

Reamker Performance in Khmer Society

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In Cambodia society, there are different performance figures, they either have different roles and atmosphere. Some performances is performed to cherish the happy moment or to entertain audiences in certain circumstances, for instance, various stories in academic literature, folklores, societal facts or sometimes ancient myths. On the other hands, there have some sorts of worship performance to perform for god sake, which is not for usual entertainment. Generally, there is one and only performance which is Reamker story.

In this research articles, I will describe about worship performance in any forms that Cambodian perform to understand more about the influence of Reamker upon our perspective and strong belief of all Cambodian classes from ordinary to higher ranking people. Additionally, I also present about the way of people in Cambodia society imitates Reamker story to their personal needs. In this case, I am not going to describe on entertaining typical performances, but mainly focuses on general worship performance of Reamker story, only.

I. Reamker Belief in ancient Khmer Society

Reamker story, that Khmer people have presently known, has its originality from Indian Ramayana by author Valmiki which had brought to Cambodian since Per-Angkor period¹. The Indian Ramayana arrival in Khmer emperor had not been clearly stated on an exact period of time. However, many researchers had agreed that Ramayana at least had presented in Khmer society since 6th or 7th century of Pre-Angkor period. Mostly, they prefer the information source from the ancient inscription, temple wall carvings or statues. About changing from Ramayana to

¹ **Pou Saveros**, Selected Papers on Khmerology (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2003), 415.

Reamker, we also do not have particular document, but we only knew that Reamker had been using since 16th century².

An important inscription that our researchers always talk about is Veal Kontel inscription, K.359, which is about the imitation of myth in Ramayana as an offer to temples and daily Ramayana story recitation in religious place³. This inscription was found in Thala Borivath district of Steung Treng Province and was re-sculpting in 7th century. The using Ramayna story as an offer to God in temple obviously expresses the importance of Ramayana story in Khmer belief. According to this inscription's information, it shows us that Ramayana was arrived in ancient Khmer Society with prosperous and Khmer people highly respected as worshipping God as well.

Besides inscription, we also have more evidences, which illustrates about our belief, worshipping to Reamker in ancient time. We either found sculpture of Reamker characters at the temples as god for worship. In fact, in Phnom Da Temple of Takeo province, we discovered a standing statue of Rama character⁴, made up of muddy stone in 6th century, standing in 189cm height for worship purpose in the temple (**Figure 1**). In present day, this standing Rama statue is positioned in Phnom Penh National Museum. The discovery of Reamker character statue in temple is either considered as another important evidence to prove about our respect to Ramayana story.

² San Phalla, “**Ravana on Painting in Wat Prah Keo Morakot at Royal Palace in Phnom Penh and Grand Palace in Thailand.**” *Khmerrenaissance* 6 (December 2009 – December 2010): 62.

³ F. Bizod, “**The Reamker**” in *Asia Variation in Ramayana*, K.R. Srinivarsa Iyengar, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2005), 264-265.

⁴ SunHeng Mengchheng & Marie Caillat, “*We Visit Museum*” third Edition, (Phnom Penh, Sipar, 2011), 14.

