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*Anne Yvonne GUILLOU**

**THE PRESENT LIFE OF POST-ANGKORIAN
ROYAL LAND TUTELARY SPIRITS: *the case
of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ in the province of Pursat***

I first met Lok Kru Ang Choulean in 1987 at Athènes street in Paris where was then located the old and labyrinthic flat used as the office of the Laboratoire Asie du Sud-Est et Monde Austronésien.¹ Back from a trip to Cambodia, Choulean was presenting new research on *anak tā* (land guardian spirits). It was my first encounter with these main actors of the Khmer religious realm. The book he published around that time on Khmer supernatural beings² has been with me ever since and is still on my desk while I am writing this text. In the early 1990s seated behind him on his motorcycle en route to Phnom Chisor or in the antediluvian four-wheel drive of the Faculty of archaeology driven by *lok grū* Chuch Phoeun heading to Phnom Da on the potholed roads, it was still traces of *anak tā* and their mediums that we encountered most among the ruins of the sacred sites. In the mid-2000s, when I began new research on social memory in Cambodia, my field data in Pursat piqued my own interest in the *anak tā* as a mean to access the way Khmer people express their thoughts about time, the earth, their past, their leaders and many other topics. And my conversations about these main actors

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¹ This research has been funded by the French National Center for Scientific Research and supported by the Centre Asie du Sud-Est (Paris) and the Institut de Recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est Contemporaine (Bangkok). It is based on ethnographic (immersive) field research mainly in the district of Bakan in the province of Pursat and to a lesser extent in other provinces (Battambang, Kompong Thom, Oddar Meanchey, Prey Veng) from 2007 to 2018 (approximatively two months a year).

² ANG, Chouléan, *Les êtres surnaturels dans la religion populaire khmère*, Paris, CEDORECK, 1986, 349 p.

of the Khmer religious system resumed with Choulean, at this time in his wooden house of Prek Eng in a far more peaceful national context.

It is then natural that my contribution to this homage to Choulean takes the form of an analysis of a major though complex and flexible figure among the *anak tã* Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ in the province of Pursat. Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ is taken as the personal name of a specific spirit whose shrine is located seven kilometers northwest of the town of Pursat. Other *ghlāmñ mīoeñ* (meaning “centers of the *sruk*” —spirits with specific characteristics) are honored, principally in Udong and Kampot, as I will discuss below. There is a second reason why I choose to speak about Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ. This particular character illustrates well a main *credo* of Choulean’s long-lasting intellectual life: the present Khmer culture is connected to its distant past and ethnography must work hand in hand with archaeology and historiography. Indeed all the details of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s present social life —reinterpreted and enacted again and again by generations of villagers, ritual servants (*smññ*), provincial officials and other actors— are related to the 16th-century gesture of King Ang Chan, crowned in 1505 C.E. This sovereign is one of the most important post-Angkorian kings who reigned during a period of turmoil and war against the Ayutthaya kings. His travels from Angkor to the south of the Tonle Sap Lake *via* the present province of Pursat has left many archaeological and ethnographic traces that are still to be studied.

This chapter has two aims. The first one is to explore the process by which an historical event (like the battles between the Siamese and the Khmer armies as a result of the fall of Angkor and the deep reorganization of the Khmer kingdom that followed) can be remembered over a span of several centuries. The plasticity and complexity of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s legend and identity are instrumental in maintaining a long-term collective memory of this period of great suffering. This has been made possible, I suggest, thanks to a process of transformation of the Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ story. Indeed, the 16th-century events can be analytically reduced to a short core story (its “bone” so to speak) to which generations of intellectuals, scribes as well as local villagers added “flesh”. The narratives of the 16th-century events at various times and by various actors provide researchers with tens of different versions of the story. From all of them, one can extract a core version. It functions as a “mytheme” in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ terms; the mythemes being the elementary “pieces” of a myth that articulate together and give the structure of a myth that Lévi-Strauss considered deeply present in every given *weltanschauung*.

