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries

Lennart Bes

Palace paintings, temple statues, kalamkaris (textile paintings), and other early modern South Indian images were not only works of art or religious expressions, but also reflected political developments. This presentation discusses such visual materials within the context of the political culture of the successor states of the Vijayanagara empire (c. 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries): Madurai, Tanjavur, Ikkeri, and Ramnad. This talk further relates these images to other sources on South Indian court politics, in particular reports of embassies of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to those courts. It appears that such external textual materials largely point to the same broad political changes in South India as local imagery does.

Lennart Bes is a historian and Indologist researching political culture in South India. He teaches Asian history, Dutch overseas history, and colonial sources at the Institute for History of Leiden University. He has published various books and articles about early modern South Indian kingdoms and Dutch sources on Asia. He is presently working on the courts and dynasties of Kerala.

## The Kāśī-Khaṇḍa in Early Indian Woodblock Prints

Joel Bordeaux

Ironically, the major vehicle for dissemination of visual imagery from the Kāśī-Khaṇḍa in early colonial India was not an edition or translation of the Skanda Purāṇa as such but the Annadā-maṅgal ('The Auspicious Song of the Rice-Giving Goddess'), a work of Bengali courtly literature composed in the middle of the eighteenth century by the poet Bhāratcandra Rāy. The poem employs the genre conventions of a regional species of vernacular purana called maṅgal-kāvya, but in a flashy and irreverent style so broadly entertaining that it became the most printed Bengali book of the nineteenth century. The images introduced to accompany the text focused substantially on the poem's Kāśī-Khaṇḍa-inspired content, including well-known episodes like Dakṣa's sacrifice and the wedding of Shiva and Parvati, along with the story of Annapurna making Varanasi her home, set alongside thematically related vignettes from a popular romance and putatively historical scenes depicting its royal patron's court and family lore.

Although the visual styles vary somewhat from artist to artist, they are generally consistent within each edition. They juxtapose and, through various architectural and sartorial flourishes, they effectively telescope the ancient past of puranic lore, the generic 'once upon a time' of the romance, and the more proximate late Mughal/early colonial eras as the text itself had done. To varying degrees the artists likewise follow the poets lead in their iconographic inconsistency, drifting between Bengali folk traditions and their grander pan-Indic counterparts especially with regard to Shiva. By highlighting these features, we can observe a complex interplay between the norms and ambitions of the Annadā-maṅgal as a whole and those of its puranic source material.

Joel Bordeaux is a specialist in South Asian religions with a PhD from Columbia University (2015). He has published on East Indian Śākta traditions, early modern Hindu statecraft, Nath Yogi literature from Bengal, and Tibetan Buddhism in Anglophone popular culture. He is a Guest Researcher at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, Shiv Dasani Fellow at the Oxford Center for Hindu Studies (Fall 2024), and a member of the research group Body and Embodiment in the Middle Bengali Imaginary based at Jagiellonian University (Kraków).

## Visual Ecologies of the Puranic Past

Elizabeth A. Cecil

This paper investigates the “visual ecology” of puranic narratives in early South and Southeast Asia, focusing on their role in crafting immersive, affective environments where the past becomes vividly present. Employing a spatial and sensory framework, the study delves into how visual representations of puranic stories shape and are shaped by sacred landscapes, serving as both participants in and stages for religious performance. The concept of “visual ecology” anchors the analysis, and shows that sites of puranic imagery are not inert backdrops but dynamic spaces that intertwine emotional, social, and environmental dimensions. These environments actively influence, and are influenced by, the collective memories and identities of those who engage with them. The paper highlights how puranic visual narratives generate a sensory experience that collapses temporal boundaries, bringing mythic pasts into immediate presence through lived, embodied encounters. By doing so, the study provides new insights into the role of visual culture in shaping and conveying religious memory and identity.

