

# The Passing of Sihanouk: Monarchic Manipulation and the Search for Autonomy in the Kingdom of Cambodia

## シアンヌーク 逝去ーカンボジア王国における君主制操作と自治への模索

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### Summary

*The survival of the monarchy in Cambodia is little short of remarkable in the light of that country's modern history. As this article develops, French manipulation of the monarchy and attempts to buttress religion and culture alongside the rise of nationalist youth and Buddhist radicalism was an important precursor to postwar events. No less momentous for modern Cambodian history was the Vichy French installation of Norodom Sihanouk as king and the elevation under Japan of the putative republican Son Ngoc Thanh. Facing down an armed Issarak-Viet Minh challenge also joined by a dissident prince, it is no less significant that the young King Sihanouk successfully trumped French ambitions by mounting his own "royal crusade" for independence even ahead of the Geneva Settlement of 1954.*

Undoubtedly the passing of Norodom Sihanouk on October 15, 2012 at the age of 89 after six decades of close involvement in Cambodian politics has served to refocus attention upon the status of the monarchy in that country, facts not diminished by the actual succession in October 2004 to his son Norodom Sihamoni (b. 1953).



**A phoenix float carries the casket of Sihanouk**

Though much exoticized and othered as a peaceful realm under the French protectorate, at least alongside the challenges imposed by Vietnamese nationalists, dissent always simmered beneath the surface calm in Cambodia, whether from the overburdened-over taxed peasantry, from the major immigrant communities, from religious radicals within and without the Buddhist hierarchies, or even from scheming royal princes. Given French manipulations of religion, tradition and even the royal line, a complex political picture emerges, even prior to the Japanese occupation. Japan was even more successful in installing an anti-French republican demagogue, an enigmatic figure whose name recurs in Cambodian history down until the US-backed military coup in Phnom Penh of March 1970. Thanks to Anglo-French intervention, and Sihanouk's personality, the post-war outcome in Cambodia was a "royal road to

independence” although even that pathway was severely challenged by the Viet Minh and their sometime Issarak (Free Khmer) allies. Yet the royal ascendancy around the Vichy French-anointed monarch, Sihanouk, would also come back to haunt Cambodia, not only in striking a neutral course in the maelstrom of the American war, but also in lending his name to the China-backed anti-Vietnamese communist movement that triumphed in Phnom Penh in 1975.

As this article develops, below the politics of culture or the tendency of the French to buttress neo-traditionalist trends wherever they saw them, emerges a byzantine crossover of royal dynasties, powerful families and cliques that, in many ways, continued to define Cambodian politics through the modern period. It is also true, as Roger Kershaw (2000; 6; 17; 19-20) unveils in a comparative study on the “fortunes” of monarchy in Southeast Asia, that analysis of surviving monarchies (as with Thailand and Brunei alongside Cambodia), should at least account for the “synthetic” alongside the “authentic traditional values” (not excepting even Britain from this analysis). And so, with decolonization in Southeast Asia, legitimacy questions were raised to a new level as with the charisma of founding fathers of independence, alongside the role of modern bureaucracies, militaries and political parties. Cambodia under Sihanouk was not an exception.

As historian of Cambodia David Chandler (2008: 167) has written, there are several ways at looking at the years of French hegemony over Cambodia. One way is to phase this history as the extension and decline of French control. Another way is to examine the period and its ideology and practice from a French point of view. A third would be to treat the period as a part of Cambodian history, connected to the times before and after French protection. He finds the third approach seductive (insofar as it can be told through

Cambodian eyes). Such would be meritorious, if possible, but without retreating entirely into a cultural studies-critical literature approach (Tully 2002; Edwards 2007), we should not ignore the established literature if we are to position Cambodia within an international political understanding.

Divided into five sections, a first section looks at French manipulation of the monarchy. A second turns to the French attempt to buttress religion and culture, alongside the rise of nationalist youth and Buddhist radicalism. A third section examines the vicissitudes of Cambodia under Vichy, including the installation of Norodom Sihanouk as king, climaxing with the rise of the Japanese-backed republican Son Ngoc Thanh. A final section examines the broad international context in which Sihanouk's mounted his “royal crusade for independence.”

### Manipulation of the Monarchy

As with the case of Annam, French colonial power did not and could not ignore traditional notions of kingship, but in Cambodia they went further in indulging the institution of the monarchy even while manipulating succession and vetting candidates upon succession. This was made easier owing to the fact that, in Cambodia, the monarchy was not strictly hereditary. Rather it is elective and chosen by a crown council (Dauphin-Meunier 1965: 10). The French also had to face down monarchs deemed ineffectual, wasteful, stubborn, or just addicted to opium.

We detour to offer a genealogy of the kings of Cambodia. To French advantage, two branches of the royal family contended in the late 19th-early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that of the Norodoms, and that of the Sisowaths, Monarchs serving under the protectorate were Norodom (r.1860-1904); his younger brother Norodom Sisowath (r.1904-27), Sisowath Monivong (r.1927-41); and Norodom Sihanouk (r.1941-55; 1993-2004).

But in strengthening the institution of the monarchy, the French also looked to boost their own prestige alongside collaborators from among the royal family. The most obvious and enduring French contribution to this project was rebuilding the palace. Commencing in 1912, and over a decade in the making, the initial reconstruction-renovation project was budgeted at 1 million piasters. This involved the commissioning of a new reception room, *salle de dances*, throne room, royal chambers, lodging for palace staff, palace hospital, earth works, drains, water works, and so on (AOM Indo NF/48/585 Résident Supérieur au Cambodge Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, Phnom Penh, Nov. 16, 1915). Notwithstanding war and revolution, alongside refurbishments, it survives.



**Cambodia Royal Palace**

### *King Norodom (r.1859-1904) and Royal Succession*

Writing on the state of affairs in Cambodia in 1886, the Resident Superior of Cambodia informed Paris that the general situation was “excellent, but delicate.” Reflecting upon King Norodom (r.1859-1904), he remarked. “It remains to believe that the death of the King will permit us to modify at our will the direction of our policies...” As he warned, “The Prince favored by the King may not be the Prince of our choice. It would have as consequence the

re-establishment of the appanage of the king. The state of health of the king is delicate. The smallest mistake on our part could compromise the return of taxes which in recent years are returned in increasing favorable conditions thanks to [...] reforms.” In a further word of caution, he remarked, “For a long time the population has been defensive over abuses. Excesses by the mandarins bring benefits almost exclusively to a parasitic class whose title owes to the king but who lack well-determined roles except to exploit this class of worker with impunity” (AOM Indo/NF/48/583-578, Résident Supérieur Cambodge à Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, Phnom Penh, 3 juillet, 1886).

Although initially installed by the Siamese court in 1863, King Norodom sought the protection of France from both the Siamese and Vietnamese after tensions grew between them. Notably, in 1867, Bangkok entered into a treaty with France, renouncing suzerainty over Cambodia in exchange for control over the western provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap duly becoming part of Siam, until ceded back to Cambodia in 1906. In a written protest to the French government, Norodom expressed his resentment and noted that he reserved the right and those of his heirs over the ceded provinces (Osborne 1969: 188-9).

As summarized in a French memorandum, matters governing royal succession in Cambodia were not subject to a written constitution. Rather, they conformed to religious sources (more accurately traditional practices also based upon religious values) and, as explained below, the needs of the French protectorate. Such practices were said to involve the caste of Brahmins represented in that age as Bakour or guardians of the sacred sword, relic of an ancient cult, performed exclusively within the royal palace. The royalty was elective with the choice of the sovereign determined by a council made up of high dignitaries of the kingdom (the Council of

Ministers under the protectorate). With the death of a reigning king, the Council met to choose a successor who, necessarily, had to be of the royal family. In the case of the royal family being extinguished, then the successor had to be chosen from among his descendants, a ceremony involving the semi-divine presence of the sovereign. Although free to make its choice, the council of dignitaries was always taken into account by the king who made his preference known, either by designation, or by the election of a candidate, preferably his son going by the title of *obbareach*, second king or, more accurately heir presumptive to the king. As indicated, Sisowath, the younger brother of Norodom, succeeded the latter and not one of Sisowath's sons (AOM Indo NF/48/585 note).

As Osborne (1969: 4-7), has elaborated, the king actually shared the administration of the kingdom with his royal relatives and senior officials, including royal figures with territorial responsibility. Moreover, owing to the widespread practice of royal polygamy, the Cambodian court counted any number of aspiring princes, certain ones harboring claims upon the throne. Still, royalty was not a permanent hereditary right. But non-royal officials, notably five great ministers of the court, in meeting with the leading civil and religious leaders of the realm, were also empowered as with the procedure for recommending a new king.

In a Convention of 1883 the French broached the question of collecting revenues from opium. In this unequal exchange it was agreed that, in return for surrendering this right to the Protectorate, the Royal treasury would collect an annual fixed sum. But King Norodom and his brother Sisowath, both opium smokers, preferred to receive the payment *en nature*. Reaching back to 1884, King Norodom demanded a payoff from the French of 18.9 kg. of raw opium every two months. In October 1915, not satisfied with the quality, the newly installed King Sisowath was presented with

“deluxe Benares.” Although a royal ordinance was handed down in 1907 proscribing the use of opium by court mandarins, that ruling was only honored in the breach. Down until 1915, at least, between 2-3,000 members of the court, male and female, royals included, were addicts (Résident Supérieur au Cambodge, Nov. 16, 1915, op.cit).