The second aim of this chapter is to further explore and systematize analysis of the specificity of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ and some of his peers as major land

guardian spirits inherited from post-Angkorian politico-religious organization of territory. Due to the limitations of space, I will focus on the political aspects of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s cult and the specificity of his ritual servant (the *smiñ*) which is often wrongly taken as an equivalent of a medium (*rūp*).³ Finally Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s complex figure includes another dimension —that of a guardian of a city/territory gate that needs to be examined in order to get a complete picture of post-Angkorian royal land tutelary spirits.

I. THE MYTHEME OF THE GHLĀMÑ MĪOEÑ LEGEND

What is the structure of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s mytheme that can be extracted from the tens of versions of the story that might have been written (royal chronicles, school textbooks, reports of the *Commission des Mœurs et Coutumes du Cambodge*, ethnographic writings, local versions transcribed by *ācāry* (ritual officiants), performed (movies, theater, broadcasted plays), painted and sculpted (drawings, statues) or locally told by villagers? Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ has acquired a country-wide reputation, probably after independence in 1953. Nowadays every Khmer knows at least a basic version of his legend. The structure of the mytheme involves four groups of actors. The Khmer 16th-century King Ang Chan (and his army) was in war against the Siamese king who was himself backed by (or who backed, depending on the versions)⁴ another Khmer pretender (named Kan in most variants)⁵ and his troops. The Khmer territory is threatened. During one of his stops in the present province of Pursat en route from Longvek (or another post-Angkorian capital south of the Tonle Sap Lake) to Angkor (or the other way around), the Khmer armed forces encounter the Siamese ones. The outcome of the fighting is uncertain. The Khmer king then meets with a local supporter, a strongman named Tā

³ For a detailed presentation of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ in a different perspective —that of Khmer animism and its notion of potency— see GUILLOU, A. Y., “Khmer potent places. Pāramī and the localization of Buddhism and monarchy in Cambodia”, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, n° 18 (5), 2017, pp. 421-443.

⁴ Depending on the versions, the Khmer king or the Siamese one is alternatively presented as the suzerain monarch. This aspect is not a significant element of the mytheme.

⁵ Although most of the narratives are in favor of the crowned king, some are in favor of Kan.

Mīoeñ⁶ (and his family)⁷. As the military situation is not favorable to Ang Chan, Tā Mīoeñ (usually with his wife and/or his sons and/or his assistants) decides to offer his life in an act that is equivalent to a human sacrifice as I will show below. He throws himself into a pit that assistants then cover with earth.⁸ After a few days, dreadful noises (Mīoeñ's voice in a version) are heard from under the earth. Transformed into a ghost (*khmoc*), Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ comes back at the head of an army of ghosts (or *brāy*) that bring disease (alternatively cholera⁹ or just panic) among the Siamese army and bring victory to Ang Chan. After his death, Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ is transformed into a land guardian spirit (*anak tā*).

This transformation is planned by Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ himself before his death. He gives instructions regarding the performance of the ritual homage which has to be paid to the *anak tā* Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ annually during the *pisākh* month (May-June). In some cases he himself appoints among his assistants or friends the ritual servant or *me smñ* who will be in charge. This transformation is explicitly described in the *Mahāpurus* legend:¹⁰ after their suicide, the text has it, *cau bañā* Mīoeñ, his wife, two of his four sons and a servant named Beñ are transformed into termite mounds which are symbols of the energy of the earth personified into *anak tā*.¹¹ Indeed, until the Khmer Rouge regime, the termite mound was the only material form taken by Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ in the shrine in Pursat.

⁶ Tā Mīoeñ is alternatively said to be a judge, a head of *sruk* (*cau hvāy sruk*), an army chief of the chakrey (*cākrī*) of Pursat. His titles are sometimes *uk nā*, *cau bañā*, *suo(r)gā lok*. His name can be Mīoeñ or Bejr. In the story reported by Porée-Maspero (PORÉE-MASPERO, Éveline, "Traditions orales de Pursat et de Kampot", *Artibus Asiae*, n° 204 (3-4), 1961, pp. 394-398), Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ is a Pear named Nup. This identity is backed by other local stories saying that Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ was born in the Cardamom hills. The "dance of the wild oxen" (*rapām danson*) and the "dance of the peacocks" performed during the annual homage ceremony were presented to me by the organizer in Pursat as a specificity of the ritual recalling the Pear of the Cardamoms.

