

Reflections on Cambodian History

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In 1975, a spokesperson for the newly installed communist regime in Phnom Penh claimed proudly that because of the revolution "2,000 years of Cambodian history have ended." By "history" the spokesperson seems to have meant the sum total of Cambodia's past, as well as all the narratives about it prior to 1975.

The abruptness with which the new government embarked on a new era made many Cambodians agree that the old "Cambodia" had come to an end. Francois Ponchaud's disquieting title, *Cambodia Year Zero*, makes this very point.



For some Cambodian communists, on the other hand, Cambodian history ended when they were driven from power in 1979. Others still consider that this dispossession was temporary and contingent; they hope to return to power and regain control of the historical process. Still others - most Cambodians, perhaps - have assumed that Cambodia's history, like the society itself, will sooner or later resume its prerevolutionary form.

Against this shifting, post-revolutionary backdrop, I would like to discuss three themes in modern Cambodian history: Cambodia's accessibility, cultural distance from Vietnam, and the grandeur of its medieval past.

Cambodia's Accessibility

Since about 1800 the Mekong River basin, where most Cambodians live, has been accessible to military forces, immigrants, and influences from southern Vietnam and central Thailand. In the mid-nineteenth century, Vietnamese forces occupied Cambodia for several years, and when Thai forces came to the "rescue" of the Cambodians, the kingdom became a battlefield.



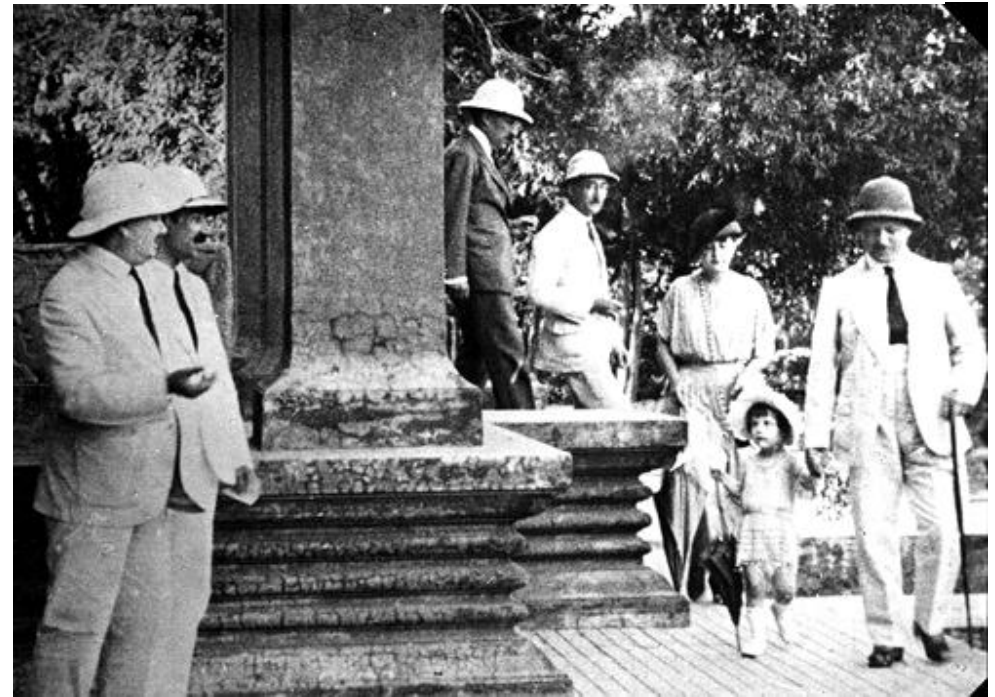
The hardships of that time, Vietnamese attempts to colonize Cambodia, and popular resistance to their rule all entered popular memory, re-emerging when Cambodians began fighting the Vietnamese again in the 1970s. At that point, some Cambodians may have thought that history was repeating itself.

The nineteenth-century struggle ended when France established its protectorate over Cambodia in 1863, separating the combatants. Had France not done so, Cambodia would probably have disappeared as a sovereign state divided into spheres of Vietnamese and Thai control, with a frontier running along the Mekong River or nearby.

"Cambodia" survived by exchanging the hegemony of its neighbours for dependency on France. In some ways, it was a French invention. Under French protection, however, Cambodia became even more entangled with Vietnam.



In the early 1900s, without being consulted, Cambodia became a component of "French Indochina," comprising three segments of Vietnam, Cambodia, and three principalities in Laos. Other entanglements followed. In 1930, a handful of Vietnamese radicals led by Ho Chi Minh founded a Communist Party, and succumbed to the "Indochina" concept, probably on Soviet advice. The consequences of an "Indochinese" communist Party, with no Cambodian members prior to the 1940s, still reverberate in Cambodian politics today.



