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Art, inscriptions, and sacred space: A survey of Śaiva traditions in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Background: The spread of Śaiva dharma in Southeast Asia is a vital chapter in the history of cross-cultural religious and political exchange between India and the wider region. This article traces the transmission of Śaiva ideas, rituals, and temple culture to the regions such as present-day Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and also includes examples from Laos, focusing on archaeological, inscriptional, and iconographic evidence. It investigates the royal patronage of Śaiva dharma, the regional adaptations of Indian forms, and the development of indigenous expressions of Śaiva worship. **Methods**: This paper is based on textual analysis, visual study of temple architecture, and secondary sources. **Finding**: The findings show that Śaiva practices were not simply imported from India but gradually integrated into local contexts through dynamic processes of reinterpretation, royal sponsorship, and ritual localisation. The study undertakes a regional survey of the spread and localisation of Śaiva dharma across Southeast Asia, drawing on epigraphic, architectural, and textual evidence. **Conclusion**: This study concludes that the spread of Śaiva dharma in Southeast Asia was not a one-way transmission from India, but a process of selective adoption, creative adaptation, and localisation. By examining evidence from Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Laos, the research highlights how Śaiva traditions became deeply intertwined with local political authority, artistic production, and ritual life, producing uniquely regional forms of Śaiva practice that endured for centuries. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The originality of this article lies in its comparative regional approach, which integrates epigraphic, iconographic, and architectural evidence to show how Śaiva dharma was reinterpreted within diverse Southeast Asian cultural settings.

KEYWORDS: *Śaiva dharma*; Southeast Asia; *Śaiva traditions*.

1. Introduction

The religious history of Southeast Asia reveals a complex and dynamic interplay between indigenous beliefs and transregional traditions introduced through long-distance trade, migration, and political exchange. Among the most influential of these traditions was Śaiva dharma, a theological and ritual system centered on the worship of Śiva. From the early centuries of the Common Era, Śaiva beliefs and practices played a critical role in shaping the region's religious, political, and artistic landscapes. Far from being a peripheral offshoot of Indian religion, Śaiva dharma became a central framework through which kingship, sacred geography, and ritual cosmology were defined across polities such as Champa, Java, the Khmer Empire, and even as far as Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula.

Śaiva dharma is not a singular doctrine but a broad constellation of sectarian traditions and philosophical schools. From the 7th century CE onward, India witnessed the rise of several Śaiva sub-sects, including the Śaiva Siddhānta, Pāśupata, Kāpālika, Kālamukha, and

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various Tantric Śaiva schools in Kashmir and South India (Jash, 1977; Sanderson, 2003). These sects differed in metaphysical emphasis and ritual procedures but shared a common reverence for Śiva as the supreme deity. Many of these traditions were carried across the Indian Ocean by Brahmins, artisans, traders, and monks, establishing a transregional religious network that included temple complexes, sacred texts, iconographies, and liturgical systems. The reception of these traditions in Southeast Asia did not follow a uniform pattern; rather, they were appropriated, reinterpreted, and naturalized through processes of religious translation and local agency (Pollock, 2006; Hall, 2011).

Theories of Indianisation have long sought to explain how Indic religious forms were transmitted and received in Southeast Asia. Early scholarship, particularly by Coedès (1968) and Majumdar (1927), emphasized the role of Indian merchants, dynastic intermarriages, and the prestige of Sanskritic culture. However, more recent studies challenge this diffusionist narrative, arguing instead for a dialogical process in which Southeast Asian actors selectively adopted, adapted, and localized Indic traditions (Mabbett, 1977; Smith, 1999). In this regard, Śaiva dharma offered a powerful religious-political idiom that could be integrated into existing cosmological and social systems. The concept of the *devarāja* or "god-king", central to Khmer and Javanese political theology, illustrates how Śaiva metaphysics was rearticulated through local idioms of kingship, spatial control, and divine embodiment.

Despite the growing interest in the comparative study of Hinduism in Southeast Asia, scholarly attention has often focused on the architectural grandeur and iconographic complexity of temples such as Angkor Wat, Prambanan, and Mỹ Sơn. While such sites are invaluable sources of data, they are often treated in isolation or interpreted through a predominantly Indian lens. What remains underexplored is how Śaiva dharma was transformed through its localisation, how doctrines, rituals, and sacred texts were not only transmitted but reformulated in new political and cultural ecologies. There is a need to move beyond monolithic accounts of Indianisation and attend to the layered, creative processes of adaptation that gave rise to regional expressions of Śaiva religiosity.

This paper addresses that gap by offering a regional and comparative analysis of the diffusion and transformation of Śaiva dharma in three major Southeast Asian contexts: Champa (Vietnam), Java (Indonesia), and the Khmer Empire (Cambodia). Drawing on inscriptions, temple architecture, and textual sources, the study investigates how Śaiva theology was institutionalized through royal patronage, ritual consecration, and the sacralization of space. It argues that Śaiva dharma in Southeast Asia was not a static import but a dynamic cultural system that interacted with local beliefs and practices, giving rise to plural, hybrid, and enduring forms of Śaiva expression. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on religious translation, ritual sovereignty, and the localization of global religious traditions.

The study of Śaiva dharma in Southeast Asia has evolved significantly over the past century, reflecting broader shifts in the fields of religious studies, archaeology, and historiography. Early scholarship, most notably by Coedès (1968) and Majumdar (1927), framed the spread of Hindu-Buddhist traditions as part of a civilizational process termed "Indianisation." Within this paradigm, Śaiva ritual, cosmology, and kingship were seen as transmitted relatively intact from the Indian subcontinent to receptive Southeast Asian courts through trade, diplomacy, and the activities of Brahmins. This approach, while foundational, tended to portray Southeast Asia as a passive cultural periphery and overlooked the agency of local actors in shaping the reception and transformation of Indic traditions.

Subsequent research has challenged these unidirectional models by emphasizing the selective adaptation and creative appropriation of Indic religious systems. Scholars such as Mabbett (1977), Wolters (1999), and Smith (1999) have argued that Southeast Asian polities actively reinterpreted imported symbols and institutions to align with indigenous cosmologies and sociopolitical structures. Within this reframed perspective, Śaiva dharma is not merely transplanted theology, but a transcultural system, a set of symbolic resources reworked to articulate local notions of legitimacy, space, and divine order.

