

THE GOLDEN IMAGE OF AGUSAN—A NEW IDENTIFICATION

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(With One Plate)

PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST SPECTACULAR DISCOVERIES IN PHILIPPINE archaeological history is the golden statue known as the "Agusan Gold Image".¹ For a clearer view of the subsequent discussions, the image may be described briefly. It is a figure of a female deity (?), seated cross-legged; made of twenty-one carat gold and weighs nearly four pounds. It has a richly ornamented head-dress and many ornaments in the arms and other parts of the body. It was found on the left bank of the Wawa River after a storm and flood in 1917. It is now on display in the Gold Room of the Chicago Museum of Natural History.²

Professor Beyer writes that the image "appears to date from the 14th century or earlier." Of this statue, he writes further that

A study of this image was made by Dr. F. D. K. Bosch, of Batavia, in 1920, who came to the conclusion that it was made by local workmen in Mindanao, copying a Ngandjuk image of the early Madjapahit period—except that the local artist overlooked the distinguishing attributes held in the hand. It probably had some connection with the Javanese miners who are known to have been mining gold in the Agusan-Surigao area in the middle or late 14th century. The image is apparently that of a Siwaite goddess, and fits in well with the name "Butuan" (signifying "phallus"). Pigafetta's account of the court of the "king of Butuan", whom he visited at Magellan's behest in 1521, bears this out—as the non-Mohammedan king of Butuan was apparently a survival from the old Madjapahit colony of a century earlier.³

He writes, furthermore, that

Mr. John M. Garvan further states that the Manobo chiefs knew of this image long ago; that one of their number kept it secretly hidden as a priceless *pusaka* (sacred heirloom) for an unknown number of generations; that it had been lost during a great flood which destroyed several villages during the late 19th century, and the guardians moved away to another district with the view of escaping the vengeance that they feared

¹ H. O. Beyer, "Outline Review of Philippine Archaeology", *Philippine Journal of Science*, vol. lxxvii, no. 3-4, 1947, p. 301.

² The information given us by Beyer (*ibid.*) surrounding the image's ending up at the Chicago Museum of Natural History is interesting. (Read the same reference).

³ *ibid.*, p. 301-302.

their ancestral spirits might wreak on them; and that after its rediscovery in 1917 they were afraid to claim it again. (The probable truth of this story is strongly supported by the number of bronze Sivaite and Buddhist images found by the early Jesuit father among the Mandayas; the Siva image from Cebu,^{3a} and other similar finds).⁴

Before commenting upon the various aspects of Beyer's views regarding the image, it would be of interest to cite here what two Indian scholars write about it. R. C. Majundar⁵ presumes that it is an image of a goddess, but in the absence of any attributes he finds it difficult to identify. But K. A. Nilakantha Sastri⁶ writes that if it shall decidedly be proved that the image is a goddess, it is still difficult to say whether it belongs to the Hindu or Buddhist pantheon.

FUNDAMENTALLY, THERE ARE CERTAIN ASPECTS IN BEYER'S VIEW that are apparently barriers towards the pursuance of further study of the image. One aspect is his reference to Dr. F. D. K. Bosch's identification of the image. Undoubtedly, Dr. Bosch may have seen certain characteristics of the image which may have led him to identify it as a copy of a *certain* Ngandjuk image of the early Madjapahit period. The Dutch scholar may have put down in his identification these distinguishing attributes that may have been left out by the local artist who copied the image, and thereby he could have definitely identified the image to belong to either the Hindu or Buddhist pantheon. But Beyer did not cite these characteristics overlooked by the local artist, if Dr. Bosch actually had made this identification, for the former fails to cite furthermore the work of Dr. Bosch that may have contained the study of *the* image.⁷ This is one fundamental barrier to the further study of the image, for we can not check on Dr. Bosch's definite views about the identify of the statue. In fact, we do not even have the supposed comparable Ngandjuk image with which we can compare this golden image.