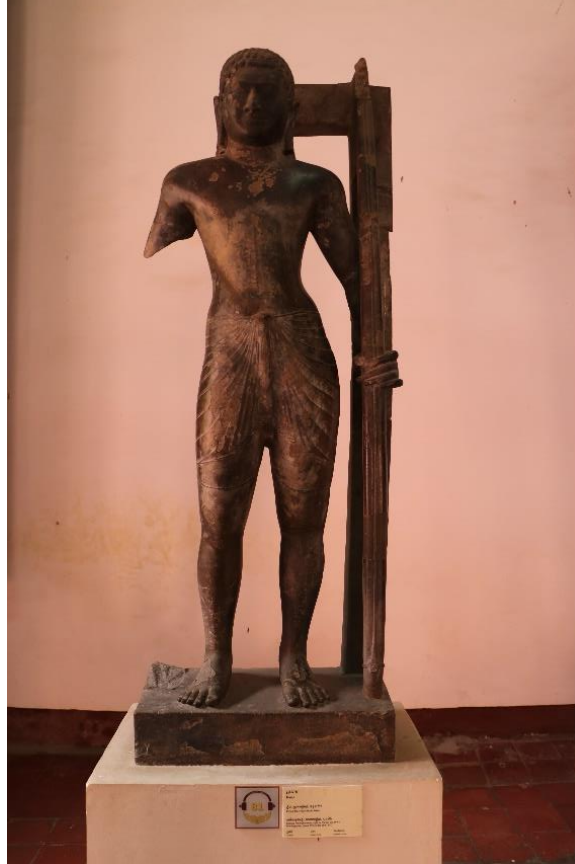


Figure 1: Statue of Rama from Phnom Da Temple, 6th Century.

Until Angkor Period, we happened to see a statue of Ramayana characters for worship purpose. For example: an evidence of the substructure of a statue (late of 12th century) in Preah Khan Temple, there is an inscription written about 3 main characters of Ramayana story: Rama, Laksmana and Sita (**Figure 2**). Based on the inscription, we could understand that these 3 main characters are glorified as Gods for worship in that era⁵, and there have no differences to Rama in Pre-Angkor that we have discovered in Takeo province.

⁵ KONG Vireak & PREAP Chanmara, **Sbek Thom** (Phnom Penh: UNESCO, 2014), 9-10.



Figure 2: The inscription that mentions the name of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita at Preah Khan Temple, late of 12th Century.

Besides temple sculptures, we also noticed that there have carvings about Ramayana on many ancient temples since Pre-Angkor to Angkor period. In fact, alongside of Sombo Preah Kuh temple wall (7th or 8th century), there is summarized parts of carvings on the wall of temple. There are more Ramayana sculptures on the wall of many temples like the sculpture of the battle between Sugriva and Valin on the pediment of Banteaysrey Temple, Ramayana storyline on Prasat Bapoun, Angkor Wat, Banteay Somrae and Bayon as well (**Figure 3**). The intricate Carving of Ramayana on the temples where is highly respected as sacred and worship place is simply illustrated that Ramayana is considered as sacred story as well.

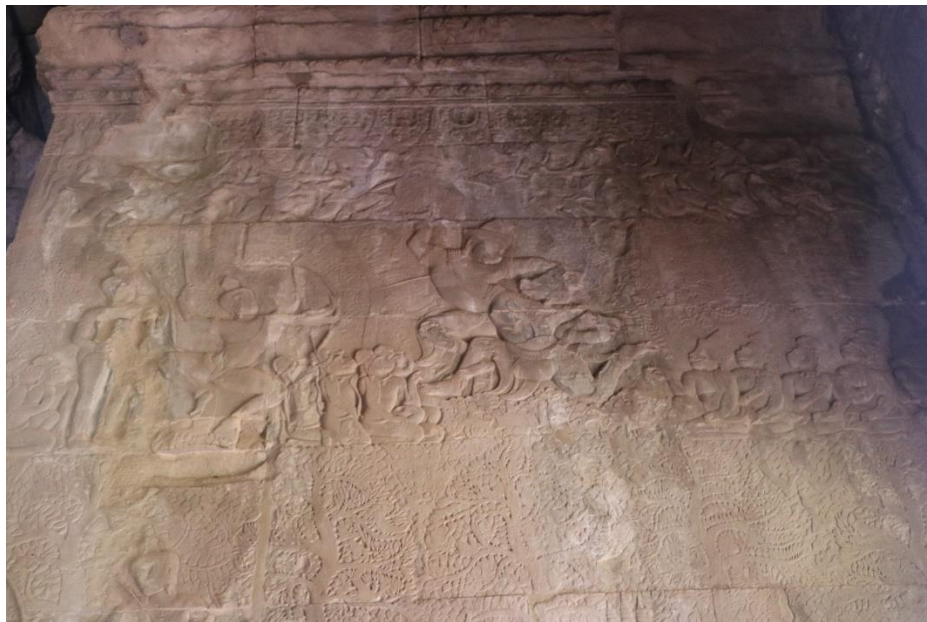


Figure 3: Ramayana carving at Angkor Wat Temple, 12 century.