⁷ Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ's spouse, when she is named, is called Khān' Khīev or Kandoñ Khīev. His sons are two, three or four. When they are named, they are called Mām, Mā and Māñ (version told by a villager) or Kaev, Kae and Deb Suk in the *Mahāpurus* chronicles (EÑ, Sut, *Ekasār Mahāpurus Khmaer*, Phnom Penh, Angkor Thom, vol. 2, 2000, p. 7).

⁸ In most variants, Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ throws himself on lances stuck in the pit. However, the meaningful element of the mytheme is the covering with earth because it is the archetypical process of a human sacrifice producing a gate guardian spirit as I will show below. In one version the sacrifice is symbolically operated via the offering of his wife and children as servants to the king Ang Chan.

⁹ Cholera is a disease brought by *brāy*, see ANG, Ch., *op. cit.*, 1986, p. 126.

¹⁰ EÑ, S., *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹¹ ANG, Ch., "Le sol et l'ancêtre. L'amorphe et l'anthropomorphe", *Journal Asiatique*, n° CCLXXXIII (1), 1995, pp. 213-238.

From this short presentation of the myth—which is locally materialized through a sacred geography structured in a coherent network centered on Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ’s shrine¹²—one can sketch the core significant elements that have been transmitted over the centuries: while the Khmer territory is in danger due to internal rivalries, the savior presents himself as an archetypal go-between or pivot: between the dead and the living; between royal power and local manpower and even between the ethnic Khmer and the other inhabitants of the kingdom (the Pear). This dimension of the Pursat Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ myth is reenacted in various ways annually during the ritual homage ceremony.¹³

Simultaneously Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ shows many characteristics of an *anak tā*.

II. THE POLITICAL CULT OF GHLĀMÑ MĪOĒÑ OF PURSAT

With the exception of the ancestor/first land clearer aspect, the Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ/Khān’ Khīev couple of Pursat shows today all the usual characteristics

¹² The sacred geography is embodied in toponymy: the monastery of the Merit-filled Bodhi Tree (Vatt Bo(dhi) Mān Puny), the Citadel of Victory (Pandāy Jāy), the Siamese Camp (Jamram Sīem), etc. as well as in ancient ruins and artefacts: a monument with a square base in laterite one meter high in the enclosure of the Monastery of the Merit-filled Bodhi Tree, etc. This monument, said to be a “*stūpa*” by Parmentier (PARMENTIER, Henri, “Complément à l’inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge”, *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient (BEFEO)*, t. XIII, 1913, pp. 1-64), and other buildings have not been subject to archeological excavations and have never been dated though they are registered as ancient sites by various sources. The ruined tower of the Monastery of the Merit-filled Bodhi Tree might be far older than the reign of King Ang Chan I (Bruno Bruguier, pers. comm. based on photos). Field work shows that the narrative of the 19th-century royal chronicles is in tune with the present material evidence mentioned above. It means either that the chronicles used oral and/or written versions kept locally (local written versions are still transmitted from one generation to another) or that the chronicles were read locally and then influenced local embodiment of the Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ’ stories in the area. In any case, it is interesting to note that the relationship between the central/national and the local levels was maintained over time. This has to be thought in the more global framework of the intensive work performed on facts, temporality and historical genealogy by the post-Angkorian palace scribes of the royal chronicles two centuries after the reign of King Ang Chan I, regarding Udong, Longvek and Angkor (see MIKAELIAN, Grégory, “Le passé entre mémoire d’Angkor et déni de Lanvaek: la conscience de l’histoire dans le royaume khmer du XVII^e siècle”, [in] N. ABDOUL-CARIME, G. MIKAELIAN & J. THACH (éds.), *Le passé des Khmers: langues, textes, rites*, Berne, Peter Lang, 2016, pp. 167-212 and “Le souverain des Kambujā, ses neveux jōrai, ses dépendants kuoy et pear. Un aperçu de la double légitimation du pouvoir dans le Cambodge du XVII^e siècle”, *Péninsule*, n^o 71 (2), 2015, pp. 35-75).