In 1897, the Resident Superior complained to Paris that the then ruling king of Cambodia, King Norodom, was no longer fit to rule and asked for permission to assume the king's powers to collect taxes, issue decrees, and even appoint royal officials and choose the crown prince (AOM Indo NF/48/585). From that time, Norodom and the future kings of Cambodia were figureheads and merely patrons of the Buddhist religion, though they were still viewed as god-kings by the peasant population. As with the protectorate in Annam with its capital at Hue, surviving as a shell of its former munificence, all other power in Cambodia was in the hands of the Resident Superior, the military, and the colonial bureaucracy.

#### *Death of Norodom and Succession of Sisowath*

Importantly, with the death of King Norodom in 1904, the succession was transferred by the French to his brother Sisowath rather than passing the throne on to his sons. More generally, the Sisowath branch of the royal family was perceived as more submissive to French rule and less nationalistic than the Norodom branch. Specifically, Norodom was viewed as responsible for the constant revolts against French rule. The succession issue and the division of the royal family would also be revisited by the French with the selection of Sihanouk, as discussed below.

Norodom had wished that he be succeeded by his favorite son, Prince Yukanthor (1860-1934). However, on one of his trips to Europe in August-September 1900, Yukanthor criticized French rule in Cambodia by way of petition (See Osborne 1969: 244-5). Having been exiled



from Cambodia for “acts of disobedience,” Yukanthor then based himself in Siam after having created an opposition movement in his favor. According to an official French source, Yukanthor was also involved in secret acts against the protectorate and the royal government during World War I. He had no official function, was deemed incapable, without personality, character, or dignity, and devoted to his pursuit of opium (AOM Indo NF/48/585).

On the side of Sisowath, there stood 39 year-old Prince Souphanouvong, Minister of Marine, deemed to have modest intellectual characteristics. Yongkot (aged 35), the youngest son, was not seen to have profited from his stay in France, having led a “dissipated life of pleasure.” Phanouvong Southarat remained a candidate from the Norodom branch of the royal family, just as Monivong remained a candidate for the Sirowath branch. Phanouvong was regarded as perfectly qualified by the correctness of his attitudes (towards France), his intellectual qualities, and the dignity of his private life. He had served as prime minister and minister of interior and religion. He was alert to religious questions, had great attachment to the country and its traditions, and was open to progress. His attitude towards the protectorate was unimpeachable. Although Sutharat had been designated as successor to the reigning king in 1915, by that time, it was impossible to propose the best candidate, because Sathavong was also well qualified. But because Prince Monivong suffered a health problem, the preferred choice of Sisowath prevailed, a fragile quality agreed upon by the government (AOM Indo NF/48/585).

As the Governor General advised Paris, due to Norodom's aggravated condition, it was important that the French Consul in Singapore ensure surveillance over Prince Yukanthor. Furthermore, he counseled, “take all measures in Cambodia to facilitate a normal transition

without a *coup de trône* by the *obbareach*, as mentioned, the presumptive heir to the throne. It would perhaps be prudent, he continued, to “send a gunboat to Phnom Penh along with an auxiliary company” (AOM Indo/NF/48/583-578 tél., Gouverneur Général, Hanoi, 1904). Needless to say, given French preparations and precautions, Prince Sisowath (1904-27) younger brother of Norodom, succeeded the latter. Whatever the truth, as Sihanouk (1974: 149) wrote in his memoirs, his discovery of documents in the royal palace in 1941-5 relating to the Yuchanthor case, revealed to him just how manipulative the French could be when faced with the ugly truth, such as exposed by the prince and legitimate heir to the throne in his petition of 1900.

With the death of Norodom on the evening of April 24, 1904, the Council of Ministers was immediately convened, bringing together the Resident Superior, local chiefs, and the proclaimed *obbareach* (Sisowath) in a ceremony where Buddhist rites were conducted. Having been recognized by all the palace mandarins, the *obbareach* pronounced an Oath declaring recognition of the protection of France and his desire for progress and a prosperous Cambodia (AOM Indo/NF/48/583-578. tél., Hanoi à Colonies, Paris, April 25, 1904). As Osborne (1969: 258) declaims, “Norodom's was a tragic life,” notably his allegiance to the past and old models of the state, scarcely prepared him to meet the challenge of the French in Cambodia. Nevertheless, the institutions he defended outlived him. The prestige of the office of king remained deeply embedded, yet the French purchase on power over the court and country had also become entrenched.

#### *King Sisowath Monivong (1904-27)*

According to a French account, the advent of Sisowath on the throne in 1904 marked an end to the discontent and conflicts which, during the long reign of Norodom, had hampered the

work of government in pursuing internal reform. In the words of Governor General Jean Baptiste Paul Beau, over this period, Sisowath had demonstrated his loyalty to France. The period from October 1902 to 1907 marked a “new era” for Cambodia. “The pacification of the country is complete, the population is at peace. Day by day the population make easy contact with our method without too much repugnance; the mandarins engage more intelligently our economic program.” To reinforce communal organization, he continued, the new position of *mesrok* or village chief was to be created, and “which will happily fill in an important administrative lacunae in the indigenous administration of the country” (Beau 1908).

Still as Kershaw (2001: 27) allows, not only did the advanced age of Sisowath (64) make planning for the next reign immediately pressing but – importantly – the French had created a parallel and rival dynasty to the Norodom “and thus a new factor for instability, though without detracting from the existing priority of malleability.” This was especially so, not only because his sons were demonstrably lacking merit, but some were even perceived as anti-French. As explained below, eventually the eldest surviving son of Sisowath, Monivong (1927-41), would be chosen.

On March 10, 1906, Sisowath embarked on a voyage to France on the *Amiral de Kersaint*, returning on August 20 the same year, evidently *enchanted* with the general experience, just as the French were approving. Meantime, special ceremonies were held to mark the retrocession from Siam to Cambodia of Krabi along with Battambang and Sisophon (Beau 1908), although such territorial adjustments at the expense of Siam would return to haunt the French in Cambodia.

As observed by Paul Luce, Resident Superior of Cambodia, writing in March 1909, several

times King Sisowath had confidentially confided his personal desires as to his designated successor, namely Prince Monivong, who had departed for France for studies. But, as Luce replied to Sisowath, he could not guarantee a firm approval on these questions. As he reported to Paris, Monivong presented the best qualities of character and sincerity towards France. He had achieved three years education in France, was seen as a good student, and had made a good impression in meeting the President of the Republic. But, he warned, Monivong's attitude could change over time. And the brother of King Norodom had also proposed his son, although later withdrawn his candidature (AOM Indo/NF/48/577 Paul Luce, Résident Supérieur au Cambodge à Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, Phnom Penh, March 18, 1909). Returning home to Cambodia in 1909, a graduate of a French military school, Sisowath Monivong pursued a military career though also brought into the inner decision making circle of the Council of Ministers and royal family. With the death of his father in August 1927, the succession passed to Sisowath Monivong (r.1927-41).

### *Sisowath Monivong and the Siamese Dancer Affair*

Still, the French had a hard time in finessing the succession. In early 1926, Sisowath Monivong engaged among other Cambodian *danceur-concubines*, the young Siamese Nangsao Baen. Several newspapers in Bangkok announced the impending marriage of Sisowath and the dancer, leading to an active exchange between the Resident Superior at Phnom Penh and, on February 6, the Minister of France in Bangkok with Foreign Minister Prince Traidós. The first article to appear on the subject was the *Daily Mail* of January 16, 1926, explaining that Monivong had requested the *actrice* Nang-Fai, for the hand of his daughter Baen. This happened after the cremation ceremonies for departed King. The Bangkok press further

speculated that the French had no objection to the marriage, and that Phnom Penh had clarified that they were only engaged and not yet married. The *Bangkok Post* reported that, in an interview, Nni Phoun, the girl's father, had stated that his daughter had received a royal title. But the royal affair was terminated and the dancer returned to Bangkok. This led to a recrudescence of Bangkok press opinion, treating the girl as victim and how she had been abandoned by Monivong under French pressure. Then followed a second French intervention with Prince Traidos. However, the tendentious articles continued in the *Daily Mail*, terming the newly crowned King of Cambodia a *pantin* or puppet. According to a French account, the hidden reasons for the press campaign, turned upon animosity between Cambodia and Siam. Notable was the influence of Prince Swasti, father of the King, and proprietor of the *Daily Mail*. Prince Swasti, it appears, had experienced a failure the previous year in his project to arrange a visit by the King of Siam to Cambodia, which he attributed to Monivong. Freeman, the American editor of the paper was thus obliged to fall in line with the campaign. In the official French account, it was deemed regrettable that repercussions of this campaign exceeded the limits of Royal neighbors. It was largely thanks to the Resident Superior that he was able to put an end to this incident, damaging to the sovereignty of the protectorate, and compromising relations between Indochina and Siam. This was all the more so, as relations had only recently become amicable (AOM Indo/NF/48/3578 "Note AS pretendus mariage de SM le roi de Cambodge avec une danseuse Siamoise").