As mentioning above that in 16th-17th century, Ramayana was known by Khmer people as Reamker, which is evolved from Ramayna of Valmiki, according to the study of Saveros Pov. The new version of Reamker was widespread influenced on khmer society by its presence in literature, fortune telling, story tale, painting and specially some sort of worship performances⁶.

II. Reamker In Other Performance Figure In Present Time

Reamker had a strong influence upon Khmer society involving from the King who is respected as the highest to people of all classes until comment people. Until present day, we could see many forms of performance included Reamker and specifically they are not just for normal entertaining, but for their belief. Here is the summarized of Reamker performance happening in Khmer Society:

1. The Royal ballet

The Royal ballet in other words is Royal Opera or either Classical Opera⁷ which this kind of performance was perform by all female performers. Our researchers had concluded that the origin of Royal Ballet was since Pre-Angkor period. Due to the evidence on the inscription, we could know that our Pre-Angkor period Kings had offered ballet dancers as gifts to temple guides in their reign. In fact, Lor Lai inscription K.324 shows us about Offering 3 ballet dancers to this temple⁸. That is why our researchers think that female ballet dancers in religious ceremony probably are under look after by royal palace that made their name so-called Royal Ballet⁹. These ballet dancers had evolved in Khmer society and religion which made other highly valued them, especially in period of King Jayavarman the XII¹⁰.

Until Post-Angkor period, we noticed that the Royal Palace, normally Royal Family, managed the Royal Ballet Dance and it also showcased in only special occasions and religious ceremony. In reality, on 8th January 1909, King Sisovath prepared a group of Royal Ballet Dance

⁶ SAKU Samut, **Reamker Story**, (Phnom Penh: Angkor Bookstore, 2007), 16-17.

⁷ The name have changed according the change of time. Please read more at San Phalla, “**Royal Ballet.**” *Khmerrenaissance* 6 (December 2009 – December 2010): 68-73.

⁸ Sotheara VONG, *Angkor Inscription of Cambodia*, (Phnom Penh: History Department, 2012), 36-46.

⁹ Preap Chanmara, “Royal Ballet” *Khmerrenaissance* 7 (December 2011 – December 2012): 61-62.

¹⁰ Swati Chemburkar (2015), **Dancing architecture at Angkor: ‘Halls with dancers’ in Jayavarman VII’s temples**. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 46, pp 514-536.

performing Reamker story, particularly on Monkey Battle scene in Royal Palace in an occasion when King Monivong and King Sphanovong came back from France¹¹. The Royal Ballet Dance has 4 main characters: female role, male role, giant role and monkey role, performed by all female dancers (**Figure 4 and 5**). Besides Reamker story, the Royal Ballet also can perform other performances, unless they are performing for any program related to Khmer belief.



Figure 4: The fighting between Rama and Ravana in Front of Vat Phnom, EFEO Archive.



Figure 5: Royal Ballet of Her Royal Highness Samdech Reach Botrei Preah Ream Norodom Buppha Devi, Photo by SAO Manut.

The Royal Ballet Dance requires all performers using body gestures to create communication language following a singer describing about the meaning of the dialogue. About dancer dressing, they have similarity to the King's dressing style, and the color of clothing is according to their characters. For example, Rama character is blue and the Sita is white, and Lakshmana is golden. About music background for dancing, we use Khmer Traditional music instrument called Pen Peat, which is originated from the combination of Harp Orchestra and Kong Peat Orchestra¹².

2. Mask Theater or Lakhaon Khaol

¹¹ Soirée Offerte Par S. M. Préa Bat Samdach Préa Sisowath, Fête Du Retour De France De L. L. A. A. Les Princes Monivong et Souphanuvong. Phnom Penh, Vendredi 8 Janvier 1909.

¹² KEO Narom, **Cambodian Music** (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2005), 46-47.