Another aspect is his identification of the image as "apparently that of a Sivaite goddess, and fits in well with the name "Butuan" (signifying "phallus") is rather doubtful, for this is extending the imagination far

^{3a} Vide John Carroll, "The Word Bisaya in the Philippines and Borneo", *Sarawak Museum Journal*, vol. ix, no. 15-16 (n.S.), 1960. Mr. Carroll writes a note (fn. 14) on this image: "A picture of this image is in H. O. Beyer & Jaime C. de Veyra) *Pictorial History of the Philippines*, p. 36-7. However, I think it is an Avalokeshvara, not Siva."

⁴ *loc. cit.*

⁵ *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*, vol. ii—*Suvarnadvipa*, part 2, p. 345.

⁶ *South Indian Influences in the Far East*, p. 8, 144-145.

⁷ In 1958, while the present writer was still in India pursuing his research for the doctoral degree, he wrote Professor Beyer (through Mr. Moises C. Bello, of the University of the Philippines Discipline of Anthropology) inquiring about the paper written by Dr. Bosch on the identification of the image. The reply to this enquiry was never received.

too much. Even the "testimony" of Pigafetta does not necessarily afford solid ground for us to accept Beyer's view. Moreover, that the king of Butuan was a "non-Mohammedan" does not necessarily logically follow that he was a Hindu, much more a Saiva by persuasion.

The citation from John M. Garvan of a tradition (or mythus?) seems even more questionable. But for the Cebu image (which has been perhaps rightfully doubted by John Carroll to be a Siva icon (*vide* Note 3a, *supra*), where are the number of bronze Saiva and Buddhist images which were found by the early Jesuit priests among the Mandayas? Indeed, these images, if they exist, are very crucial in the full understanding of Indo-Javanese cultural penetration in the Islands.

In fact, the diffidence of the two Indian scholars to identify the image thereby putting it to a definite pantheon was justifiable. It is, however, understandable that they were reluctant to put their fingers upon any certainty for they had seen the image through published photographs which were not very clear and sharp. This diffidence may further be explained in terms of the absence of definite identifying *mudras* (hand gestures) of the image, apart from the supposed attributes that these scholars expected to see. It may be stated in passing that these *mudras* are fundamental in the study of Indian (Hindu and Buddhist) iconography.

PERHAPS, WE ARE IN A MUCH BETTER POSITION AT THIS JUNCTURE TO make one or two suggestions as to which pantheon the image belongs. (This may dispel the diffidence of the two Indian scholars to identify the image). We just obtained on loan a photograph of the image which is very sharp and clear.⁸ We are therefore able to see clearly many of the ornaments which did not show in the photograph examined by the two Indian scholars mentioned above.

First Suggestion. If Dr. Bosch had made a very extensive study of the image (as Beyer had cited the famous Dutch Scholar), he could not have missed one of the most outstanding attributes of the image. That is, the flame-like projection from the rather very ornamental head-dress. If this flame-like projection is actually a representation of a flame which characterizes (?) a great number of Buddha images in the South East Asian locus,⁹ then it may undoubtedly belong to the Buddhist pantheon. A

⁸ Mr. Fred Evangelista, Archaeologist of the National Museum, lent the present writer the photograph. He obtained this from the Chicago Museum of Natural History while he was pursuing graduate work at the University of Chicago, in 1956.

⁹ *Vide* and *Cf.*, Henri Parmentier, *L'Art du Laos* (Publications de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient, Hanoi, 1954). Vol. i, p. 269, 271, 275; vol. ii, Fig. 140-a, c,g; Fig. 142, Fig. 144-a, -b; and Fig. 145-a, -b.

Also Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia* (Bolinggen Series 39, New

question may, however, arise: If the flame is characteristic of Buddhist images, how then can its appearance in a female "deity" be explained? Perhaps, this question may be set aside for the present because we are not yet in possession of materials with which to answer it.

If on the basis of the attribute, it is a Buddhist image, with a Ngandjuk relation, it may belong to the Indo-Javanese art of the Madjapahit period. It may then be related to the cult of Queen Dedes, who on her death (or even before) was celebrated as a Prajñāparamita. It must be stated here that Queen Dedes was the consort of Ken Angrok (1220-1227),¹⁰ and that they were Buddhists by persuasion. It may be suggested that the Agusan image could have been a lesser goddess related to the Prajñāparamita as an attendant.