One important area of focus has been the connection between Śaiva ritual and kingship. The concept of devarāja, or divine kingship, is central to understanding the political-theological landscape of the Khmer and Javanese courts. According to Kulke (1978) and Hall (2011), Śiva was not simply worshipped as a transcendent deity but was embodied in the person of the king, particularly through the ritual consecration of the liṅga as a symbol of both cosmic and royal authority. These interpretations draw upon primary sources such as the Sdok Kak Thom inscription in Cambodia and the Canggal and Tri Tepusan inscriptions in Java, which demonstrate the centrality of Śiva in the sacral legitimation of rule.

In addition to textual and epigraphic sources, architectural and iconographic studies have further enriched our understanding of Śaiva religiosity. The works of Dumarçay (1991), Guy (2014), and Griffiths (2012) have highlighted the ways in which Śaiva temples such as Vat Phu, Mỹ Sơn, and Prambanan served not only as ritual centers but as cosmological models, encoding Śaiva metaphysics in stone. These temples reflect Tantric and Siddhānta influences, with spatial arrangements and iconographic programs that express the vertical hierarchy of the cosmos, the micro-macrocosmic unity of the liṅga, and the embodied presence of Śiva as both ascetic and lord of the universe.

Despite these important contributions, there remains a relative paucity of comparative studies that examine the localized transformations of Śaiva dharma across Southeast Asian polities. While individual regions such as Angkor, Java, or Champa have been studied in isolation, few works attempt to trace the regional continuities and divergences in the adaptation of Śaiva theology, ritual, and kingship across cultural and ecological zones. Furthermore, the intersection of Śaiva metaphysics with local ritual practices, oral cosmologies, and landscape sacralization remains understudied, especially in terms of how Śaiva symbols were resemanticized within local belief systems.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a comparative, multi-sited analysis of Śaiva dharma in Champa, Java, and the Khmer Empire. By integrating epigraphic analysis, ritual theory, and spatial hermeneutics, it seeks to uncover how Śaiva dharma was not merely received, but remade, resulting in plural and enduring forms of religiosity that continue to shape Southeast Asian sacred geographies to this day.

2. Methods

This study employs a qualitative historical method to examine the diffusion and localization of Śaiva dharma across selected polities in Southeast Asia, particularly in Champa (Vietnam), Java (Indonesia), and the Khmer Empire (Cambodia). The research is grounded in a hermeneutic-interpretive epistemology, which assumes that religious traditions such as Śaivism are not static or uniform, but are constantly reinterpreted through historical processes and embedded within sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Ontologically, the study views religious symbols and practices as constructed realities that acquire new meanings through regional adaptation.

Data for this research were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data include epigraphic inscriptions in Sanskrit, Old Javanese, Old Khmer, and Cham, which reference Śaiva deities, rituals, and temple establishments. These inscriptions, such as those from Canggal (Java), Prasat Damrei (Champa), and Sdok Kak Thom (Cambodia), were analyzed for their religious content, ritual language, and political context. Archaeological remains, including liṅgas, yoni bases, sacred icons, and temple foundations, were studied alongside iconographic programs found at key temple sites such as Vat Phu, Mỹ Sơn, Prambanan, and Angkor. Secondary data were obtained from scholarly books, journal articles, and inscriptional corpora published by respected institutions and researchers (e.g., Coedès, 1968; Sanderson, 2003; Griffiths, 2012).

The research was conducted through three integrated procedures. First, a textual analysis of inscriptions was carried out, focusing on terms related to Śaiva ritual (e.g., liṅga-pratiṣṭhā, Śivabhakti, devarāja) and the socio-political context of their issuance. These inscriptions were closely read, translated, and compared across regions to trace patterns of religious legitimation and localisation. Second, a visual and iconographic analysis was

undertaken, examining architectural layouts, deity iconography, and cosmological representations in temples associated with Śiva. This visual data was interpreted using symbolic hermeneutics to understand how metaphysical ideas were spatially and materially expressed. Third, a contextual-comparative approach was applied to trace similarities and divergences in Śaiva practice across the three regions. This involved considering variables such as the role of kingship, temple economies, and interactions with local belief systems.

In processing the data, the study followed techniques of data condensation, display, and interpretation commonly used in qualitative research. Inscriptions and visual data were coded thematically based on three key aspects: ritual installation, temple symbolism, and theological-political integration. These codes were then organized into comparative matrices to identify patterns and distinctive local features. The interpretive process prioritized triangulation between textual, material, and contextual evidence to strengthen analytical validity. Reflexive attention was paid to the limitations inherent in reconstructing religious history from fragmented sources, and colonial-era translations were re-examined against updated readings where possible.

The selection of research sites was based on their historical significance as major religious and political centers of Śaiva activity. The chronological focus ranges from the 6th to the 13th centuries CE, corresponding to the peak period of Indianized state formation and temple-building across the region. The geographic scope covering Champa, Java, and the Khmer Empire enables a comparative framework that situates Śaiva dharma not as a monolithic system imposed from India, but as a flexible and evolving tradition negotiated through regional dynamics. The inclusion of site-specific evidence allows for a grounded understanding of how Śaiva symbols, rituals, and metaphysics were reinterpreted in the Southeast Asian context.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Śaiva *dharma in Java (Indonesia)*

Tantric Śaiva dharma in Java developed as a significant strand of religious practice during the Central and Eastern Javanese periods, particularly under the Mataram and later Majapahit dynasties. The syncretic nature of Javanese religion allowed for the integration of Śaiva-tantric elements with local cosmologies and statecraft. Texts such as the *Tattvas* (or *Tuturs*) of Bali and Java (some of which are derived from earlier Javanese originals) reveal a system rooted in Śaiva Siddhānta, yet layered with esoteric ritual, yogic discipline, and metaphysical speculation. These works emphasise the importance of guru initiation (*dīkṣā*), inner visualisation, mantra recitation, and the purification of the subtle body. The pantheon reflects a strong affinity with tantric cosmology, with deities like Śiva as Sadāśiva, Bhairava, and various Śaktis occupying central roles.

Fig. 1. Prambanan temple complex, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
(Public domain via Wikimedia Commons)

Archaeological evidence from temples such as Candi Sukuh and Candi Cetho in Central Java further attests to the practice of Śaiva-tantric rites, including symbolic representations

of fertility, death, and liberation. Scholars such as André Bareau, Jan Gonda, and R. Goris have argued that these sites reflect an advanced engagement with left-handed (*vāma*) Tantric currents, perhaps influenced by the Kāpālika or Pāśupata traditions of India. These tantric forms were not peripheral but were likely integrated into royal ideology and temple ritual, indicating the depth of tantric Shaiva assimilation into the religious fabric of the Javanese court and countryside.