### Culture Wars: A Protectorate Under Challenge

Almost from the outset of their presence in Cambodia, France sought to unlock a number of historical truths about the kingdom and its history, vital if they were to run a successful

protectorate with limited resources. Initial attempts did not meet with much progress and it would be decades before French understanding began to gel with the complex reality of an ancient kingdom on the ropes. Leclerc (1914: xi-xii), writing in 1913, claims that King Norodom placed documents under lock and key and forbade their scrutiny under pain of severe sanction. However, King Sisowath proved more modern than his brother and predecessor and facilitated consultation with a view to demonstrating to the Khmer people their grand history. Still, he felt monastic collections held locally would provide even more information on local events, as with the history of Kan the rebel or on Sambok. More broadly, the French sought to renovate Cambodian culture where they thought it would buttress the status quo, as well as to demarcate Cambodian national identity vis-à-vis cultural and religious competition arising from Bangkok. The state of the Buddhist *sangha* (congregation) in Cambodia was a major French concern in this regard and this would be borne out by the facts.

#### *L'Institute Bouddhique/The Buddhist Institute*

While France virtually emasculated Confucian tradition in Vietnam, in Cambodia and Laos they found it expedient to actually reinforce religious and cultural traditions where they did not contradict broader colonial goals. The key project in this endeavor in Cambodia was the plan to establish an Institute of Buddhist Studies in Phnom Penh. Joining the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in Hanoi before arriving in Phnom Penh in 1923, the brains behind this endeavor was Mlle Suzanne Karpeles, a Sanskrit and Pali expert-graduate of L'Ecole des Langues Orientales. EFEO resources along with the Institute of Indian Civilization of the University of Paris would also be deployed in the creation of the Institute in Phnom Penh with a branch established in Vientiane. Founded on May 12, 1930 by King Sisowath Monivong, King Sisavong Vong of

Laos, Governor General Pierre Pasquier, and then head of EFEO, George Coèdes, the goal of the Institute was to stimulate a revival of Cambodian Buddhism otherwise seen as lacking in doctrinal rigor and rent between two schools, one of them playing into the hands of the Thai.

Symbolically, the Institute Bouddhique and library was situated in Wat Ounalom (founded in 1422), touted as one of Phnom Penh's five original monasteries, and located on the riverfront about 250 m. north of the National Museum facing the Tonlé Sap River near the Royal Palace. For her part, Karpeles launched into a project to produce a translation and critical edition of the Pali canon (100 volumes, each 600 pages long). Such would require the employment of teams of translators, etc. The Tripitaka Commission, established in 1929, eventually accomplished the task of translating the whole body of Theravada Buddhist scriptures from Pali into Khmer. More than that, through her scholarly activities and promotional works, she also disseminated works on Pali Buddhist philosophy and Cambodian culture. According to the *Dhamma Encyclopedia*, such activities, "helped the educated class to distinguish the Dhamma from Cambodian animistic and folk beliefs and to diminish Thai influence, allowing the Cambodian Sangha to emerge as a distinct and independent body".

Having wrested both Cambodia and Laos from control of the Bangkok court, the French also sought to undertake what today would be called "nation-building" exercises. For instance, in the late 1930s, the Governor General observed that Cambodia, properly speaking, did not have a national anthem. It only had a royal anthem called Nakoreach. Accordingly a new anthem dubbed national hymn was composed at the request of the king by François Perruchot, head of royal music in Phnom Penh (AOM Indo NF 2365/269 Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, Hanoi, à

Ministre des Colonies, Jan. 17, 1938).

Towards the end of the protectorate, the French also created the Commission des Moeurs et Coutumes setting up in an office next door to the Buddhist Institute. The moving force was another woman, EFEO scholar Eveline Porée-Maspero, with a brief to preserve traditions and to make Khmer civilization better known. Between 1941-45 she also held the position of conservator of the Phnom Penh museum.

### *The Seeds of Nationalism: The Lycée Sisowath Strike*

More generally the rural masses in Cambodia remained almost entirely oblivious or resistant to communist ideas or organization, undoubtedly owing to the ethnicity of the messenger, Chinese or Vietnamese, respectively. Nevertheless, in Cambodia, as across the colonized world, the first generations to receive an education in the language of the colonizer stood as a cultural avant garde, not only to fulfill the administrative needs of their masters, as was expected, but also to redeem, however vicariously, their people's expectations.

Notably, in an unprecedented action on May 7 1936, 168 interns or resident collegians of the elite Lycée Sisowath refused to attend classes. Certain returned to their natal villages, while the majority put up in Buddhist temples or resided with friends. A number of "externs" also joined the boycott. Having sought the intervention of various leading local personalities, on May 9 a majority of students had returned to their desks. On May 11, the situation was viewed as back to normal. The reason given for this strike, exclusively touching the indigenous population, was to protest a recent decision to limit to 20 years of age the personal tax exemption for students. But the students were already offside with the school authorities over the earlier imposition of stricter disciplinary measures. Blame was also



laid at the proprietor of the *La Verité* newspaper, known for his grudge against the administration and whose anti-administration tirades reached right to the gates of the school where the papers were sold. The authorities viewed it as imprudent to punish the student-strikers lest they create new martyrs to the anti-colonial cause (AOM Indo NF/329/2656-2659, Résident Supérieur au Cambodge Cabinet, Rapport Politique, May 1936).

Reviewing the case, the Resident Superior observed that, “the origins of the strike rests with the susceptibility and pride of the Cambodian students of the Lycée Sisowath who are a privileged caste.” He was correct. To wit, the future Madam Pol Pot née Khieu Ponnary was also an alumni. In a separate report, as the Resident elaborated, the single notable fact about the Lycée Sisowath strike was that, although of purely scholarly character, it also demonstrated a certain political dimension which cannot be passed over in silence. Notably, these protests emanated from the most elevated ranks of the Cambodian elite. Under the barely discernible external influences of the local press jeering against French authority and its representatives in Cambodia, “It appears that the loyalism manifest earlier towards the Protectorate by the mandarin and the educated youth progressively gives way to a certain dissatisfaction.” As also reported, youth in Chinese schools in Phnom Penh were also politically active dedicating May 4 in honor of Sun Yat-sen (ibid).

### *Buddhist Conflict*

Notwithstanding Cambodia's rich Theravada Buddhist heritage and its royal patronage, the *sangha* or Buddhist hierarchy was also subject to schism. According to Osborne (1969: 11), reflecting Cambodia's tributary relationship with Siam, on one side, the Thammayut (Dhammakay) sect of Buddhism also gained

status in Cambodia. Certain opinion holds that this only transpired in 1864, while a continuing oral tradition holds that it began during the reign of Ang Duong (r.1841–1844, 1845–1860), the last Cambodian king before the French protectorate, and a monarch who strongly encouraged the growth of Buddhism. In a word, as Osborne embroiders (1968: 3), “Buddhism, the village pagoda, and its monks provided continuity in the Khmer state.”

In November 1937 a virtually unprecedented religious incident occurred at Battambang involving a display of “Buddhist indiscipline.” As the Resident Superior of Cambodia signaled the ministry of colonies, ever since the 12<sup>th</sup> century the southern Buddhism of the Lesser Vehicle (Theravada) was the single faith, albeit mixed with Brahmanism and northern Buddhism, practiced across the region down until the last (18<sup>th</sup>) century, at least down until the religious reforms of Ang Duong and violent sequels. But Cambodian Buddhism came to be rent between two schools. The minority Thammayut sect in Cambodia ran 87 temples with 1,500 monks. On the other hand, the Mahanikay was represented in Cambodia by 2,500 pagodas supported by 60,000 monks. The Thammayut sect came to the attention to the Protectorate, however, especially because of its location and spiritual subordination to Siam. In effect, it was observed, the Thammayut sect was under the moral sway of high religious dignitaries of a neighboring kingdom, just as Thammayut monks residing in Cambodia annually visited Siam to study Pali and to consult sacred texts. Accordingly, it was feared that the instruction they received was inimical to the Protectorate. In the event, it had always been the policy of the Protectorate to stem this emigration and to counteract the Siamese influence by offering the best of the Siamese monks the possibility of future religious education in Cambodia. It was thus found necessary to create a center of Buddhist culture to enfranchise the Cambodian clergy against the attractions of the religious centers

in Siam. It was this preoccupation which led to the creation in Phnom Penh of the Royal Library, the Pali School, and the Institute of Buddhist Studies, charged with overseeing the translations of all the sacred texts to permit consultation by monks without the need to visit Bangkok. We should note that, jealous of their intellectual superiority and independence, the Thammayut sect did not well receive the creation in Phnom Penh of a center of Buddhist cultures. It should be said that with the creation of the above-mentioned institutions, the Mahanikay culture gradually increased its level to that of the Thammayut. Generally, however, the animosity between the two sects had rapidly abated. The Thammayut of Phnom Penh were no longer hostile to the Royal Library and commenced to collaborate. The Cambodian monks no longer went to Siam for their religious education. Conflict between the two sects was restricted to Battambang and Siem Reap provinces (reattached to Cambodia in 1907), still lightly under Siamese influence from a religious perspective, an influence which increasingly counteracted the “purely” Cambodian religious movement such as propagated by the religious centers in Phnom Penh (AOM Indo NF 2365/269 (Thibaudeau), Résident Supérieur, Cambodge à Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, Phnom Penh, Nov. 5, 1937).

