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The Role of Cambodian Classical Literature in Preserving Indian Religious Influences: A Study of Cultural Continuity and Adaptation

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Abstract

This study examines Cambodian classical literature's contribution to preserving and adapting Indian religious influences, focusing on Hinduism and Buddhism as conveyed through the *Reamker* and the *Jātaka* tales. The impact of Indian religions on Southeast Asia is well traced through the region's architecture and epigraph remains, but comparatively little is known about its influence in the literary sphere. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring how Cambodian authors and cultural custodians adapted Indian religious stories employing Khmer motifs, ethics, and narrative styles and employing a qualitative interpretative approach within the artistic and literary analysis framework; the study considers primary sources, including the Khmer versions of the *Rāmāyāna* and relevant Buddhist parables, alongside a wide range of secondary literature. The research applies thematic and symbolic analysis and identifies central mechanisms of literary adaptation: convergence of characters and themes, introduction of local symbols, and differentiation of sophisticated religion-philosophical discourses. These mechanisms enabled foreign religious ideas not merely to exist within Khmer society but to strongly reinforce community values, governance principles, constituents of national identity, and spiritual life. The study results show that Cambodian classical literature was both a vessel of cultural identity and an instrument for the sustenance of culture. The research further contextualizes Cambodia's relations in the greater Southeast Asia scope, analyzing Cambodian literature in parallel with Thai and Javanese literary traditions to demonstrate both encompassing Khmer influences and distinct Khmer attributes. This research not only explains the dynamics of cross-culture literature and the transmission of culture, but it also suggests ways of employing classical texts in the education system of Cambodia, preserving literature heritage, and promoting cross-discipline study. This policy contributes to the debate that modern classical Khmer literature is a historical and living monument fundamental for constructing cultural identity, knowledge, and the transfer of wisdom across generations in modern-day Cambodia.

Keywords: Cambodian classical literature; Reamker; Indian religious influences; cultural adaptation; Hinduism; Buddhism; Southeast Asia; Khmer identity

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The Role of Cambodian Classical Literature in Preserving Indian Religious Influences: A Study of Cultural Continuity and Adaptation

I. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The deep-rooted and ever-preserved impact of Indian religion, literature, and philosophy, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, can be observed in the cultural development of Southeast Asia. Considered one of the important centers of maritime trade and cultural diplomacy, Cambodia (Coedès; Hall) emerged as one of the most essential cultural recipients of these traditions during the first century. The transmission of Indian religious concepts through traders, missionaries, and even royal ambassadors shaped the cosmopolitan order and moral structures of Khmer society. One of the most profound impacts of this cultural intermingling can be seen in Cambodian classical literature, which served as an archive and an imaginative retelling of Indian myths. This literary canon includes two crucial works, the Khmer version of the Rāmāyāna called *Reamker* and the *Jātaka* tales of Buddhism, which depict the lifetimes of the Buddha and serve as ethical tales. These texts were Indian in their cosmology and religious values. However, they underwent pronounced localisation to fit with Khmer sociocultural realities, including Indigenous cosmologies, the royal court, and popular beliefs (Chandler; Harris *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*). Thus, Cambodian classical literature is not a passive inheritance but thoughtfully engages with and actively reconfigures Indian religion. Adapting these narratives was not just a translation but a symbolic re-scripting, thematic alteration, and localisation blending. These Hindu and Buddhist philosophies were safeguarded but made coherent and relevant within the Khmer context. So, literature became a flexible channel for culture, identity, and political negotiation, especially during the Angkor period, where politics and religion were intricately fused (Vickery).