Elizabeth A. Cecil is the Timothy Gannon Associate Professor of Religion at Florida State University. Her scholarship explores the history of Hindu religions in South and Southeast Asia through the study of text, image, monument, and landscape. She is the primary Research Collaborator in the ERC PURANA project. Elizabeth’s publications include *Mapping the Pāśupata Landscape: Narrative, Place, and the Śaiva Imaginary in Early Medieval North India* (2020) and *Primary Sources and Asian Pasts* (2021). Her research has been supported by fellowships from the Getty Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

# Aesthetic and Synaesthetic: Early Modern Experiments in South Indian Music

Naresh Keerthi

The Song (kīrtanam, padam, prabandham) was arguably the most important genre in early modern South India. Now more than ever, the song gained salience and significance currency in the court and temple, beside enjoying currency in other social spaces. This Cambrian explosion is not only one of numbers. We see a marked increase also in variety and complexity in the lyrical and musical contents of songs. This is also the most active period for musicological literature. This ferment, not only of the song itself but of its entire habitus – the composer, the performers, the audiences – remains to be described and explained.

Songs went from being simple, free form lyrics, to a regulated, complex genre – one that invited literary complexity, linguistic innovations, and hyperlocal associations of place and person. Specialized repertoires of song served as religious and sectarian shibboleths, easier to perform, and more readily recognizable than theological arguments and tracts. The intermediality of language and melody make the song potent and polyvalent in a way few other things are. In this talk, I will attempt an alternative cultural history of early modern South India, using song as an analytical lens.

Naresh Keerthi is Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit Studies, at Ashoka University, India. His research is in the overlapping literary cultures of Sanskrit, Prakrit and the South Indian languages Kannada and Telugu. Naresh studies Sanskrit poems and plays, literary commentaries as well as literary and dramaturgical theory, with an eye for the interactions of theory and practice in these domains. He is also a musicologist and cultural historian of the performing genres (music, dance, theatre) in early modern South India.



# Appropriation and Subversion: 'The Churning of the Ocean' at the Bayon temple (Cambodia) and Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Thailand)

Marijke Klokke

The Churning of the Ocean (samudramanthana), known from the Mahābhārata's Ādiparva and several Purāṇas, was a popular theme in narrative reliefs on Khmer temples, especially between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Khmer visual tradition of this Hindu myth was highly flexible, easily transcending religious boundaries and embraced in various political contexts. After presenting the standard visual format of this mythical theme, I discuss a new authoritative visual design, in a 50-meter-long relief at Angkor Wat, the state temple of King Sūryavarman II in honour of Viṣṇu (first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century). The new design, characterized by the monumental size and division of the relief into three layers, contains innovative elements with political overtones. Half a century later, King Jayavarman VII, a Buddhist successor, adopted the same format for his principal temple, the Bayon. However, the innovations in the Angkor Wat depiction are repositioned and modified, subverting Sūryavarman II's political message and aligning the meaning of the relief with Jayavarman VII's own religious and political outlook. Finally, I show how a recent visual version of the story transforms the famous Khmer format into a Thai style and provide reasons for the Thaification of the theme and its representation at Bangkok's new Suvarnabhumi International Airport in 2006.

Dr Marijke J. Klokke (1958) is a (partly retired) senior lecturer in Art and Material Culture of South and Southeast Asia at the Leiden Institute for Area Studies (LIAS), Leiden University. She has been lecturing in this area since 1991. Her research focus is the Hindu and Buddhist art and culture of Java. Narrative art is one of her favourite topics.

# Mythical and Historical Time in the Author Portraits of the Persian Puranic Translator Anandghan 'Khwush' (fl. 1790-1795)

