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# Yasovarman I, a Master Propagandist in 9th CE Cambodia

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# **Communicating the Sacred**

Varieties of Religious Marketing

Edited by  
Miloš Hubina and Francis S.M. Chan



**PETER LANG**

# Table of Contents

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List of Illustrations .....	vii
List of Tables .....	ix
List of Abbreviations .....	xi
Introduction: <i>All Religion is Marketing</i> .....	1
Miloš Hubina	
Chapter One: Religion on a Placard: A Study on Advertising New Religious Movements in Contemporary Poland .....	11
Adam Anczyk and Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska	
Chapter Two: A Disappeared Leader: Falun Gong and Its Advertisement Outside China .....	35
Jana Benická	
Chapter Three: 'Failure' of Catholic Propaganda: The Case of Evangelization in Thailand .....	57
Francis S.M. Chan	
Chapter Four: Communicating Devotion: Sharing Experience and Calling for Participation among Muslim Varkaris in India .....	79
Dušan Deák	
Chapter Five: Yaśovarman I, a Master Propagandist in 9th CE Cambodia .....	107
Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif	

Chapter Six: The Forest for the Trees: Some Systemic Features of Buddhist Advertising and Propaganda .....	129
Miloš Hubina	
Chapter Seven: Jihadi Marketing: Reasons for the Success of Islamic State Propaganda .....	161
Pavol Kosnáč	
Chapter Eight: Visual Propaganda in the Maya Proto-Writing Period: The Example of Stucco Frieze from Palace H-Sub 2, Uaxactun, Guatemala .....	211
Milan Kováč	
Chapter Nine: Forward-Looking Statements: How Mediums and Charismatics Make Their Publics .....	233
R. Jeremy Saul	
Chapter Ten: Were Miracles and Martyrdoms Means of Christian Mass Marketing? .....	257
Andrej Zeman	
About the Authors .....	273
Index .....	277

# List of Illustrations

---

Figure 1.1	Poster: The Science of Identity Foundation “Chaitanya Mission.” Case 1: March 2016, Kraków. ....	20
Figure 1.2	Poster: The Science of Identity Foundation “Chaitanya Mission.” Case 2: November 2016, Kraków. ....	22
Figure 1.3	Poster: The Science of Identity Foundation “Chaitanya Mission.” Case 3: December 2016, Katowice. ....	24
Figure 1.4	Poster: The Science of Identity Foundation “Chaitanya Mission.” Case 4: January 2017, Kraków. ....	27
Figure 1.5	Poster: The Science of Identity Foundation “Chaitanya Mission.” Case 5: January 2017, Kraków. ....	29
Figure 4.1	A Simple Printed Poster.....	95
Figure 4.2	A Large Poster Made for Special Occasions.....	96
Figure 4.3	A Poster on Bhakti Events.....	97
Figure 5.1	Comparison of the two types of characters of the digraphic inscription K. 110, in stanza XXXII (end of the 9th c. CE; rubbing EFEO n. 744 ; © EFEO). ....	120
Figure 5.2	Foundation steles from the āśramas of Angkor (from left to right: K. 290, K. 701, K. 1228; end of the 9th c. CE; © EFEO).....	120

Figure 5.3	Digraphic foundation steles of the provinace āśramas (from left to right: K. 223, K. 95; end of the 9th c. CE ; © EFEO).	121
Figure 5.4	Hospital foundation steles from Jayavarman VII (from left to right: K. 209, K. 435, K. 537; 12th-13th c. CE; © EFEO).	121
Figure 5.5	3D rendering of Angkor Yaśodharāśramas' perennial buildings (realization: BBC; © Mission Yaśodharāśrama).....	122
Figure 5.6	Prasat Khna: Overall plan and location of the perennial buildings of the āśrama of Yaśovarman I. (© Yaśodharāśrama Research Programme, after Parmentier 1939, pl. XXVII, Bruguier & Lacroix 2013, p. 135, plan 19 and Soutif et al. 2020).....	122
Figure 6.1	A Billboard Inviting the Public to Contribute to Building the <i>uposatha</i> Hall at a Wat (Monastery) Famous for its Buddha Statue Believed to Heal Eyes. ....	151
Figure 6.2	A Banner Featuring a TV Star, a Magical Amulet Available at the Wat whose Name is Given at the Bottom and the Word “rich” at the Top. ....	152
Figure 6.3	Picture of a Monk Behaving Inappropriately, Posted with a Critical Comment on Social Media.....	153
Figure 7.1	The Proper Islamic Behaviour, ISIS Textbook for 5th Grade.....	194
Figure 7.2	The Book of Doctrine for Muslim Children: Course for New Generation. By Islamic State, Wiyalat of Ninewa.....	195
Figure 7.3	A Mathematical Exercise in a Textbook.....	196
Figure 8.1	Frieze H-Sub 2 of Group H South at Uaxactun in Original Context. ....	214
Figure 8.2	Details from Frieze H-Sub 2, “swimmers” and Severed Heads. ....	216
Figure 8.3	Frieze of the Great Central Acropolis at El Mirador. ....	219
Figure 8.4	Details of the “swimmers” from the frieze of the Great Central Acropolis at El Mirador.....	221
Figure 9.1	A Ritual Fire in Amritsar in Honor of Balaji/Hanuman. The Wall-Like Remainder of the 16,000-kilogram Laddu is Visible in the Rear of Center.....	244
Figure 9.2	Pouring a Sanctified Liquid over a Shiva Linga, with the Assistance of an Indian Brahmin Priest, on the Occasion of Opening a New Shop, North of Bangkok. ....	253



# List of Tables

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Table 1.1 A SWOT Analysis of Cases..... 31

# List of Abbreviations

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Act.	Acts
AN.	Aṅguttara Nikāya
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
DN.	Dīgha Nikāya
<i>Eccl. Hist.</i>	<i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i>
Gal.	Galatians
Heb.	Hebrews
Jn.	John
Mk.	Mark
MN.	Majjhima Nikāya
Mt.	Matthew
Mv.	Mahāvagga
Skt.	Sanskrit
SN.	Samyutta Nikāya
SV.	Suttavibhaṅga



# Yaśovarman I, a Master Propagandist in 9th CE Cambodia

JULIA ESTÈVE AND DOMINIQUE SOUTIF

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To date, the corpus of Cambodian inscriptions amounts to more than 1,500 texts covering a period from the 6th century to the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> Until the modern era, these inscriptions constituted the only source at our disposal to reconstruct the political, economic and social history of the Khmer polities. These epigraphs raise a variety of questions, the first one being: Who composed these texts? They were engraved by sculptors who most likely copied a text provided by an authority who represented the king who commissioned the inscription. Indeed, the texts directly imply that the king, or the high dignitary who ordered the inscription, was the author since these narratives usually declare that he is versed in Sanskrit poetry or grammar, perhaps to justify his literary productions. Or was it necessarily the *brāhmaṇas* or the *purohita*, his political and religious advisors, who chiselled a beautifully versed Sanskrit text? Then comes the audience of these texts, and the inscriptions of ancient Cambodia present a peculiarity insofar as scholars themselves do not agree on the existence of the said audience: some argue that these epigraphs were intended only for the gods and therefore were not read by humans, whereas others consider that, logically, they had to be read, and it remains then to be established who actively read them (the royal family, the court, or the elite? The members of the population?).<sup>2</sup> Finally, we must also interpret and deconstruct the text itself, especially its structure and content. These texts are mainly written in Sanskrit and in Khmer,<sup>3</sup> but their respective contents are generally not identical. The Sanskrit part usually deals with religious topics and the good deeds

of the king, royalty and other high dignitaries, while the Khmer section focuses on the technical aspects of trade and economics.<sup>4</sup> How one can understand these respective parts, and their accuracy when mythology and religion were so deeply intertwined in these accounts?

Here, in the Khmer inscriptions the three principal themes of politics, mythology and religion coalesce into what can be understood as a specific genre of propaganda. In this article we argue that the Angkorian arena does not constitute an exception in this case. We examine the epigraphical corpus through the lenses of propaganda and the analogy of marketing, by focusing on one particular example, the epigraphy of King Yaśovarman I of the 9th century CE.<sup>5</sup> This king attempted to make his mark on history by taking advantage of the close connection between politics and religion, and this case study will shed light on the specificities of Angkorian practices as they pertain to the codification of propaganda and rhetoric.

## INSCRIPTIONS: STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

Khmer inscriptions are literary texts, especially the stanzas in Sanskrit, but we will see that they encompass much more than literature. All epigraphs, especially those commissioned by kings or related to the royal family (the Sanskrit components), begin with a section entitled *maṅgala*. This *maṅgala* is first of all a prayer to important deities of the kingdom. It accomplishes the promotion of obedience not necessarily to the king, but to the tutelary deities of the kingdom. At this first level, we are dealing with a deployment of rhetoric. The *maṅgala* is then usually followed by the *praśasti* (eulogistic praise).

As in all the countries of the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” (which dates approximately between 300 and 1300 CE), the role of Sanskrit and its power to confer charisma in Indianized policies was paramount.<sup>6</sup> In this Sanskrit Cosmopolis, the royal eulogies contain at least some expected themes, if not all, of the common references.<sup>7</sup> Most notably, the king is compared or likened to a deity, but he is also a pious devotee to the gods and Brahmins, and his piety is displayed by making the proper sacrifices and gifts. He observes *dharma*, i.e., he respects and protects it.<sup>8</sup> The triple *śakti* of the king, namely his military power (he is always heroic in battle), his fiscal power and his political power are all declared.<sup>9</sup> The text also displays his universal sovereignty, and his heroism is chanted in accounts of the defeat of his enemies and the legitimacy and prosperity of his dynasty.