1.2 Research Problem

While the spread of Indian religious traditions to Southeast Asia has been studied extensively, there is a relative gap in understanding these traditions in Cambodian classical literature regarding their adaption and preservation. Most scholarly conversations focus on material culture, temples, sculptures, and inscriptions and appreciate less the literary sphere as a site of cultural negotiation and preservation (Maxwell). Despite the comprehensive scholarship regarding the Indianisation of Southeast Asia, a striking gap within existing literature seems to focus on the study of architecture, iconography, and ritual spaces as the primary entry points through which culture and religion are transmitted (Coedès; Giteau; Woodward Jr et al.). The textual component of this transmission, especially essential classical literary texts such as the *Reamker* and *Jātaka* tales, is markedly under-theorized. These texts have been recognised as cultural artifacts, but their crucial role in constructing, preserving, and localizing religious ideologies has not been analysed as deeply as material culture has. This neglect creates a theoretical gap in analysing how Cambodian intellectuals, poets, and storytellers engaged with Indian religious thought not through replication but through transformative interpretation and cultural adaptation. Cambodian classical literature was not a vessel for transmitting doctrines claimed as authoritative; it was a dynamic medium that negotiated, contested and tried to adapt the dominant narratives of philosophies emerging from India through Khmer ethics, politics, and cosmology. As Pollock argues, in the context of Sanskrit cosmopolitanism, vernacularization of the 'language of gods' in South and Southeast Asia was made possible through literary texts, which strung together alien metaphysical systems, making them comprehensible in localized frameworks. The existing discussion around literature in Cambodian heritage, considering its function in shaping scholarly traditions, is rather sparse. (Harris "Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice") and (Sophearith), for instance, analyse

the ethical dimensions of *Reamker* and Buddhist tales but do not attempt to view these texts as processes of religion rooted indigenously or innovatively framed epistemologically. This neglect creates a lack of coherent explanation that considers literature as an instrument of philosophy and religion, which fragments comprehension of the impact of literary traditions on the evolution of spiritual identity and the enduring culture of Cambodia. Fulfilling this gap involves comparative literature approaches as well as crossdisciplinary theorization integrating text with memory, religion, culture, and politics. From a pragmatic standpoint, the status of Cambodian classical literature has been integrated at a national educational and cultural level within the boundaries of contemporaneity in the world for the past few decades. There seems to be remarkable neglect in modernised, globalised syllabuses teaching, conserving, and interacting with fundamental literary masterpieces like the *Reamker* and *Jātaka* tales. Once central to monastic education and public recitation, these works are now sidelined in formal schooling, leading to a form of cultural amnesia about Cambodia's resonant philosophic, spiritual, and ethical lore. This exclusion demonstrates an inadequacy within policy frameworks directed toward cultural safeguarding and educational development, where classical Khmer literature is treated as a legacy rather than a living asset for civic and moral reasoning and nation-building. As noted by UNESCO in 2020, there is an undeniable need to shift the focus of post-conflict societies like Cambodia to consider intangible cultural heritage, including literary traditions, as fundamental to cultural resilience and identity consolidation. Moreover, the absence of classical literature from school syllabi both at urban and rural levels has exacerbated the problem of literacy in the ancient Khmer language and symbolic representation, thereby reducing the interpretive capacities of emerging youth toward their cultures. This issue is aggravated by scarce digitized manuscripts, bilingual translations, and interactive educational resources that go beyond elite academic institutions (Morotti). Addressing this urgent challenge requires the integration of Cambodian classical literature into formal education and informal culture initiatives, such as community-based storytelling, temple instruction, and performing arts, thus aimed at restoring and sustaining the Cambodian national heritage. Not only will this bring back the Cambodian heritage, but it will also nurture the youth's sense of cultural identity and deepen their historical awareness.