Ayelet Kotler

Between the years 1790-1795, the Persian-educated Brahmin Anandghan 'Khwush' translated from Sanskrit into Persian the *Kāśīkhaṇḍa*, *Gayāmāhātmya*, and *Adhyātmārāmāyaṇa*. In addition to these translations, Khwush also composed a Persian mathnawī in two volumes and produced a *dīwān*, i.e., a collection of his poetry. All these manuscripts, fifteen in total, currently held at the British Library, include a frontispiece illustration, and at least seven of them portray Khwush himself in various mythical settings. In this talk I examine the author portraits of Anandghan Khwush as paratexts and thus focus on their relationship to the texts they accompany. These portraits, I show, transport the author to mythical time and place to offer a rounder image of his persona not only as a translator but also as a Vaiṣṇava devotee. Furthermore, these author portraits present Khwush as an eyewitness to central mythical events and thus serve to establish his status as a reliable translator and enhance the authoritativeness of his vision of the past. Anandghan Khwush's author portraits, I argue, offer a distinct understanding of what moments are worthy of visual commemoration, as well as a unique sense of the relationship between past and present.

Ayelet Kotler (Ph.D. University of Chicago, 2023) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow affiliated with the ERC-funded PURANA project at Leiden University. She is a historian of Indo-Persian literary culture, focusing on the Mughal and early colonial periods in South Asia. Her research examines the emergence of Persian as a language of Hindu devotion in northern South Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and addresses questions of translation, multilingualism, narratology, and transtextuality. Her first book project explores how and why Persian language was stretched and expanded to accommodate Hindu devotionality through a comparative analysis of the numerous Persian Ramayana retellings produced in South Asia from the sixteenth century onwards.

# Of Goddesses and Mosques: Heritage, Repatriation and Violence in Hindu Nationalist India

Vera Lazzaretti

This paper takes a statuette of the Hindu goddess Annapurna and a historic and functioning Sunni mosque as prisms through which to untangle some of the (ill)logics of heritage in Hindu nationalist India. My general concern is with the ways in which religious artefacts, practices and places of worship are selected and crafted (or not) as heritage. More specifically, I investigate how global heritage emancipatory concepts and processes that are normally associated with struggles for social justice, mutate and are refashioned on the ground at the core of Hindu nationalist India. In 2021 a statuette of Annapurna travelled from a Canadian museum to India's increasingly politicised 'heritage city', Banaras (Varanasi), as a purportedly restorative and emancipatory act and a decolonial achievement for a postcolonial nation. Upon arrival the statuette was enshrined in the premises of the Kashi Vishvanath temple, meters away from the Gyanvapi mosque. The latter is a well-known longstanding target of Hindu nationalist movements seeking to 'liberate' supposedly originally Hindu places of worship from Muslims, central to escalating legal and political disputes. Drawing on longitudinal ethnographic research around the temple-mosque compound, I explore Annapurna's afterlife as a statuette-turned-deity, demonstrating that her repatriation exacerbates longstanding local disputes and highlights the violence of recent redevelopment in the neighbourhood for the construction of the controversial Kashi Vishvanath Dham and Corridor. Additionally, I track how discourses on repatriation intersect with Hindu nationalist agendas, arguing that heritage-making and its associated potentially emancipatory concepts and processes generate paradoxical outcomes: they can conceal, refract, and reconfigure epistemic, symbolic, structural, and physical violence.

Vera Lazzaretti (Ph.D. in Indian and Tibetan Studies, University of Turin, 2013) is a Senior Researcher at the Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia (CRIA) in Lisbon, where she coordinates the South Asian Studies Circle. She is currently working on her second research monograph, which builds on over a decade of research on the politics of heritage and security in Banaras (Varanasi, India). In addition to this primary line of research, Vera's work encompasses two overlapping strands: (i) Hindu spatial imagination and pilgrimage practices and (ii) inter-religious relationships and religious offence in Hindu-majoritarian India. Prior to joining CRIA, she held positions at the University of Milan, the University of Oslo, and the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University. Her research has been published in several international peer-reviewed journals, including *Ethnography*, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *Contemporary South Asia* and *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*.

