

Reading Passage - Beginner level (Set 1)

Read and answer questions in the Question-Answer Book.

The magical tattoo artists of Cambodia.

[1] Magical tattoos, known as *sak yant* in Khmer — the language of Cambodia — have centuries of history in Southeast Asia. They are believed to render their wearers impervious to bullets, protect them from misfortune, and ward off bad luck. While the tradition prevails throughout Southeast Asia, little is known about the art in Cambodia, partly because of a 1920 royal ordinance that forbade monks from tattooing and partly because

5 the remaining practitioners were killed during the Khmer Rouge genocide and civil war. Today, traditional Cambodian *sak yant* is especially difficult to find because those who are still practising the art form are reluctant to publicise their activities.

[2] Chan Tra is a sacred tattooist in Phnom Penh, and follows eight holy precepts in order to keep himself a pure conduit for magical power. Inside his single-room shop, the walls are covered with designs: Brahmanic

10 deities with swarming arms, geometric shapes and swirling spells. “My grandfather was a tattooist,” he says, absent-mindedly pressing a finger to the tip of a traditional bamboo needle. “But he was killed by the Khmer Rouge, so I found those monks who still had copies of the designs and learned them. That was 20 years ago.”

[3] Teven Say is also a master of magical tattoos. He is sitting in a large shed in Siem Reap, Cambodia with a chained monkey and owl. Stripped to the waist, his muscular torso is webbed with ink. Tangled outlines of

15 gods and sacred geometry weave around his fists and arms like wires in a fuse box, pulsing with an ancient magic. One of his students connects a tattoo gun to a battery pack. Teven Say dips the needle in black ink and tells me to lay down. I start sweating. Teven Say is among the handful of tattoo masters left. “I meditate every day,” says Teven Say. “When I tattoo, I recite a secret mantra I learned from a hermit in the jungle.”

[4] When Teven Say puts his needle to my back I feel a burning sensation. He could have used the traditional

20 bamboo needle but apparently the power remains the same regardless of the instrument. So I chose the gun because it is quicker and more accurate. He begins searing the sign for the divine mother, with its Swiss-roll swirl and three peaks, onto my left shoulder blade. Audible above the tattoo gun's buzz is the oddly comforting mantra he is muttering. In the endless forgotten past, before Southeast Asia was so called, people of my age were feeling the same bum and hearing similar comforting chants.

[5] The chants of the artists from the aboriginal tribes that populated south China and Southeast Asia from the first millennium BC sounded different but also served a sacred purpose. In animistic cultures, all things are imbued with spirit and therefore sacred. Their tattoos are mentioned by Sima Qian, China's grand historian of the Han dynasty, who wrote, in the first century BC, that they “cut their hair and tattooed their bodies”.

[6] Shamans dreamed designs and watched them bloom from the tips of bamboo needles — giving tribal

30 members *sak yant* was their sacred duty. The word *sak*, meaning to “prick” or “jab”, survives to this day. Indeed, the word occurs in several languages spoken by the indigenous tribes of Southeast Asia, suggesting it comes from an older root language. Some researchers maintain that the early, Indian-influenced civilisations of Southeast Asia are the most likely origin of *sak yant*. “It is likely that tattooing is an indigenous form that developed with Indian interaction,” says Jonathan H.X. Lee, associate professor of Asian American studies at

35 San Francisco State University, in the United States.

[7] In another time and place, a holy tattooist chanted softly as he focused on the ink and blood-blatted back of Angelina Jolie. It was 2004 and the American actress was celebrating being offered Cambodian citizenship by getting a *sak yant* of a Bengal tiger. Through her patronage, the spirits of *sak yant* have emerged into the global consciousness. Now they are coveted by fashionistas, but Thai traditionalists raised concerns earlier this year
40 about Westerners getting *sak yant* with little regard for their spiritual significance. “Today it's about fashion,” professor Sukanya Sujachaya, former director of the Centre of Folklore Research at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, told news agency Agence France-Presse. “But this type of tattoo cannot be sold just for its beauty. It also has to be for the belief.”

[8] In Cambodia, too, getting inked involves a serious spiritual commitment. Traditionally, it included a period
45 of mentoring with the tattoo master, during which the initiate was trained how to live a good life. If the niles are respected, the tattoo remains powerful. *Sak yant* initiates are expected to abide by the five Buddhist precepts for laypeople: no killing, stealing, lying, intoxicating the mind and using sexual energy to harm.

[9] Teven Say laid out the rules before he began. I needed to abide by the five precepts and also not eat dog or snake meat. The tattoo gun's buzz starts again, the sound coming from my right shoulder. “We want to tattoo
50 foreigners so the tradition spreads around the world,” says Arjar Tar, one of Teven Say's students, whose ripped torso is a sketchbook of traditional designs, “But if they don't follow the rules it's bad luck for them.”

[10] Over the border in Thailand, the tradition of sacred tattoos (also called *sak yant*) is as tough as the jungle vines. Lineages that stretch back hundreds of years continue to hold people's imaginations. But, in Cambodia, the lineages have been badly damaged. “I couldn't find a single tattoo master with a real lineage in Cambodia,”
55 says Cummings. Now it is up to artists such as Teven Say and Chan Tra to nourish what is left in the hope *sak yant* can again grow into something relevant.

[11] After receiving two tattoos from Teven Say in Siem Reap, I am finishing a third Buddha design on my arm from Cha Tran in Phnom Penh. Afterwards, Chan Tra takes three fragrant incense sticks and circles the fresh tattoo, praying feverishly in Pali. He finishes the blessing by blowing on the design, activating it. “What you
60 must understand is that these tattoos have real power,” he says. “They really can protect you from accidents and danger, and bring you luck.”

END OF READING PASSAGE