¹³ See a description of this ceremony in another perspective—that of the transformation of the Buddhist field in Cambodia—in GUILLOU, A. Y., “The (re)configuration of the Buddhist field in post-communist Cambodia”, [in] M. PICARD (ed.), *The Appropriation of religion in Southeast Asia and beyond*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 67-94.

of an ordinary couple of local land guardian spirits¹⁴ —Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ being predominant. He controls the territory and its natural environment in which he is merged, communicates with human beings through dreams and possessions —be they “spontaneous” or organized— fulfils wishes and is offered alcohol, meals, money and music in exchange (*lā pamñan*’ ritual).¹⁵

However, Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ is more than an ordinary *anak tā*. His audience is far larger and reaches all the provinces of Cambodia, his potency is perceived as higher by local villagers¹⁶ and, above all, he is the object of a political cult and the presence of the governor of the province is essential in it.¹⁷ Moreover, at the *sruk* level, the ceremony is thought to strengthen the connections between all the components of the social fabric of the locality, the inhabitants of all the neighboring villages, the provincial and district authorities headed by the governor and his wife, the monks from neighboring monasteries —all guided through the ceremony by the ritual servant of the *anak tā* (*me smññ*).¹⁸ This is the way a seventy-year-old man born in the village describes the allocation of duties during the preparation of the annual ceremony:

Before [the Pol Pot regime] the governor of the province used to send an invitation letter to the head of the *sruk* (*cau hvāy sruk*) who in turn sent letters to the villages. Each village played a role in the organization of the ceremony. For example, the tent of the catering (*ron sî phik*) was run by the *sruk* of Lolok Sar (Lalak Sar), Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ’s shrine was kept by the *sruk* of Kandieng, etc. The preparation of the offerings was also shared between the villages. The village of Snam Preah (Snam Brañ) had to bring the cows (two or three black cows).¹⁹

Since the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, the provincial Head of the Department of Culture has been in charge of the shrine and has year after year emphasized the involvement of the civil servants. The ceremony of “raising the *anak tā*” (*loēñ lok tā*) is gaining more pomp every year while the shrine, its new gardens, ponds and small bridges are becoming a tourist attraction for Cambodians. This is paralleled by the clear evolution of the materialization of

¹⁴ ANG, Ch., *op. cit.* and *IDEM, loc. cit.*, 1995.

¹⁵ GUILLOU, A. Y., “Khmer potent places [...]”, *loc. cit.*, 2017, pp. 421-443.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ I have taken part in two annual ritual homage ceremonies, the 17th and 18th of May 2008 and the 24th and 25th of May 2014.

¹⁸ This role is now taken on by the charismatic former head of the provincial Department of Culture. See below.

¹⁹ Interview with Om Mean, village of Kompaeng Svay, district of Bakan, Pursat, May 9th 2008.

the *anak tā* from an amorphous form (termite mound) to an anthropomorphic one (with statues becoming more and more realistic).

The political dimension of another major *anak tā*, Me Sar in the province of Prey Veng, was even more noticeable during the ritual of “raising the *anak tā*” the 9th and 10th of June 2017. A formal meeting largely devoted to the achievements of the government and the Cambodian People’s Party preceded the procession attended by civil servants, teachers and pupils. Even if this particular organization can be attributed to the preparation of communal elections in June 2017, it shows that this *loeñ* ceremony was and still is a cult where the attendance of the highest provincial representatives of political power is required.