# Memories of Defiance: Narrative, Heritage, and Resistance to Java's Islamization

Verena Meyer

The memory of Java's Islamization is very alive today. Stories of Java's first Islamic saints (wali) and kings are imprinted on the Javanese landscape through sites like monuments and natural features, where certain episodes of their lives are said to have taken place. Most of these accounts are told from a Muslim perspective, hence attributing positive value to Java's Islamization. At least since the intensification of Islamization in the nineteenth century, there has, however, also been a counter-memory of this history by those who have resented Java's Islamization and invoked a different past to critique contemporary erasures of pre-Islamic spiritual forms. Based on ethnographic field research around the city of Yogyakarta in Central Java, this article focuses on how individuals who do not, or not fully, share the triumphalist historical vision of Islam navigate the space that has been imprinted with this Islamic vision of Javanese history. By showing how different actors tactically and unpredictably move through and reinscribe space, it argues for a reconsideration of categories of religious identities in Indonesia, which continue to be undergirded by colonial understandings of orthodoxy and syncretism, as well as acquiescence and resistance.

Verena Meyer is an Assistant Professor of Islam in South and Southeast Asia at the Leiden Institute for Area Studies. In her work, she draws on ethnographic field research, training in contemporary critical theory, and literary studies in Javanese, Malay, and Arabic to investigate questions of Islamic identity, the role of memory and the formation of heritage, and the transmission of knowledge across time and space. Before coming to Leiden, she received her PhD at Columbia University and held a postdoc in Norway.

## From Mandirs and Monasteries to Museums

Roshan Mishra

As cultural objects transitioned from temples (Mandirs) and monasteries to museums, they experienced significant changes both physically and conceptually. These artifacts were originally part of open, communal spaces like religious institutions, playing a vital role in daily life with deep spiritual meaning and active participation in cultural practices. However, when museums began emphasizing preservation and study, these objects were often taken out of their historical contexts, leading to a sense of detachment beyond just physical relocation.

This detachment wasn't just physical but also cultural and intangible. Items that once supported community rituals and shared memories became curated pieces, valued more for their aesthetic and historical importance than their living cultural relevance. While this shift preserved artifacts for future generations, it unintentionally broke the connections between communities and their tangible heritage, disrupting ongoing cultural practices and communal identity.

Moreover, placing museums in distant urban centres created a physical and psychological gap between communities and their cultural legacies. What was once accessible and participatory in communal spaces became curated and controlled, reinforcing a hierarchical relationship where certain narratives and interpretations dominated.

This transition's impact is still felt today, raising questions about who owns and represents cultural heritage. Communities affected by the removal of their artifacts often struggle with the loss of control over their own histories and identities. Museums, while crucial for preserving cultural treasures, must handle these issues with care, acknowledging the ethical aspects of acquisition and display. "From Mandirs and Monasteries to Museums" explores not only the journey of cultural objects but also the broader implications of their displacement. It invites reflection on how preservation efforts can honour the past without diminishing the living cultural heritage that supports communities today.

Roshan Mishra is one of the founding members of the Nepal Heritage Campaign (NHRC), the first non-governmental organization registered in Nepal dedicated to retrieving Nepali cultural artifacts, antiquities, and heritage items that have been lost or stolen and taken abroad, with a focus on preserving Nepal's cultural heritage. Roshan is also the founder of the Global Nepali Museum, Nepalian Art, and a driving force behind the Mishra Museum. He serves as a visiting faculty member at Kathmandu University, contributing to research, documentation, and archiving programs. His educational background includes studies in Fine Arts in Nepal, Japan, and the UK, culminating in a Master's Degree in Digital Art. Currently, Roshan holds the position of Director at Taragaon Next/Taragaon Museum and is a visual artist based in Kathmandu.