More generally in the religious field, the report continued, the monarchs in Cambodia had exercised a certain lack of restraint. The Ordinances of 1918 and 1929 called to order those who departed from the true doctrine. It was specified that no-one could deviate in doctrine and Buddhist discipline without special authorization of His Majesty. In 1929, in order to put an end to doctrinal quarrels which threatened to upset the tranquility of religious life, as well as to retain the monks newly trained in Bangkok, His Majesty set up a Religious Commission comprising the Tripitika or three vessels, the “Buddhist Bible,” treating upon the three great principals of the religion,

the Law, the Assembly and the Community, with the goal of translating into ordinary language destined to serve the collection of Buddhist precepts of Cambodian usage. Sisowath reserved the right to verify the work of the Commission. Both sects shared the Tripitika but the two upheld certain traditional differences as with clothing and the alms bowl. The two sects argued over traditional rules, possession of the true doctrine, and the best fashion to practice, just as each sought to impose his way on the other. Generally, such disputes were localized to particular monasteries and did not pose a serious character until the time when the monarch, his advisers, and his entourage, and above all by the adversaries of the Mahanikay of the new school, publicly administered at Battambang a very lively discontent at its practices. From this instant, the noise spread that Sisowath disavowed the work of the Tripitaka Commission and proposed to stop publication and suppress the teaching of Pali (Ibid).

As observed, the Cambodian monks exercised a great influence over the mass of the population through their sermons and pagoda ceremonies. Most led exemplary lives but their number included a few black sheep as well. Recently, old guards among the Thammayut monks tracked the Mahanikay colleagues and publicly reproached them for usurping disciples of their seat. There were disputes and several exchanges of blows in the streets of Phnom Penh and even death threats. Menacing words were even uttered by monks of the two provinces against His Majesty. The Resident Superior personally intervened with the monarch in May and June requesting him to quickly dissipate the “rising malaise.” “As the situation aggravated my interventions became more pressing.” Public order risked to be compromised. Finally, in July, King Sisowath Monivong consented indicating that he would take measures to redress the situation. Rulings on religious affairs or rituals would rest exclusively with the sovereign, the spiritual

head of the kingdom. As the Resident Superior wrote, "I disapproved of his suggestion that, in order to cut short the most tendentious, to approve the Tripitika volumes already appearing after examination according to the new Mahanikay discipline." Finally, on August 31, a royal edict was promulgated and immediately circulated in the pagodas and around the country and calm was restored. As observed, the monarch was much under the influence of his advisers. "Whatever his attachment to Buddhism, he is not passionate on theological questions." He cedes this role to his immediate entourage. It was only on my proposition that he be offered an automobile and the palpable joy created by my gift that he signed the Royal edict (Ibid).

Evidently the minister was surprised to learn that the Resident Superior had intervened to arbitrate religious differences. But, as Thibaudeau argued back, it was actually the monarch who informed him of the situation and then took his advice. According to the principle – never transgressed – religious disputes were ruled, first, by the Mekon, a kind of Buddhist bishop, then at the second level, by a religious tribunal presided over by the ministry of *cultes* (religion), comprising the chiefs of religious "sects," several "notorious" monks, and the Royal decision to intervene followed. Finally, the decision was communicated to the Resident. Civil action only intervened if crimes had been committed (Ibid).

Undoubtedly this was an age of transition. Under Monivong, communism made its entrée into Cambodia, albeit confined almost exclusively to the immigrant population. It was also an age in which the young Saloth Sar (alias Pol Pot) was growing up. As mentioned, his future wife was graduating through the elite school system. From a no less privileged background, Saloth Sar's elder brother was employed as a secretary in the "*cabinet du roi*," even facilitating his younger sibling's access to the palace. "No victim of social injustice," as

Sihanouk (1986: 383) later quipped of Pol Pot.

## The Monarchy Under Vichy

With the advent of the Vichy regime in Indochina, Cambodia as with Laos, underwent some administrative restructuring also touching upon the role of the monarch. Under a decree of July 19, 1940, the powers of the king were considerably "deconcentrated." First, he lost his right to intervene in the legislative and administrative domain. Second, the responsibilities of ministers of the Council were more precisely defined. Third, government legislation was reexamined to avoid ambiguity. While certain affairs were reserved for the monarch, as with the nomination of high Buddhist officials, honors, *droit de grâce* (royal pardon), and royal palace administration, on the other hand, other affairs handled by the monarch only came after consultation with the Council of Ministers in agreement with the Resident Superior. Such included Krom affairs (an allusion to the Khmer Krom or ethnic Khmer born in the lower Mekong delta in Vietnam), management of Pali schools, the Buddhist Institute, the royal guard, and the regulation of societies. Still other affairs were simply decided by the Council of Ministers after agreement with and /or decreed by the Resident Superior. As Decoux summarized, the decree reinforced the authority of the monarch, rationalized the administration and, owing to the more complex nature of the administration, released the monarch from certain prescribed duties. As Decoux pointed out, the modalities of this reform adhered closely to administrative reforms undertaken in Annam ("*du*" of May 23, 1933), at the time when Thibaudeau was Resident Superior in Hue and which had produced "an excellent result" (AOM Indo NF 2753-2767 344, Decoux à Ministre des Colonies à Vichy, "Organisation du fonctionnement du Gouvernement Cambodgien").

Taking a lead from from Vichy France's own national renovationist policies, Decoux also

promoted an Indochinese version. As such, youth in particular were to be drawn into this campaign through sports, boy scout type formations, and other uplifting ventures. Especially in Laos and Cambodia, a number of measures were put in place to strengthen local nationalism against Thai irredentism. Such included promotion of local language and script alongside literary productions. Religion was also to be strengthened under state patronage. Ironically, one victim of Vichy anti-semitism was Suzanne Karpeles, one of 15 Jews living in Cambodia dismissed from their posts in 1940 by the pro-Nazi Vichy French government (Edwards 2004: 79-80).

With respect to language, in Cambodia as in Laos, attempts were made to do away with their respective ancient Indianized scripts, and to replace them with a roman alphabet. As in Laos, such an artifice would with time have succeeded in rupturing cultural and literary links with the past. In fact, the move aroused widespread indignation, particularly among the Buddhist *sangha*, while offering ammunition to such proto-nationalists as Son Ngoc Thanh (Tully 2005: 106-09). As mentioned below, Thanh, would return to center stage in Cambodian politics in the early post-war period, albeit as a thorn in the side of the Sihanoukist order.

#### *Investiture of King Sihanouk (April 1941)*

As revealed by internal French correspondence, Sihanouk was deliberately chosen as future monarch even prior to the death of the former king, Sisowath Monivong on April 24, 1941. At the time Sihanouk had been completing his studies in Saigon (Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat), including a deep immersion in French language and culture with the assistance of specialized tutors. Born on October 31, 1922, Sihanouk was also seen as representing two branches of the royal family of Cambodia, the Norodom and Sisowath branches. On his father's side, Prince

Sumarawith was the great grandson of King Norodom. On the side of his mother, Princess Kossamon (Kossamak), he was the great grandson of King Sisowath. His promotion was seen as linking or reconciling the two branches of the royal family. He was also seen as acceptable to the masses as well as the elite. Even so, his investiture went through a lengthy vetting process with other candidates (including the eldest son of the king, Prince Sisowath Monorith), before gaining the support of the Vichy Minister of Colonies Admiral Charles Platon and Indochina Governor General Jean Decoux. The Vichy French (Resident Superior Gautier in Phnom Penh and key officials in Hanoi) were the king makers in this process. Finally, on April 4, 1941, Platon offered his agreement to Sihanouk's candidature. The ascension of the then 18 year-old prince to the throne, it was observed, was at a juncture when Japan was already imposing its military weight upon Indochina. In the event, the French did not stand back from the enthronement ceremonies in their backwater protectorate, with Decoux personally addressing felicitations to the newly-installed King Sihanouk. There is no question that the young king's pledge of cooperation and collaboration with France in perpetuity was at the heart of this investiture (AOM Indo NF/132/1197).



**Sihanouk ascends to the throne at age 18.**



Sihanouk (1974: 144-5) himself confirms the facts surrounding his appointment, namely that the French sought to correct an “irregularity” committed some 40 years prior in interfering in the line of succession. In other words, because his father was a Sisowath and his mother a Monivong, the French sought through him to unite the dynasty and to put an end to royal disputes. However, he contends, and the truth bears out the facts, the French were mistaken in thinking that he would be a “docile,” monarch, especially as he stood up to Decoux on the personal question of marriage and in the way he made contact with ordinary people and their sufferings.

It might seem trite, but the French also observed an ill omen at the investiture ceremony for the young king. It transpired that the royal elephant categorically refused to draw alongside the official dais to salute the official representative of France, namely Admiral Decoux. People are very impressionable in Cambodia, the report observed. Although certainly disproved, according to a Buddhist soothsayer of some stature, the new king would only reign for seven years (AOM Indochine NF/138/39/1252 BR - Politique 21.1/2839/SD Cambodge/Siam (BO/i35, March 25, 1946).

#### *The Japanese Occupation of Cambodia (March-October 1945)*

As Norodom Sihanouk, variously King and Prince of Cambodia, remarked in his memoirs, one of the first acts of the Japanese was to inform him that he place Cambodia at Japan's side in the war, and start mobilizing the country's human and material resources to this end. Sihanouk also explains that, for the first years of their occupation, the Japanese retained the French administration and ruled through it. Until he was replaced in office, five months later, he unsuccessfully petitioned the Japanese for the necessary documents establishing de jure independence (Sihanouk 1974: 147). Even

so, following the Meigo operation of March 1945 leading to the Japanese military *coup de force* against the French, Sihanouk fell in line with Japanese demands in making a public statement to the effect that, “the kingdom of Cambodia no longer feels the need of French protection and hereby declares the Treaty of Protectorate concluded with France null and void” (Patti 1982: 73).