Besides the presence of the highest provincial authorities, the traditional sacrifice of human beings²⁰ transformed into the sacrifice of a buffalo—and now replaced by the offerings of pigs in the Chinese manner—is in mainland Southeast Asia associated with ritual homage to major land spirits.²¹

I have often asked myself how one could assess, on an ethnographic basis, the “importance” of *anak tā* and the subsequent potential notion of hierarchy among them or, put in other terms, if the notion of a “cadastral religion”²² coined by Granet was useful in the Khmer context. Was it an issue linked to the size of their audience;²³ their degree of potency (“measured” by the perception of the influence of the *anak tā* on human beings and their natural and social environment); the popularity of their names like Yāy Mau,²⁴ Tā Kraham Kă, Țampañ Țaek/Kraññ, said by researchers to have absorbed former Hindu divinities (respectively Kāli, Śiva, Viṣṇu); or, last but not least, the royal dimension of some of them in 19th-early 20th centuries, like Me Sar of Ba Phnom in the province of Prey Veng or other *me sar* such as those hailed

²⁰ CHANDLER, David P., “Royally sponsored human sacrifices in nineteenth-century Cambodia: the cult of neak ta *me sar* (Mahisasuramardini) at Ba Phnom”, *Journal of the Siam Society* (*JSS*), n° 62 (2), 1972, pp. 209-222.

²¹ ARCHAIMBAULT, Charles, *Le sacrifice du buffle à S’ieng Khwang (Laos)*, Paris, École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1991, 262 p.

²² Granet’s reference was to the religious organization of a given territory by spirits doubling the royal mandarin administration in China.

²³ The nine *anak tā* worshipped in the 2000s in front of the royal palace in Phnom Penh are Kraham Kă, Țampañ Țaek, Braḥ Cau, Lok Tā Kraññ, Lok Tā Isī, Lok Tā Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ. Three are not materialized: Yāy Mau, Yāy Deb, Yāy Beñ. Two more are not represented (Tañkoe and Me Sar).

²⁴ See ANG, Ch., “Yāy Mau”, [in] N. ABDOUL-CARIME, G. MIKAELIAN & J. THACH (éds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 249-262; Yāy Mau has become over the past ten or fifteen years a major instrument of the integration of the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng (Oddar Meanchey) into Phnom Penh-controlled territory (personal observations).

in oaths and attached to specific places (*sātrā praṇidhān*)?²⁵ However, lists of spirits perceived today as being potentially “important” vary from one source to another and the historical and ethnographic relationships between various categories of entities such as *anak tā*, *me sar*, *ghlāmñ mīoeñ* and *āraks*^o have still to be documented in a systematic way.

III. THE RITUAL SERVANT (*ME SMĪÑ*)

In the Khmer religious field orthopraxis often precedes and explains orthodoxy. Observing the actual rituals, their evolution, and the negotiations around the right way to perform is always full of information for an ethnographer of the *anak tā*. The practical ritual rules to be respected in the organization of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s annual homage gives the first role to a ritual servant, called the *me smīñ* and not to a medium (*rūp*). Regular mediums—men and women—however, may also attend the ceremony although none performed during my observations in 2008 and 2014.²⁶ The ethnographic data makes it clear that these two ritual actors do not have the same function and do not serve the same kind of religious entity.

In most writings, the difference between the *rūp* and the *smīñ* (also called *me samññ*, *tāy smīñ*) is not noticed. The two terms are both translated as mediums and sometimes even considered together in the single composed word *rūp samññ*.²⁷ The present elderly Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s *smīñ* himself sometimes uses the word *sīñ rūp* to designate his function. *Smīñ* is said by some authors to be a regional variation of *rūp*.²⁸ In other publications, its first meaning is given (to die, death) but the connection to a deity’s servant remains unclear until one refers to its old khmer root *siñ*, “officiate”.²⁹ The elderly *me smīñ*, born around 1926, helped me understand the relationship he had with his spirit master.