However, scholars have recognized the role of Indian religions in developing Southeast Asian societies, but existing scholarship tends to focus on material and artistic manifestations, temple architecture, statuary, and royal iconography rather than the literature (Giteau; Woodward Jr et al.). Those who do focus on literature tend to take a descriptive or historical approach without addressing the processes of localisation and adaptation. This has resulted in a limited understanding of the use of classical texts as instruments of cultural negotiation and identity formation in Cambodia. Moreover, most comparative studies concentrate on the reception of Indian epics in Thai or Javanese literature, ignoring these narratives' rich but overlooked Khmer reinterpretations (Blackburn; Pollock). A sparse combination of literary analysis, religious studies, and cultural anthropology approaches Cambodian classical texts as palimpsests of dynamic religious and philosophical thought. This aims to fill these gaps by analysing Cambodian classical literature as situated within the context of Indian classical literature, not as an outgrowth of Indian influences but as a critical domain where unfamiliar religious concepts were preserved, altered, and absorbed into the Khmer cultural consciousness. This helps to understand the literary history of Southeast Asia more clearly and furthers the conversation around cultural adaptation and postcolonial identity construction.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

In an attempt to fill these gaps, this study examines the complex relationship between Cambodian classical literature and its preservation, as well as the adaptation of Indian religious influence. The following objectives direct the study; the first is to evaluate the extent to which

Indian themes were incorporated into Cambodian classical literature. The second is to examine the processes through which these themes were adapted in order to portray Khmer culture, and the third is to analyse how these adaptations contribute to Cambodian cultural identity. As such, the study tries to address three more issues: What Indian religious motifs are retained in Cambodian classical literature? And how are these motifs adapted to suit the Khmer culture? In addition, what role do such adaptations play in the preservation of the cultural identity of the Cambodians? These questions guide an investigation that brings into focus the integration of literary analysis, the history of religion, and cultural anthropology in studying processes of culture using texts.

1.4 Significance of the Study

The enduring significance of this study is its examinational breadth concerning culture as a perpetually preserved phenomenon, highlighting literature as a vital instrument in transmitting religious and philosophical ideas through the years. The study effectively illustrates and explicates this by analyzing the *Reamker* and *Jātaka* tales as integral texts that preserved and transformed Indian religious principles, demonstrating the processes of culture, change, and identity in Cambodia. The research adds to the existing literature on literary indigenization and transcultural adaptation, examining Cambodia as a textual mediation case study of intricate cultural interactions (Dallapiccola and Vergheze; Pollock). In Cambodia, classical literature can be integrated into policies concerning educational and cultural heritage frameworks. While attempting to blend ancient traditions into modern identity construction, Cambodian culture can take advantage of Indian religious literature's magnifying and strategizing functions of cultural resilience and renewal.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Dissemination of Indian Religions to Cambodia

Indian religious traditions reached Cambodia through an intricate and gradual process that included maritime trade, cultural diplomacy, and the activity of religious scholars and artisans. As early as the first century after the Common Era, international shipping trade routes in the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea facilitated the movement of Indian cultural and religious ideologies towards the Khmer region, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism (Hall; Ray). These interactions led to the adoption of the Sanskrit language, Indian cosmology, and religious rites into Southeast Asian societies, including the early Cambodian states of Funan and Chenla (Coedès). The Indian religious systems were not simply imposed but were carefully adapted to fit local worldviews and systems of rule. The acceptance of Hindu gods like Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, alongside Mahāyāna Buddhism and later Theravāda Buddhism, is documented in Sanskrit and Old Khmer inscriptions from the pre-Angkor period to the Angkor period (Jacq-Hergoualc'h). Such religions were critical to the formation of the Khmer polity with regard to royal sovereignty, legal frameworks, social stratification, and artistic forms of expression. The temples of Angkor, notably Angkor Wat, and Bayon, serve as masterpieces of integrating Indian religious beliefs within Khmer cosmology. Nevertheless, along with these tangible forms of religion, Cambodian classical literature developed as a written space where these concepts were documented and reinterpreted through the ages. Thus, the spread of Indian religion was both an event and an ongoing process of cultural negotiation exercised through literary imagination.