As such, they give us access not only to the history of events, as Paul Lacombe (1894) defined it, but provide a basis to reconstruct battles or other happenings based on these statements.<sup>10</sup> However, considering the corpus as a whole, it illuminates history in the long term<sup>11</sup> and the evolution of institutions and practices.<sup>12</sup>

These eulogies of kings, as we have seen, form a predictable leitmotif in Sanskrit epigraphy and in the countries that have adopted the values and literary traditions of ancient India. These tropes can be understood as a hallmark of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, but it shouldn't cloud our judgment as to their other main goals: they served as analogous to a pre-modern or pre-capitalist marketing technique to promote certain services, persons, and ideas for the purpose of codifying and disseminating propaganda. Of course, it is possible as Aristotle explained, that language is a force, a fact, which does not function referentially to define what a thing is but of having an impact on the addressee.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it seems that for the authors more was at stake than mere epigraphy. Propaganda aims at disseminating or promoting particular ideas, and according to Jowett & O'Donnell:<sup>14</sup> "The purpose of propaganda is to convey an ideology to an audience with a related objective". We will see that this definition applies to Khmer epigraphy as kings not only narrated their exploits but self-promoted and imposed a certain vision of society and history in the inscriptions. They employed the propagandist practice of "resonance"<sup>15</sup> a strategy that builds on themes and messages that echo beliefs, values, and attitudes already known to the audience. They accomplished this tactic notably through conventional tropes, which, by virtue of their literary status and their repetition in the inscriptions, projected and built in each reign a certain vision of society, its morality, its functioning, and the close interrelationship of kingship and religion.

## POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA FOR SOCIAL COHESION

Throughout the Angkorian period, kings were trying to expand their kingdom and subdue new peoples and territories. One of the reasons why this era is so famous was the ability of kings to manage and control vast lands and subdue populations, creating a politically and economically centralized kingdom. The kings deployed political and religious propaganda techniques in an attempt to create a sense of social cohesion and legitimize royal power.

One recurrent royal tradition in Khmer history of the pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods was key to achieving this goal: each important sovereign was committed to multiplying foundations with common characteristics in all the zones he controlled (Chea *et al.* [to be published]). The first evidence of this practice dates from the 7th century, when Citrasena, who ruled under the name of Mahendrarvarman, installed religious statues of *liṅgas* (the aniconic representation of Śiva as a creative phallus) and Śiva's mount, the bull Vṛṣabha. These foundations were accompanied by very similar inscriptions in areas often far from his

capital, Sambor Prei Kuk.<sup>16</sup> Twenty such repetitive “provincial” foundations have been identified thus far for Citrasena/Mahendravarman. This kind of public work was seen as a charitable endeavor, but such campaigns played an important role in promoting economic development programs as they included construction of roads, water-features, and other infrastructures.

The corpus of Yaśovarman I (AD 889–910) illustrates particularly well this point of disseminating religious propaganda for political goals. It shows that he followed this specific tradition of repetitive royal foundation but took it to another scale. He commissioned the establishment of monasteries or *āśramas*, the role of which ranged from welcoming pilgrims to teaching and copying manuscripts in the city of Yaśodharapura—known today as Angkor. However, Yaśovarman also founded numerous *āśramas* in the provinces of the realm. He conquered new territories<sup>17</sup> and decided to place his provincial monasteries on the outskirts of the kingdom. The location of the monasteries at once provided places of rest and asylum for pilgrims and travellers while territorializing a map of the new country that included new roads and infrastructures.

More specifically, Yaśovarman I founded more than a hundred monasteries in the kingdom’s provinces, where, the inscriptions state, all the religions were represented and honoured (i.e., Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism and Buddhism). In other words, followers of these religions were welcomed without discrimination in each monastery,<sup>18</sup> whereas in the capital he built four monasteries, each dedicated to one denomination. Another was established for the *brāhmaṇas*, or Brahmins, for they were the depositaries and holders of timeless knowledge associated with Vedic India. In Indianized Southeast Asia, the Brahmins played an important role in the shift from local chiefdoms to unified kingdoms.<sup>19</sup> Brahmins constituted a separate group, above the religious leaders of the other communities, and thus were the most eminent members of society as they were the guardians of magical ritual powers indispensable for the legitimate rulership of kings. They were able to predict the future, to create protection spells and, of course, to serve as political advisers. However, their own religious affiliation did not really matter, and, as Bronkhorst claims, Brahmanism could not be assigned to the category ‘religion’ but to the realm of the moral stewardship of social order.<sup>20</sup>

The fact that followers of what would appear to be different religions living together in each provincial monastery could be explained in economic terms, because after all, building 100 monasteries already required a formidable investment of labor and resources. Admittedly, the construction of 400 seems impossible, but we would rather find a religious, political, or social reason to explain this fact. We have proven elsewhere that provincial monasteries were constructed at highly revered pre-existing temple sites or natural deity shrines. The *āśramas* were thus established at the most venerable sanctuaries of the kingdom.<sup>21</sup> In sum, by selecting these locations, Yaśovarman I implemented a kind of religious

propaganda: he acknowledged the existence and legitimacy of pre-existing deities at the boundaries of the kingdom; he recognized their power within the newly formed country. This undertaking further ensured that the populations accepted the conquest and inclusion in the Khmer kingdom, thus creating a sense of belonging to an imagined community comparable to the identity politics of a nation.<sup>22</sup> As such, we have an exemplary illustration of the definition of propaganda as defined by Jowett & O'Donnell:<sup>23</sup> “Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.” And this political propaganda used religion as its principal tool.

### BUILDING ACCEPTANCE AND RESPECT FOR THE KING

We mentioned the triple *śakti* of the king (military, political, and fiscal powers) and interpret it as another propaganda tool to encourage the acceptance of this new king by both foreign peoples and Yaśovarman's pre-existing subjects. Indeed, very often in the Khmer genealogies, a king took over from the previous one by killing him or defeating him in a battle.<sup>24</sup> This trope of heroism in battle propagandistically celebrates the strong political and war-like man that legitimates the universal sovereignty of the king. These tropes present a clever mixture of truth and myth. The endless literary comparisons between the king and the gods or mythical figures prove this point. Furthermore, historians must take with a pinch of salt every battle, royal genealogy, and such, which are mentioned in these inscriptions. The exaggerations and other liberties taken with the historical truth can sometimes be identified by the epigrapher.

For example, in the traditional royal chronology, it was established that the successor of King Sūryavarman II was Yaśovarman II, whose origin and date of ascent were unknown. He was indeed supposed to have come to power at an unknown date and reigned until 1165, when he was “dethroned and killed by a usurper who took the name of Tribhuvanādityavarman.”<sup>25</sup> Inscriptions, especially those dating from the time of the very renowned king Jayavarman VII, consistently presented Tribhuvanādityavarman as a usurper who seized power before his defeat at the hands of the Cham King, Jaya Indravarman. For example, the Phimeanakas inscription (K. 485, end of 12th CE) described him as a “servant greedy for royal power” (*bhṛtyena rājyodayatatpareṇa*, st. LXV of K. 485) and differentiated him from the other kings who were, contrary to him, honoured by “many parasols” (*IC II: 175, st. XXVI*). Another text, inscription K. 288 from Prasat Chrung (Southwest, Angkor Thom, st. CVIII, end of 12th century, Jayavarman VII's reign again) narrates that “(i)n the past, as a result of a battle that lasted only one day, King Śrī Dharaṇīndravarman was stripped of the helpless

kingship by Śrī Sūryavarman; King Yaśovarman, who had defeated the darkness of the Daitya, was stripped of it by King Tribhuvanāditya; the latter, proud of his strength, was stripped of it in turn by the king of the Chams called Jaya Indrarvarman.”<sup>26</sup> The great epigraphist and historian Georges Coédès, hence affirmed that King Śrī Dharaṇīndravarman “was only a *bhṛtya*, that is to say a servant or an official,” without any legitimacy to the throne, even though he noted that his rather “unremarkable” reign had lasted 12 years, from 1165 to 1177.

Now, thanks to the recent discovery of the inscription K. 1297, in 2012, we have learned that the reign of Sūryavarman II ended in 1071 *śaka*, i.e., 1149/50 CE, a date which was earlier only assumed. This new inscription also reveals that Tribhuvanādityavarman succeeded him directly from this date, and that he belonged to the same family, refuting the theory that he was a usurper and only a simple civil servant. It remains to be understood why Jayavarman VII knowingly minimized and negatively portrayed one of his predecessors, who belonged however to the same dynasty as him.<sup>27</sup>

Should we consider this text as disinformation? Disinformation means “false, incomplete, or misleading information that is passed, fed, or confirmed to a targeted individual, group, or country.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, these examples are not just misguided or erroneous, but passed off as real and from what should be the most credible sources: the royalty itself, the incarnation of power and truth. Or should we just understand that there is no such thing as truth in History? Usually, it is the role of the historian to compare texts from different kings when available, to try to approximate the facts, setting aside tropes, falsehoods, and exaggerations.

J. Revel offered another method of historiography, mobilizing the particular example of Arnaldo de Bresica. Revel writes:

Here is the life of an Italian reformer of the eleventh century, Arnaldo da Brescia, who is known to us through a series of testimonies that do not agree with each other (which is probably the most frequent case). What happens if we depart from the traditional approach, which would consist of keeping only the coherent part of these testimonies and rejecting the rest as doubtful? This is what the medievalist A. Frugoni has attempted to do this with remarkable success: Arnaldo’s life appears to be inscribed in a plurality of disjointed worlds - as is, in fact, every biographical experience. The lesson of the analysis is not: to each his own truth, as a common scepticism would have it. On the contrary, it pushes analysis to the side of complexity, taking advantage of a literary genre that usually produces simplification effects.<sup>29</sup>

## Inspiring Respect for Social Order

The inscriptions commissioned by the king and his court describe him as a protector of the *dharma*. The king followed the *dharma* but he also protected it: these

claims were a disguised way of influencing public opinion since it is through the notion of *dharma* that he preached morality, a moral conduct for all, and more broadly, the well-being of the community.

A good example of the dharmic basis of kingly legitimacy is apparent in Yaśovarman's second great royal "foundation of public interest", the Eastern Baray, a huge waterworks that expanded and guaranteed the capital's rice production, and the creation of which was commemorated in the inscriptions placed at its corners (K. 280–283).<sup>30</sup> At the same time, if these stelae praise his qualities as a warrior, as well as a builder, they also insist on his kindness and generosity, as in stanza XCVII of the inscription K. 282: "Though many other kings, when in possession of this great title of master, instead of protecting their subjects, destroy them as the kings of animals destroy gazelles, he, for his subjects, was like Pṛthu, giving sustenance to the good out of his own sustenance."<sup>31</sup> This eulogy echoes the writings of Confucius in his *Analects*,<sup>32</sup> where he suggests that "good" rhetoric, together with the proper forms of speech and writing, could effectively persuade men to live meaningful lives. The use of deliberate forms of speech carefully calculated to deliver a persuasive message characterizes Yaśovarman I's inscriptions as well.