²⁵ CHANDLER, D. P., “Maps for the ancestors: sacralised topography and echoes of Angkor in two Cambodian texts”, *Journal of the Siam society (JSS)*, n° 64 (2), 1976, pp. 170-187; BRĀP, Cān’ Mārā, “Sātrā praṇidhān”, *KhmeRenaissance*, n° 7, 2011-2012, pp. 118-128. I am grateful to Brāp Cān’ Mārā who discussed with me in October 2011 the version he republished. The text is kept at the library of the National Museum and is dated from 1906.

²⁶ During the 2014 ceremony, a young woman was “spontaneously” possessed by Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ but the ritual orchestra was not allowed to play by the organizer and the possession was shortened. This is an effect among others of the tensions between the Head of the Department of Culture and people concerning the use of and control over the shrine.

²⁷ PORÉE-MASPERO, Éveline, *Études sur les rites agraires des Cambodgiens*, Paris & La Haye, Mouton & Co, 1964, t. 2, p. 23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ POU, Saveros; ANG, Chouléan, “Le vocabulaire khmer relatif au surnaturel”, *Seksa Khmer*, n° 10-13, 1987-1990, p. 106.

I first met Lok Tā Ren, in 2007 at his home about 5 kilometers away from Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s shrine in Pursat. He was at that time *ācāry*^o in the nearby monastery of Luong (also linked to Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s myth). Tā Ren defrocked at the age of 26 and succeeded his father as the ritual servant of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ. Tā Ren believes he is the 7th generation of *me smiñ* in the direct paternal line after Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ’s death. Before the Pol Pot regime, he was given a salary by the governor. After the Khmer Rouge regime, the provincial authorities asked him to reassume his duties, and he performed for three years before the supervision of the shrine was taken over by the provincial Department of Culture.³⁰ But Tā Ren is still considered by the villagers as the legitimate *me smiñ* of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ. Like a medium, Tā Ren is “held” (*kān*’, controlled) and protected by Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ to whom he owed his life under the Khmer Rouge regime, he says. However, his relationship with Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ is not that of possession. Unlike the medium (*rūp*), he does not “tremble” (*ñār*) and is not “entered” (*cūl*) by Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ in the shrine but physically feels his presence and, moreover, feels in his body when the ritual is not correctly performed. His description implies that offerings wrongly presented would not be accepted by Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ and therefore would endanger the well-being of the entire community as the annual homage is above all a ritual of asking for rain and prosperity for the *sruk* at the beginning of the rainy season (May-June).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to develop a detailed analysis of the differences between a *rūp* and a *smiñ*. Gender, lines of succession, physical relationships with the spirit/deity and forms of legitimation are among the lines of delineation. The present *me smiñ*’s ritual and social role makes him a distant heir of the Angkorian servants of divinities appointed by the king.³¹

The identity of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ is made even more complex by an additional dimension, that of a “navel” of the territory, particularly developed in Tai societies.

³⁰ The now retired former Head of the Department acts much like a *me smiñ* himself, among other roles.

³¹ The inscription of Sdok Kok Thom was commissioned by the ritual servant of a *kamrateñ jagat añ* and *kamrateñ jagat ta rāja* called *devarāja* (founded by Jayavarman II). This honorific privilege bears the title of *steñ añ* and is transmitted according to matrilineal calculations (sisters’ sons) (CÉDÈS, George & DUPONT, Pierre, “Les stèles de Sdòk Kāk Thom, Phnom Sandak et Práh Vihār”, *BEFEO*, t. XLIII, 1943, pp. 56-154).