Mask Dance is another worship dancing performing only Reamker story. There are differences to the Royal Ballet because Mask Theater requires all male performers, even when performing female character (**Figure 6 and 7**). Moreover, all performers require wearing mask, excluded Female character whom needs to wear a heavy makeup similar to wearing mask. This performance does not require dancers singing to communicate, but there have a narrator narrating to flow of the story for performers¹³. Hence, story narration is very important for Mask Theater. Story narration reminds us about recitation or praying the scripture of Ramayana since Pre-Angkor period as I have mentioned.



Figure 6: Mask Theatre at Vat Svay Andet, photo by An Sopheaktra.



Figure 7: Mask theatre of Her Royal Highness Samdech Reach Botrei Preah Ream Norodom Buppha Devi, Photo by SAO Manut.

About the origin of Mask Dance, our Khmer specialize had concluded that it's probably had since 10th century, according to Ms. Saveros Pov had concluded based on an inscription K.99 describing about one performance calls, "Bhanni"¹⁴. Bhanni performance consists all male performers, even musical performers. The term Bhanni means the story narration, story tale or story reading, which the meaning is aligned to Mask performing. All Mask Theater performers

¹³ Pich Tum Kravel, **Khmer Mask Theater** (Phnom Penh: Toyota Foundation, n.d.), 38-39.

¹⁴ Saveros Pov, **Music and Dance in Ancient Cambodia as Evidenced by Old Khmer Epigraphy**. East and West, IaIAO, Vol. 47, 1-4, Dec. 1997: 229-248.

could perform well based on the story narration and Mask performers all are male¹⁵, hence the specialized believe that Mask Theater is a revolutionized from Bhanni performance.

Mask Theater has 2 types: 1st type is a type that created in Royal Palace managed by Royal institution and another type is sort of countryside¹⁶. However, they both perform only Reamker story. Mask Dance created in Royal Palace is only performing in special occasion for King only. On the other hands, countryside Mask Theater is performing in any certain period annually in aim of worshipping and offering to their local sacred spirits. In fact, a group of Mask Theater in Svay Andet Pagoda of Keansvay distric of Kandal province, they have annual performing and they are not professional performers. They are just local residents doing farming or selling that have ordinary training from generation to next generation¹⁷. Reamker story performance in Svay Andet is a compulsory for local people resided in that particular area, because they have a strong belief that if they miss the performance for their scared spirits, their village will face many disasters, like drought.

3. Khmer Shadow Theatre

Khmer shadow theatre is another performance which Khmer people consider as worship performance and only perform about Reamker story. In Khmer shadow theatre, we use the cow leather to form in different shapes of Reamker characters and the performance is being shown by shaking those theatre panels reflected with the light on big white screen. Because of Reamker is a long story, unusual from normal stories, hence the number of those theatre panels also has big amount (**Figure 8**). For background music of Khmer shadow theatre, it is Pin Pet with story narrators making dialogue instead of theatre panels. By reason of this performance is a worship type which we perform only during big festivity for praying or preaching or even in offering the fire for King or chief of priest in Buddhism.

¹⁵ Pich Tum Kravel, **Khmer Mask Theater**, 30.

¹⁶ PREAP Chanmara, **Lakhon Khol Vat Svay Andet** (Phnom Penh: Reyum, 2009), 1-2.

¹⁷ Narom KEO, Siphantha PROM & Buntheurn AOK, Living Heritage Mr. YIN Sarin, (Phnom Penh: N.P. 2015), 28-30.