Moreover, if this will certainly be identified as a goddess of the Buddhist pantheon, it may yet turn out to be a portrait of a queen, which expresses "the idea that the members of the reigning families, when dead, were assumed into the essence of the supra-celestial divine being, or that while alive they functioned as avatars of the forces that support the world."¹¹ Indeed, this concept is expressed in the funerary representation of Queen Dedes conceived of as Prajñāparamita, the Sakti of the Adi Buddha. The Agusan Image may be an unknown statue of an Indo-Javanese (Madjapahit) queen represented as Sakti of one of the Buddhas or Boddhisattvas.

York, 1955). vol. ii, Plates 590, 591-b, 593-b, and 595.

The same flame-motif is also represented in the Buddhist images of Dvaravati, Siam. (Vide Pierre Dupont, *L'Archaeologie Mone de Dvaravati* (Publications de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient, vol. xli, 1959), Text vol., p. 165 & Plate vol., Fig. 336-337.

Cf. these images possessing the flame-motif on their crown (usnisa) with bronzes discovered in Nēgapatam (and preserved in the Madras Government Museum) representing the standing Buddha (without the usnisa, however, but) whose head is surmounted with a flame of the Singhalese tradition (*ibid.*, Text vol., p. 184).

But cf., Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (Bollingen Series, New York, 1953), p. 152, 153, and 154: "That the flame is a symbol of Siva . . ."

¹⁰In Mahayana Buddhism, there are many female powers one of which "is a counterpart of the great goddess of Hinduism, the Universal Mother. She is known as Prajñāparamita (Plate 499), "The perfection of the virtue (paramita) of the enlightening transcendental wisdom (prajña)', . . . 'the enlightening wisdom (prajña) that has gone (ita) to the far shore (param)'—the shore of the transcendental void where that wisdom eternally abides." (Zimmer, *op. cit.*, p. 140.)

The Indo-Javanese Prajñāparamita (plate 501) is described as ". . . the most spiritual manifestation possible of maternal principle. . . . For this transcendent image seems to have been what is known as the 'consecration figure' of an actual Javanese princess—Queen Dedes of the Dynasty of Singhasari." (*ibid.*, p. 143-144).

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 144.

Furthermore, if this is a Buddhist image, it would give credence to John Carroll's view¹² that the Cebu copper statue is Avalokitesvara (Avalokitesvara), and not a Siva image according to Professor Beyer.

Second Suggestion. On a closer study of the image, it has been found out that Professor Beyer may not have been entirely wrong in his identification of the image as "Sivaite" (although we can not subscribe to his view of its relationship with the word *Butuan*, "phallus").¹³ The image may be a Sakti of the Siva-Buddha (Bhairava?) and may it be rightfully named Bhairavi (?)? The Siva-Buddha is a religious (?) development in Java, in which the destructive or ferocious aspect of Siva (that is, the Bhairava aspect)¹⁴ is synthesized with the debased Tantric forms of Buddhism (both in Java and Sumatra) which was introduced from Bengal in circa 13th century A.D.^{14a}

The image's connection with the Siva-Buddha aspect may be explained from the prominent representation of what seem to be skulls as

¹² *loc. cit.* "Avalokitesvara, a Bodhisattva in the Buddhistic concept or mythos, is the 'being who is capable (Isvara) of enlightening insight (avalokita)', but who, out of infinite mercy, postponed his own attainment of nirvana," (Zimmer, *op. cit.*, p. 182.)

¹³ The connection that Professor Beyer assumes between the image' being identified as Sivaite and the name *Butuan*, "phallus", may be dismissed on the ground that *Butuan* may after all mean "the place where bones are in abundance" (*butu*, "bone" plus *-an* a native suffix).