The most prominent symbol of Śaivism in Java is the temple complex of Prambanan. Located in Central Java, its construction was initiated in the 9th century CE by King Rakai Pikatan and later expanded by King Lokapāla and Balitung Mahāsambhu of the Sanjaya dynasty. Historians, citing the Śivagriha Inscription of 856 CE, inform us that the temple was originally known as Śivagriha or Śivalaya (Bhargava, 2012), and was dedicated to Lord Śiva. The temple is situated as if upon the sacred mountain Meru, believed to be the abode of Lord Śiva. The entire complex was constructed in accordance with Hindu cosmological concepts and the principles of Vāstuśāstra (traditional Hindu architecture). At one time, this complex housed at least 240 temples, of which the largest still standing is the Candi Loro Jonggrang, dedicated to Śiva (Bhargava, 2012).

Fig. 2. Image of Śiva Mahādeva enshrined in the sanctum of the Prambanan temple (Public domain via Wikimedia Commons)

Evidence for the spread and influence of Śaivism in Java is also found in the region's textual sources. The *Tutur* and *Tattva* texts, or esoteric treatises of Bali and Java, provide insights into the region's Śaiva spiritual traditions. These texts were brought from Java to Bali during the fall of the Majapahit Empire. Many of these manuscripts, originally written on palm leaves (*lontar*), have been preserved in their original form, while others have been transcribed into Roman script. The *Tutur* texts are largely speculative in nature and are mostly composed from a Śaiva perspective, though a few Buddhist texts have also been identified. The primary concern of the authors appears to have been the formulation of practical ritual manuals. These texts often deal with aspects of Śaiva soteriology, cosmology, micro- and macrocosmic classifications, yogic disciplines, supernatural powers, mantras, the nature of ultimate reality, and the various manifestations of Śiva (Acri, 2006). They are commonly framed as dialogues between the deity (Śiva, Bhattāra, etc.) and another interlocutor, usually Bṛhaspati, Kumāra (the son of the god), or a goddess such as Śakti. Notable Śaiva *Tutur*texts that provide evidence for the presence and continuity of Śaivism in the Malay and Javanese world include *Jñānasiddhānta*, *Sang Hyang Tattvajñāna*, *Svayambhu-sūtrasangraha*, *Niśvāsa-tattvasaṃhitā*, *Sāradhātrīśatikālottārāgama*, *Bhuvanakośa*, *Brahmayakṣakota-vidhiśāstra*, *Śivāsana*, *Tutur Ādhyātmika*, and *Tutur Kamoksan* (Acri, 2006).

An adaptation of Indian Śaiva texts into Old Javanese literary forms has also been found and reveals how Śaiva beliefs were domesticated within local cultural idioms. A striking

example is the *Śiwarātrikalpa* or *Kakawin Lubdhaka*, a 15th-century Old Javanese retelling of the Sanskrit *Skanda Purāṇa* tale of the hunter Lubdhaka. This poem, attributed to Mpu Tanakung, not only reflects textual continuity with Indian Purāṇic literature but also underscores the value placed on *bhakti* and ritual austerity in Javanese Śaiva dharma. The text was widely read in Java and Bali, often recited during *Śivarātri*, indicating the ritual calendar's integration into local practice.

The Śiva–Buddha syncretism in Indonesia, and especially in Bali, represents one of the most distinctive religious syntheses in Southeast Asia. While Hinduism and Buddhism entered Java and Bali as separate traditions, their coexistence gave rise to a unified Śiva–Buddha cult, which was articulated both in Old Javanese texts such as the *Sutasoma*, *Sang Hyang Kamahāyānikan*, and *Kuñjarakarna*, and in ritual practice (Kats, 1910; Widnya, 2005). This synthesis reached its peak during the Majapahit period, epitomized by the celebrated dictum *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity"), affirming the essential oneness of Śiva and Buddha (Santoso, 1975). In Bali, the syncretism endured beyond Majapahit, with inscriptions such as Blanjong and Landih invoking both Śiva and Buddha, and rituals like the *Eka Dasa Rudra* at Besakih temple led jointly by Śaiva and Buddhist priests (Phalgunadi, 1984; Suamba, 2007). Unlike India, where sectarian competition often prevailed, Bali preserved a parallel and complementary relationship between the two traditions: Śaiva priests were expected to master Buddhist teachings, and vice versa, while both communities shared ritual media such as *tirtha* (holy water). As a result, Śiva–Buddha in Bali survives not as a relic, but as a living substratum of Balinese Hinduism, with theological roots in Tantric integration and practical continuity in contemporary religious life (Widnya, 2008).

3.2 The *kingdoms of Kambuja (Cambodia) and Champa (Vietnam)*

In the Southeast Asian kingdoms of Cambodia and Champa, the influence of Śaiva is seen to be as prominent as in Java, if not even greater. From the 5th to the 8th century, in the Khmer regions and in the unified empire of Angkor, which lasted until the 14th century, it is evident that throughout this period, three Indian-origin religions were practiced: Śaiva dharma, the Pāñcarātrika Vaiṣṇava of the Bhāgavatas, and Mahāyāna Buddhism, which included ritualistic and meditative systems known as Mantranāya, Mantrāyana, or Vajrayāna (Sanderson, 2003). While all three largely coexisted in harmony, Śaiva held a dominant position.

Excavations at Tra Kieu, one of the ancient capitals of Champa Empire (Vietnam), have revealed substantial evidence of Śaiva influence in the form of Śaiva temples and *bas-reliefs*. During their period of prosperity, the Chams were devoted Shaivites. Among the deities, Śiva, Shakti, and their two sons, Gaṇeśa and Skanda, were considered the principal gods and were actively worshipped (Jash, 1977). In this regard, several inscriptions have also been found that shed light on the religious beliefs and practices of the Champa empire. In this section, a brief discussion will be undertaken on the presence and practice of different Śaiva traditions in different regions of Southeast Asia.