IV. THE “NAVEL” OF THE *SRUK*

“*Mīoēñ*” is without doubt a Thai equivalent of the Khmer word *sruk*.³² The present meaning of *ghlāmñ* as a “warehouse” does not make much sense. More profitably, *ghlāmñ* can be understood as *khlāmñ* which means “strong” in Khmer. It is also a Siamese word loaned from the Khmer and can take the acception of “magically strong, having a sacred power” which is in tune with qualities attributed to Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ in some legends.³³ Alternatively, or additionally, *klāñ* means “the middle” in Thai language. The notion of a “centre” of the territory fits the idea of a “navel of the village” (*bhicit bhūmi*) present in old circular villages in the province of Siem Reap as well as in many Tai societies. It designates the central post, phallic in shape, symbolizing the village as a whole in fertility and protection rites.³⁴ In my field research, among the potent places associated with Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ’s shrine, the monastery of Bakan was referred to as the “navel” of the country by several of my interlocutors. Besides this evidence, Leclère published at the beginning of the 20th c. a description of the Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ of Kampot “kept in a thatched hut lost in the bush behind the Cambodian village of Kampot [Kampot was at that time a pluri-ethnic area] and erected on a small hillock enclosed by pillars”. When Leclère visited the hut, it contained “three cylindric-shaped monoliths irregularly shaped, rounded on the top without any ornament”.³⁵ These small poles resemble the Thai pillars representing the territory (*lak muang*).

The Tai societies and particularly the Thai, Lao, and Shan kingdoms are familiar with the institution of a center of the *muang* (a province, a city or a

³² I am grateful to Ang Choulean, Michel Antelme, Gilles Delouche, Olivier de Bernon for their comments on the etymological aspects.

³³ The name of the canoe of the monastery of Luong, not far from Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ’s shrine, is called “magic power of the victorious Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ” (*tejañ ghlāmñ mīoēñ saen māñ jāy*). It was offered by the Minister of Industry, Commerce and Energy. He is a traditional supporter of the province of Pursat. The supportive actions of ministers in specific provinces recalls the way the ancient *stec trāñ* were in charge of a part of the kingdom.

³⁴ MARTEL, Gabrielle, *Lovea village des environs d’Angkor. Aspects démographiques, économiques et sociologiques*, Paris, École française d’Extrême-Orient, 1975, pp. 240-241; ANG, Ch., *Brah Liñg*, Phnom Penh, Reyum publishing, 2004, pp. 149-163; DIN, Dīṇā, “Brah Bhūmi”, *KhmeRenaissance*, n° 7, 2012, pp. 41-45. It is interesting to note that in rural Thailand the shape of the post is not perceived as phallic but associated with a plant. Terwiel (TERWIEL, Barend T., “The origin and meaning of the Thai ‘city pillar’”, *JSS*, n° 66 (1), 1978, p. 169) makes the hypothesis that the phallic interpretation comes from foreign researchers.

³⁵ LECLÈRE, Adhémar, “Histoire de Kampot et de la rébellion de cette province”, *Revue indochinoise*, n° 60-61, 30 juin-15 juillet 1907, p. 4.

village) representing the whole territory and taking the form of a pillar (*lak muang*) protected by a special kind of spirit called *phi muang*.³⁶ The Thai royal chronicles mention human sacrifices taking place at the feet of pillars of cities such as Bangkok, Vientiane and Luang Prabang in order to produce a land guardian spirit (*phi muang*). The sacrificed persons were usually pregnant women and it is believed that the energy engendered by their death was highly potent and fierce.³⁷ This spirit is similar of course to the Khmer malevolent female *brāy*. The connotation of a *brāy* in Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ's cult today is present in the ethnographic findings of Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ in Pursat in the shape of his spouse, Khān' Khīev/Kandoñ Khīev whose color (*khīev*, green-blue) and name (Green-blue Receptacle) recalls a *brāy*.³⁸

If we examine now the modes of sacrifice aimed at producing a *phi muang*, the similarity with Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ/Khān' Khīev is even clearer. In Bernard Formoso's study of the malevolent spirits among the Tai people, he reports the story of the land guardian spirit Cao Com, "Lord of the Summit", who died voluntarily by impalement³⁹ —on the tusks of an elephant rather than on spears as in most Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ legends. The modes of sacrifice by burying alive and impalement (both found in narratives of Ghlāmñ Mīoēñ's death) are found in the literature on Thai ritual practices. An envoy of the Dutch East India Company in Ayutthaya personally witnessed in 1634 C.E. the impalement of pregnant women under the pole of the city.⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that the victim's consent had to be obtained —even by a trick— as it is recounted in Terwiel's article⁴¹ about the recruitment process for a human sacrifice offered to the city pillar of Trat, the nearest Thai city of the Khmer town of Kampot. Ang Choulean has documented similar cases of sacrifice of pregnant women designed to transform the victim into guardian spirits in the province of Kraceh (monastery of Vihear Thom) and other places,⁴² and has underlined "the useful effects of an intentional ritualised death".⁴³