Moreover, because the French educational system in southern Vietnam, or "Cochinchina," was more extensive than its counterpart in Cambodia, many more southern Vietnamese than Cambodians were literate in French. They soon filled up the middle ranks of the supposedly Cambodian civil service. During the colonial era nearly half a million other Vietnamese, mostly farmers, fisherpeople, and artisans, emigrated to Cambodia, encouraged by the French authorities, who considered them more vigorous than the Cambodians as a "race." By 1945, more than half the inhabitants of Phnom Penh were ethnic Vietnamese, and so were nearly all the workers on Cambodia's rubber plantations.



Cambodian nationalists in the 1930s were distressed by these developments. Many educated Cambodians feared that they were being sidetracked by the French and that they would eventually be "swallowed" by Vietnam.

The push against Cambodia from the Vietnamese and later from the French was matched in the nineteenth century by similar pressure from the Thais.

In 1794, Thailand annexed two Cambodian provinces, Battambang and Siem Reap. The former was prosperous agriculturally; the latter housed the "undiscovered" ruins of Angkor. The Thais annexed the provinces in exchange for allowing a Cambodian prince back into his country to be king, and they held onto them until they were forced to give them up by the French in 1907. When France was prostrated by World War II, the Thais took the two provinces back, releasing them in 1946 as part of a deal that enabled them to enter the United Nations.

It is not surprising that when Cambodia gained its independence in 1953, Thai and Vietnamese activities over the past century and Cambodian perceptions of their intentions led the kingdom's leading politician, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, to be wary of these neighbours.

In the 1950s, Sihanouk's watchfulness was justified by frequent plots against him undertaken by the pro-US governments in Thailand and South Vietnam. Later on, he had to worry about the clandestine occupation of much of eastern Cambodia by Vietnamese communist troops. Sihanouk agreed to this installation, being unable to resist it, and also to gain credit with the communists if they won the Vietnam War. His own preferences were both Vietnams to leave Cambodia alone.

Sihanouk frequently claimed that Cambodia was "surrounded" by Thailand and Vietnam. In his speeches he indulged in racist rhetoric to assert Cambodia's superiority over the three states, a tendency that kept relations at a fever pitch. Unlike Lon Nol and Pol Pot, who said similar things, Sihanouk had a healthy respect for the military potential of the two powers and a corresponding sense of Cambodia's vulnerability. To counterbalance pressure from his neighbours, he formed an alliance with China. This "pro-communist" behaviour infuriated Bangkok and Saigon authorities all the more.

Cambodia's modern history has been entangled with the histories and interests of Thailand and Vietnam, largely because of its accessibility to these two powers. Another reason for the entanglement lies in the cultural differences between Thailand and Cambodia on the one hand and Vietnam on the other.





Cultural Distance

These differences spring from the fact that until very recent times both Thailand and Cambodia were Theravada Buddhist kingdoms with cultural roots stretching back to India, while Vietnam, until 1945 a Mahayana Buddhist empire, derives much of its culture from China. The differences have grown less important over time, but they still form a component of Cambodian, Thai, and Vietnamese cultural baggage, and they deeply influenced Cambodian political behaviour in the 1970s. Traditional attitudes of the nations toward each other also affect many of the choices that Cambodians, Thais, and Vietnamese make in the sphere of foreign relations. The Thais and Cambodians have traditionally perceived the Vietnamese as territorially aggressive, mendacious, and condescending. As non-Theravada Buddhists, the Vietnamese have also been seen as nonbelievers, unredeemably beyond the pale. Two anecdotes will illustrate this point.

In April 1970, soon after the coup that had removed King Sihanouk from power, anti-Vietnamese riots in Phnom Penh got out of hand and thousands of unarmed Vietnamese civilians were massacred by Cambodian troops. No expressions of regret were forthcoming from Lon Nol's government, the press, or the Buddhist monastic order. For Cambodians, there were no "innocent" Vietnamese and no "guilty" Cambodians, either.





Five years later, when the Cambodian communists came to power, one of their first actions was to dismantle the Roman Catholic cathedral in Phnom Penh, which they called "the Vietnamese church." They also tore down other Catholic churches frequented by Vietnamese. Most Cambodia's own Buddhist temples in Phnom Penh were not subject to the same abuse, and neither was the former US Embassy, the headquarters of Cambodia's "Enemy Number One."



If Cambodian feelings about Vietnam were traditionally fueled by resentment, those of Vietnamese toward Cambodians, until very recently, have occasionally been tinged with a sense of superiority, often disguised as bafflement. Vietnamese have tended to see Cambodians as a childlike, barbarian people whose kingdoms on the outer reaches of Vietnam cry out for management or stratagems.

These attitudes were submerged in fraternal rhetoric and behaviour in the years of Vietnam's protectorate over Cambodia in the 1980s. During that time, many Cambodians at home and abroad began to question some of their mythology. Were the Vietnamese better or worse than Pol Pot? Was there a future for a brand of nationalism based on mistrust and confrontation with Vietnam?

A third theme affecting modern Cambodian politics, related to the other two, is the grandeur of its medieval past.

Cambodia's Medieval Past



When France abandoned Cambodia in the 1950s, it left behind an ambiguous legacy. Starting in the 1870s, French archaeologists, historians, and savants had untangled the chronology of medieval Cambodian history; recovered the names of Angkorean kings; excavated, named, and dated more than a thousand religious monuments; and deciphered roughly the same number of inscriptions. They had constructed a framework for Cambodia's history. Arguably, this work was France's most enduring contribution to Indochina.