Returning to the *āśrama*, the epigraphy of Yaśovarman I's reign claims the construction of a hundred of these monasteries. This signalling of his presence and work is completed by the repetition of similar texts. In the first instance, all of his royal edicts consistently repeat his genealogy and panegyric, and vary only in referring to specific foundations. Moreover, in the case of digraphic stelae, i.e., where the same text was reproduced on both sides, but in two different alphabets, commemorating the foundation of provincial monasteries; the same text is repeated, with the exception of a stanza specifying the name of the shrine to which the *āśrama* was offered. This is already true in the 16 cases found to date, and it may be assumed that this was originally intended for the 100 or so foundations announced in the inscriptions. The king thus aimed to cover his entire territory with these edicts, even if the number of one hundred may have been idealized, for publicity or metric style, since these were Sanskrit versified texts.

We also interpret the religious plurality and ecumenical ethos promoted by Yaśovarman as a propaganda tool. In the provincial monasteries discussed above, all religious denominations are mixed as a means to encourage moral and ethical behaviour by the example of the king. In endorsing peaceful religious plurality, he encouraged the acceptance of ethnic plurality and different countries (virtuous action being, once again, the primary means of persuasion).

Studying further the case of Yaśovarman I, we come to realize that he did not only repeat the old propaganda practices but also tried to innovate, precisely in his way of "making history." That is not to say that he tried to change the power relationship between the languages: Sanskrit was still employed for the texts of high

standing, thus conforming to other polities of the Sanskrit cosmopolis. He was innovative in other ways, for he created a new kind of communication, or pushed it further in trying to create his own unique brand, thus affirming his success as a master propagandist. In the following section we demonstrate that Yaśovarman I intended to create his own brand name through a multifaceted visual campaign, that relied on a combination of a new script, art, and architecture as symbols to create a form of “corporate symbolism.”

## KING YAŚOVARMAN I, A MASTER PROPAGANDIST

### The Display of Abundance

Yaśovarman I’s employment of a display literature to assert his greatness is already noticeable by the predominance of “royal” inscriptions to the detriment of those of high dignitaries that characterize some other periods in Khmer history. However, we add the fact that certain characteristics of the epigraphs allow for immediate recognition of the corpus of his reign as well as a clear desire to make a name for himself.

For example, one could cite the case of the lists of donations made by this ruler and commemorated in the inscriptions. The never-ending lists of slaves that were copied onto the temple pedestals—no doubt kept on palm-leaf to be periodically amended—were probably not intended to be read, but to display the prodigality of the donor. They literally covered the walls of certain sanctuaries and were therefore visually unavoidable.<sup>33</sup> This illustrates particularly well how epigraphy functioned as propaganda that was particularly fashionable between the reigns of his father Indravarman I (r. 877–889 CE) and his uncle Jayavarman IV (r. 928–941 CE).

At the same time, the inscriptions of the 10th–11th centuries described important land donations and specified their limits, with workforce being granted to the sanctuaries in question (e.g., K. 257, 10th c. CE; *IC* IV, 140–150). It is possible that these second texts, which are highly administrative in nature, were intended to be read. However, it should be noted that these epigraphs more often emanate from high dignitaries wishing to legitimate their property holdings by obtaining for them the status of royal foundations, which exempted them from the tax due to the king. These inscriptions often commemorate a transaction, a gift or the outcome of a court case related to a land dispute (e.g., K. 1238, 11th c. CE);<sup>34</sup> therefore, they must be understood as a medium intended to signal and affirm this ownership.

In any case, covering the door jambs of a royal foundation with servants’ names is not the most relevant example in the case of Yaśovarman I, as it has



precedents as early as the pre-Angkorian period and will endure on the same scale until the middle of the 10th century with the inscriptions of Koh Ker.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the foundation stelae of *āśrama* present characteristics specific to the reign of this ruler that reveals innovations in the domain of propaganda.

## A Royal Alphabet

Heir to an alphabet borrowed from southern India during the phase of Indianization at least from the 5th century, the Khmer alphabet, of which the modern alphabet is the direct inheritor, achieved by the end of the 9th century a form that can be described as “classical” and was particularly polished at the time of Yaśovarman I.

Literacy seems to have held great importance to Yaśovarman I, as shown by the fact that his skills in writing are celebrated in his panegyric, which is unprecedented in earlier inscriptions (K. 323, st. LI, Barth 1893, 407, n. 3). The king thus undertook a unique experiment in the whole Angkorian history in introducing to Cambodia a new alphabet, also of Indian origin, but very different in appearance (Estève & Soutif 2010–2011, 354, fig. 9; see Figure 5.1 of this chapter), so much so that Auguste Barth and Abel Bergaigne described these characters as “foreign,” specifying that they belong to the category of “*nāgarī* alphabets from northern India.”<sup>36</sup> It may be noted that this script is very ornamental, the *akṣara*<sup>37</sup> comprising numerous florets making their decipherment rather tedious but giving them a singular aspect that is virtuosic and, above all, easily distinguishable from classical writing. In fact, Richard Salomon proposed that Yaśovarman’s innovative script is a variant of the “*siddhamātrkā*,”<sup>38</sup> an alphabet developed in North India between the end of the 6th and the 10th century CE.<sup>39</sup>

Auguste Barth noted that very similar characters were introduced into southern India and Java around the 7th–8th centuries CE.<sup>40</sup> It is therefore possible that they passed through one of these regions with which Cambodia had close trade relations. It is tempting to think that the king was following a fad, but we contend that his project was more ambitious. The king clearly wished to impose this new script throughout his territory, as witnessed in stanza L of stele K. 95, which, referring to this alphabet, tells us that “the king of the Kambujas with eyes of *ambujas* (lotus) drew these characters called Kambuja characters.”<sup>41</sup> An interesting fact is that this stanza is written in the “classical” alphabet, no doubt to ensure that it was well understood. In the same vein, the foundation stelae of Yaśovarman I’s great works carried out in the capital (the Eastern Baray and the four of the royal monasteries) are written entirely in this new alphabet. It may be assumed that the deciphering of the *siddhamātrkā* was mastered in this area. On the other hand, the stelae of its important foundations in the provinces were all digraphic inscriptions, which was perhaps also a means of facilitating its learning, apropos

to places devoted in particular to teaching.<sup>42</sup> The aim was therefore to impose a script that would be recognizable as his own and to emphasize, by means of these immediately identifiable “stone posters,” the major transition that constituted the reign of none other than the founder of the city of Angkor. This monarch had significantly extended the borders of the empire and was determined to control its frontiers by making himself not only known but also recognized, obviously as part of a campaign aimed at the cultural and political domination of all the provinces in the Angkorian realm.<sup>43</sup> This change was undoubtedly intended to leave a lasting mark on society. However, this would not be the case as Yaśovarman I’s innovative script was abandoned at the end of his reign.<sup>44</sup>

### Recognizable Epigraphs

In addition to introducing a new and particularly recognizable script, Yaśovarman I also associated his new form of writing with distinctive media and monuments. Whereas in the case of King Citrasena’s repetitive foundations, the texts were reproduced on a variety of media (pedestals, stelae, and even cave walls). Yaśovarman I’s epigraphs takes on an additional visual dimension through the use of specific media. In Angkor, tall square stelae of the same format signal the sovereign’s “public utility” foundations (Figure 5.2). For instance, they were placed at all four corners of the *baray*—such repetition was necessary for a hydraulic work of this size—and one for each at the four great monasteries, which specifies their obedience and rule. In the provinces, the format is very different—more adapted to the reproduction of digraphic texts. These are rectangular stelae, the size of which differ from one region to another—no doubt a consequence of different production workshops—but which remain very recognizable because of the sculpting of their top into a truncated accolade, which is otherwise very rare (Figure 5.3).

The aim of this king, as one can suppose, was to impose a writing that would be recognizable and identifiable as his own and to make it last. In any event, this writing was abandoned after this king. However, Yaśovarman I must have achieved his goal and shaped later social memory because the king Jayavarman VII would again follow this pattern, i.e., identical text on similar supports, for hospital foundation inscriptions at the end of the 12th—beginning of the 13th CE (Figure 5.4).

### Architectural Campaign

In order to establish the best “promotional campaign” possible, Yaśovarman I did not limit himself to this “poster campaign,” for he developed also an architectural trademark that expressed his reign. It seems that in the visual field, beyond the

shape of the stelae and the alphabet, he chose monumentality to distinguish his work. It is not a question here of adopting a particular style for the decoration of the buildings, which would not be specific to his reign. Indeed, the evolution of reliefs and in the round statues enabled Philippe Stern to propose a finetuned chronology of the analysis of Khmer art. Here we are in the presence of the creation of new types of buildings adapted to the king's projects.

The first of these types is still linked to epigraphs as he designed square shelters devoted exclusively to his steles. Naturally, the aim was to house them, especially the inscriptions located at the corners of the Eastern Baray where no other building could fulfil that purpose. But it was also a question of highlighting these miniature shrines. Indeed, the four *āśramas* of Angkor included such a building, located near the sanctuary housing the deity or deities within a space delimited by long rectangular wooden buildings that formed a sort of enclosure with openings at the corners. However, it was the stele shelter and not the deity's sanctuary that was placed in the axis of the main entrance to the east,<sup>45</sup> the sanctuary being set back slightly to the south (Figure 5.5). The inscription was therefore essential and was given pride of place in these capital monasteries in order to commemorate its founder as effectively as possible. Moreover, excavations carried out by the authors of this article in these monasteries have shown that their sanctuary also follows the same plan, which moves away from the traditional scheme of the square sanctuary to adopt that of a rectangular building, 25 meters long, oriented east-west and comprising 2 rooms, probably to install the divine entourage of the main god placed in the central room.<sup>46</sup> This plan is rather atypical and can once again be directly associated with this reign.