Initially, the then 23-year old King Sihanouk was served by such pro-monarchy and ostensibly pro-French figures as Ung Hy, the Prime Minister, Norodom Montana, the Minister of Finance, Tea San, Minister of National Defense, Cham Nak, Minister of Justice, Sum Hieng, Minister of Interior, and Van Kamel, Minister of Religion (AOM Indo NF 1211101, “Note sur l'organisation de l'Indochine”). Crown Prince Monivong was vested with a special role as Councilor of the Government with supervisory functions (Reddi 1970: 91). Yet their loyalties also wavered under Japan. Ung Hy, a Sino-Cambodian, who had held various senior positions under the protectorate, including minister of the palace and, prior to that, minister of interior under Monivong, was viewed by the French as lacking character, and “taking the side of the strong.” Norodom Montana, who already held this portfolio prior to the coup, was a member of the royal family and also part of a young Cambodian circle around Prince Monireth. Viewed as intelligent but little effective in office, he was also seen as ambitious and pretentious. Although a *homme de confiance* to Resident Superior Georges Gautier (subsequently murdered by the Japanese), he threw in his lot with the Japanese for reasons similar to Ung Hy. Tea San, an aged mandarin, was part of a group around Crown Prince Monireth, and had been minister of interior under Gautier. The Sino-Cambodian Cham Nak, a protégé of Gautier, had no prior experience as minister. Promoted by Decoux as a federal councilor, he was thus a *homme de confiance* of the Resident Superior. Kamel was seen as a

*bon garçon* and it was simply inexplicable how he gravitated to the Japanese cause. He was also viewed as very serious, a good mandarin, and member of the Federal Council.

Removed from office by the French for his Franco-phobic sentiments, Prince Monireth (1905-75) was actively sought out by the Japanese from October 1944. According to a French report, going back to 1935 the Prince had already envisaged the notion of a Cambodia without France. Since the death of his father, King Sisowath Monivong, he had acted as flag bearer for the pro-Siam party. This was demonstrated in 1939 when, in liaison with the Boui Chan and Pokel families (to whom he was linked by marriage), he returned to his anti-French position. At that time, the French still openly supported a Monivong as candidate to the vacant throne. But the Treaty of Tokyo under which Battambang was annexed by Siam was a turning point. Although it was difficult to link Monivong with this lowering of French prestige, the report conceded, by a “sudden and unexpected” turn of events it was found expedient to place a Norodom on the throne. Profoundly vexed at the humiliation of being passed over, he rallied the support of the Pokel and Boua Chan clans along with the Mahanikai Buddhist clergy. Even so, the minority Thammayut stayed loyal to the Norodom party. Prior to the Japanese coup, Monireth returned to Cambodia (from Siam), albeit confined to his paternal property where he immediately launched into intrigues. Following the coup, he made contact with Pac Chhoeun and a former internee from Pulo Condore named Boua Cham Moll who was sent on a secret mission to Bangkok. Monireth (appointed Councilor to the Government under Japan) linked up with the British during their postwar occupation of Phnom Penh, thus gaining a special role for the Pokel clan. In December 1945, Monireth had apparently declared himself an admirer of Siam (under Pridi Phamanyong), now backed by the United States. Writing in March 1946, the French

rapporteur declared that today, as Prime Minister of Cambodia, Monireth is the “grand master” (AOM Indochine NF/138/39/1252 BR – Politique 21.1/2839/SD Cambodge/Siam (BO/i35, March 25, 1946).

Sihanouk also began to style the name of the kingdom, Kampuchea, after the Khmer rather than French pronunciation. He also reversed Vichy's alphabetization of Khmer language in the interest of continuity with culture and history (See Dommen 2001: 90). According to Japanese sources, the continued publication of Khmer, Chinese, and Vietnamese language publications was a general morale booster. Additionally, the Japanese claim to have permitted the opening of libraries, museums, as well as the Institute of Buddhist Studies (Domei, Phnom Penh, April 11, 1945).

As the Japanese official news agency Domei stated of Cambodian independence after the proclamation of March 1945, “the Kingdom of Kampuchea as a member of the Co-prosperity Sphere is already in full flight for the reconstruction of the new East Asia.” As the report continued, with the replacement of all French government officials by Cambodians and the installation of new cabinet, French influence in the Kingdom had totally collapsed. Administratively speaking, while the system of 13 provinces and the city of Phnom Penh was being maintained, the position of the Resident Superior, Resident, and other positions formerly held by the French had all been assumed by Cambodians who responded to the new responsibilities of independence “with the greatest fervor” (Domei, April 11, 1945). Although the transfer of power was entirely nominal it is also true, as Reddi (1970: 93) contends that, by the end of July 1945, the Cambodians were in control of the administration. Even so, as Chandler (1986: 86) writes, the freedom of action of the new government was “almost entirely symbolic.” The Japanese, he asserts, saw Cambodia, not as a nation but part of a military zone and source

of military requisitions.

As Reddi (1970: 93) elaborates, Japanese wartime demands upon such vital products as rice, maize, cotton (and manpower) were so heavy that, even though production was on the increase, the government had to introduce rationing. According to statistics provided by Minister Montana, Cambodia increased its rice production from 690,366 tonnes in 1943-44 to about 800,000 tonnes in 1944-45 (though this author is at pains to stress that it is simply not possible to calculate the amount of rice exported from Cambodia owing to gaps in the statistical record).

### *The Rise of Buddhist Nationalism*

As well recorded in Western writings on Cambodian nationalism, two of the earliest figures to be identified with Khmer nationalism were Son Ngoc Thanh, by birth a Khmer Krom, and Pac Choeun (Chandler 1993: 171-2). In 1936, these two individuals founded the first Khmer language newspaper, *Nagaravatta* (the name means Angkor Wat), obviously designed to conjure up patriotic associations. American sources reveal that, by 1940, the paper's circulation had reached 4,000, attracting numerous younger Cambodian intellectuals with its anti-French line. Also attracted were certain of the more "modern monks," particularly those of the Mahanikay sect leading an unsuccessful revolt against the French on July 20, 1942.

As Elizabeth Becker (1986: 56-8) points out, it was actually the Buddhist Institute of Mme. Karpeles that became the "first home of anticolonialism in Phnom Penh." The reason for this was that, under the tutelage of the French, the monks comprised an educated elite "without sacrificing their identity as Khmers." They were esteemed in society and set the moral and social standards of the country. Further, they were "the only influential Cambodians in a position to question both the French and the king," Moreover, it was the

Institute which offered a base for "the first modern anti-colonial agitator in Cambodia," and with the Vietnam and France-educated Son Ngoc Thanh, who became its secretary. Working with the Lycée Sisowath Alumni Association, Thanh successfully engineered an alliance between lower class Buddhists and the elite. In turn, the Alumni Association gave the Buddhists badly needed funds and legitimacy. Together they presented a potent threat to the French.



**Son Ngoc Thanh**

Still, as symbolized by the "umbrella or monk's war" of 1942, a reference to the demonstration by monks in Phnom Penh on July 20, 1942, abetted by the Son Ngoc Thanh and Pac Choeun groups, the monarchy also faced down challenges by a range of proto-republicans, abetted by Japan. Pretext for the confrontation, leading to long prison terms for a group of demonstrators, was the French closure of

*Nagaravatta* and the arrest of the leading monk, Hem Cheav, a professor at the Ecole Supérieure des Pali in Phnom Penh, who had appealed for Cambodian soldiers to desert from the French colonial army. In handling the monks with force, the French did not come out of this confrontation with the moral high ground (Kiernan & Boua 1982: 116-7; Becker 1986: 58-9).

Allegedly abetted by Japanese agents, the revolt was crushed by police action, the newspaper closed down, and with Pac Choeun and Hem Cheav arrested (the latter dying in Poulo Condore prison island three years later). Evading arrest, Son Ngoc Thanh fled to Thailand with Japanese assistance from where, as will be seen, he staged a triumphal return in the wake of the Japanese coup of March 1945, joining up with Pak Choeun who, later in his career, returned to Phnom Penh serving as Royal Librarian. In any case, as an American report concludes, the *Sûreté* had successfully decapitated the nationalist movement from which it was not to recover until 1945 (Dept. of State, Office of Intelligence Research, Political Developments in Cambodia 1945-55, Intelligence Report, no.7058, Oct. 14, 1955).

Evidence of Japanese attention to the Buddhist question is revealed by one report on the visit to Cambodia in 1943 by a mission representing six Japanese Buddhist organizations. Although state Shinto was supreme at home, these Buddhist organizations sought in Cambodia to promote religious culture as well as the "Co-prosperity Sphere" (PRO Hong Kong KWIZ/07/d/26/2/43). Even so, Japanese attempts to patronize Cambodian Buddhism, however, made no particular headway. A more solid pillar of support for Japanese-sponsored order in Cambodia was a youth movement with its "green shirts" army of about 2,000 semi-trained and semi-armed troops, recruited mainly from among the estimated 220,000 Vietnamese settlers in eastern Cambodia (Reel II OSS, Part II, State 8/2/1047).