3.3 The Pāśupata Dharma

Several inscriptions and records from India and abroad confirm that the Pāśupata sect of Śaiva originating in northern India, gradually spread southwards and eventually reached Southeast Asia. Scholars such as Swati Chemburkar and Śivani Kapoor, in their work *The Pāśupata Sect in Ancient Cambodia and Champa* (in *Vibrancy in Stones*), provide valuable insights into the socio-political and cultural ties that facilitated this transmission (Swati & Kapoor, 2018).

At least six inscriptions from both the pre-Angkor and Angkorian periods attest to the presence of the Pāśupata tradition in Cambodia. One of the earliest is inscription K. 604, which explicitly mentions that a Pāśupata Brahmin, appointed by the king for divine

worship, was granted foundational privileges. The Pāśupatas likely played a significant role during the reigns of Indravarman I (877–889 CE) and Yaśovarman I (889–910 CE).

The Prasat Prei inscription of Yaśovarman I distinguishes between Śaiva and Pāśupata teachers and notes their doctrinal differences. Śaiva *dharma* had already taken root in Khmer lands by the time of Funan, as evidenced by many pre-Angkorian and Angkorian sacred sites bearing names reminiscent of Indian holy places such as Amareśvara, Prabhāsa, and Siddheśvara. Historian Michael Vickery has noted that the use of the suffix "-eśvara" in these names suggests the influence of the Pāśupata tradition (Vickery, 1998).

3.4 Bhadreśvara

Among the many forms of Śiva, one is Bhadreśvara. It is worth noting, however, that the term Bhadreśvara does not appear in the Vedas. Its earliest mention is found in the Skanda Purana, where a place named Bhadreśvara is associated with Śiva. In this Purāṇa, the goddess (Śiva's consort) is also referred to as Bhadreśvari. Additionally, several of Śiva's attendants bear names associated with the root *bhadra*, such as Veerabhadra, Vibhadra, Mahābhadra, Shalibhadra, and Bhadraka, among others. The Vāmana Purāṇa also mentions Bhadreśvara—in Chapter 46, Bhadreśvara is connected to a *Pārthiva Linga* (a linga made of earth) located in the Himalayas, which was worshipped by Goddess Durga. For these reasons, the name Bhadreśvara came to be adopted in the Śaiva tradition as one of the forms of Śiva. (Sahai, 2016).

Bhagwan Śiva-Bhadreśvara appears to have remained a prominent deity in Southeast Asia for a long time. Though examples of Bhadreśvara in sculpture are limited, his name is found frequently in the inscriptions of Champa and Khmer. It is likely that even when Śiva was worshipped under the name Bhadreśvara, he continued to be venerated primarily in his linga form. According to historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, the kings of Champa referred to the Śiva linga itself as Bhadreśvara. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar explains that there was a tradition of naming deities by combining a descriptive prefix with the word *'Ishvara'* (Lord).

The earliest reference to Bhadreśvara is found in the Mỹ Sơn temple complex, which was once a significant capital of the Champa kingdom. All temples at Mỹ Sơn were dedicated to Lord Śiva, particularly to Bhagwan Bhadreśvara. Many lingas have been recovered from the site, and even recent archaeological excavations continue to yield Śiva lingas (In the year 2020, a 9th-century CE Śiva linga was unearthed at Mỹ Sơn during excavations.) In the A-1 complex at Mỹ Sơn, the C-72 inscription—the oldest inscription in the series—was found at the foundation of the Bhadreśvara temple. It declares Mỹ Sơn as the true abode of Bhadreśvara, built by King Bhadravarman (Sahai, 2016). Another inscription, C-73, tells us that this temple, originally constructed by Bhadravarman in the 5th century CE, was destroyed by fire during the reign of King Rudravarman. It was later rebuilt by Rudravarman's son Shambhuvarman, who dedicated it to Shambhu-Bhadreśvara (Sahai, 2016.

Fig. 3. A Śivaliṅga found at the Mỹ Sơn temple complex and site

Indravarman II was a devout Buddhist. His Đông Dương inscription of Shaka year 797 (875 CE) opens with an invocation to Lakshmindralokesvara, yet the bulk of the inscription

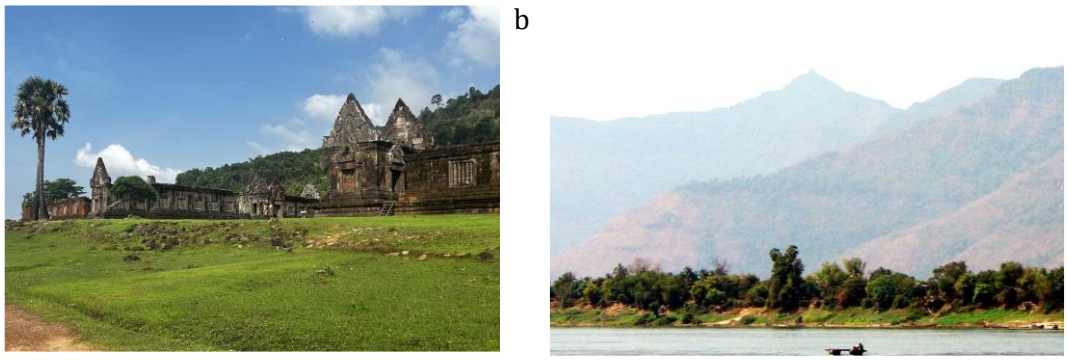
is devoted to an elaborate description of Bhadreśvara. Interestingly, Indravarman II appears to deliberately omit references to the earlier temple built around 400 CE by Bhadravarman I, its destruction by fire, and its restoration by Shambhuvarman. Instead, he recounts a different story involving Śiva, Bhrigu, and Uroja, in connection with the establishment of the Bhadreśvara linga in the land of Champa. (Sahai, 2016)

In Laos, the cult of Bhadreśvara spread through the Khmer Empire. The Vat Phou complex is considered one of the largest Śaiva sites in all of Southeast Asia. The presence of Bhadreśvara at Vat Phou can be traced back to the Chenla period. Chinese sources describe a temple located on Mount *Ling-kia-po-po*, dedicated to *Po-to-li*, who, according to Michael Vickery, is likely none other than Bhagwan Bhadreśvara. (Vickery, 1998)

During the 1st century CE, the Funan Empire had extended control over the areas near Tonlé Sap, while the Chams had established their presence over the Mekong Valley, from below present-day Krang Stung Treng to the river's mouth. Khmer legends state that they conquered this land from the Chams, and the oldest known Khmer temple in Cambodia, Vat Phou, was built in this region and dedicated to Bhadreśvara, who was revered as the patron deity of the Chams (Coe, 2021)