Now, while it was thought that Yašovarman I's use of stele shelters was limited to the monasteries located in Angkor,<sup>47</sup> it has recently been proven that the foundation stelae of the *āśramas* in the provinces were also placed in a shelter installed near an identical rectangular sanctuary, and that they were arranged in an equivalent position, but on a north-south axis, perpendicular to the main entrance of the temple to which they were offered (Figure 5.6).<sup>48</sup> All these choices were clearly aimed at giving real visibility and recognition to the king's work.

Between the specificities of his inscriptions and the addition of new buildings to the architectural repertoire of ancient Cambodia, Yašovarman I broke with tradition and created a trademark for himself. This trademark had several levels of reading, and it guaranteed immediate recognition of his foundations, his presence, and his power.

This architectural and graphic campaign can be compared to the corporate symbolism displayed by the Caesars and more precisely by Julius Caesar himself as discussed by Thomson.<sup>49</sup> He was a true master propagandist in his understanding of meaningful symbols and the need to disseminate such symbols of power

and sophistication as a means of converting subject populations to the Roman way of life. The Greeks already knew that arts and representation (such as sculpture, poetry, architecture, music, and theatre) could project an image of sophistication, but the Caesars skilfully expanded and mass-produced this means of communication in order to successfully convey state ideology over a long period to a very large area.<sup>50</sup> The process of expressing (and imposing) the force of Angkor's king and kingdom through architecture, art, literature, and subjugation, while at the same time paying allegiance to the great local deities, powerfully codified a corporate symbolism and projected the image of the king and state as all-powerful and omnipresent. We establish another even earlier parallel; in Taylor's analysis<sup>51</sup> he reminds us of the Egyptian Pharaohs, who were among the first to recognize the power of public architecture on a grand scale (the Sphinx and the pyramids) to showcase prestige and dynastic legitimacy. In addition, he adds that they "devised their own unique, personalized style of propaganda that embodied a gradual shift that occurred from war being fought in the name of a god to war being fought in the name of the king, often as the embodiment of 'the living god'." It appears that we can apply a similar ideology to Khmer kings: the buildings they erected were mainly temples and houses of gods, but as they displayed the very special relationship that existed between kingship and sacredness, they participated to the creation of a personalized style of propaganda fusing politics with religion.

## CONCLUSION

Did Yaśovarman I succeed in his endeavor to impose his trademark? Considering that Yaśovarman I's attempt at imposing a new script did not succeed, should one consider his innovations a failure?

In fact, even the illiterate would have recognized Yaśovarman's unique style and could date his foundations and inscriptions to his reign. One does not need to be a palaeography expert, nor to have knowledge of the evolution of the graphemes; it is enough to observe. By this specificity, this king is unique. Of course, it is possible that this is linked to the difficulty of reading this new alphabet, or to the fact that apparently it was reserved during his reign for scholars writing in Sanskrit, depriving him, knowing that the administrative texts were written in Khmer, of a wider means of dissemination. However, that it did not endure is perhaps also a consequence of the fact that the objective became so attached to this key reign of Angkorian history that its successors endeavoured to distance themselves from it by returning to the classical alphabet.

However, if Yaśovarman I's alphabet did not survive his reign, a similar usage was adopted by the highly centralized regime of Jayavarman VII (r. 1182–1218? CE), during the so-called Bayon period (end of 12th–13th centuries CE). This

time, it is not a question of the appearance of a new alphabet, but of a very clear evolution of the classical characters that assumed a notably angular form. It should be noted that this evolution goes hand in hand with an increase in royal inscriptions in Sanskrit to the detriment of epigraphs commissioned by dignitaries.

Moreover, as we have pointed out, this usage was far from the only means to leave a mark, whether via the content of the text, the form of their shelters and their strategic placement, or the foundation of new types of buildings characteristic of his reign. It seems that this king's objective was emulated, as the methods were subsequently repeated, notably with other monastic foundation campaigns.<sup>52</sup> For instance, the *virāśrama*, undertaken during the reign of Sūryavarman I is particularly interesting in this respect since here again specific buildings were created and those identified to date were founded in sanctuaries already containing an *āśrama* of Yaśovarman.<sup>53</sup> Other kings favoured the foundation of so-called “stop-over” sanctuaries (*temples d'étape*) along the roads that criss-crossed the empire.<sup>54</sup> However, it was not until the Bayon period under the reign of Jayavarman VII that repetitive royal foundations were made on the same scale with the establishment of numerous hospitals and fire halls. The sanctuaries of these two buildings were again built on the same plan, and the hospitals were also marked by inscriptions. Here again, we can only observe that Jayavarman VII used the same media, and even more extensively when we think of the 102 hospitals and multiple fire houses he founded in the main cities of the empire and along its many roads.<sup>55</sup>

These two kings are among the most famous rulers of the Angkorian civilisation, the first having given his name to the city, Yaśodharapura, today's Angkor that remained the centre of royal power for most of the Angkor period, and the second having pushed the borders of the empire to its maximum extent. It goes without saying that this celebrity testifies to their power and their deeds, but in the face of so much evidence of a desire to communicate and to place signs that are still identifiable today of their control over the whole of their territory, one can think that the staging of their work, written or monumental, contributed and still contributes to this celebrity.

Their fame may be due to the profusion of their foundation. However, it seems to us that the means used to remind people about them and their mastery of the tools of propaganda have largely supported their reputation and allowed them to be perpetuated even until today.

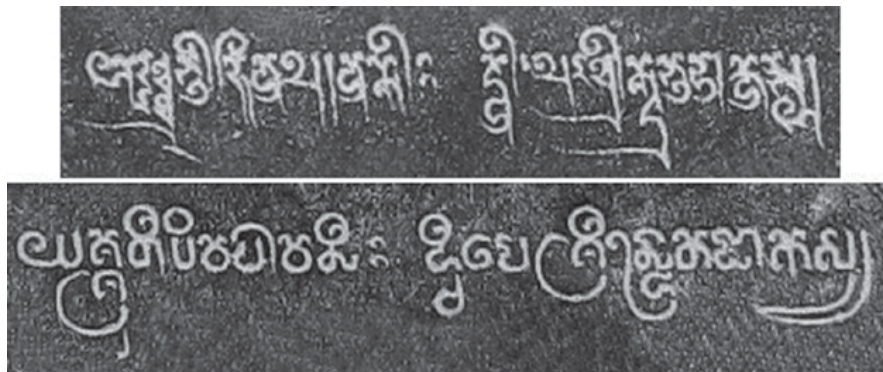


Figure 5.1: Comparison of the two types of characters of the digraphic inscription K. 110, in stanza XXXII (end of the 9th c. CE; rubbing EFEO n. 744 ; © EFEO).



Figure 5.2: Foundation steles from the āśramas of Angkor (from left to right: K. 290, K. 701, K. 1228; end of the 9th c. CE; © EFEO).

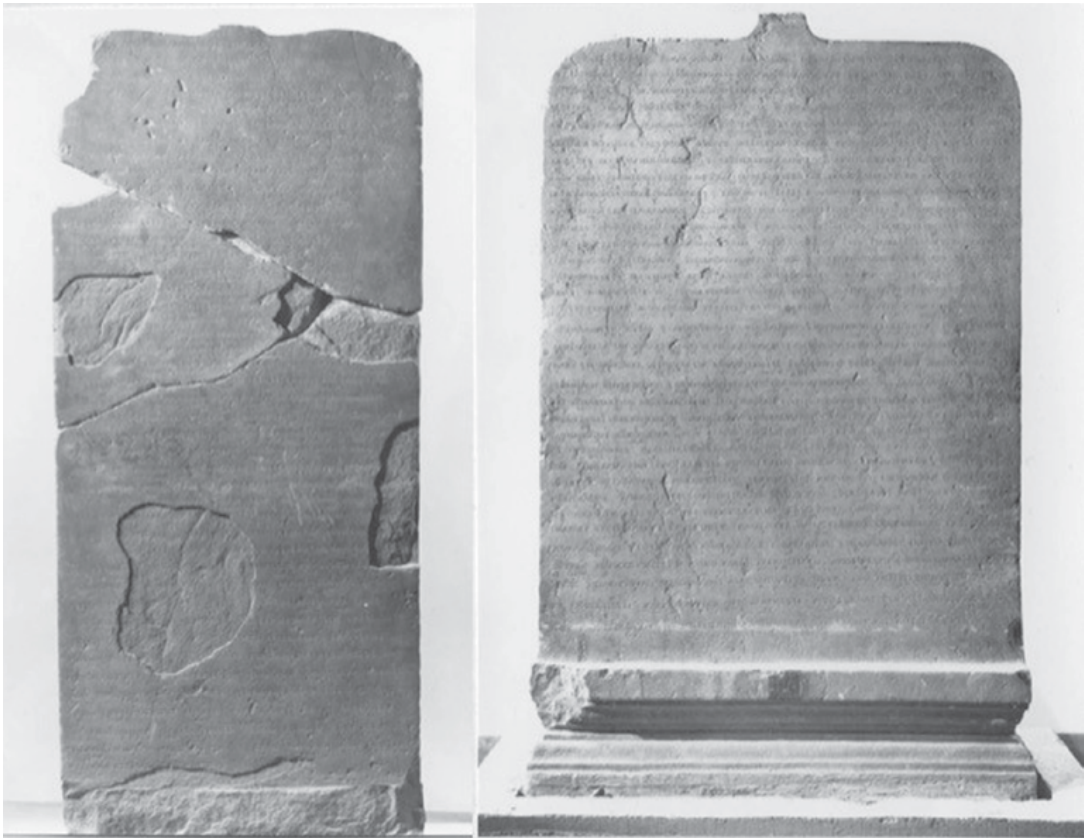


Figure 5.3: Digraphic foundation steles of the province āśramas (from left to right: K. 223, K. 95; end of the 9th c. CE ; © EFEO).

