Thousand-year-old depictions of massage abortion

Malcolm Potts, Maura Graff, Judy Taing

Background
Abortion induced by physical trauma has a long history. This article describes bas-relief sculptures in Angkor Wat, Cambodia dating from the 9th to the 12th centuries, and compares them to contemporary observations of massage abortion. The Cambodian carvings, along with two similar representations in Indonesia, are the earliest known illustrations of an abortion in progress. The bas-reliefs prove that abortion techniques were well understood at the time, although their cultural interpretation is uncertain.

Massage abortion
Massage abortion is widely practised in present day Southeast Asia, from Myanmar, through Thailand, down to Malaysia, and across to Indonesia and the Philippines. In Malaysia it is called hilot. In the Philippines a hilot, or traditional birth attendant (TBA), is the person who usually conducts the procedure. Narkavonnakit interviewed 81 abortion practitioners in Thailand and found almost half of all abortions were by massage. She estimated that several hundred thousand massage abortions were being performed in rural Thailand each year.2

In Southern Nigeria, traditional abdominal massage techniques are used for a variety of obstetric conditions, such as cephalopelvic disproportion. In approximately 20% of cases it is practised early in pregnancy, and possibly perceived as an abortion technique.3 The crude application of force to induce abortion has been observed in many preliterate societies.4 Massage abortion does not involve any vaginal manipulation and the pregnancy must be sufficiently advanced for the fundus uteri to be palpable from above the symphysis. The TBA attempts to stabilise the uterus (Figure 1) and then begins to put increasing pressure on the abdominal wall. She may use her fingers, her elbows, her feet, or even the pestle many village women own to pound rice. The pressure is continued until vaginal bleeding is observed. Some abortions occur within minutes, but sometimes the procedure is continued for much longer and occasionally leads to internal haemorrhage. Surgeons report admitting women with board-like abdominal subsidence.10,11 Some of the accompanying inscriptions beneath a raised footpath, supposedly put there to prevent the afterlife. Although photographed 100 years ago, the sculptures to depict religious teachings. Both also locate these inscriptions were added some centuries later. Each hell is portrayed as a tableau and the images appear to be tailored to treat the perpetrators of specific crimes. The carvings of massage abortion appear in the thirty-second hell. Women are piled up like cordwood, naked with bound hands, and each is about 20 weeks pregnant (Figure 2). The male figures in the reliefs are pounding the abdomen of a pregnant woman with a pestle. Immediately to the left of the massage abortion scene, two torturers are loading another pregnant woman on a pile and women are being stacked in a horizontal position over flames.

Similar, although artistically cruder, representations of massage abortion have been found in the Indonesian temples of Borobudur (built by the Shailendra dynasty, AD 750–860)9 and Prambanan (AD 900). Both temples share an architectural plan with Angkor, and have bas-relief sculptures to depict religious teachings. Both also locate their images of massage abortion among representations of the afterlife. Although photographed 100 years ago, the bas-relief sculptures at Borobudur are currently buried beneath a raised footpath, supposedly put there to prevent subsidence.10,11 Some of the accompanying inscriptions may have been lost. At Prambanan, a bas-relief sculpture tells the story of a king warned by a prediction that he...
would be killed by a child of his sister. His sister’s pregnant belly is being hit by the hands of a woman whose face is contorted with a frightening expression. The pregnant sister leans back but cannot escape the blows.12

**Interpretation**

Clearly, the method of abortion illustrated in the 1000-year old bas-reliefs is identical to that used today, even if the procedure has been transposed to the afterlife and, at least at Angkor, the operator is a demon and not a TBA. The carvings attest to the antiquity of the massage abortion technique and also strongly suggest that most people were sufficiently familiar with the method to identify with the illustrations on the frieze.

Each hell in the Angkor frieze is tailored to treat the perpetrators of specific crimes. The inscription over the thirty-second hell in the Angkor carvings is: “The hell of the violent, the miserly, the creditors without pity”.12 The thirty-second hell is also known by the name given by French archaeologists, *L'enfer Raurava*, the Hell of Groaning or the Hell of Screaming.

For medieval Christendom, hell was eternal torture, but in Hindu (and Buddhist) theology, with its belief in reincarnation, hell represented a process of atonement. For the women in the thirty-second hell, the abortion could be interpreted as a remedy for some wicked deeds that led to a short life in the next reincarnation. Interestingly, this is the only explicit reference to abortion in the Old or New Testament, and it is notable that abortion itself is not considered murder.

The Angkor carvings underscore the universality of abortion. For hundreds of millions of women, the torments it was imagined women might suffer in hell for terminating a pregnancy are a reality on earth.

**Acknowledgement**

Part of the background research for this article was done by David Handel, MA, who died in 2003.

**Statements on funding and competing interests**

**Funding** None identified.

**Competing interests** None identified.

**References**