# Blood, Puffed Rice, and Tender Coconut: a Pre-modern Malayali Recipe for a Holy Shade

Elena Mucciarelli

In the *Tiruniḷalmāla*, *The Garland of Sacred Shadow*, from the pre-modern (possibly 14<sup>th</sup>-century) era, a long procession of gods and humans reaches the *Āranmuḷa* temple in present-day central Kerala to ritually free the god *Kṛṣṇa* from the evil that is affecting him. Both his pollution and his purification seem to be based on and respond to the polymorphic concept of *niḷal*, literally “shadow, shade,” but also conveying the idea of “protection” and that of a reflection in a mirror. As the thematic framework of this poem, which belongs to the Dravidian meta-genre of the *pāṭṭu*-song, *niḷal* evokes the divine shelter offered by the god and its splendour. At the same time, the term is connected to a body of liturgical and ritual knowledge of low-caste communities performing healing rituals to this day. Focusing on exact and concrete lists of objects to be used for these rituals, which feature, among other substances, (fake) blood, this talk will explore how the performative dimension waves within the narrative dimension of the text. It will attempt to address some questions, such as: How can the medium of performance allow us to rethink the possibilities of ritual by foregrounding local, sensory, and performative epistemologies? How does the ritual body act as a means of storing and reformulating stories? How does the materiality of ritual shape authoritative stories?

Elena Mucciarelli works at the University of Groningen as Gonda Lecturer and Assistant Professor of Hinduism in the Sanskrit Tradition. In pursuing her research on the intellectual, artistic and religious history of South India she adopts a holistic approach that integrates visual, written and oral sources. This approach is reflected in a multidisciplinary methodology combining philology, anthropology, textual analysis and media studies, which has led her to investigate types of ‘multimedia’ textuality hitherto left on the margins of academia. Her recent project studies the relationship between literary and oral song cultures.

# The Illuminated Manuscript of Jāmāsp the Sage: the Crossroads of Art, Politics, and Ancient History

Forough Sajadi

This paper focuses on the illuminated manuscript of the book of Jāmāsp the Sage (Kitab-i Hakim Jamasp). The book is a Persian translation of originally a favoured Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition, compiled in the third quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The content of this book represents a syncretic history of the world. This particular narration embodies the social, cultural, and political circumstances of Iran in the Mongol era (1256-1335). Noteworthy, there is only one known illuminated copy of this book dated the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, made in Shiraz, in southern Iran, in the territory of the Inju dynasty (1325-1353). This compelling book was unbound in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and, thus, currently is preserved as detached folios in various collections. The present paper will scrutinize the paintings of this manuscript to discuss how the painters and the patron of this manuscript visualized ancient history for their contemporaries. Throughout this visualization to what extent was ancient history created, interpreted, and politicized?

Forough Sajadi is an art historian specializing in Islamic art and in particular Persian paintings. She earned her doctoral degree in Art History from the University of Warsaw in 2021. Her doctoral research focused on the link between Netherlandish art and Persian painting during 1588-1722. During 2018-2019, she worked as the Andrew Mellon Fellow at the Rijksmuseum. Since 2021, her research has focused on Persian paintings preserved in Dutch collections. In 2023, Forough conducted her research as a Scaliger Fellow in the Special Collections, Leiden University Libraries. Her latest publication is the forthcoming book entitled *The Persian Miniatures Collection of the Rijksmuseum: A Hidden Treasure Trove* (Brill: Dec. 2024).

## Reading Weapons: The Layered History of Lewke's Cannon

Alicia Schrikker

On 5 December 2023 six weapons were returned to Sri Lanka after multiple requests for restitution. The most notable of the six is a ceremonial cannon, lavishly decorated with gold and silver. The history of this cannon, often referred to as Lewke's Cannon, has been subject of myth and speculation. In 2021 I worked together with a team of researchers from Sri Lanka, the Netherlands and the UK, on the provenance questions concerning the cannon and the other objects. In this paper I will discuss how reading the cannon, literally and metaphorically, played a crucial role in our reconstruction of the history of this weapon. Material, art-historical, epigraphical and historical research provided us with new clues that not only helped us establish the cannon's provenance, but also contributed to our understanding of 18th century Kandyan politics.