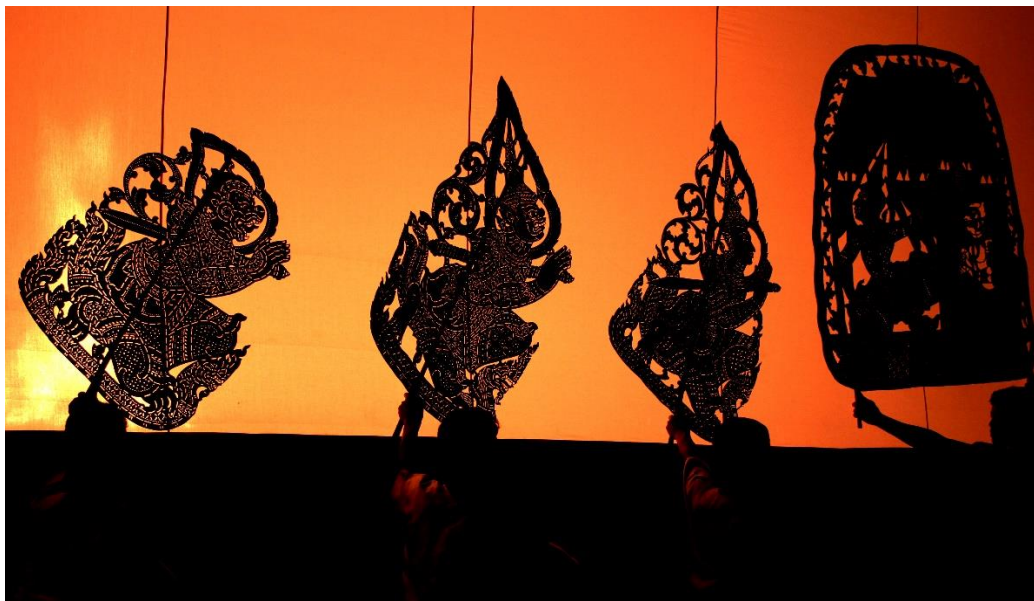


Figure 8: Shadow Theatre by Vat Bo performers, photo by CHIN P. Vion.

However, there is no particular source citing about the origin of this Khmer shadow theatre yet, but we had already known that we have Khmer shadow theatre since late of 19th century¹⁸. In spite of that, our specialist's conclusion had raised that Khmer shadow theatre has relevancy to a term of pre-angkor period inscription which is Tukta or Tukata. This term refers to present term, which is Tukatar, an object that we are able to hold or carry. This conclusion could not precisely assume that Khmer shadow theatre has origin from the term Tukatar.

Recently, there is an interesting comparative study about Reamker story in Cambodia by Vittorio Roveda. In this studies, he figured out that Khmer shadow theatre had been happening at least since 12th century¹⁹. He also had analyzed Reamker story in The Lpoek Angkor Wat, which was written in 17th century with the remaining leather panels from ancient time. He assumed that Reamker in The Lpoek Angkor Wat is possibly the Reamker for Mask Dance, Royal Ballets and Khmer shadow theatre in Angkor of 12th century. This case could prove us to understand that Khmer shadow theatre had displayed since at least 12th century.

4. Reamker Story Narration

¹⁸ KONG Vireak & PREAP Chanmara, **Sbek Thom** (Phnom Penh: UNESCO, 2014), 11.

¹⁹ Vittorio Roveda, **In the Shadow of Rama: Murals of the Ramayana in Mainland Southeast Asia** (Bangkok: River Book, 2015), 220-221.

Reamker story narration is not a typical performance that does not require so many performers as usual performances, but the narration has one narrator (**Figure 9**), and sometimes those narrators either have some movements alongside to their story narration (**Figure 10**). Reamker story narration is not just a sacred performance but it also has direct attachment to sacred performance type which we simply can describe its direct relation. In fact, the Mask Dance story narrator sometimes also can be Reamker story narrator. Reamker story narrator profoundly has connection to Reamker praying in ancient time because to produce satisfied quality in story narration, the story narrator has to memorize and pray the whole storyline to gain full attention from audience.



Figure 9: Reamker Story Narrative by Ta Krut, photo by Jacques Brunet.



Figure 10: Reamker Story Narrative by Ta Krut, photo by Jacques Brunet.

About Reamker story narration, it had been starting with written format in French Colonial period, only, by utilizing voice-recording tool from France. After using voice-recording tool, we had duplicated the words from the voice into scripts. During that period, there are two famous narrators: Grandpa Chok and Grandpa Krud, they both were well-known because they beautifully can narrate the Reamker story, besides they had good movement along with their story narration as well²⁰.