2.2 Cambodian Classical Literature as a Cultural Repository

Cambodian classical literature serves as an essential repository of culture that captures and sustains the principles and values of Hinduism and Buddhism. One of the most notable works is the *Reamker*, a Khmer version of *Rāmāyāṇa* that intertwines epic tales with Khmer history, Khmer culture, and political thought (Higham). The *Reamker* does not completely reproduce the Indian epic; instead, it incorporates elements of dharma, devotion, loyalty, and a distinctly

Khmer bolster nationalism and patriotism (Sirang). Also widely circulated, adapted, and performed in Cambodia are the Buddhist *Jātaka* tales, stories about the Buddha's past lives. Compassion, renunciation, and karmic justice formed the moral framework of these stories, which were employed in monastic teachings and village storytelling traditions to nurture ethical conduct and religious learning (*Harris Buddhism, Power, and Political Order*; Ledgerwood). In order to appropriately tailor the stories to Khmer audiences without altering their doctrinal teaching, they were often adapted to include Cambodian characters, places, and customs. By such means, Cambodian classical literature functions as an ethnological archive that fills the void between Indian religious thought and modern Cambodia. It offers enjoyment, instruction, and cultural preservation, maintaining a dialogic relationship with India's religious traditions while shifting in form and content to serve Cambodian purposes.

2.3 The Literary Adaptation and Preservation Mechanisms

Indian aspects of literature preservation and adaptation in Cambodia are multifaceted in that exotic characters and events from Indian epics were imbued with Kent's socio-political significance and vice versa. For example, Rama in *Reamker* is not simply a divine prince. He is also an ideal Khmer king, just, brave, loyal, and everything a Khmer ruler should embody, shaping the narrative to fit the local conception of kingship (Wyatt). Another is the universal adaptation called thematic localisation, which was concerned with changing the scope of religion in Cambodian society. Buddhist *Jātaka* tales were almost invariably set in places unmistakably Khmer, and their courtiers were glued with Khmer names and descriptions, making the tales easy and effective for educating the masses about ethical values (Keyes). This localization extended to performative arts like *Lakhon Khol* and *Lakhon Sbek Thom*, where literary works were turned into moving pictures through dance and shadow puppetry, ensuring that the tales were passed down orally and visually (Brandon). A third mechanism is concerned with the simplification and reinterpretation of complex Indian philosophies within a given culture. The abstract concept of dharma was transformed into practical codes of behavior appropriate within Khmer's social and familial relational structures. The Buddhist ideas of karmic rebirth were delivered through folk stories that stressed immediate moral outcomes in accordance with indigenous animistic notions (Piphal et al.). Such changes ensured that the philosophies of Indian religion preserved their fundamental character while acquiring fresh relevance from the Khmer perspective (see Table 1).

Table 1: Literary Preservation and Adaptation in Cambodian Classical Literature

Mechanism	Definition	Example in Texts	Cultural Impact
Symbolic Representation	Use of Indian religious symbols re-coded to reflect Khmer values	Rama as a Khmer idea king in <i>Reamker</i> ; Sita as a model of familial loyalty	Reinforces political legitimacy and moral leadership according to Khmer ideals
Thematic Localization	Adaptation of religious themes into local sociocultural narratives	<i>Jātaka</i> tales set in Cambodia villages with localized animal characters and folk wisdom	Enhances accessibility and relevance for rural Khmer audiences
Cultural Reinterpretation	Reframing complex religious ideas in terms of local ethics and worldviews	Dharma as familial duty; karma illustrated through visible moral consequences in everyday life	Aligns Indian philosophy with Indigenous Khmer belief systems

Performative Integration	Transmission through oral, theatrical, and performative modes	Shadow puppetry (<i>Sbek Thom</i>), masked dance (<i>Lakhon Khol</i>), monastic recitation of <i>Jātaka</i> stories	Sustain intergenerational cultural transmission and communal moral education
Linguistic Hybridization	The blending of Sanskrit/Indic vocabulary with Old Khmer language	Use of terms like "Dhamma," "Rama," or " <i>Jātaka</i> " with Khmer contextual meanings	Reflects a syncretic literary and religious identity unique to the Khmer tradition

III. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study's uniquely interpretive qualitative approach is rooted in cultural and literary analyses. It focuses on the Cambodian tradition of classical literature to examine its integral Indian religious components. The research was conducted within a hermeneutic self-textual analysis framework, synthesizing close reading, historical contextualization, and symbol logical interpretation of keystone Khmer literature. This methodology is most appropriate for examining culture over time and across languages, providing rich analysis of culturally created systems of meaning within literature (Geertz; Said). The study was designed to provide a detailed examination rather than a broad overview. It was, therefore, limited to classical texts considered central to Cambodia's literary heritage, which, in fact, represent the most popular scholarly analyzed pieces. In addition, it considers the methods of cultural history with respect to the transmission, modification, and internalization of Indian religions, especially Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, within Khmer belief systems. This is consistent with the approach taken in other cross-cultural literary studies (Blackburn; Pollock), which focus on processes of localisation and reinterpretation as opposed to trying to generalise over a wide range of texts.

3.2 Collection and Analysis of Data

The primary data consisted of traditional Cambodian literary works that illustrate the incorporation of Indian religious motifs into Khmer narrative traditions. Importantly, these were the *Reamker*, the Khmer version of the Indian Rāmāyāna, steeped in Hindu philosophical and moral teachings, and the *Jātaka* tales, each of the Buddhist tales recounting the former incarnations of the Buddha are known in Cambodia in oral and written forms. Both texts were accessed in the Khmer language editions, and their English translations and Sanskrit and Pāli versions were used to trace thematic and symbolic changes. These texts were chosen due to their historical depth, rich narratives, and prominence in Cambodians' religious education and cultural identity (*Harris Buddhism, Power, and Political Order*). To support the analysis, a wide-ranging collection of secondary sources was used the monographs and journal articles on Southeast Asian literature, religion, and Cambodian historiography (Chandler; Coedès), cultural commentaries by Khmer literary and cultural scholars, as well as introspective religious studies scholars and restoration documents and reports of Mnemonics ethnology related to UNESCO and the French School of the Far East. These studies accompanied the primary texts within their broader socio-political and religious contexts, aiding their interpretation.

3.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis relied on two primary strategies; the first is a thematic analysis of inductive core religious motifs, dharma, karma, compassion, renunciation, and divine kingship, which were tracked as they appeared in specific passages. The objective was to trace the presence of Indian

religion within Khmer narratives and evaluate its pedagogical and sociomoral impact on Cambodians (Salomon). The second is critical semiotic analysis, which is driven by symbolic anthropology (Turner). The research sought the culturally particular manifestations of Indian philosophy in softened images, characterizations, and narrative devices. Attention was placed on these re-codings, which captured Khmer's ethical norms, governance ideals, and cosmological understandings. The texts were also situated within the context of historical periods, particularly the Angkorean and Post-Angkorean, with the aim of studying changes in literary style, political emphasis, and religious focus. This perspective enabled several mechanisms, including constative re-enactment and monastic retelling, to be observed. All interpretations were validated through corroboration of primary evidence, scholarly texts, and cultural-historical commentaries to documents for cultural sensitivity and analytical validity.