What were the Cambodians to make of this extraordinary gift?

The narrative of Cambodian history bequeathed to them by France involved a period of greatness, culminating in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and followed by a long decline. The period of greatness was marked by strong leadership, monumental art, imperial ambitions, and a highly stratified society. Times of "decline" were characterized by weak leaders, inward-looking policies, foreign interference, and a society that, if not egalitarian, was organized in terms of villages, families, and entourages rather than on a national scale. The French associated what they insisted was Cambodia's decline with the refusal or inability of Cambodians to continue to behave in Angkorean ways. A fondness for grandeur, nourished by a close study of Cambodia's extraordinary art, made some of them disdainful of periods when Cambodia's rulers and ruled seem to have made more realistic assessments of their environment, and perhaps lived on better terms with each other.

At the level of popular belief, Cambodians blamed the abandonment of Angkor in the fifteenth century on supernatural causes and the machinations of the Thais. Here is Lon Nol, talking to US Ambassador Swank in July 1971:

In response to my request for his assessment of the internal political situation he launched into an exposition of his plans to rejuvenate the Khmer nation. Warming to an obviously favourite subject, he spoke of the historical superiority of the Khmer people to their western and eastern neighbours and of the long centuries of their decline... He recounted the legend explaining this decline involving the capture by the Thai of a sacred buffalo impregnated with the creative soul of the Khmer nation, thereafter lost for centuries. The present task, he continued, is to restore to the nation its soul, the formulae (kbbuon) which once made it great.

The idea that Angkorean greatness was purely Khmer and could be reconstituted almost by an act of will preoccupied Pol Pot and his colleagues after 1975. "If we can build Angkor," Pol Pot declared, "we can do anything." Cambodia's grandeur, for example, could be summoned to defeat the Vietnamese.

Cambodia is the only country in the world to display a ruin on its national flag. The gift from the French of a certified "greatness" (as well as a certified "decline") has been a mixed blessing to a country suffering from its accessibility to outsiders, a shortage of



saleable resources, and a relatively small population. The tension between its past greatness and its present misfortune has characterized a good deal of Cambodian political thinking in recent times.



The withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in 1989

Cambodia Today (as of 1990)

The People's Republic of Kampuchea (now known as the State of Cambodia) submerged or altered some of these psychological tensions because the PRK, like its Vietnamese patrons, was eager to set itself apart from previous regimes ("feudal" Sihanouk, "puppet" Lon Nol, "fascist" Pol Pot) and disavow the strand of Cambodian nationalism that was based on conflict with Vietnam. This belated injection of common sense into Cambodian self-perceptions contrasted sharply with the rhetoric of many Cambodian refugees and of opposition groups along the Thai border, who still proclaim that prerevolutionary Cambodia and its



Cambodia war refugees in the 1970s

privileges can be brought back to life, and that the *raison d'être* of all Vietnamese has always been to "extinguish" the Cambodian "race."

With the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, some of these fears and animosities might re-emerge, or flare up, in the countryside, where Vietnamese migrants have settled in large numbers. Prerevolutionary "live and let live" attitudes among Khmers are also likely to revive. At the government level it seems unlikely that policies will ever be based on the military confrontation with Vietnam or on alliances with Vietnam's enemies.

Paradoxically, 10 percent of the pronouncement that opened this article seems to be coming true. Two hundred years of

Cambodia's history, rather than two thousand, have ended - or have been modified at least in the last ten year or so. Animosity toward Vietnam and fears of encirclement have faded from official pronouncements. Vietnamese ambitions toward Cambodia, whatever they were, seem to have receded. As the demythologizing process works itself out on both sides of the border, cultural differences between Cambodians and Vietnamese, so useful to Cambodian demagogues in the past, are blurring, and the people of both countries find themselves as neighbours in a global village. Cambodian culture, insofar as it is unique and looks backward to its periods of greatness, will survive, and a more internationalized "Indochinese" culture may develop (as it seems to be doing among some Cambodian migrants in the United States).



Cambodian royal family 1995

When peace turns, the outside powers that guarantee it will probably not allow Cambodia the luxury of unbridled nationalism, the chance to revert to the status of a hermit nation, or to be swallowed up by one state or another. Instead, what we might see in the 1990s is a more outward-looking, post-revolutionary phase of Cambodian history, dominated by Cambodia's independence guaranteed by the United Nations.

The prospect of Cambodia becoming a small state locked into the rest of Asia, bereft of some of its mythology, does not seem to be too high a price for Cambodians to pay for their survival. They have already paid for more than most of us.



Cambodian country family in the 1960s

The Cambodian people and some kind of Cambodian nation will also survive, provided that the fighting stops, political stability reasserts itself, and foreign powers stop using the country as a testing ground for allegedly larger interests, such as punishing Vietnam, pleasing Beijing, or avenging the coup that removed Sihanouk from power 20 years ago.