Even during the reign of King Suryavarman II, Bhadreśvara's presence at Vat Phou is evident. Inscriptions from his time describe a learned man from the Vikranta lineage being appointed as the chief priest (*hotar)* of the Bhadreśvara shrine. He also installed a bronze image of Harihara in the Bhadreśvara temple. Additionally, he erected images of Bhadreśvari (the goddess) and Visu on Lingaparvata (the sacred mountain). He commissioned the digging of three water reservoirs, which he named Bhadreśvaralaya. (Coedès, 1937)

a b



(a) (b)

Fig. 4. (a) Vat Phou, Champasak, Laos (b) Liṅga Mountain, Champasak, Laos

Similarly, Bhadreśvara is also prominently found in the architectural complexes of Angkor, Cambodia. Several temples are dedicated to this form of Śiva, including Prasat Kandol Dom in the city of Hariharālaya; Prasat Khleang near Kompong Thom; Prasat Ampil Rolum in Stoeng district; East Mebon; Pre Rup; Kok Rusei; Prasat Trapeang located north of Beng Mealea; the Preah Nan temple in Kompong Cham district; and the sanctuary of Preah Ko. These temple complexes collectively demonstrate the regional devotion to Bhadreśvara.

All of these are notable examples of the wide influence of Bhadreśvara across Champa, Khmer, and Laos, attesting to his importance in the Śaiva tradition of Southeast Asia.

3.5 Harihara: A composite deity

Harihara is a composite deity representing a synthesis of the two major Hindu gods — Viṣṇu (Hari) and Śiva (Hara). In early Indian and Southeast Asian art, Harihara is typically depicted with a strict bilateral division: the left half representing Viṣṇu's attributes, and the right Śiva's. Khmer depictions of Harihara often show the deity with four arms and a vertical division through the head, with Śiva's matted locks (*jaṭāmukuṭa*) rising on the right and Viṣṇu's tall cylindrical crown (*kīrtimukha*) on the left.

Fig. 5. This object was discovered in the 1990s at a Śiva temple located at the foothills of Phnom Da. Symbols are engraved on each of its four corners: the vajra (upper left), conch (right), trident (lower right), and discus (left). Since the conch and discus are typically associated with Viṣṇu, and the trident with Śiva, it may be inferred that the vajra, commonly linked with Indra, could, in this context, symbolise Śiva. If this interpretation holds, the object appears to represent Harihara, the composite form of Viṣṇu and Śiva.

The form of Harihara symbolised a divine synthesis and was especially prevalent in Khmer iconography (Lavy, 2003) While isolated examples exist in Champa, the scale and quality of representations in Cambodia far surpass them. Evidence of Harihara images appears during both pre-Angkorian and Angkorian periods. Inscriptions, such as the one from Prasat Phum (K.145/706 CE), mention offerings made to Śaṅkara-Nārāyaṇa (Harihara), possibly corresponding to an image housed in a sanctuary. Thus, this image, dated around 706 CE, is one of the earliest securely datable pre-Angkorian sculptures of Harihara (Regnier, 1966).

Fig. 6. Harihara, Pre-Angkor period, National Museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

There is a notable connection between King Īśānavarman and the cult of Harihara. A Sanskrit inscription from Wat Chakret (K.60/626–27 CE), found near Ba Phnom in southern Cambodia, records the installation of a Harihara image by a local ruler under Īśānavarman's overlordship. The image commemorated a military victory over Tamrapura and was intended to enhance the ruler's prestige (Lavy, 2003). At least four inscriptions from Īśānavarman I's reign attest to the presence of Harihara, and three sculptures dating to the 7th century likely represent the earliest extant Khmer depictions of this deity. The cult of Harihara symbolised the divinely sanctioned power of Khmer monarchs. The time of installation is specified through a Sanskrit verse, which provides the year according to the Śaka era, the exact date, the positions of the seven planets in the zodiac, and the lagna (the rising zodiac sign at that moment).

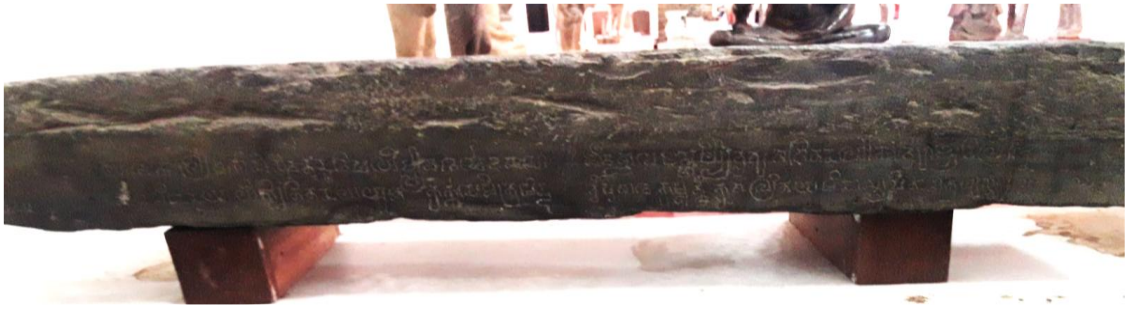


Fig. 7. This inscription records the consecration of an image of Harihara (the composite form of Viṣṇu and Śiva) on 15 April 667, during the Vṛṣabha lagna (approximately 6 a.m.).

3.6 Liṅgopāsanā: The worship of the Liṅga

Representations of the liṅga and yoni are widespread across Southeast Asia, especially in the art and architecture of the Khmer Empire. Angkor Wat, one of its greatest architectural achievements, initially dedicated to Viṣṇu, also features multiple Śaiva elements, including a central liṅga, highlighting the prominence of Śaiva dharma during this period (Hong, 2010). Khmer kings employed the liṅga as a political symbol to legitimise their rule, often portraying themselves as *devarāja* (God-kings).

Fig. 8. Śivaliṅga, Angkor period, Kampong Speu, Cambodia

Liṅga worship in Cambodia dates to the 7th century CE. King Bhavavarman is recorded as worshipping a liṅga known as Śrī Gambhīreśvara. Other liṅgas were given titles such as Bhadreśvara and Kedāreśvara. As a devoted Śaiva, Bhavavarman is said to have consecrated at least four liṅgas, the last of which was named Tryambaka. His successor Jayavarman installed a liṅga to honour his elder brother Rājendravarman, as recorded in the inscription of Prasat Damrei (Jash,1977).