IV. Findings

One of the most prominent examples of keeping Hindu beliefs alive within Khmer culture is showcased in *The Reamker*, a Cambodian retelling of the Indian *Rāmāyāṇa*. The *Reamker* remains theologically and philosophically consistent with the original epic, particularly concerning the concepts of dharma (righteous duty), karma (moral retribution), and bhakti (devotion to the divine) (Marrison). The theme of 'dharma' is vital in Khmer society and is especially prevalent in the depiction of Preah Ream (Rama), whose life story is of a king devoted to upholding truth, justice, and moral authority. Even his actions, particularly the exile of his wife Sita (Neang Seda), are depicted as personal tragedies but quintessential public virtue and sacrifice royal integrity. This marks the fusion of the Hindu ideal of kingly responsibility synthesized with the Khmer sociopolitical narrative about expectations from leaders (Harris *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice*). The concept of karma and its many interpretations is inextricably integrated into the story, where actions are rewarded and punished based on past deeds, and moral reasoning is rooted in trusting divine law and order. Even as one tends to demonize and cast judgment on Ravana (Krong Reap), he at the same time is lifted within this tragic focus, reinforcing how karmic retribution is unavoidable. While bhakti, or devotion to God, is incarnated through Hanuman's devotion and loyalty toward Preah Ream, he symbolizes exempt bravery and the commitment of the spirit. These motives reveal the paradox of Hindu cosmology within Khmer literature, alongside its deep-rooted indigenous concepts of kingship, heroism, and loyalty. What distinguishes the *Reamker* was its fidelity to the Indian source text but rather how they preserved those themes throughout Khmer idiom, folklore, prose, and oral tradition and performed them to ensure pedagogical and spiritual relevance via generations (Brandon; Chandler).

The *Jātaka* tales how, alongside the *Reamker*, preserved Hindu values held significant importance to conserve and pass along Buddhist ethical teachings within the Cambodian society. The *Jātaka*, a collection that recounts the history of Buddha, showcases traits of compassion, proper conduct, calm, charity, and the way to enlightenment. These stories are known very well amongst the Cambodian people and are often used as educational devices of monastic and lay contexts (Harris *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*; Ledgerwood). In Cambodia, these tales were translated and localized in every imaginable way. For instance, animals within the *Jātaka* tales uniquely Khmerize as proverbs and speak, reflecting village ethics. These adaptations helped rural societies assimilate sophisticated Buddhist teachings. No sources in the current document have scant access to doctrinal literature (Keyes). The narrative of *Vessantara Jātaka*, which highlights the Buddhist virtue of selfless giving (dāna), remains especially popular in both literary and ritual forms depicting the life of a compassionate prince believed to be a former Buddha (Houtart). Oral retellings alongside temple murals supplement these strong sentiments alongside emotion through shadow puppet displays based on *Jātaka* stories, making them far more appealing. Ensuring Cambodians think of these narratives is the

preservation of Buddhist teachings through stories, unlike mere scriptural containment. These works are dynamic traditions rooted in underlying experiences, blending social and cultural vibrancy alongside doctrinal purity (Morotti). A set of literary adaptation mechanisms employed by Cambodian classic literature's Khmer authors, storytellers, and cultural custodians sheds light on why Indian religious themes remain relevant in Cambodian classical literature. These mechanisms made it possible to preserve select ideas and transform them innovatively through indigenous cultural frameworks (see table 2).

Table 2: Literary Adaptation Mechanisms in Cambodian Classical Literature

Mechanism	Description	Example from Literature	Cultural Function
Contextualizing Characters and Themes	Characters were modified to embody Khmer ideals of kingship, and morality.	Preah Ream as archetype of Khmer king; Neang Seda as virtuous, suffering Khmer wife.	Reinforce values and legitimize authority via moral exemplarity.
Integrating local Symbolism	Indic symbols were replaced or merged with local imagery and mythic elements.	Use of nag (serpent) spirits), apsaras, and Angkorian cosmological motifs in religious storytelling.	Anchors spiritual concepts in familiar visual and narrative forms, increasing relatability and acceptance.
Simplifying Complex Philosophies	Abstract religious doctrines were transformed into practical, moral lessons.	Buddhist <i>Jātaka</i> tales depict karma through daily life metaphors and village folklore.	Facilitates moral education and popular understanding of religious ideas.

These adaptation strategies demonstrate the considerable negotiation effort at the cultural level, for the core essence of Indian religious teachings, was retained while being articulated through Khmer reasoning, aesthetics, ethics, and narrative frameworks. Cambodian literary personalities were not passive receivers; they operated as cultural brokers to adapt foreign ideologies for Khmer spiritual and ethical frameworks. This evolving pattern illustrates cultural continuity or the enduring significance ancient texts hold in constructing contemporary Cambodian identity in intellectual discourse, schooling, dialectic activities, and the arts. In this way, Cambodian classical literature preserves the region's heritage and transforms to instill localised spirituality (Pollock).