III. The Story of performing Reamker

²⁰ Pich Tum Kravel, **Khmer Mask Theater**, 24.

Reamker is a main mythical story among others and that is why we normally do not perform from the start until the end. Performers only select some scenes of Reamker as they prefer or even sometimes, they summarize the whole story for an easy understanding performance. Hence, there are two types of Reamker performance: a summarized performance and short scene performance. As following, they are the summarized performances of Reamker story, which we popularly perform:

In Reamker performance, it mostly starts when Rama, Lakshmana and Sida go into the jungle as Kaikeyi's wish. In the middle of the journey during break in the jungle, Ravana has seen the beauty of Sida and started to fall in love with her. Ravana had prepared a trick to get Sida by ordering a servant named Maricha transforming into golden deer to trick Sida. Suddenly, when Sida saw that golden deer, and she wanted it and persuaded Rama to catch it for her, and Lakshmana helps Rama. A good chance came when Rama and Lakshmana were not here, Ravana went in and got Sida to Lanka city. After knowing the Ravana's trick, Rama and Lakshmana went back to find Sida, sadly they could not find her. Rama knew that Ravana kidnapped Sida by a giant bird named Jatayu, but was hit to injury by Ravana during flying Sida to Lanka.

Rama decided to battle with Ravana in Lanka, with a very powerful white monkey known as Hanuman supporting him in battling with Ravana. Additionally, there had Sugriva troops assisting Rama in this battle. When they arrived the boundary of Lanka, Rama told Hanuman and other monkey troops to prepare the stone into bridge to go through to other sides. However, the preparation was destroyed because Sovann maccha had moved out all the stone, yet Hanuman persuaded her until the process of building the bridge is done successfully.

Eventually, Rama with his troops had crossed the ocean and reached Lanka that is the capital of Ravana Empire and the battle between Rama and Ravana had begun. In the battle of Rama and Ravana, Rama had killed Ravana with the pointy arrow and went in Lanka to get Sida back. Meanwhile, she first met Rama, she did not believe that was Rama but she thought that is maybe Ravana that transformed himself to trick her. Immediately, Rama showed her the Ring that she gave it to Rama by Hanuman and she then believed that was exactly Rama. However, Rama told her to express her honesty and integrity during her stay with Ravana by forcing her to

walk on fire. The fire did not hurt her and then Rama believed that she is honest and faithful, hence he ordered his troops to arrange a parade to get Sida back to Ayuthya²¹.

Besides the summarized version above, we also take some scenes to perform based on our preference. In reality for Mask Dance crews of Svay Andeng pagoda, annually after Khmer New Year Festival, the villagers always gather for discussion to select a scene of Reamker to perform as local traditional habit. For instance, mostly the villagers select a scene “ Kumbhakana Block the Water²²” because they have a believe that this scene will help them to have rain that is good for their irrigation system and it’s resourceful for villagers’ farm plantation. In present day, local people name this scene as traditional performance. In this scene, there is a story that Kumkhakarna, whom had battle with Rama, had stopped the water in whatever aims for Rama troops not able to water access. Rama had ordered Hanuman and Angkut to damage the Kumkhakarna’s strategy by order Hanuman to transform into a crow and Angkut into a smelly dead dog floating on the water. At that time, Kumkhakarna could smell that unpleasant smell and it caused destruction to Kumbhakarna’s ritual and the dam that he tried to build was literally damaged. In this case, it is the main reason that causes villagers believe that this scene will spiritually help them to have enough rain for daily usage.

Even Reamker is a sacred story, some scenes of this story are not selected to perform, in fact on Jatayu scene trying to stop Ravana when he brings her to Lanka Empire. At that time, Rama took the ring from Sida and throws toward Jatayu and made him died after facing Rama. In this specific scene, it illustrates us the bad luck, which Khmer people and performers considered that bad luck should not be selected to perform²³. Hence, it clearly shows that every single scene of Reamker, they do have strong influence in our belief, customs, tradition, and daily life of all classes of Khmer people.