The veneration of the *liṅga*, often conjoined with the *yoni*, constitutes one of the most enduring expressions of Śaiva religiosity across South and Southeast Asia. In the Khmer context, this symbolic pair transcends its ritual role and emerges as a central ideological and cosmological motif. Particularly within the Khmer Empire (9th–13th century CE), the *liṅga* was not only a cultic object but also an axis mundus through which kingship, cosmology, and temple architecture were integrated.

Angkor Wat, although originally dedicated to Viṣṇu epitomizes this syncretic religiosity. Its inclusion of prominent Śaiva motifs, such as the central *śivaliṅga*, reveals a deeper religious substratum wherein Śaiva dharma remained a pivotal force shaping the Khmer sacred landscape (Hong, 2010). This convergence of Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva iconography mirrors the integrative nature of Khmer polity, which skillfully merged theological traditions to consolidate authority and sanctify kingship.

In this setting, the *liṅga* functioned as a political theophany. Khmer rulers adopted the title *devarāja* (God-king), positioning themselves as earthly embodiments of Śiva. The *liṅga*, thus, was not merely an emblem of devotion but a visual and spatial legitimation of royal sovereignty (Boisselier, 1966; Filliozat, 1991). This sacralization of kingship reached a formative moment under King Bhavavarman (7th century CE), who installed a *liṅga* named Śrī Gambhīreśvara, indicating not just personal piety but strategic statecraft grounded in divine sanction.

Moreover, the liturgical practice of naming *liṅgas* such as Bhadreśvara, Kedāreśvara, and Tryambaka underscores the localization and personalization of Śiva worship. These names reflect theological nuance, linking the king's spiritual merit with regional cults and pan-Indic mythologies. As recorded in the inscription of Prasat Damrei, Jayavarman's consecration of a *liṅga* in honor of his brother Rājendravarman further exemplifies the intersection of filial devotion and ritual legitimation (Jash, 1977).

Such practices resonate with what Alexis Sanderson (2009) identifies as "imperial Śaivism" a mode of religio-political integration where temple-building, iconographic standardization, and public ritual served to consolidate state ideology under the aegis of Śiva. In this light, *liṅgopāsanā* in Cambodia is not merely a devotional phenomenon but a sophisticated expression of religious statecraft.

Fig. 9. This inscription, containing two lines in Sanskrit and six lines in Old Khmer, was discovered in 1924. It records the consecration of a Śivaliṅga named "Kedāreśvara" by the Brahmin Brahmaśakti on 29 September 667, at approximately 1 A.M.

In Champa, too, the practice of liṅga worship is attested. Much like in Khmer territories, Cham kings used the cult of Śiva to reinforce their sovereignty. The sanctum (garbhagṛha) of a Cham kalan (temple) was a restricted space considered highly sacred. At its centre stood a liṅga and yoni placed on a square pedestal. The yoni base, facing north, often included a drainage spout (soma-sūtra) used for the ceremonial bathing of the deity.

During rituals, the liṅga would be covered with a metal sheath, made of gold or silver, often bearing an image of Śiva's head (as *ekamukha* or *caturmukha* liṅga). Several such ornate metal liṅga-covers have been unearthed in recent years and are considered masterpieces of Cham art. An ekamukha liṅga carved in sandstone continues to be worshipped in the sanctum of Pô Klông Garai temple. During festivals, ritual objects made of stone used in the liṅga worship were adorned with gold ornaments, including a crown, earrings, a necklace, and armlets. One such set was discovered in Temple C7 near the main C1 temple at Mỹ Sơn—a fine example of Cham ritual art. (Phuong, 2009)

Numerous liṅga-covers (*liṅga-koṣa*) have been recovered in recent years, especially from the Mỹ Sơn and Tam Kỳ regions of Quảng Nam Province. A series of Sanskrit inscriptions from Champa, dated to the 6th to 8th centuries CE, mention the consecration of golden liṅga coverings. These liṅgas are described as having four or five faces (*catur-* or *pañca-mukha)*. Such liṅga-koṣa symbolised the most valuable gifts offered by Cham kings to their tutelary deity.

The cult of the *liṅga* in Champa reflects a sophisticated articulation of Śaiva theology adapted to local sociopolitical contexts. Much like in Cambodia, the integration of *liṅga*-worship into state ceremonial life underscores the deep entanglement between religious devotion and royal sovereignty in early Southeast Asian Hindu polities. Inscriptions and archaeological evidence from sites such as Mỹ Sơn and Trà Kiệu reveal that *liṅgopāsanā* was not merely a matter of private piety, but a public assertion of divine kingship and regional identity (Southworth, 2001; Guy, 2014).

The garbhagṛha (sanctum sanctorum) of Cham *kalan* (temples) functioned as a microcosmic axis of cosmological and political order. Centered on the *liṅga–yoni* placed upon a square pedestal with *soma-sūtra* drainage, the ritual installation itself embodied metaphysical principles from Śaiva Siddhānta: Śiva as transcendent consciousness (*liṅga*) and Śakti as immanent creative power (*yoni*) (Gonda, 1970). The north-facing orientation of the *yoni* spout was not incidental, but symbolically resonant—aligning the flow of *tīrtha* (sacred liquid) with the axis mundi of the ritual cosmos.

Elaborate *liṅga-koṣa* (metallic coverings), often made of gold or silver and adorned with facial imagery (*ekamukha*, *caturmukha*, *pañcamukha*), testify to the liturgical and aesthetic richness of Cham Śaivism. These coverings served a dual purpose: to preserve the sanctity of the stone *liṅga* and to embody royal offerings of wealth and devotion. Such artefacts, unearthed in Mỹ Sơn and Tam Kỳ, are not only masterpieces of Cham metalwork but also material expressions of the king's role as donor and devotee (Phương, 2009; Guy, 2014).

The frequent use of *ekamukha* or *caturmukha liṅgas* where the face of Śiva is sculpted directly onto the cylindrical *liṅga* represents an important shift from aniconic to semi-iconic forms in early Southeast Asian Śaiva practice. This evolution reflects an adaptive theological strategy wherein the abstract principle of *Śiva-tattva* becomes more accessible and intimate to worshippers (Davis, 2014). The presence of gold ritual ornaments crown (*mukuṭa*), earrings, necklaces, and armlets, further indicates the elevation of the *liṅga* to a regal and anthropomorphic status, emphasizing its role as a divine sovereign within the sacred polity of the temple.