V. Discussion

5.1 Literary Adaptation as a Tool for Cultural Continuity

From this study, it emerged that Cambodian classical literature, especially the *Reamker* and the *Jātaka* tales, were indeed works of art but served powerful purposes of cultural continuity. Their localised retellings of Indian religious stories integrate external philosophical strands and internal identity frameworks, claiming the validity of Clifford Geertz's (1973) proposition about cultural systems functioning through symbolic representations conveying meaning across time and space. The Cambodian culture undergoes a literary reshaping of these concepts to prevent Indian metaphysics and religions from remaining frozen as alien structures. Instead, they were conveyed through Khmer moral proverbs, pectoral symbols, and choreography so that the communities could assimilate these teachings in a manner that aligned with their sociocultural systems and everyday life (Chandler; Harris *Cambodian Buddhism: History and*

Practice). Transforming sophisticated Hindu and Buddhist metaphysics into culturally significant moral tales and symbols made classical literature a treasure trove of educational and ethical wisdom for generations. Furthermore, this dynamic process exemplifies what Pollock (2006) has referred to as "the vernacularisation of the sacred"; this is where trans-regional concepts are repurposed through local cultural vocabularies. These Cambodian literary texts are further examples of this phenomenon by preserving the core doctrinal elements of Hinduism and Buddhism while rooting them into Khmer culture. This not only sustained cultural memory, but through narrative, performance, and temple iconography, such adaptation reinforced national identity.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research adds to the increasing scholarship on literary mechanisms of cultural transmission by mapping, in the case studied, how religious concepts are narrated and transformed by localised storytelling structures. It identifies three main mechanisms: contextualization, symbolic integration, and simplified philosophical exposition, which make a contribution to the analysis of adaptation across cultures. Incorporating the concept of cultural hybridisation (Bhabha) and textual indigenisation (Pollock), this research attempts to define the scope of agency in postcolonial Khmer classical literature. The adaptation of Indian epics and Buddhist parables into the Khmer context mitigates the 'coloniser vs. colonised' dichotomy as a one-sided process and exposes a more complex interplay of creativity in both directions. It also enriches the discussion of Southeast Asian literary studies by drawing attention from monumental architecture and ritualistic practices toward the literary realm as another site of cultural dominion.

The study practically contributes by advocating for the inclusion of Khmer classical literature into Cambodian national educational and cultural frameworks. With standing the pressures of globalisation and cultural homogenisation, these narratives preserve essential ethical, identity, and historical frameworks that facilitate resilient cultural memory. Integrating the *Reamker* and *Jātaka* Tales into school lesson plans, community storytelling initiatives, and online archive platforms could help Cambodian youth reclaim their heritage. Moreover, funding local research, performance, and translation projects could attract wider public interest in these texts across generations and languages (Morotti). In this context, literature stands as a means of cultural preservation and a tool for forward-looking innovation.

5.3 Comparative Analysis with Regional Adaptations

A comparative approach shows that Indonesia's archetype reading intersects with Cambodia's literary encounter with India's religious text as both share similarities with, yet differ meaningfully from, the rest of Southeast Asia. For instance, in Thailand, the *Ramakien*, a localised rendition of the *Rāmāyāṇa*, retains the epic's overriding themes but focuses more on godly meddling, elaborate courtly ceremonies, and valorous military deeds reflecting the Thai royal ideology and aesthetic preferences (Winichakul; Wyatt). In parallel, the Kakawin *Rāmāyāṇa* in Java builds on love and poetic imagination, which is more associated with Javanese court literature and Hindu-Buddhist syncretism (Robson). The uniqueness of such adaptation among Khmers is that it has been woven into more performance community-centered moral education and village-level traditions. The *Reamker* is not performed in elite literary circles, and rather, it endures through popular dance dramas (*Lakhon Khol*), shadow puppetry (*Sbek Thom*), and monastic chanting. *Jātaka* stories are also found within temple murals and country, suggesting a unidirectional model of cultural transmission that is decentralised and participative (Brandon; Ledgerwood). Moreover, these Cambodian adaptations express distinct sociopolitical histories shaped by the country's enduring relations with Hinduism and Theravāda Buddhism. The post-Angkorian decline along with colonial and postcolonial recovery periods, have all influenced the region's rich literary landscapes. The end