As American intercepts of Japanese cable traffic reveal, neither could the Japanese ignore Cambodian nationalism vis-à-vis Vietnam. The problem arose in July 1945 in the context of the plan by the Japanese to attach Cochinchina to Annam. On that occasion, a Cambodian counter-protest over prior claim to part of Cochinchina met with "extreme displeasure" from Emperor Bao Dai. Mindful already at Cambodian displeasure over the transfer of Battambang province to Thailand in 1941, the decision as to whether Cambodia would accept part of Laos as compensation remained doubtful (Magic no. 1214, July 22, 1945). In the event, no such transfers were effected.

### *Son Ngoc Thanh and the Coup of August 1945*

As tracked by American intelligence, in January 1943 a Cambodian nationalist leader going by the name of "Son Niyotuku Tan" (Son Ngoc Thanh) escaped the French authorities in Cambodia by fleeing to Thailand. In the event, Thanh was granted sanctuary in the Japanese Embassy in Bangkok until January 23, at which time he was spirited away to Japan by plane for "safe-keeping." Special instructions were sent by the Greater East Asia Ministry to Japanese-occupied Thailand and Taiwan to take special precautions with the Cambodian's flight. As the American source warned, "Under the present circumstances of course we must keep absolutely secret the fact that Japan is patronizing him and especially the fact that he has come to Japan so please be especially careful about the newspapers" (Magic War Department, Office of Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, Feb. 10, 1943).

As recorded in a French intelligence report, the decision to bring Thanh back to Cambodia was made by Supreme Councilor Kubota and Col. Hayashi. After a stay of 12 days in Cochinchina (May 21-30, 1945), where he was briefed on the situation, Thanh arrived with great pomp in Phnom Penh accompanied by Japanese military officials including Col. Kodo. The entourage



then proceeded with an audience with the King. Two days later Thanh was named Minister of Foreign Affairs, in part a position created to facilitate liaison between the Japanese military and the Cambodian authorities and, on the other hand, to facilitate the various demands and abuses perpetrated by Kubota in the name of the Japanese army. Condemned to death in 1942, but reprieved, Pac Chhoeun was released from Poulo Condore prison by the Japanese and brought to Phnom Penh. In early May, he was appointed editor of the newspaper *Nagaravatta*, Working with Thioun Muong (also condemned in 1942), Pac Chhoeun launched an anti-French crusade with the assistance of “modernist monks, whose Francophobic tendencies were well established.” Concurrent with these events, Thanh and his relative Sung Hieng, along with Prince Montana, sought to achieve a total collaboration with the Japanese along the lines determined by Col. Hayashi and Counselor Kubota. Not wishing to obstruct the “last desires” of the Japanese, Thanh and his clique installed a regime of “extreme authority,” intolerant of the least opposition. Notwithstanding the zealousness displayed by Thanh and his agents in satisfying Japanese demands, the recruitment of labor became so intolerable that dissent reached the heart of the government. The reaction was immediate, and the Japanese provoked a *coup d'etat* on August 9, 1945 in the course of which a number of less enthusiastic ministers were arrested, including Prince Montana (actually known for his pro-Japanese sentiments). Kubota and Hayashi were removed from Phnom Penh. The effect of this coup also became apparent with the expanded influence of Thanh, and the diminishing influence of the sovereign, whom the Japanese saw in a bad light as with his presiding over the Council of Ministers. Finally, foreseeing the possibility of a Japanese surrender, the Japanese authorities in Phnom Penh went all out to install a group of resolutely anti-European figures. Thanh and Pac Chhoeun fitted the bill perfectly, a team “without scruples,” just as they turned to the

Japanese-sponsored “green shirts” and to a new secret police organization, “active and devoted” to the cause. In this situation, not even the King dared to intervene. The champion of independence, Thanh, secretly advised by Col. Saito, persisted in his intransigent attitude towards the Allies through to October 15 or 16 1945. Still in office, Thanh launched a diplomatic appeal to China and Siam. Ominously, he also opened negotiations with the Viet Minh (AOM Indo NF/137/1244 NTCl - Indochine: “Les Menées Anti-Français au Cambodge” (March 1945-June 1946).

According to Chandler (1986: 88), the coup of August 10, 1945 demanding the dissolution of the Ung Hy cabinet, was not only approved by Thanh but occurred with Japanese permission. Though the swearing in of Thanh's cabinet almost certainly coincided with the installation in Saigon of the “National Unity Front,” the pro-Japanese government replaced ten days later by the Viet Minh. As Chandler concedes, “a good deal about the coup resists analysis.” The dependence of Son Ngoc Thanh upon Japan, even in office, was pointed up by an intercept of a message between the Japanese adviser in Phnom Penh and the Cambodian premier in September 1945. Son Ngoc Thanh revealed that he wished to cooperate with Japan “in time of peace just as in time of war.” He also revealed that, if the French returned, he would “resign and take refuge in Japan” (Magic 1256, War Department, G-2, Sept. 2, 1945). History reveals, however, that Thanh was too ambitious to take a back seat. Indeed, the reverse was the case.

French intelligence continues that, through to October 1945, the Japanese sowed rumor and false news in an atmosphere of constant “agitation” where anti-French propaganda and instructions was broadcast from Phnom Penh to the provinces, ordering preparations to resist the return of the French. French intelligence determined that Vietnamese armed by the Japanese along with volunteers were preparing

a general massacre of the French cantoned on the perimeter of Phnom Penh. Given near contemporaneous events in Saigon and Hanoi, that scenario may not have been entirely misplaced. The danger was so real that certain ministers traveled to Saigon (apparently with Thanh's knowledge although this remains out of character), to meet French General Leclerc and British Major Gracey. This is a probable reference to Sihanouk's special emissary, Khim Tith, minister of defense in the Son Ngoc Thanh government, and who secretly facilitated this contact

(<http://khmerization.blogspot.com/2007/12/biography-of-prince-norodom.html>). The arrest of Thanh was then decided and effected on October 16 (AOM Indo NF/137/1244 NTCL, "Les Menées Anti-Français au Cambodge" (March 1945-June 1946). With the British under Gracey facilitating the French restoration of power in Cambodia, the French also entered into the Modus Vivendi of January 7, 1946, virtually restoring the status quo ante prior to the Japanese intervention.

#### *Prince Norodom Chandrangeri's Critique of the Modus Vivendi*

In a situation of vulnerability to larger French political and economic designs, a range of nationalists began to gravitate towards a *heterogeneous* group of rebels styled Khmer Issarak or Free Cambodians while a sizable section of the Issarak began to gravitate towards the Viet Minh. Thailand was both a base for the Issara-Viet Minh and a source of intrigue against the French. One such dissenter was Prince Norodom Chandrangeri (Chantaraingsey), signing himself as leader of the Free Cambodians, who complained in a petition to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on December 31, 1946 that the postwar French modus vivendi with Cambodia "contained no clause outlying the international sovereignty of Cambodia as self-governing." Moreover, he continued, "83 years of French protectorate rule did not to any extent benefit

Cambodia" (AOM Indo NF/366/2907 "Letter from Prince Norodom Chandrangeri, Chief Pan Issara, etc., to Sec-Gen, UN," Dec. 31, 1946). By the end of 1948, almost the entire country became the arena of Viet Minh-Khmer Issarak activities (Reddi 1970: 153).

A grandson of Norodom and uncle of Sihanouk, Prince Norodom Chandrangeri, had served in the Japanese-sponsored anti-French forces under Son Ngoc Thanh. As highlighted below, following the resumption of colonial rule, Chandrangeri moved to Thailand (the ceded province of Battambang), leading the Khmer Issarak in armed resistance in the provinces of Kompong Speu and Kompong Thom at the head of a large private militia (Dommen 2001: 197). As such, he associated himself with the forces of Son Ngoc Thanh in Siem Reap though continuing to operate as a regional warlord.

In his letter to the United Nations, Prince Norodom Chandrangeri described himself as the Chief Pan Issara, along with Assistant Secretary General S. Bhotisat, "Chiefs of Free Cambodia Free Cambodians representing five million Cambodians." Specifically he sought "self-government" for Cambodia along democratic lines. He also sought "free and friendly" negotiations with the French. To put a stop to unnecessary bloodshed, he appealed to the United Nations charter, citing Chapter 3, hoping that France "being one of the big powers would be glad to consider our proposals and petitions as she is one of the nations whose principle is to uphold freedom, equality and fraternity" (AOM Indo NF/366/2907 "Letter from Prince Norodom Chandrangeri, Chief Pan Issara, etc., to Sec-Gen, UN," Dec. 31, 1946).

An attached memorandum on "self-government" is a revealing if somewhat naive recapitulation of classical Cambodian history, Cambodia's travails under the French protectorate, Cambodian responses to the Japanese occupation and, the pressing issue at hand, to set a calendar for Cambodia's self-

determination, albeit negotiated between the French and the Free Cambodians or Issarak. The letter is naive in so far as the Issarak were highly factionalized and, obviously, the French had already played the Sihanouk card as with the Modus Vivendi of January 7, 1946. Moreover, unlike the Vietnam and Laos cases, the French restoration of power in October 1945 appeared less contestable – especially as Japanese protégés as opposed to genuine nationalists were in charge. Nevertheless, Viet Minh and subsequent dissident Issarak armed resistance would pin down large French resources. Yet, it does offer a trenchant critique from a Cambodian aristocrat and anticipates by at least 20 years the writings of Cambodia graduates of French universities, many of them swayed by neo-Marxist discourses and joining the full-blown Khmer Rouge revolution of the 1970s.