IV. Performers’ Reamker belief

As we have explained from the beginning that Khmer people have strong belief and respect into Reamker by oftenly select Reamker to perform in any sacred or significant ceremony. Additionally, characters in Reamker are mostly valued by Khmer people as God, especially

²¹ Denise Heywood, **Cambodian Dance Celebration of Gods**, (Bangkok: River Books, 2008), 101.

²² PREAP Chanmara, **Lakhon Khol Vat Svay Andet**, 29.

²³ Pich Tum Kravel, **Khmer Mask Theater**, 100.

among performers. Every performer considers all Reamker characters as equal as their teacher and they always arrange gratitude ceremony to their teacher before they perform in real. On the other hands, at some villages, Reamker characters are considered as god or sacred objects of their local village.

Talking about Royal Ballet and Mask Dance, we always notice that pre-performance, all artists prepare gratitude ceremony (Sampeah Kru) for their teacher before they perform. During gratitude ceremony, we obviously could see the face mask of characters in Reamker story to pray, there have old guru in the middle, and on the right side there are Rama, Lakshmana, Sida's crown, Hanuman and Sukrip mask as well. On the left side, there are Ravana, Inajit, MontolKiri's crown and other giant's masks (**Figure 11 and 12**). In addition, all performing artists believe that if they do not celebrate the gratitude ceremony for the teacher before performing, their real performance won't go smoothly and their learning process won't grow either. That is the reason why all performers always put high attention to gratitude ceremony²⁴. Besides, the Khmer Shadow Theatre also selects Reamker characters for praying in pre-performance. About Reamker story narration, the narrator also has a set of worship materials for praying to teacher as gratitude before the narration because Reamker is a sacred and worship story of goddess.



Figure 11: Sampeak Kru Ceremony at Vat Svay Andet.



Figure 12: Sampeak Kru Ceremony at RUFA, Photo by Faculty of Archeology.

²⁴ Narom KEO, Music and Khmer (Phnom Penh: Toyota Foundation, 1995), 199.

If we look at public countryside performing artists, we precisely could notice that characters of Reamker story have integrated into our society. As I have illustrated above about Mask Dance form of Kean Svay Knong villagers of Svay Ondet pagoda, local residents around Svay Ondet Pagoda area look up to Reamker characters as their local goddess and they frequently pay respects and pray whenever they encounter any problems. The most respectful and popular characters of Reamker story are Ravana and Hanuman whom villagers entitled them as Lok Ta Tosakmuk (**Figure 13**) and Lok Ta Kamheng (**Figure 14**). Lok Ta Tosakmuk is ranked the highest in every festivity annually, especially in gratitude ceremony for teacher before Mask dance performance in the pagoda. They need to conduct that ceremony in front of the shelter of Lok Ta Tosakmuk before ceremony at the main stage²⁵.



Figure 13: Lok Ta Tosakmuk at Ta Skor Village, Sarikakeo Commune, Lvea Eam District, Kandal Province.



Figure 14: Lok Ta Kamheng at Vat Svay Andet.

Hence, we could view that our respect of current Khmer people towards characters in Reamker story has no difference from Khmer people in ancient time, especially for Reamker character performers.

²⁵ AN Sophaktra, “**Reamker in Religious Ceremonies in North Part of Phnom Penh**” Bachelor of Archeology, Faculty of Archeology, Royal University of Fine Art, 2016, 70-79.

V. Conclusion

Cambodian people value Reamker story as a sacred and holy story since ancient time until present time. According to the evidence since ancient period until current day, we observe that Khmer people look up to Reamker character as the goddess for respect or worship based on their belief. Furthermore, Khmer people have taken Reamker story to be performing in various type of performance and those performances are in worship types, which have connection to Cambodian's belief. Using Reamer story to perform in any spiritual ceremony, we could see that there have presence since the King status until normal citizen, and this case clearly indicates that Reamker story still has strong influence in Khmer's thoughts, belief, customs, tradition and daily life of Khmer people. In short, Reamker story performance has widely integrated into Khmer ideas from leader level to normal people, which we always implement up to now.

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