¹⁴ In India, "Ramanuja describes the Kalamukhas as using a skull as a drinking vessel, smearing themselves with ashes of a dead body, eating human flesh, holding a club, setting up a wine-jar as a site for offerings to the deity" (who is Siva, as Bhairava) and . . . Sankara was said to have had "controversies with Kapalikas—at Ujjayini . . . where Siva, as Bhairava, was worshipped with human sacrifices and wine libations". (Vide *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. xi, p. 93-a.) Also S. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, V, p. 2-3, ff.

The Kalamukhas and the Kapalikas are believed to be worshippers of the Destructive (Bhairava or Bhairavi) aspect of Siva and his consort, Parameśvari.

^{14a} Vide P. V. Bapat (Ed.), *2500 Years of Buddhism* (New Delhi, 1959), p. 95: ". . . . There are interesting accounts of kings in the later period of Sri Vijaya history who were followers of this cult. Two important Mahayana texts in Java are known: The *Sang hyang kamahayanan mantranaya* and the *Sang hyang kamahayanikan*. . . ."

(The first work consists of Sanskrit verses with a Javanese translation, while the second consists of somewhat free Javanese version of a Sanskrit original mixed with a number of original Sanskrit verses. The second text gives a detailed exposition of the sacred principles of Mahayana, but the first gives the picture of a more popular but degraded form of Mahayana. Its title *Mantranaya* is probably another form of *Mantrayana*. In any case, it is really an exposition of the *Trantrayana* or *Vajrayana*, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, and explicitly refers to the five kinds of sensual enjoyments (*kamapaneakam*) which no doubt refer to *panca-makara*. There exists a fairly detailed account of King Krtanagara of Java (1254-1292 A.D.) who was passionately devoted to this degraded form of Buddhism. *ibid.*, fn. 1, p. 95.)

The *pañca-makara* are the five essentials of the left-hand Tantra ritual. These five essentials are *madya*, "wine"; *mamsa*, "meat"; *matsya*, "fish"; *mudra*, "intertwining of fingers"; and *maithuna*, "sexual union."

ornaments around the region of the arm just above the elbow; around the wrists, and upon the head-dress (if they do not represent lotus buds¹⁵). In fact, if it were conceived of as the Sakti of the Siva-Buddha, it may show that she may possess some of the fundamental characteristics similar (?) to those possessed by Prajñāparamita, who is the Sakti of the Adi Buddha (*vide supra*). Moreover, the rather prominently developed breasts speak of that fundamental function of a female—the ideal of motherhood, the chief element in creation.¹⁶

It may be suggested, furthermore, that if it is a Tantric image, it may be related to the Ganesa statue of Singhasari, which is ornamented with human skulls, and sits upon a slab of stone supported by human skulls.^{16a}

Third Suggestion. This suggestion more or less confirms the present writer's surmise in the first suggestion, that the image belongs to the Buddhist pantheon. This confirmation comes from U Bo Kay (Conservator, Archaeological Directorate, Rangoon, Burma) and R. J. Thapa (Director of Archaeology, Kathmandu, Nepal). Both "agree that the image belongs to the Buddhist pantheon, as to the manner of sitting, calmness of facial expression, long ears and halo around the head. They, in fact, venture the opinion that the image represents a female deity of the Mahayana Buddhism."¹⁷

Corollary to this confirmation, P. R. Srinivasan (Assistant Superintendent of Epigraphy, Archaeological Survey of India, Ootacamund, S. India) "identifies it as that of a Tara, probably late Medieval. 'Some people call such images of female deities as female Boddhisattvas'."^{17a}

Fourth Suggestion. This suggestion does not necessarily involve iconographic attributes, but that of the image's date. According to R. C. Majumdar, the head-dress and other ornaments show the influence of Indo-Javanese art of the 10th century A.D.¹⁸ If it were a Buddhist image, judging from the two foregoing suggestions, it may then belong to the

¹⁵ If they are lotus buds, the image may also be Hinduistic, for the flower (lotus) is a prominent symbol in Hinduism and in Buddhism.

¹⁶ Cf. Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*, vol. i, Chapter V. "Indian Ideals of Beauty", p. 68-157. In this chapter, the well-developed breasts as one of the prominent attributes of Indian beauty are given very extensive attention to by the author.

