

same period, they owned more, but this was simply a contingent matter – it by no means negated the possibility of inheritance by males.¹⁰ Nowhere, in fact, is there any concrete evidence of a rule that property should pass exclusively or predominantly through females; neither the oldest epigraphy nor the relevant chronicles refer to the possibility, and there is nothing in the ethnography of present-day Cambodia to suggest it. Clearly, a number of writers have seized on the presence of female rights to assume the absence of male ones and have extrapolated from this to a thesis of the priority of the former. This is despite the weakness of the evidence and the existence of a more plausible alternative explanation, namely the continuity of cognatic rules of inheritance throughout Cambodian history.

3 *References in mythology*

Porée-Maspero cites in some detail the Cambodian origin myth as evidence for a matrilineal past in Cambodia (1950: 247ff.). This is the myth in which the Brahman Kaundinya obtained the kingdom of Cambodia from the King of the Nagas through his marriage to Soma, a Naga princess, from which the Cambodian race sprang. However, her interpretation confuses the status of Soma as daughter with her status as wife. In fact, the succession uses an affinal, not a matrilineal link, and from Kaundinya's point of view the kingdom is less his own inheritance than his wife's dowry.

Then there is the myth of the Khmer of Cochinchina to the effect that original proposals for marriage came from the woman's, not the man's side. Maspero (1928: 31) reasons from this that in reality "l'homme est peu important, c'est la femme seule qui l'est", and Coedès clearly agrees with him (1948: 86 n. 6). Conversely this is what the thirteenth-century Chinese chronicler Ma Tuan-lin has to say about it: "It is the girls who ask for the boys in marriage, because they [the girls] are considered to be of an inferior nature".¹¹ Malleret goes further, saying that the practice was regarded as repugnant and shameful despite its prevalence (1941: 169ff.). This suggests not matrilineal descent but merely female inferiority in status.

Nonetheless, Malleret himself clearly regards this myth and others as showing the superior status of women over men in ancient Cambodia. One problem is, of course, that although myths can usually be linked to the social structure in some way, they frequently reverse the normal order of things to make their point, witness the considerable number of origin myths involving sibling incest or the descent of a patrilineal group from an ancestress.¹² Another problem is just what is meant by "status" when this can easily differ with context. For example, among the Iatmul of New Guinea, a

¹⁰ See on these matters Leclère 1894: 70–1, 85; 1898: 647–8, 651–2; Malleret 1941: 175; Imbert 1961: 98–100; Martel 1975: 220–1; Orans 1955: 313; Ebiyara 1974.

¹¹ Quoted in Coedès 1948: 86. Ma Tuan-lin was actually writing about seventh-century Cambodia.

¹² For an example of the latter, see Watson (1969: 83, 86) on the Pacoh, a patrilineal group of central Vietnam who are linguistically related to the Khmer through Mon-Khmer.