Moreover, the Sanskrit inscriptions that accompany these ritual objects frequently describe the installation of *liṅgas* with four or five faces as "supreme gifts" (*mahādāna*) by Cham kings. These acts were performative assertions of dharma, authority, and merit (puṇya), situated within the logic of *raja-dharma* and royal *bhakti*. In this way, Champa exemplifies what Sanderson (2009) characterizes as the "imperial idiom of Śaivism," where the temple economy, kingship, and transregional Sanskrit cosmopolitanism coalesced into a coherent religious statecraft.

Fig. 10. Liṅga-koṣa, Vietnam
(Public domain via Wikimedia Commons)

The earliest confirmed reference to such a ritual offering is found in a royal inscription dated 687 CE (Śaka 609), issued by King Prakāśadharma. The stele was discovered near Temple B6 at Mỹ Sơn and records the dedication of a liṅga to Īśāneśvara (Śiva), as well as the consecration of a *koṣa* and a crown for Bhadreśvara (Guy, 2009).

In Java, the prestige of *Śaiva dharma* was widespread throughout the island chain. An important inscription dated 732 CE, from a Śaiva sanctuary on Mount Wukir (Canggal), records the installation of a liṅga. The ruler, referred to as Sanjaya, proclaims that on the island of Yava (Java), rich in grain and gold, a liṅga was established. (Coedes,1975) The following three verses extol Śiva in vivid details- with three eyes, the Ganges flowing from his matted hair, the crescent moon adorning his head, his body smeared with ash and garlanded with serpents. He is described as the supreme deity, worshipped not only by ascetics but also by Indra and other gods. As the master of ghosts, he sustains the world through his eight forms (Majumdar, 1986). These verses highlight the significance of Śiva's cult in Java.

The royal inscription of King Prakāśadharma, dated 687 CE (Śaka 609) and discovered near Temple B6 in Mỹ Sơn, constitutes the earliest epigraphic evidence of ritual gifting (*dāna*) in the form of a *liṅga-koṣa* and crown (*mukuṭa*) to the deity Bhadreśvara—an epithet of Śiva as patron of the kingdom (Guy, 2009). This act of dedication exemplifies what Daud Ali (2011) terms "ritual economies of sovereignty," in which elite sponsorship of divine cults functions not only as religious piety but also as a performative assertion of kingship and dharma.

The dual consecration—of both *liṅga* and royal regalia—signals the fusion of theological and political authority, wherein Śiva is honored as Īśāneśvara, "the Lord of the Lordship," the ultimate anchor of moral and cosmic order. This logic finds resonance across the Indicized kingdoms of Southeast Asia, particularly in Java.

In the case of Java, the prestige of Śaiva dharma and *liṅgopāsanā* is confirmed by the Canggal inscription (732 CE), attributed to the ruler Sanjaya. Found at the Śaiva sanctuary on Mount Wukir, this stele asserts that on the prosperous island of Yava "rich in grain and gold" a *liṅga* was ceremoniously installed (Coedès, 1975). The Sanskrit verses that follow constitute not only an act of devotion but a theological manifesto: Śiva is extolled in classical pan-Indian imagery—three-eyed (*tryambaka*), with the Ganges flowing from his matted locks, adorned with the crescent moon, smeared with sacred ash, garlanded with serpents. This composite iconography echoes the *Mahādevīya* sections of the *Skanda Purāṇa* and the *Śatarudrīya* hymns of the *Yajurveda*, signaling Java's profound immersion in the Śaiva scriptural universe (Majumdar, 1986).

More than literary embellishment, these verses establish Śiva's ontological supremacy and his royal patron's spiritual legitimacy. As master of ghosts (*bhūtanātha*) and lord of the elements (*aṣṭamūrti*), Śiva embodies both ascetic transcendence and cosmic immanence qualities mirrored in the king's dual role as world-renouncer and world-sustainer. Thus, *liṅga* installation rituals in Java were not isolated religious acts but strategic rites of state that fused the metaphysical with the political.

Fig. 11. This liṅga-shaped inscription dates to 9th-century Indonesia and contains verses in praise of the Trimūrti

This pattern aligns with what Pollock (2006) describes as the "Sanskrit cosmopolis," where the Sanskritic language of divine kingship traveled alongside ritual technologies such as *liṅgopāsanā*, generating a shared idiom of sacred authority across polities from South

India to Angkor and Java. Through such ritual inscriptions, rulers re-inscribed themselves into a transregional dharmic order, grounded in Śaiva metaphysics and legitimized through public sanctification of sacred space.

The artefact in question is a liṅga-shaped inscription from 9th-century Indonesia, most likely originating from the early Medang or Mataram Kingdom in Central Java. It serves not merely as an epigraphic source but as a sacral object that integrates three interrelated dimensions: form, function, and transcendent meaning.

Morphologically, the artefact follows the cylindrical structure characteristic of the liṅga, devoid of anthropomorphic features. Its inscribed surface, however, bears praises to the Trimūrti—Brahmā (the creator), Viṣṇu (the preserver), and Śiva (the dissolver)—revealing a theological syncretism that marked Javanese religiosity in the 9th century. This inscription reflects not an exclusivist sectarianism, but a harmonizing vision in which the three deities are revered as distinct expressions of one supreme metaphysical Reality (Para Brahman).

Rather than being a mere historical relic, this liṅga functions as a tangible embodiment of a lived philosophy wherein the Divine is understood as the unified force behind the creation, sustenance, and dissolution of the universe. It stands as a silent witness to the integrative spirituality of the Nusantara region, which seeks not to divide, but to unify. Academically, such liṅga-shaped inscriptions may be interpreted simultaneously as text, icon, and sacred space, a powerful representation of the Śaiva–Vaiṣṇava tradition uniquely assimilated into Old Javanese religious culture.

The liṅga thus manifests not only the symbolic aspect of Śaiva worship but articulates a cosmological vision deeply embedded in the religious thought of ancient Java. Its aniconic, cylindrical form points to a metaphysical preference for representing the divine in abstract, non-anthropomorphic terms. In Śaiva metaphysics, this abstraction signifies the inexpressible presence of the Absolute. Accordingly, the liṅga is not merely a phallic emblem or generative signifier, but a cosmogram, a condensed representation of the supreme ontological principles, existence (sat), consciousness (cit), and bliss (ānanda).