For more information about the Sakti concept, *vide* Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, p. 137-148.

^{16a} Zimmer, vol. ii, plate 504.

¹⁷ The confirmation comes in the form of Notes taken by Mr. Evangelista (*vide* fn. 8, *supra*) after he had shown the photograph of the image to the above cited authorities whom he met in the International Archaeological Congress held in New Delhi, India, in December, 1961. These Notes had been transmitted to the present writer in a letter (Manila, dated 24 January, 1962).

^{17a} *Vide* same letter.

¹⁸ *loc. cit.*

second half of the Sailendra period Sri Vijaya history (900-950 A.D.).^{18a} The Sailendras who ruled Sri Vijaya between 850 and 950 A.D. were Buddhists. And therefore, the whole sculptural techniques would have been influenced by Indo (Buddhist)—Javanese art of this period.

Moreover, if this image belongs to the Buddhist pantheon and therefore may have been artistically influenced by the Indo-Javanese art of the 10th Century A.D., the inference may be that this image could have been related to the Buddhist tradition that was prevailing at that period, and which was responsible of the building of the famous Barabudur, the text-book in stone of Buddhism, and other Buddhist monuments at Kalasan and Mendut (in Java).

WHILE MENTION OF THE ICONOGRAPHIC ATTRIBUTES OF THE IMAGE HAS been inevitably made, it is not the purpose of the present paper to explain and discuss their symbolism in relation to their religious significance. An excursus on these will have to be deferred for a separate paper, for materials on this subject are not readily available in the Philippine libraries.¹⁹

It is, however, hoped that the foregoing discussions will suffice to show that the earlier "identification" by Professor Beyer was comparatively doubtful. This is, moreover, to stimulate further study of the image and its implications in the entire historical perspective of the Philippines in pre-hispanic times.

NO DEFINITE INFERENCES ARE TO BE DRAWN FROM THE ABOVE DISCUSSIONS, for the suggestions are not conclusive. The points raised in the suggestions, particularly in the first and second, were advanced, because they seemed logically related to the image under study. These may be taken, in future studies on the image as basic ground for the determination of its final identification.

However, as to the present writer's view on the four suggestions, he is comparatively inclined to the 1st suggestion, which has been *fortified* by the confirmation laid down in the 3rd suggestion. Indeed, it seems incontrovertible that with these two suggestions the image is a goddess of the Buddhist pantheon, in the Mahayana group. It is related to the concept that it is a female Boddhisattva, and at the same time the counterpart of the Hindu goddess (Sakti), as a Tara (or wife of a Buddhist god), which is a peculiar development of Buddhism in South East Asia.

^{18a} Vide K. A. Nilakantha Sastri, *History of Sri Vijaya* (Madras, 1949), and G. Coedes, *Les Etats Hindouises d'Indo-Chine et d'Indonesie* (Paris, 1948).

¹⁹ Letters had been sent to the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient, the Institut Francaise d'Indologie, the Kern Institute, Leiden, requesting for comparable iconographic materials. It is hoped that with these materials will give us firm ground to identify the image with a degree of certainty.

As to the date of the statue, its probable connection with the Tantric development of Buddhism in South East Asia would put it in the late 13th or early 14th century A.D., and this is confirmed by Mr. P. R. Srinivasan (*Vide Suggestion 3, supra*).

If the foregoing suggestions were to be affirmed by the discovery of corroborating evidences, the present writer believes that his efforts will have been fully justified, inspite the stand he took in the previous paragraph. With this justification, moreover, the Philippine's early cultural-historical contacts with the outside world would fully be understood and appreciated. The Islands' artistic history will have been also partially explained as a continuum from the primitive to the modern. But, if evidences to the contrary were also found, Philippine pre-European art history will have been explained in the light of its indigenous character. Thus, it may be rightfully claimed that Philippine art, in its early history, had reached a "certain degree of aesthetic perfection?" as evidenced by this priceless discovery—the Agusan Gold Image—if it may be considered as representative of pre-European Philippine art.