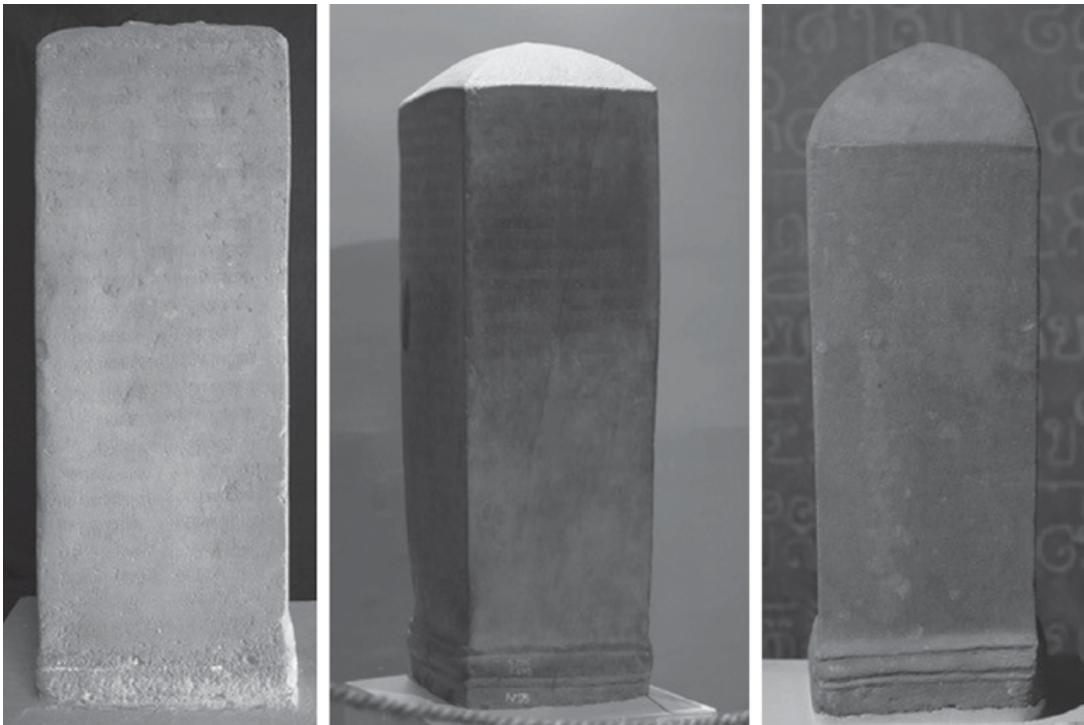


Figure 5.4: Hospital foundation steles from Jayavarman VII (from left to right: K. 209, K. 435, K. 537; 12th-13th c. CE; © EFEO).



Figure 5.5: 3D rendering of Angkor Yaśodharāśramas' perennial buildings (realization: BBC; © Mission Yaśodharāśrama).

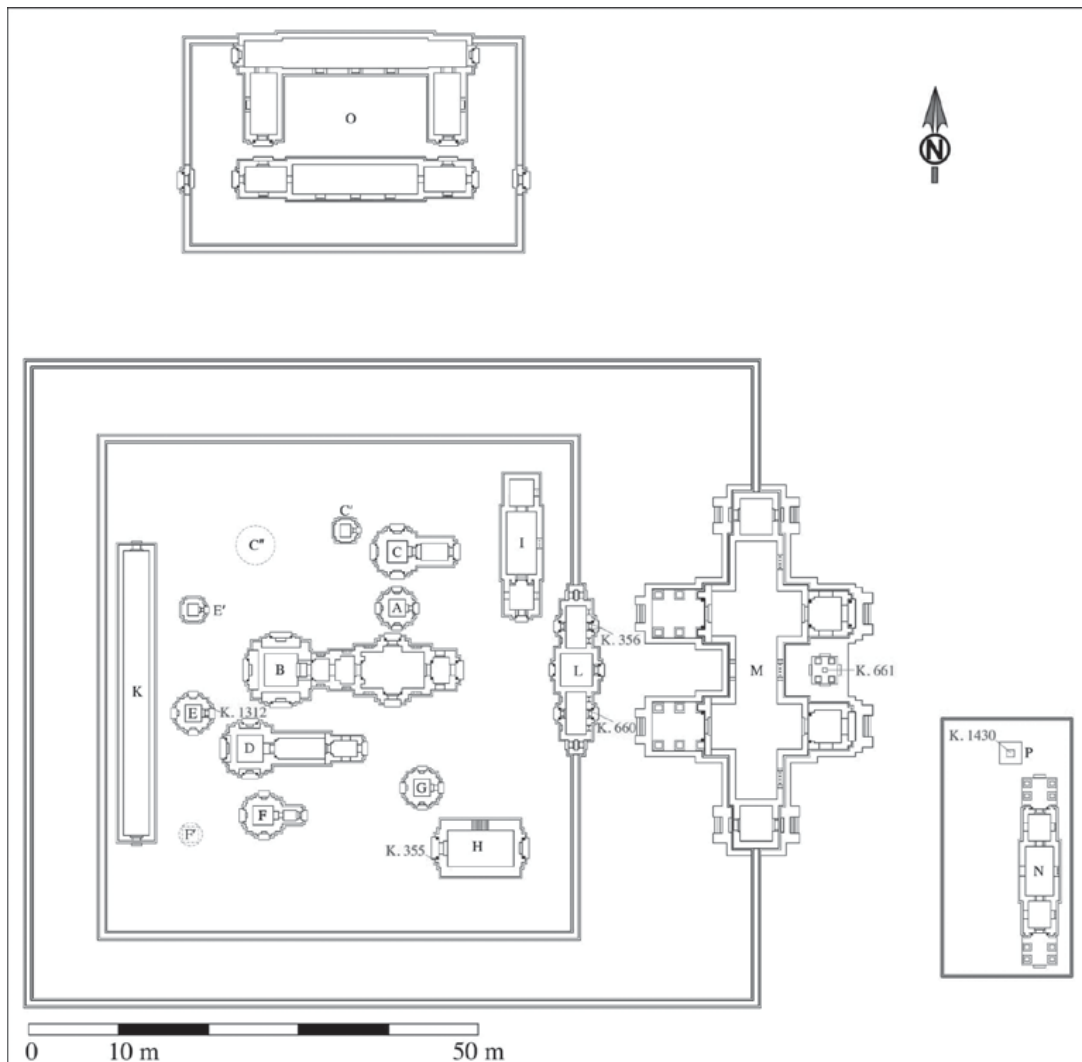


Figure 5.6: Prasat Khna: Overall plan and location of the perennial buildings of the āśrama of Yaśovarman I. (© Yaśodharāśrama Research Programme, after Parmentier 1939, pl. XXVII, Bruguier & Lacroix 2013, p. 135, plan 19 and Soutif et al. 2020).



## NOTES

1. This article is part of the CORPUS DES INSCRIPTIONS KHMÈRES research programme (CIK; <https://cik.efeo.fr/>; Soutif 2018), which focuses on the study of inscriptions from ancient Cambodia and related endeavours to continue and correct the inventory first compiled by George Cœdès (*IC VIII*) and continued by Claude Jacques (1971). This programme forms part of the DHARMA project (<https://dharma.hypotheses.org/>) which is funded by the European Research Council (ERC; European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, grant agreement n° 809994). We would like to thank Edward Swenson of the University of Toronto for his corrections and comments.
2. See Claude Jacques, *L'histoire enfouie, Angkor et le Cambodge du XIIIe au XIXe siècle*, 75, for such a point of view, and Saveros Pou, *Nouvelles inscriptions du Cambodge, tomes II et III*, 14, for *contra*.
3. This is the case for the Angkor period (9th–15th CE), which is our focus. The Pāli language appears around 12th–13th centuries but remains sporadic until the post-Angkor period.
4. In rare examples, Sanskrit and Khmer inscriptions narrate the same topic but in most instances they navigate two different realities (Julia Estève, *Étude critique des phénomènes de syncrétisme religieux*, 308–331).
5. It goes without saying that we are employing 'marketing' in this article as an analogy since marketing as it plays out in the modern world, i.e. advertising commodities and services to ensure profit and perpetual consumption, has no direct equivalent in the preindustrial world. For the use of the concept of propaganda for a premodern society, see E. Levy's *Propaganda and the Jesuit Baroque* (2004), and J. Marcus' *Mesoamerican Writing Systems* (1992).
6. Sheldon Pollock, *The Sanskrit Cosmopolis; Language of the Gods in the World of Men*.
7. Emmanuel Francis, *Le discours royal dans l'Inde du Sud ancienne. Inscriptions et monuments pal-lava (IVe–IXe siècles)*, 470–482.
8. Dharma can be defined as "usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty" but also as "nature, character, peculiar condition or essential quality, property, mark" (M. Monier-Williams (*s.v.*)).
9. Sheldon Pollock, *Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, 119.
10. In 1971, Paul Veyne wondered, in *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, how it was possible to claim to produce scientific statements (in the sense of exact sciences) in history: history could, according to him, at best produce "intrigues", that is to say, narratives producing intelligibility "un mélange très humain et très peu "scientifique" de causes matérielles, de fins et de hasard ; une tranche de vie, en un mot, que l'historien découpe à son gré et où les faits ont leurs liaisons objectives et leur importance relative". (Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, 46).
11. Paul Lacombe, *De l'histoire considérée comme science*.
12. For a remarkable analysis of Royal Eulogies as World History, see Ali's article on Copper-plate Inscription in Cōḷa India (Ali 2000).
13. Enrico Carontini, *Une raison qui incline, mais qui ne nécessite pas*, 10.
14. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 3.
15. As Jowett and O'Donnell argue: "Both persuasion and propaganda tend to produce messages of *resonance*; that is, the recipients do not perceive the themes of messages to be imposed on them from an outside authority to which they are required or committed to defer. Rather, the