In critiquing the Modus Vivendi, he pointed out that it contained no clause outlying the international sovereignty of Cambodia as self-governing. Under the rubric of “French Wrongs against Cambodia,” he asserted, characteristically France exercised a divide and rule policy among the units of French Indochina. For example, whenever unrest occurred in Cambodia, Vietnamese troops were deployed in suppression operations, when rebellion occurred in Laos or Annam, native soldiers of other states were used, ensuring perpetual friction between the various states (Ibid.).

Turning to a rendition of modern colonial history, he noted that, in 1916 during the reign of King Sisowath, exorbitant taxation was imposed upon the people causing untold misery (actually, borne out by the facts) (See Osborne 1978). In 1925, large-scale massacres of the people of Kompong Chaang occurred without proper trial or justifications (See Chandler 1982). As for self-government 1927, the Cambodian Minister of Justice made a failed attempt to put an end to the 50 year-long

Protectorate. In 1940, a declaration was made by Resident Superior Léon Emmanuel *Thibaudeau*, to the effect that Cambodia would gain its self-government, although the French authorities never followed through. On October 15, 1945, Son Ngoc Thanh, appointed prime minister by King Sihanouk in March of the same year, was arrested by the French authorities. King Sihanouk was forced to sign a proclamation denouncing his prime minister and swearing that Cambodia would continue under the French protectorate (Ibid.).

With respect to the Japanese occupation, France allowed Japan to invade Cambodia without offering any resistance. France allowed the Japanese army to impose conscription upon Cambodians, causing a large number of deaths and sickness among them. A large number of Cambodian soldiers under the French had been killed or disappeared as a result of the Japanese occupation. Neither did the Cambodians seek to take revenge upon the French at the outset of the Japanese occupation, rather the Cambodians sheltered the French from Japanese retribution on many occasions (Ibid.).

The internal economic status of Cambodia was still far behind that of Siam, Burma or Annam. The standard of living of the people was extremely low relative to the natural wealth of the country. Agriculture, the backbone of the country, had never received the application of modern methods. Irrigation works were backward and agricultural activities were carried out as they had been for hundreds of years. The principal commercial activities such as forestry, saw milling and the purchasing of paddy rice were all monopolized by the French. Any income derived from fishing in the Tonlé Sap, along with the coastal fishing and rice farming was subject to rigorous taxation imposed by the state. Finance was under the absolute control of the Commissioner of the French Republic in Cambodia. France also obtained revenues from the selling of lotteries,

internal loans, public subscriptions, and so on, the bulk of which were not plowed back into Cambodia (Ibid).

The general education system in Cambodia was of a very low standard compared to Annam, Siam or Burma. France never promoted the study of modern science. There was no professional or commercial school. Such diverse branches of knowledge as science, government, and law were completely lacking from the school curriculum. As the Memorandum underscored, this was a deliberate policy to retard Cambodia's advancement so that it would lag behind other nations in the attainment of modernity. Despite the presence of primary schools, large number of Cambodians remained illiterate. Moreover, schools were restricted to the big towns exclusively. Again, this was a deliberate policy to facilitate the government of Cambodians "because the ignorant are more easy to govern than the wise." Diseases prevailed in Cambodia. People in outlying districts never received medical care in time of epidemics. Public health facilities in the districts were non-existent. Country school children never received any medical attention. The country hosted large numbers of TB sufferers, lepers and mental cases (Ibid).

As the Memorandum continued, although equally qualified, various Cambodian officials were invariably relegated to a lower status than French officials. All over Indochina, French clubs upheld a strict rule that only French and naturalized French along with a few especially invited princes, could be admitted. Native officials had no right to enter these clubs. In sum, as the Prince contended, "The 83 years of French protectorate rule did not, to any extent, benefit Cambodia." With powers of national defense, Cambodia would never allow the nation to be invaded as occurred with the Japanese invasion. Without any controls, France sanctioned gambling and narcotics, together destroying people financially,

spiritually and morally. A self-governing Cambodia would abolish gambling and narcotics "so that they may have a standard of living which is a birth right" (Ibid). Obviously this was powerful anti-French propaganda and undoubtedly met with great resonance from large sections of the population. Although not openly stated, the prospect of working with the monarchy was left open.

To be sure, much of this Memorandum rang true. Cambodia remained cocooned under the Protectorate and the French arrested the true development of Cambodia's potential. Even so, absolute poverty leading to starvation and even famine never afflicted land-abundant Cambodia to the degree of densely-populated northern and central Vietnam, just as Cambodia produced an exportable rice surplus. As suggested, development and underdevelopment in Cambodia was not only academic, as with the political economy-legal theses of the early-postwar Paris-educated generation (Khieu Samphan; Hu Nim and Hou Youn), but also political as these individuals lent their support to the future Khmer Rouge movement.

In 1948, according to Heder (2004: 22, 180-1n), the possibility of the Viet Minh sanctioning a constitutional monarchy in Cambodia was still on the table, as Soviet-dominated Romania and Bulgaria had originally been. But, the card was not Norodom Sihanouk, rather it was Norodom Chatareangsei (Chandrangeri), as mentioned, a dissident Issarak member of the royal family. The idea was abruptly dropped when he rejected "ICP guidance" or what he believed was Vietnamese leadership, relegating him to the status of a puppet. For his efforts, Chantareangsei was then excoriated by the Viet Minh as a "traitorous prince" and "feudal reactionary." Overt Viet Minh propaganda against Sihanouk would soon follow.

### *The Viet Minh Capture of the Issaraks*

As the French observed, the appeal of the Issaraks was also boosted by certain



Cambodian intellectuals who looked to Bangkok as a counterweight to a feared Vietnamese domination of the country. Meantime, the Issaraks continued to evolve. Leadership was now divided between Pac Chhoeun (President of the Council) and a former sergeant of the Garde Indigène at Seam Reap. Son Ngoc Thanh (who had returned to Cambodia from exile in France also threw in his lot with the anti-French cause). Issarak forces then numbered some 5,000 although suffering many desertions owing to lack of salaries and arms along with Siamese “repression” (AOM Slotfom Note Technique de Contre-Ingerence Politique, Indo-China -Siam (EO/262) Situation au Cambodge et dans les Provinces Annexé, Paris, May 24, 1946).

The question remains as to the relationship between the Khmer Issarak and the Viet Minh? The now accepted standard approach to the study of Cambodian communism, especially including the rise of the genocidal Khmer Rouge, all refer back to the early postwar period and the genesis of Viet Minh support for the Cambodian communist movement. Arguments and debates turn on the question of Khmer autonomy or independence vis-à-vis Vietnam, and upon the role of French-educated returnees, as with Saloth Sar/Pol Pot, Khieu Ponnary, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, Hou Youn, etc. (Burchett; Kiernan; Heder; Chandler). In any case, the generational legacy issue cannot be ignored in any discussion on modern Cambodian history.

According to period American sources, were it not for the communists, the Issarak movement would have no current “political importance.” Communist or pro-communist elements variously attempted to capture the Khmer Issarak movement and to use the term “Issarak for their own purposes.” The communists claimed that the nationalistic Issarak movement and the communist movement were one, having been united from about 1950 under the control of the communist insurgent leader,

Son Ngoc Thanh (U.S. *Dept. of State*, 1955). Obviously, questions of leadership and loyalties were important, and such is exposed in the following analysis. Even so, we should be attentive to the respective followings of the Issarak and the Viet Minh. Hardly a homogenous group, the Issarak were essentially Khmer-speaking Cambodian peasants with little knowledge of communism or even broader Viet Minh goals. By contrast, the rank and file of the Viet Minh was drawn from the immigrant Vietnamese working class as with plantation workers. Relative to the Issarak, they were far more exposed to communist doctrine.

As Reddi (1970: 150-1) explains, initially the Cambodian nationalists did not seek out support of the Viet Minh. Rather, it was Viet Minh agents who began to infiltrate into Cambodia in 1945. The Viet Minh *modus operandi* was to cross the border in groups of not more than six at a time. They would then attack and destroy the authority of the local Cambodian officials. Finally, they would install themselves and their families at vantage points along the border in southern parts of Cambodia. By the end of 1946, Viet Minh agents had spread thinly through the western and eastern parts of Cambodia. Battambang region in the west had become a particular focal point of Issarak activity. American sources confirm that communist elements, drawing recruits from Vietnamese living in Cambodia, had conducted guerrilla operations inside Cambodia since the reentry of French troops in 1945. From the outset, the DRV had found in the Issaraks a potentially useful force for harassing the French and compounding the postwar pacification problem in Indochina (U.S. *Dept. of State*, 1955).

According to American sources, the communists in Vietnam were too preoccupied with operations in their own country to have afforded any substantial material support to the communist bands in Cambodia until late 1947

and 1948. The Viet Minh evidently offered military aid and propaganda support to whatever Issarak bands would accept their tutelage. Overall, however, some accepted communist aid and leadership, some kept up a short term liaison, and yet others rejected communist support completely (U.S. *Dept. of State*, 1955). By the end of 1948, however, almost the entire country became the arena of Viet Minh-Khmer Issarak activities. As King Sihanouk pointed out in a letter to the French Commissioner in 1949, no part of the country was free from the Issarak and the Viet Minh troubles (Reddi 1970: 153).