³⁶ TERWIEL, B. T., *loc. cit.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*; LÉVY, Paul, "Le sacrifice du buffle et la prédiction du temps à Vientiane (avec études sur le sacrifice du buffle en Indochine)", *Bulletin de l'Institut Indochinois pour l'Étude de l'Homme*, n° 6, 1943, p. 303, note 3.

³⁸ ANG, Ch., *op cit.*, 1986, p. 49. n. 100.

³⁹ FORMOSO, Bernard, "Bad death and malevolent spirits among the Tai peoples", *Anthropos*, n° 93, 1998, p. 14.

⁴⁰ TERWIEL, B. T., *loc. cit.*, p. 161.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁴² ANG, Ch., *op cit.*, 1986, pp. 132-133.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 291, note 9.

Finally, the Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ ritual institution presents itself as a practice aimed at protecting the Khmer territory in the aftermath of the destruction of Angkor. Pursat is not the only province where a Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ was instituted, the most important being Kampot;⁴⁴ Udong where Thompson observed a ritual of calling in the monastery of Vāmñ Cās'.⁴⁵ Phnom Penh where a Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ (sacred post) is purported to have been established during the foundation of the capital by Ponhea Yat.⁴⁶ Pursat and Kampot have been in post-Angkorian Cambodia places of fights between the Khmer and their enemies —be they Siamese in Pursat or Vietnamese in Kampot where the Siamese sent troops by boat to support a Khmer king or a challenger several times during the 19th century.⁴⁷ The two main Siam-Cambodia axes in post-Angkorian times, notes Groslier, were the Battambang-Pursat-Udong road and the Kampot-Udong maritime route.⁴⁸ The institution of Ghlāmñ Mīoeñ then shows at the same time Siamese influence (even if the “navel of the village” can be a much older practice widespread among Southeast Asian mainland societies) and a practice aiming at defending the Khmer land.

The practice of erection of new *anak tā* has been mainly studied in the context of the foundation of a new human setting. Its protective function needs more research.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ LECLÈRE, A., *loc. cit.*, 1907; PORÉE-MASPERO, É., *op. cit.*, 1962, p. 10.

⁴⁵ THOMPSON, Ashley, “Performative Realities: Nobody’s Possession”, [in] A. R. HANSEN & J. LEDGERWOOD (eds.), *Songs on the Edge of the Forest: Narrative and Problems of Meaning in the Work of David Chandler*, Ithaca, Cornell University, Asian Studies Press, 2008, pp. 93-120.

⁴⁶ KHIN, Sok, *Chroniques royales du Cambodge (de Bañā Yāt à la prise de Lanvaek) ‘de 1417 à 1595). Traduction française avec comparaison des différentes version et introduction*, Paris, EFEO, Collection de textes et documents sur l’Indochine XIII **, 1988, p. 72.

⁴⁷ LECLÈRE, A., *loc. cit.*, 1907.

⁴⁸ GROSLIER, Bernard Philippe, “Pour une géographie historique du Cambodge”, *Les cahiers d’Outre-Mer*, n° 26 (104), 1973, p. 353.

⁴⁹ Soon after the dispute between the Cambodians and the Thais over Preah Vihear, I witnessed erections of an *anak tā* at the border in the Dangrek hills, particularly the land guardian Dassaparamī brah bhākr° 8 mukh. In the Anlong Veng area in Oddar Meanchey province where the ultra-nationalist Ta Mok and Pol Pot were lastly defeated by the governmental army, the main spirit recently instituted is Yāy Mau. She is said by an important local ritual entrepreneur to be the wife of an army chief, whose name implies a notion of border: Braḥ Cau Kruñ Sīmā (Preah Chao Krong Seima, Prince of the ritual border markers).