- recipients perceive the anchors on which the message is based as coming from within themselves” (Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 38).
16. Twenty such inscriptions have been found to date in Laos, Thailand, and the Kratie region of central Cambodia, three areas that likely delimited Mahendravarman’s area of influence to the east, north and northeast of Sambor Prei Kuk, his capital.
  17. Several inscriptions from his reign (K. 333, K. 335 and K. 337) mention, for example, prisoners of war (kh. *psok* ~ *phsok*) from Śambhupura and Tryambakapura (Dominique Soutif, *Organisation religieuse et profane du temple khmer du VIIe au XIIIe siècle*, 162, 492–493), suggesting that some areas resisted Citrasena’s encroachment at least at the beginning of his reign. Furthermore, an important testimony to the integration of the inhabitants of the controlled areas is the disappearance, during the 9th century, of a distinction between Khmer and other ethnicities in the lists of servants of the gods (e.g., K. 607, *ibid.*, 412).
  18. Abel Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*, 355, 413; George Cœdès, *La stèle de Tép Pranam, Études Cambodgiennes*; and Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif, *Les Yaśodharāśrama, marqueurs d’empire et bornes sacrées*.
  19. Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*. The concerned kingdoms are: the Môn realm, the Khmer realm, the Cham kingdom, and the kingdoms of Java and Bali, that all emerged as centralized states at the beginning of the Common Era.
  20. “That is to say, a region is brahmanized when its population, or its rulers, accept Brahmins as the most eminent members of society. This population, or these rulers, are not so much converted to a different religion: no converts are made to Vedic religion, or to any other specific religion promulgated by the Brahmins. No, these populations or rulers are made to accept a different vision of society, in which Brahmins are highest because they have access to the supernatural” (Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*, 54–55).
  21. Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif, *Les Yaśodharāśrama, marqueurs d’empire et bornes sacrées*, 339.
  22. B. Anderson has highlighted the fact that a nation is “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.” (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5–6). The fact that he traced nationalism to the diffusion of newspapers, which promote the consciousness of a community, somewhat echoes the importance of writings in our case-study.
  23. Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 7.
  24. Claude Jacques, *Koh ker temples et inscriptions*, 34.
  25. George Cœdès, *Études Cambodgiennes*, 329.
  26. George Cœdès, *IC IV*: 231.
  27. This inscription is a work in progress by authors A. Griffiths, J. Estève, I. Lowman, L. Roche and B. Vincent.
  28. Richard H. Shultz and Roy Godson, *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy*, 41.
  29. Jacques Revel, *Ressources narratives et connaissance historique*, 35.
  30. Abel Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*, 432–503.
  31. Abel Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*, 501–502.
  32. Huiling Ding, *Confucius’s Virtue-Centered Rhetoric*.
  33. Dominique Soutif, *Organisation religieuse et profane du temple khmer du VIIe au XIIIe siècle*, 449–540.
  34. Arlo Griffiths and Dominique Soutif, *Autour des terres de Loṅ Śrī Viṣṇu et de sa famille*.
  35. Claude Jacques, *Koh ker temples et inscriptions*.

36. Abel Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*, 347, 349, 412.
37. *Akṣara* designates here a character representing one syllable.
38. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 156.
39. Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy*, 39.
40. Abel Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*, 349–351.
41. Abel Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*, 368, 376.
42. Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif, *Les Yaśodharāśrama, marqueurs d'empire et bornes sacrées*, 342; Socheat Chea, *Saugatāśrama*, 83. Concerning these characters, see also Abel Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*, 402, 411; Saveros Pou, *Nouvelles inscriptions du Cambodge*, 27–28; and Dominique Soutif, *Organisation religieuse et profane du temple khmer du VIIe au XIIIe siècle*, 452, ill. 225: CXIV.
43. Abel Bergaigne, *Inscriptions sanscrites de Campā et du Cambodge*, 347; Julia Estève and Dominique Soutif, *Les Yaśodharāśrama, marqueurs d'empire et bornes sacrées*.
44. Two notable exceptions should be noted the first being the Preah Vihear stela, K. 382, which dates from the 10th century. Although the characters are slightly different, they are nonetheless the same type of characters and thus perhaps a desire to point out that the construction of this shrine was initiated by Yaśovarman I (Auguste Barth, *Inscriptions sanscrites du Cambodge*, 525 and *IC VI*, 270). The second example is stranger, since it is an unpublished inscription from the Battambang region, K. 1353, which is dated 893 śaka (971–972 CE) and repeats the founding text of Banteay Srei—with some spelling variants—but which has lines in this alphabet at the beginning and end of the inscription. One wonders whether this stele is not linked to a school of engravers who were trained to reproduce a particularly famous text and the complex characters of the *siddhamātrkā* of Yaśovarman.
45. Socheat Chea et al., to be published.
46. Dominique Soutif et al., *Rapports annuels*.
47. Generally speaking, this type of building had little success during the following reigns, and it was not until the reign of Jayavarman VII that it was once again given pride of place by housing the inscriptions placed at the four corners of his capital, Angkor Thom.
48. Soutif et al. *Rapports annuels*. (esp. 2019 and 2020).
49. Oliver Thomson, *Easily Led: A History of Propaganda*, 106–112.
50. Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*, 106–112.
51. Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*, 23.
52. Socheat Chea et al. [to be published].
53. Socheat Chea et al. [to be published].
54. Mitch Hendrickson, *People Around the Houses with Fire; Historic Routes to Angkor*.
55. Mitch Hendrickson, *People Around the Houses with Fire; Historic Routes to Angkor*; Christophe Pottier and Rethy Kieth Chhem, *À la découverte d'un hôpital angkorien*, 170. It should be noted that the fire houses were not marked by inscriptions.

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# Index

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## A

- Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi 162
- Acts of the Apostles 262
- Acts of John 262
- Ad Gentes* 63
- adolescents 18
- Adonis 222
- Advertising/advertisement 5, 234. *See also*
- religious advertising
  - and Durkheimian theory 4
  - and the ethic of choice in India 237
  - and Peter Berger's secularization thesis 79
  - and propaganda 3, 146
  - as a form of religious competition 81
  - as a result of the contractual nature of *Samgha*-laity relationship and the overly counter-intuitive nature of Dhamma 144
  - basic dilemma of 30
  - Chaitanya mission 5
  - Falun Gong in Slovakia 49–50
  - forms of 3, 146
  - in Buddhism, the scholarly view of 130
  - in the preindustrial era 123
  - function of Buddhist monks 143, 149–150
  - function of Buddha statues 147
  - indirect 5
  - prevailing over propaganda in Thailand 146–147
- Advertising Standards Authority 79
- Ahmadnagar 87, 89
- Alandi 88
- Alexander the Great 211
- alphabet 21, 119, 113, 115, 118, 125
- Amritsar 236, 237
- Angkor/Angkorian 23, 108, 109–110, 116, 119
- apocalypticism 166
- Apphianus 266

Apuleius of Madauros 262  
 architecture/architectural 7, 114, 116–118,  
 213, 214, 220  
 art 114, 117  
 Association of Spiritual Love  
 Awareness 18  
 astrology 130, 144, 148  
*āśrama* 83, 113, 115, 117, 119  
*ātman* 131  
*attā/anattā* 132, 134, 136, 138, 139  
*avadāna (apadāna)* 140

## B

Balaji/Hanuman 239–244  
 Balakhilya Das 19  
 Bangkok 60, 144, 146, 148, 245–254  
 Baray/*baray* 113, 115–117  
 base art 130  
 believing, belonging, behaving 171–174  
 Bhairava 246, 249  
 bhakti 6, 84, 85, 89, 99  
   bhakti hagiographers 86  
   bhakti performance 84–86, 89–91, 92,  
   94, 100, 102  
   expressed as sharing 92  
*bhikkhu* 130, 133, 141–142  
*bhikkhuni* 130, 137, 142  
 billboards 80, 144, 146, 147  
 Brahmanism 61, 110, 137  
*brāhmaṇas* 107, 110  
 Brahmins 108, 124, 134, 137, 242, 246  
 brand/branding 3, 4–5, 7, 114, 129–130,  
 141–142, 145, 149, 150, 175, 177, 251,  
 258, 260  
   the *Samgha* 14, 143  
 Buddhāsa Bhikkhu 148  
 Buddhism 38, 48, 110, 129, 130, 136, 137,  
 144, 145, 147  
   Buddhism of wats 143  
   Buddhism and Hinduism (Brahminism)  
   model 76, 247  
   Burmese Buddhism 145

  cannot satisfy the desire or material  
   benefits 245  
   Chinese Buddhism 35, 51  
   commercial Buddhism  
   (*putthaphanit*) 143  
   Thai Buddhism 60, 69, 70, 146  
 Buddhist marketing in Thailand 143–150  
 Buddhist millenarianism 245  
 Buddhist monastic rules of  
   conduct 137, 143  
 Burma, Burmese 12, 145  
 Butler, Chris (Jagad Guru  
   Siddhaswarupananda Paramahansa) 18

## C

Calakmul 217, 218, 223–225  
 Caliphate 162–165  
 Cambodia 23, 76, 107–124  
 capitalism and religion 236, 237, 245, 252  
 Carp, Richard M. 11  
 Catholic 13, 66, 67, 61, 69, 70, 72  
 Catholic Church 15, 16, 58, 59, 60,  
 68, 73, 75  
   evangelization according to 61–65  
 Central Statistics Office of Poland, the 15  
*ch'ulel* 217  
 Chaahk 218–221, 223–225, 227  
 Cham 111, 112, 124  
 charismatic founder 35, 37, 42  
 charismatics 233, 236, 238, 244, 246, 253  
 Charlie Hebdo 14  
 Chinese Falun Gong 48  
 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day  
   Saints, the 263–264  
 Church of Scientology 16  
 Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster 16  
 Clear Wisdom network 46  
 Commodification of religion 3, 143, 236,  
 237, 238, 251  
 communicating  
   the divine, 80, 84, 86, 88, 98  
   religion 79

communication 2, 3, 6, 80–82, 85–86, 136, 142, 228, 235  
 complexity of 131  
 hub 26  
 hub for Falun Gong practitioners 47  
 modern technologies of 146, 174–175, 186–188  
 printed 82  
 skills 81  
 turn 81  
 conceptual proliferation (*papañca*) 132–134  
 conspiracy mentality 177  
 conspiracy theory 177, 179  
 cosmopolis 108, 109, 114  
 counter-intuitivity  
   of the *Dhamma* 7, 130–138, 144, 150  
   the theory of 130–131  
 cultivation practice 51, 35, 36, 37, 40, 45