### The Royal Road to Independence

In any case, Sihanouk's "royal road to independence" was a successful formula as he began to cut away at the righteousness of the Issarak challenge, though also facing down domestic challenges both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary (See Osborne 1994: chap. 5). In balancing France he not only looked to Washington but also to Japan, eager to forget and forgive in return for economic assistance (Gunn 2011).

Meeting the French President in Paris on May 25, 1953, Sihanouk successfully negotiated the transfer of the Royal Khmer Army and complete military responsibility in all sectors from France to Cambodian control. As Sihanouk and Prime Minister Pen Nouth announced to the Paris press, besides a transfer of military as well as judicial functions, Cambodia would assume total economic and monetary control in line with the Pau agreements or Conference of Associated States (June-December 1950). Meanwhile, the Cambodian public was informed as to these discussions and demands. They were also requested to remain "calme et dignes" allowing time for the king to handle the problems with the French government. Caution was also deemed prudent because the King was absent during the important - not-to-be-missed and propitious - Buddhist New Year

ceremonies (13 April) (AOM 14 Slotfom Rapport Mensuel, Direction de Services Français de Sécurité, April 1953).

Departing Paris on April 11 for Washington via Canada, on April 17 Sihanouk met, inter alia, vice president Richard Nixon and Foster Dulles of State. In his discussions Sihanouk made it known that the malaise besetting his country arose from frustration at French "subjection" in several domains. He expressed his wish to obtain complete independence within the French Union with an equal association of powers. Arriving at Honolulu on April 22, Sihanouk stated. "Nous voulons être libérés de la France mais nous nous battons avec elle contre le communisme. (We want to be liberated from France but we stand with them against communism)." Meantime, on April 21, the Council of Ministers sought to ascertain whether and how the King's views were reflected by the Council and the people. In so doing they sought to establish the views of political parties, officials, bonzes, students and the rural population. The government published notices but strictly forbade all public demonstrations. On April 23, coinciding with the King's arrival in Tokyo where he also spoke to the press, a vote of confidence in the King was unanimously endorsed. Notably the bonzes had taken a position in favor of the King from the beginning of the campaign. The Pali School also lent its endorsement in April. Finally, in early May, the local administration commenced to collect motions and petitions in the rural communities where the population was invited to either sign or add their finger print to the petition. The King was duly informed of these steps. On April 30 over Voice of America the King proclaimed that he foresaw establishing complete independence for the present generation. Nevertheless, the Democrats, aligned with Son Ngoc Thanh questioned the efficacy and attributes of the King restating that independence could only be won by high force. Government propaganda noted that while the whole world was riveted upon the

Viet Minh invasion of northern Laos, in fact the Viet Minh invasion of Cambodia was now entering its fifth year (Ibid).

Simultaneous with these grand international diplomatic gestures, as French intelligence observed, military operations in Seam Reap had weakened the strength of bands under Son Ngoc Thanh and Kao Tak. Both were seen to have benefited from the Viet Minh presence, including specialists in the manufacture of munitions. Son Ngoc Thanh kept up a propaganda campaign through tracts calling on Cambodian people to join him. He also continued to question the efficacy of Royal politics by pushing the idea that independence could only be won by struggle. Nevertheless his agents in Thailand enthusiastically endorsed the public statements made by the King in the United States, leading the French analyst to predict that even the Khmer Issarak would rally to the King if he obtained real independence (Ibid). Cambodia's independence would gain international imprimatur at Geneva and with the Viet Minh – temporally at least – put in their place.



**Sirik Matak (left) with Lon Nol, 1973.**

Envoi: From Monarchy to Republic

If we take Sihanouk seriously, it was actually Son Ngoc Thanh and the CIA along with Sihanouk's royal cousin Sirik Matak (b.1914)

who, in cahoots with Marshal Lon Nol brought down the monarchy in March 1970. By the 1960s, Thanh headed the CIA-backed Kampuchea Krom (Khmer Serei) movement which then commenced launching guerrilla attacks against neutral Cambodia from bases in South Vietnam (Kiernan & Boua 1982: 115). In September 1969 Thanh would also conspire with Lon Nol to overthrow Sihanouk and, meeting again in February 1970, gained crucial support from Thanh's Khmer Serei to mount the actual coup the following month. In the event, Thanh was dumped by Lon Nol-Sirik Matak and never entered Phnom Penh. He would eventually die in little-known circumstances in Vietnam in 1976 (Kiernan & Boua 1982: 115). Sihanouk, who actually rescued Thanh from a French prison, spares no venom in denouncing him as, variously, "traitorous," "disgruntled office-seeker," and "sinister careerist" (Sihanouk 1974: 37; 49-50; 55; 103-4).

Passed over by the French in 1941 in favor of a Norodom, Sirik Matak from the Sisowath branch of the royal family soon entered into rivalry bordering on antagonism towards Sihanouk. Although brought into government in the 1950s as a prime minister and, after independence, as minister of defense, he was also sidelined as ambassador to, respectively, China and Japan. Subsequently, the two drifted apart especially over the issue of Sihanouk's tolerance of Vietnamese base areas inside Cambodia. In part drawing upon the journalism of T.D. Altman and the writings of Milton Osborne, Sihanouk (1974: 37-8) directly levels blame at the CIA for fomenting the coup although also allowing that Sirik Matak was ahead of Lon Nol in plotting his assassination. Osborne (1994: 209-13) does not deny the coup-assassination plots especially implicating Sirik Matak, but also portrays the coup as a purely domestic affair. Although duly taking his place as acting premier in the newly minted American-backed Khmer Republic, at least until dismissed by Lon Nol in April 1973, Sirik Matak

was also obliged to renounce his royal title, though not his ambitions. From his new place of exile in Beijing, Sihanouk continued to pour scorn on the “traitorous” royal. Sirik Matak, in turn, scarcely survived the fall of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, executed (possibly beheaded) days later by the Khmer Rouge along with other top Khmer Republic officials who did not flee.

## Conclusion

By no means did the French protectorate sweep all before it in Cambodia. The notion that Cambodia was a land at peace under France was never true and no sooner had France instituted a system of taxes and corvées than mass peasant rebellion sundered this *paix française*. But in engaging Cambodia, the French also encountered a debilitated monarchical system, variously confirming a sense of Asian decline and calling down France's *mission civilitrice*. Accordingly, with lessons learnt from its dealings with the Court of Hue, France also saw in the manipulation of the monarchy a device to check an incipient undercurrent of hostility. This we have seen with attempts to bolster traditional institutions and to form up a Cambodian identity especially vis-à-vis Thailand.

But the enemy was also within in the form of incipient republican and other anti-monarchical elements around Son Ngoc Thanh, even if certain of these figures subsequently looked to Japan to advance their careers and projects. It is ironic then, as Becker (1986: 63) alludes, that the aristocrats of the Sisowath alumni group would become leaders of a future independent Cambodia under Sihanouk, while certain of the Buddhist leaders would become communists. If we examine the facts, even the young King Sihanouk was obliquely seduced by Japanese propaganda, notwithstanding wartime duress and his own ex post facto rationalizations. But, in grudgingly welcoming a postwar French restoration, Sihanouk was

also adroit in acknowledging the threat posed to himself and the monarchy by the Machiavellian Son Ngoc Thanh. Undoubtedly, the Issarak-Viet Minh challenge placed Sihanouk between a rock and a hard place, setting down fissures which returned to haunt Cambodia in the future. But by bringing dissident Issarak back into the fold, Sihanouk's “royal crusade” also bought time for Cambodia as much as legitimacy for the King-turned Prince-politician at least until the wider war closed in consuming practically all before it.

The restoration – actually resuscitation – of the monarchy around Sihanouk in 1993 under United Nations auspices, however, has actually resulted in a decline in the popularity of royal politicians as with Norodom Ranariddh, another of Sihanouk's sons. It has also seen a lower-key role for the incumbent monarch Norodom Sihamoni, the elder of Sihanouk's two sons with his last queen, Monineath. Though sharing time with his father as “prisoner of the Khmer Rouge” in Phnom Penh (1976-79), Sihamoni was also chosen above other more high profile siblings. With (at this writing) the “King Father” funeral-cremation still upcoming (February 2013), we may anticipate a mix of “synthetic” and “authentic” traditions on call, as indeed with the funeral of Norodom Suramarit, Sihanouk's father in 1960. Doubtless the soothsayers will have the last word but, in drawing in a galaxy of international visitors alongside locals, such an auspicious and ceremonial state event might just add new life and vigor to this ancient institution.

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## Note

Despite his personal rivalry with Sihanouk and his nominally republican stance, Chandrangeri aligned with the Sihanouk government after Cambodia achieved independence. However, after discovered to be conspiring along with other former members of the Issarak to stage a coup against Sihanouk, he was stripped of his military rank and royal title. Following three years' imprisonment, subsequent to the 1970 Lon Nol coup against Sihanouk, Chandrangeri served as commander of FANK's 13th or "Tiger" Brigade. Also serving as military governor of the Kompong Speu province, he continued resistance even after the Khmer Rouge takeover but disappeared in mysterious circumstances.