Furthermore, the inscription carved directly onto the surface of the liṅga marks the transformation of matter into śabda-mūrti a manifestation of the sacred word itself. This concept reflects Tantric understandings in which speech (vāc) is a vital expression of Śakti, the creative energy of the Divine. The Trimūrti theology embedded in the inscription suggests a theistic integration in which Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva are not worshipped as separate deities but as complementary modalities of a singular transcendent reality. As such, this artefact is a critical testament to how 9th-century Javanese society internalized and materialized Hindu philosophy in tangible, narrative, and liturgical forms that were both distinctive and deeply rooted.

The liṅga-shaped inscription dated to 9th-century Indonesia represents a unique confluence of religious iconography, textual theology, and spatial sacrality. Unlike standard stone inscriptions that function primarily as historical records, this artefact exemplifies a deliberate material embodiment of divine presence. Its cylindrical aniconic form, consistent with Śaiva metaphysics, aligns with the pan-Indic notion of the liṅga as the ineffable symbol of the Absolute (Paraśiva), transcending anthropomorphic representation (Gonda, 1970; Davis, 2014).

The inscribed verses praising the Trimūrti of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva suggest a theological model that departs from sectarian exclusivism. Instead, it affirms an integrative cosmology wherein the three divine functions of creation, preservation, and dissolution are not seen as competitive paradigms but as complementary modalities of the One Reality. This doctrinal synthesis resonates with developments in Java under the Mataram kingdom, particularly in the Śivagṛha and Tri Tepusan inscriptions of the Prambanan complex, which likewise present Trimūrti devotion as state-supported theology (Jordaan, 1996; Degroot, 2009).

What makes this artefact particularly significant is the performative materiality of the inscription. The stone is not merely a medium for sacred text (śabda), but a sacred object a śabda-mūrti that mediates divine presence in the ritual landscape. This aligns with Tantric

understandings of vāc (sacred speech) as inherently potent and generative, where inscribed mantras and praises are not informational but transformational (Sanderson, 2009). The liṅga here operates simultaneously as icon, cosmogram, and textual altar, merging the visual, spatial, and verbal domains of sacred power.

From a ritual perspective, the installation of such a liṅga-inscription likely served not only as a commemoration of royal patronage or temple consecration but also as a cosmological act a re-centring of dharma in physical space. As studies on ritual polity in early Southeast Asia have shown, royal authority was inseparable from the establishment and maintenance of sacred order through temple networks and theophanic symbols (Ali, 2011; Pollock, 2006). This liṅga, inscribed with eulogies to the Trimūrti, becomes a political-theological statement: it affirms not only divine sovereignty but also the ruler's role as dharma-dhātṛ, the sustainer of cosmic order.

In comparative terms, the liṅga-inscription shares affinities with similar phenomena in Champa and Cambodia, where liṅgas were not only consecrated with koṣa (metallic sheaths) and crowns but also served as mnemonic and liturgical nodes of divine kingship (Guy, 2009; Phuong, 2009). Yet, the Javanese emphasis on Trimūrti theology introduces a distinct layer of integrative religiosity, suggesting that Śaiva devotion in Java did not operate in isolation but within a broader matrix of religious harmonization.

While Śaiva traditions in Cambodia and Champa (Vietnam) flourished between the 5th and 14th centuries, their direct ritual continuity has largely lost direct ritual continuity. In Cambodia, Śaiva worship was gradually absorbed into Theravāda Buddhism from the fourteenth century onward, leaving temple-ruins such as Angkor, Sambor Prei Kuk, and Banteay Srei as the primary testimonies of its former vitality (Sanderson 2003; Vickery 1998). Today, local memory persists in syncretic practices: for instance, Brahmā and Śiva images are still venerated at certain shrines, though usually reinterpreted within a Buddhist framework. In Vietnam, the Cham temples of Mỹ Sơn and Po Nagar retain ritual life, but often under a reconfigured "Cham Balamon" Hinduism, where Śiva continues to be worshipped alongside local deities, albeit within a minority community (Phương 2009; Baptiste 2014). Thus, in both Cambodia and Vietnam, the monumental temples stand as "museum relics" in one sense, but the traditions they embody survive in fragmentary, redefined forms within living religious practices.

4. Conclusions

Across Southeast Asia, different forms and aspects of Śiva were venerated. The liṅga remained a dominant and enduring symbol, while manifestations such as Harihara appeared frequently in sculpture and Bhadreśvara in inscriptions. These forms were not confined to single regions but circulated widely, their prominence rising and receding according to dynastic preferences, local cosmologies, and political ideologies. This fluidity suggests that Śaiva traditions adapted flexibly to diverse landscapes while retaining their theological core.

Artistic representations, epigraphic records, and literary sources reflect this diversity of devotional emphasis. The coexistence of multiple Śaiva forms across the region highlights not only the depth of the tradition but also its capacity to evolve in conversation with local cultures. In doing so, Śaivism contributed directly to the construction of sacred space and royal authority, embedding itself at the heart of political and religious life.

Continuity, however, followed divergent trajectories. In Cambodia, Śaiva worship was gradually absorbed into Theravāda Buddhism after the fourteenth century, leaving monumental complexes such as Angkor as testimony to earlier vibrancy. In Champa, elements of Śaiva devotion survive among the Cham Balamon community, while in Java and Bali, tantric and ritual texts such as the Tuturs ensured transmission into Balinese Agama Tirtha, Javanese Kejawen spirituality, and even Islamic mysticism (tasawuf, kebatinan). These layered survivals underscore that Śaivism was not extinguished but transformed, with fragments of its ritual and cosmological systems continuing in redefined forms.

Taken together, the evidence affirms that Śaivism was never a mere extension of Indian religion but a dynamic, locally negotiated system of theology, ritual, and kingship. By integrating symbols such as the liṅga, the ideology of devarāja, Trimūrti theology, and tantric ritual forms into local contexts, Southeast Asian polities shaped distinctive versions of Śaiva dharma. Approached as a living and mobile tradition, Śaivism thus emerges as both a unifying transregional current and a source of regional specificity, a religious force whose legacy remains visible in monuments, texts, and the reconfigured practices of living communities.

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