## D

Daoism *see* Taoism  
 Denmark, Danish 14  
 dependent origination  
   (*patīcasamuppāda*) 138, 139  
*Devanagari, nāgarī* 21, 23, 91, 115  
 devotion 99, 245, 251, 252, 254 *see*  
   *also* bhakti  
   as commodity 239, 240  
 Dhamma/Dharma (the Buddha's  
   teaching) 1, 7, 130, 155, 156  
   Dhamma studies (*pariyatti*) 148  
   Dhamma talk 149  
*dhammas* (phenomena) 132, 154  
*dharma* (law, order, principle, practice,  
   conduct, duty, "religion") 85, 100, 102,  
   108, 112–113, 123  
 digraphic 113, 115, 116  
 disciplinary analysis 19, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29  
 disinformation 112  
 divine possession 248  
 doctrinal and imagistic religions 145, 157  
 Dulles, Avery R. 58, 72, 73

Dumuzi 222  
 Dziennik Łódzki 23

## E

early Christianity 257–258, 262–263, 264  
*Ecclesia in Asia* 64, 65, 70, 71  
 economy of religion 30  
 Egypt/Egyptian 7, 117, 118, 178, 212, 225,  
   226, 227  
 Eight-Section Brocade Qigong 40, 52  
 Eknath 89  
 El Mirador 219, 221–225, 226, 227  
 emotion/emotional 1, 41, 73, 85, 86, 92,  
   99, 139, 141, 145, 157, 171, 172, 175,  
   178, 179, 180, 182, 183, 187  
 epigraphs 107, 108, 114, 116, 117, 119  
 eschatology 136, 137, 141, 166, 167, 183,  
   226, 227  
 ethics  
   and practical ends 169  
   Buddhist ethics 137  
   business ethics in the United States 236  
   religion as the basis of 176  
 Eusebius 8, 261, 264, 266, 267  
 Evangelical Church of the Augsburg  
   Confession, The 15  
*Evangelii Gaudium* 65  
*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 63  
 experience 89, 90–94, 98, 102, 133  
   emotional experience as a source of  
     charisma and group unity 41  
   ineffable 136  
   of personal identity 28, 138  
   sharing the ultimate experience 85–89  
   ultimate 81–83  
 extremists 14, 167

## F

Falun Dafa 35–41, 43, 47, 48, 51  
 Falun Dafa Information Center 47

Falun Gong in Slovakia 49, 50  
 fire ceremony 243  
 fire halls 119  
 fire houses 119, 125  
 five aggregates (*pañcakkhandhā*) 138  
 five precepts (*pañcasīlāni*) 137, 140, 155  
 foreign fighters 166–167, 182–188  
 Francis, Pope 65, 71

## G

game theory 176, 192  
 Ganesha 246–247, 249–253  
 Gauranga 26  
 global capitalism and neoliberalism 234–  
 237, 244–245, 252, 254  
 god G I 217  
 god G III 217  
 Golden Ass *see* Metamorphoses  
 Górka, Anna E. 28  
 Gospels 8, 61–62, 259–261

## H

hagiography 43, 45, 84, 86, 102  
 Hanuman *see* Balaji  
 Harvey, John 13, 19  
 Hauron 212  
 Heracles 211  
 Hindu  
 cosmology 240  
 deities and royal ceremonies 246  
 radicals 180  
 renunciant tradition 141, 142  
 Shaka Hindu calendar 87  
 triumphalism 238  
 the word 84  
 Hindu-Muslim divide 83  
 Hinduism  
 and market economy 236, 238, 241,  
 252, 254

and Vedic ceremonies 243  
 lacking unity 84  
 historiography 84, 112  
 history 112  
 holy water 240  
 Horus 222, 227  
 hospitals 119  
 Hun Ajaw 218–222, 227  
 Hun Hunahpu 222  
 Hunahpu 218–222, 224, 227  
 hybrids 85  
 identity  
 advertiser's identity hidden 5  
 caste 99  
 numerical and qualitative 131  
 of the Church 63  
 personal 4, 138, 183–184  
 political 181  
 religious 13, 80–81, 85, 86–87, 88, 89,  
 93–94, 162, 168, 170, 171–174  
 social 4  
 spiritual 18  
 transgender 251  
 Thai 60, 70  
 the internet as the basis of 46

## I

ideology 57, 109, 118, 129, 184, 215, 226, 227  
 ISIS 163–167, 189  
 neo-liberal 7, 130, 150  
 Ignatius, the letters of 8, 264–267  
 imagistic religions *see* doctrinal and  
 imagistic religions  
 inculturation 65, 71, 73  
 India 23, 79–106, 109, 110, 115, 136,  
 175, 227, 230, 231–235, 237–241, 244,  
 246–248  
 Indianization 108, 110, 115  
 Indianness in Thai religion 250  
 inscriptions 7, 12, 107, 108–109, 110–116,  
 117, 118–119, 123, 124, 125

International Society for Krishna  
 Consciousness 18  
 Iraq 162, 163, 169, 175, 177, 179, 186, 187,  
 189, 191  
 Iraqi Kurdistan 185  
 Islamic State (ISIS) 162, 164, 168, 169,  
 174, 185, 187, 188–189, 192  
 and apocalyptic visions 166, 192  
 and moral mission 164  
 and literal and selective approach to the  
 Hadith 164  
 as the true successors of the Wahhabi  
 movement 164  
 the ideology of, *see ideology*  
 the origins of 162, 163  
 republishing the work of Muhammad  
 ibn Abd al-Wahhab 165  
 religious motivation for joining 168,  
 174–176, 185  
 the propaganda of 179, 186–188  
 Itzamna 219  
 Ixbalanque 218, 221, 222, 224  
 Izapa 217, 218, 220, 222

## J

Jackson, Peter A. 244–245, 247  
 Jagad Guru Siddhaswarupananda  
 Paramahansa *see* Butler, Chris  
 Jainas 134, 139  
 Jedi Order 31  
 Jehovah's Witnesses 15, 16  
 Jesus 1, 13, 41, 58, 61, 63–65, 67, 69, 76,  
 162, 167, 252–256, 258  
 jihad  
 leadership of 166  
 Jihadi Salafism 163, 184, 187  
 violent jihad 164, 184  
 Jnanadev 89, 91, 101  
 Jowett, Garth and Victoria O'Donnell 57,  
 73, 109, 111, 123–124, 139–140, 234,  
 241, 252–253  
 Jyllands-Posten 14

## K

Kabir 91, 101  
 Kali 246–247, 248, 249, 250, 251  
 Kaminaljuyu 216  
 kamma/karma/*karman* 51–52, 133–134,  
 137, 148  
 as a law (*niyama*) 134  
 as volition 134  
 eliminating negative karma 37, 38–40,  
 130, 147  
 in Upaniṣadic tradition 133  
 the direct implications of suppressed 140  
 the directive power of kamma among  
 Thais 148  
 the psychological indeterminacy of 134  
 the teaching of, not for mass  
 consumption 140  
 Katowice 17, 24, 26  
 Kazimirowski, Edmund 13  
 Khmer 107, 109, 111, 114, 118, 123, 124  
 kirtan, *kīrtan* 26, 28, 88  
 Kitiarsa, Pattana 236, 244–247, 250, 252  
 Kowalska, Faustina 13, 32  
 Kraków 17, 19–23, 26–29

## L

*laddu* (consecrated food) 243, 244, 254  
 language 109, 131, 131, 132, 189, 190  
 “gods’ language” (*phasa thep*) 248  
 learned helplessness 180–182  
 Libiszowska-Żółtkowska, Maria 15  
 Łódź 23, 32  
 Lotus Sūtra 135  
*Lumen Gentium* 62–63

## M

maharaj 89, 90, 93, 94  
 Maharashtra 80, 87, 90, 92, 98  
 Mahāyāna 136, 142

- Maize God 222–227
- Małopolskie 17
- maṅgala 108
- mantra 21, 23, 25, 26, 28, 185, 242
- marketing
  - broadening the concept of 3, 4
  - employed as analogy 123
  - persistence of religion without
    - marketing as an open question 83
- martyrdom 8, 263–265, 267, 270
- Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp 8, 264–267
- Martyrs of Palestine 265, 266
- Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma) 253
- material
  - culture 4, 11, 80
  - studies 13
  - turn 12
- Matwiil 219
- Matzanel 215
- Mayer, Jean-François 16
- McGovern, Nathan 246
- meditation 133, 134
  - as mindful observation (*sati*, *vipassanā*) 133
  - as the source of charisma 142, 145
  - in Falun Gong 37
  - morality as the prerequisite of 137
- Meditation and Self-actualisation School 21, 23, 25, 26, 29, 31
- mediums 236, 239–242, 248
  - contrasted with charismatics 251
- Mehandipur 239–241
- Metamorphoses 262
- military 76, 108, 111, 148, 166, 167, 178, 185, 192, 193
- millenarian movements in China 41
- miracles 8, 88, 234, 235, 237, 245, 246, 266–269
  - as propagating technique 262, 263
  - disregarded as testimony 262
  - in Acts and Paul 260, 261
  - miracle deities 7, 238, 240, 245
  - outside of New Testament 261, 262
- miracles 234, 238, 239, 245–247, 249, 253, 254
- modernity 240, 241, 254
  - as final era of Hindu cosmological circle 240, 245, 246
  - as hybrid 85, 160, 244
  - dealing with the challenges of 18, 25
- monastery 2, 6, 12, 110, 113, 115–117, 119, 130, 143, 145, 146
- monks
  - Buddhist monk as model public persona 143
  - Buddhist monks 1, 2, 7, 70, 76, 136, 138–142, 144, 145, 146, 149 see also *bhikkhu*
  - Eastern warrior 183
- Moodie, Deonnie 236, 240
- motivation 148, 149, 167–174, 176, 182–185, 241, 268
- Muslim(s) 165, 167
  - and Sharia 168
  - and the 9/11 attack 178
  - and victimhood see victimhood
  - identity 89, 93
  - organizations called “firms” 98
  - participating in bhakti culture 86
  - resentment see resentment
  - Suni 174
  - victims of pogrom 180
- mythology 6, 108, 133, 211, 212, 218–220, 222–224, 226, 227

## N

- Nanda, Meera 237–238, 241–243
- national traits 181, 182, 147, 148
- Native Polish Church 16
- nature and nurture 181, 182
- New Age life coaches 244, 246, 247, 251, 252
- New Age/New Spirituality 16, 244
- new religious movements, NRM, NRMs 16–19, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29, 30, 41