product is a synthesis of Khmer origins that integrates the metaphysical advancement of Indian religion and the ethical pragmatism of its local cosmologies and community values. Thus, while regional counterparts can be drawn, Cambodia's classical literature showcases an exceptional instance of cultural continuity whereby foreign ideological religions were incorporated, adapted, and safeguarded not through imitation but through a local and vivacious tradition (see table 3).

Table 3: Comparative Analysis of Indian Religious Literary Adaptation in Southeast Asia

Feature	Cambodia (<i>Reamker</i> , <i>Jātaka</i>)	Thailand (<i>Ramakien</i>)	Java (Indonesia) (<i>Kakawin Ramayana</i>)
Primary Religious Influence	Hinduism (early) and Theravāda Buddhism (dominant)	Hinduism and Theravāda Buddhism.	Hinduism and Mahāyāna Buddhism, later Islamic influence
Language of Composition	Old Khmer and Pāli	Thai	Old Javanese (Kawi)
Cultural Emphasis	Moral instruction, karmic justice, local Symbolism, communal storytelling	Royal court rituals, divine authority, military valor	Romanticism, mysticism, philosophical poetry
Performance Traditions	<i>Lakhon Khol</i> , <i>Sbek Thom</i> (shadow puppetry), temple murals, village recitations	Khon masked dance, royal performances	Wayang Kulit (shadow puppetry), court recitals
Character Reinterpretation	Rama (Preah Ream) as ideal Khmer king; strong female roles (Neang Seda), localized animal figures	Rama as divine hero, upholding state power; emphasis on nationalism	Rama as mystical ideal; Sita and Laksmana receive poetic elaboration
Localization of Setting and Symbols	Integration of Khmer mythical creatures (nagas, apsaras), Angkorian architecture references	Thai geographic and courtly references	Javanese palaces, forests, and mystical mountains
Educational Role	Used in monastic instruction, ethical training, rural education	Emphasized in elite education and nationalism	Integrated into Javanese cultural education and philosophical debate
Continuity and Relevance Today	Still active in village life, religious festivals, education reforms	Promoted in national identity, royal sponsorship	Revived in cultural festivals, less central in modern discourse

VI. Conclusion

This study has shown that Cambodian classical literature, notably the *Reamker* and the *Jātaka* tales, has been critical in maintaining, altering, and localizing the impact of Indian religions. This was carried out through the embedding of core Hindu and Buddhist philosophies such as dharma, karma, devotion, and compassion into the Khmer language and symbol system through narrative devices crafted by Cambodian authors, ensuring these spiritual traditions survived in forms that were meaningful pedagogically to Khmer audiences. The pathways for adaptation identified by this study, including contextualization of characters and themes, incorporation of local emblems, and reduction of complex doctrines to basic concepts, highlight a negotiation of a dynamic culture. Cambodian literary figures were not simply passive bearers of Indian religious traditions; they actively adopted and adapted these frameworks and acted as cultural builders, redeveloping the philosophies into Khmer identity. These adaptations occurred not

just at the level of written texts but also at the level of performance, temple murals, oral storytelling, and other practices to ensure multi-generational community involvement. Significantly, the comparative study with local practices in Thailand and Java highlighted both cross-regional traits as well as distinctive Khmer features, marking Cambodia's unique position in Southeastern Asia's geography of literature and spirituality.

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