Alicia Schrikker is associate professor in history at the University of Leiden. She works on different aspects of the history of colonialism, with a focus on Indonesia and Sri Lanka. In 2021 she was provenance researcher within the PPROCE project, and since 2022 she is appointed as member of the Dutch Colonial Collections Committee that advises on restitution requests. Recent publications include *Weapons of persuasion, the Global Wanderings of Six Kandyan objects* (edited with Doreen van den Boogaart) and *Being slave. Histories and Legacies of European slavery in the Indian Ocean* (edited with Nira Wickramasinghe).



# The Swing Ceremony: Puranic Symbolism, Political Ideology and Royal Legitimacy in Thai Culture

Saran Suebsantiwongse

The Swing Ceremony, the climax of the Triyampawai Festival (or Tiruvempāvai in Tamil), celebrated in the second month of the Thai calendar (December or January), was once among Thailand's most significant religious events, deeply rooted in the Puranic mythology until its cancellation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ceremony draws from various myths of Śiva and Viṣṇu narrated in the Purānas, particularly their roles in maintaining cosmic balance. Central to this is the myth of the churning of the ocean of milk (Samudra Manthana), as described in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.

The Swing Ceremony symbolizes cosmic balance and reflects the king's duty to ensure harmony within the realm. The ritual features a large wooden swing on which Brahmin priests reenact a cosmic game between Śiva and Viṣṇu, representing the cyclical and harmonious rhythm of the universe. The swing's motion mirrors the ebb and flow of creation, governed by divine forces. This ritual, now depicted in various forms of Thai material culture—from 19<sup>th</sup>-century temple paintings to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century colossal fibreglass centrepiece at Bangkok's airport—not only highlights the divine interplay between the gods but also reaffirms the Thai monarch's role as a divine representative entrusted with maintaining both cosmic and earthly stability.

The research reveals that the Swing Ceremony, though no longer performed, continues to influence Thai society by blending mythological symbolism with political ideology. It plays a crucial role in legitimizing royal authority, linking religious belief with governance, and positioning the king as the protector of cosmic balance, as prescribed in the Purānas.

Saran Suebsantiwongse holds a PhD in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Cambridge and a Postgraduate Diploma in Asian Art from SOAS. His research focuses on the material culture of South and Southeast Asia in relation to Sanskrit texts and epigraphy. He is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher in the Material and Visual Culture of Southeast Asia under the ERC's PURANA Project at Leiden University.

The Cosmic Tortoise: I feel like my ancestors have left me a 1000 voicenotes  
to decipher

## Samboleap Tol

Artist Samboleap Tol will present a sonic and visual lecture, focusing on her artistic journey and latest works, including *The Cosmic Tortoise*, on display at Leiden University during this symposium.

*The Cosmic Tortoise* features a finely carved tortoise with a hidden manuscript inside its shell. The manuscript, written by hand in Khmer, tells a heartbreaking story inspired by the Khmer Chanted Leporello, folded-paper manuscripts used in Buddhist end-of-life chants. It also references the pustaha, a similarly formatted manuscript by the Batak, and tortoise sculptures from the Churning of the Ocean of Milk.

Tol's work explores the psychological inheritance of the Khmer diaspora in the West, the broader postcolonial diasporic experience, and how ancestral stories can help reconcile disrupted pasts. She draws inspiration from Khmer veneration practices to connect with lost family members and is fascinated by the layered Khmer spiritual tradition, where Southern Chinese spiritual elements, Hindu deities, indigenous chthonic spirits, and Theravada Buddhism converge.

Recently, she has deepened her interest in ancient South and Southeast Asian intercultural relationships, such as the potential Khmer-Javanese temple-building exchange in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, as a way to challenge the Western gaze that often views Southeast Asian histories through a colonial lens.

Samboleap Tol ([samboleaptol.com](http://samboleaptol.com)) creates interactive sonic installations, drawings, and lecture performances. She studied at Central Saint Martins and the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam. In 2023, she won the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the Dolf Henkes Prize, Rotterdam's biennial art award, and was an artist-in-residence at the Cemeti Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Her artworks and performances have been showcased in institutions across London, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Yogyakarta. She is a research associate at The Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN), University of Arts London.