New Testament 58, 61, 62, 67, 259  
 Niebuhr, Reinhold 139

nun

Faustina Kowalska 13  
 Buddhist 7, 130, 142 *see also bhikkhuni*

## O

Orient, oriental 15, 21, 23, 26, 28  
 Osiris 222, 225–227  
 overly counter-intuitive *see* counter-intuitivity

## P

propagating the 138–141, 150  
     side-lining the aspects of 140–141  
     the realization of 145  
 paddler gods 218  
 Paithan 89  
 Palenque 217, 219  
 Pandharpur 89, 91, 92, 98, 101  
 panegyrics 86, 113, 115  
 Paul, Apostle 8, 258, 260–262, 268  
 People's Republic of China 36, 37, 40, 45–47, 50  
 performance 238, 241, 243, 254 *see also*  
     bhakti performance  
 persecution 36, 37, 45, 47, 49, 50, 60, 169, 263  
     Great Persecution 266, 267  
 persuasion 3, 113, 123, 140, 240, 254, 265  
 Petersen, Melody 234–235  
 pharmaceutical companies 8, 233–237, 243, 254  
 pharmaceutical forward-looking  
     statements 233–235, 238, 242–244, 249–253, 254–255  
 Poland 5  
     New Religious Movements in 14–17, 19, 32  
     self-development organizations in 28

Polycarp 264–266

poster

as a form of indirect marketing 21, 23, 30  
 poster campaign 116  
 manifestation of the bhakti-performance's presence 90  
 combining spoken word and print media 90

Prabhupada, Bhaktivedanta Swami 28

praśasti 108

Principal Bird Deity (PBD) 219

producer-consumer/client-like relations 30, 142

promotional campaign 116

propaganda

and Alexander the Great 211  
 and its audience 147–149, 177, 253  
 and Egyptian Pharaohs 118  
 and epigraphy 114  
 and eulogies 109  
 and evangelization 6, 57–59  
 and forward-looking statements *see*  
     pharmaceutical forward-looking  
     statements  
 and Li Hongzhi 42–46  
 and miracles and martyrdom, 8, 265, 268  
 and miracle-makers 245–249  
 and “necessary illusions,” 139  
 and religion 129–130, 150  
 and religious stabilization 1  
 and religious *teaching* 7, 36, 130, 138, 139–141  
 and “resonance” 123  
 and “skilful means” (*upāyakośalla*) 139  
 and social cohesion 109–111  
 and spectacular performances 7, 8  
 and *śakti* 108, 111  
 and the Angkorian arena 108  
 and the Chinese government 37, 51  
 negating the propaganda value of martyrdom 265  
 war between Falun Gong adherents and the Chinese government 36

- FalunDafa.org. 47–48  
 the ISIS, *see* ISIS  
 in Maya art 212–214, 223–224, 225–226  
 of anticipation *see* pharmaceutical forward-looking statements  
 the function of 3, 109, 111, 140, 146–147, 234, 237, 238, 240, 252, 258, 263  
 simplification and limited interactivity as the two characteristics of 140  
*Propaganda Fide* *see* Sacred Congregation for Propagating the Faith  
 prosperity religion 245, 247  
 public, the 84–86, 88, 91, 94, 143, 167, 233–237, 239, 240  
 public  
   architecture 118  
   image of mediums 247  
   religiosity 237–239, 242, 245, 254  
   nature of Jesus’s sign-making 259  
   sphere 147, 214, 220, 237  
   utility 116  
   Vaishnava public 88  
*purohita* 107  
 qigong 35, 37, 38, 39, 40–43, 51, 52, 53
- Q**
- Quran 100, 168, 169
- R**
- Radha Govind Society 18  
 radicalization 178, 187, 188  
 Rama 241, 246  
 Ramesses II 212  
 relaxation 5, 21, 24, 25, 26  
 religion  
   and capitalism 130, 150, 234, 236–238  
   and competition 81  
   and marketing 3–5, 79, 82, 129–130  
   and material culture 2, 11–14  
   and political legitimization 118, 111, 146, 161  
   and the studies of material and visual culture 11–14  
   and prosperity 143, 245, 247–248  
   as motivator 171, 173, 174–177  
   concept of 81, 85, 98, 109, 124, 168  
   current and former scholarly approaches 11  
   economic dimension of 2, 30  
   functions of, transferred to market 4  
   hybrid/hybridized 85, 245, 248  
   in Poland 15–16  
   kingship and 109  
   legitimizing ISIS 174  
   Maya 224, 226  
   modern middle-class American’s 140  
   national/nationalism and 60–61, 83, 85  
   private/interior 80, 235, 238, 259  
 religious advertising 1, 14  
   motivation for participation in 148–149  
   religious terms and objects used in advertising 4, 5  
   self-referential 129  
   values and objects advertised 147  
 resentment 7, 162, 178–180, 182, 193  
 resonance strategy 109, 123  
 rhetoric 108, 113, 182, 262  
 ritual 76, 88, 134  
   efficacy of 133  
   Hindu participation in ritual performances of Sufi sheikhs 99  
   politically legitimating 110  
   ritual reading (*parāyaṇ*) 87, 88, 101  
   self-referential nature of 129  
 ritualization of ethics 137  
 Royal Castle of Wawel 21  
 Sacred Congregation for Propagating the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) 1, 58, 62  
 saint(s) 89, 91, 102  
   carrying saints’ shoes 101  
   graves of 87, 165  
   as a poet 84, 86, 87, 89  
 Polycarp, Martyrdom of 264–267



ancestor as a source of identity 93  
 venerated by Shia 164  
 Salafism 100, 163, 196  
*Samgha*  
 advertising function of 149  
 and Thai government 144, 146  
 as “field of merit” (*puññakkhetta*) 141,  
 142, 145  
 economy of 2, 134  
 marketing/branding of 7, 130, 136, 137,  
 141–143, 145, 150  
*Samgha*-laity relationship 144, 150  
 San Bartolo 223, 226  
 San Juan Sacatepequez 221  
 sanctuaries 110, 114, 117, 119, 238  
 Sanskrit 6, 107, 108, 113, 114, 119  
 Saudi Arabia 164, 165, 169, 177  
 Science of Identity Foundation “Chaitanya  
 Mission,” The 5, 17, 18, 23, 28, 32  
 script 114, 115, 116, 118  
 Second Vatican Council 62–63  
*sekhiya* (“to be trained in”) rules 143  
 Shakti/*śakti* 108, 111  
 Sheikh Muhammad 86–88, 91, 94,  
 100, 101  
 Shiva 246, 249  
 Shiva linga/*liṅga* 109, 262  
 Shivaism/Śaivism 110  
 Shrigonda 86–88, 100, 101  
 shrine 113, 117, 125, 144, 145, 238, 239,  
 246, 247, 250, 252  
 siddhamāṭṛkā 115, 125  
 signs 259–260, 261, 262  
 Sinha, Vineeta 238  
 skilful means (*upāyakosalla*) 136, 139  
 Snodgrass, Jefferey 234  
 social media 28, 167, 183, 186–188,  
 192, 251  
*soblā* (devotional event) 91, 92, 101, 102  
 Songs of All Saints 86  
 Sopoćko, Michał 13  
 speaking in tongues 248  
 spirituality 16, 21  
 St. Paul's Church 21  
 Star Wars 31

stone posters 116  
 Strawson, Peter F. 131  
 substantialist bias 131  
 Sufi 87, 88, 99, 101  
     Qadiri Sufi 87  
 supernatural powers 6, 37, 39–40, 41, 42–  
 46  
 SWOT 5, 31  
 symbol 4, 5, 65, 101, 117, 119, 147, 167,  
 180, 211, 213, 251, 252  
     corporate symbolism 114, 118  
     of the Watery Underworld 216, 220  
     *laddu* 244  
 Syria 163, 166, 169, 177, 184, 189, 191, 264

## T

Tammuz 222  
 Taoism 35, 48, 53  
 temple 2, 21, 23, 76, 87, 90, 98, 100, 118,  
 240, 249, 250  
 Tertullian 8, 262, 263, 264, 26  
 theological correctness 131  
 Theravāda 60, 71, 76, 141  
 three characteristics of all existence  
     (*tilakkhaṇa*), The 132, 134, 138  
 Tiltepec (Chiapaz) 221  
 Tlalocan 227  
 trademark 116–117, 118  
 transactional and transcendent social  
     roles 132  
 transvestism 251  
 Turning the Wheel of the Law 38, 39,  
 41, 43, 45  
 tutelary deities 108

## U

*Upaniṣads* 129, 133, 138  
 upward mobility 237  
 urbanization and urban life 236–237, 245,  
 248–249, 252–254

**V**

Vahira 87, 88–90, 91, 94, 101  
 Vaishnavism/*Vaiṣṇavism* 86–89, 91, 98, 99,  
 102, 110  
 Varkaris 6, 80, 86–91, 93, 98, 101, 102  
 Vatican II *see* Second Vatican Council  
 Vedic 110, 124, 138, 243  
 vengeance 161, 179, 182  
 victimhood 161, 178–181, 183, 184,  
 192, 193  
 Vilnius 13  
*virāśrama* 119  
 Vishnu 91, 246, 247  
 visual artifacts 13  
 visual culture  
   the studies of 11–14  
 Viththal-Vishnu 89, 91, 93, 98, 101  
 Vṛṣabha 109

**W**

Wahhabism/Wahhabis 164–166, 169–170  
 Warriar, Maya 253  
 Wat Khaek 249  
 Wat Phra Kaew 144  
 Wat Thamai 149  
*wat* 143, 145, 147, 148

Watery Underworld 216, 221, 223, 225  
 Weller, Robert 236  
 Wicca 16  
 Women and careers/upward mobility 249,  
 252–253

**X**

Xibalba 217  
 Xochicalco 216

**Y**

Yaśodharapura 110, 119  
 Yax Bahlam 218, 221, 222, 224  
 Yax Kokahmut 219  
 Yoga  
   Bhaktiyoga 18, 30  
   hathayoga 21, 28  
   *japa* yoga 26  
   of sound 28, 30

**Z**

Zeus 211  
 Zimniak-Hałażko, Marta 16, 32