

Thailand-Cambodia: A Love-Hate Relationship

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The violence which culminated in the burning of the Royal Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh on January 29, 2003, was both shocking and unexpected. The rioting not only inflicted extensive damage to Thai-owned property (fortunately, no one was killed) but severely strained Thai-Cambodian relations. It also warrants study of the history of Thai-Cambodian relations to understand the deep-seated causes of what took place so that similar incidents can be avoided in the future.

Among the neighboring countries of Southeast Asia, none seems more similar to Thailand than Cambodia (perhaps not even excluding Laos and the “Tai” people scattered throughout such countries as Burma, Vietnam, and southern China). Both nations share similar customs, traditions, beliefs, and ways of life. This is especially true of royal customs, language, writing systems, vocabulary, literature, and the dramatic arts.

In light of these similarities, it seems surprising, therefore, that relations between Thailand and Cambodia should be characterized by deep-seated “ignorance, misunderstanding, and prejudice.” Indeed, the two countries have what can be termed “a love-hate relationship.”

This lack of understanding is reflected in the thinking of a considerable number of educated Thais and members of the ruling class, who distinguish between the Khom and the Khmer, considering them to be two separate ethnic groups. They assert that it was the Khom, not the Khmer, who built the majestic temple complexes at Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom and who founded one of the world’s truly magnificent ancient empires. They further claim that Khmer culture, for instance its various forms of masked dance drama, is merely a “derivative” of Thai culture. (This is despite the fact that the word “Khom” is derived from the old Thai “Khmer krom,” meaning “lowland Khmer.” In spoken Thai, “Khmer” was gradually dropped, leaving only “krom,” which over time became, first, “klom” or “kalom,” and then eventually “Khom.”)

The border between Thailand and Cambodia is approximately 800 kilometers long, stretching along the provinces of the lower Northeast from a point known as “Chong Bok” in Ubon Ratchathani (where the Thai, Laotian, and Cambodian borders meet and which some refer to as the “Emerald Triangle”) and ending in Had Lek sub-district of Klong Yai district, in Trat province.

This long border is symbolic of the long history of relations between the Thais and the Khom-Khmer, which date from before the founding of the Sukhothai kingdom in the thirteenth century, thus starting the “love-hate relationship.” A similar relationship exists between the Japanese and the Koreans. Much of what defines Japanese culture today has been influenced by and is part of the cultural heritage of Korea. Buddhism, silkmaking, lacquerware, architecture, and sculpture – the most refined aspects of culture which the Japanese identify with China – passed to them first through Korea. But because of Japan’s successful transformation into an industrial powerhouse, that country has overlooked its debt to Korea and, in fact, treats Korea as an inferior.

Those elements of Thai culture which are generally considered to have originated in India, such as Buddhism, architecture, artistic designs, and even a significant portion of the Thai lexicon, did not enter Thailand directly from India. Rather, they were all second-hand transmissions, so to speak, having first passed through the Sri Lankans (including the Tamil), the Mon, or the Khmer. Even the concept of divine kingship (*devaraja*) and much of the special vocabulary associated with the royal court were, as M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, a noted intellectual and former Thai prime minister, said, “derived from Cambodia.”

Thai leaders in the past were filled with tremendous admiration for anything Khom-Khmer. Khun Pha Muang, who ruled the city of Muang Rad, somewhere in present-day northern Thailand, and was instrumental in the founding of the Sukhothai kingdom, was given the title “Sri Intrabodintrathit” (before it was changed to “Sri Intrathit”). This is a name taken from the lord or *phee fah* of the city of “muang Sri Sothonpura.” Pha Muang’s royal regalia, known as “Pra Khan Jayasri,” the Jayasri sword, and his royal consort named “Sikara Maha Devi,” were all bestowed by the King of Angkor.

This is the message conveyed to us by a fourteenth-century stone inscription of Wat Srichum at Sukhothai (the authenticity of which has never been questioned, unlike that of the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription). The Thai term “phee fah” (referring to a king) and the term “Sri Sothonpura” are direct references to a Khom-Khmer king and his royal capital. The king in question was probably King Jayavarman VIII (1243-1295) and the royal capital of Sri Sothonpura is certainly Angkor Thom.

In other words, the earliest royal Thai titles – King Sri Intrabodintrathit, the Pra Khan Jayasri sword, and the consort Sikara Maha Devi – were derived from the Khmer, one of the most highly advanced civilizations in Southeast Asia at the time and a source of knowledge and inspiration to the Thai people. It is possible that Sikara Maha Devi was a daughter of King Jayavarman VIII and thus the Thai leader Khun Pha Muang, one of the founders of Sukhothai, was a son-in-law of the Khmer King.

The early history of the Lao Lan Xang kingdom in Luang Prabang shares distinct similarities. Fah Ngum, the founder of the kingdom, had sought refuge at Angkor, where he was given a sacred Buddha image (Phra Bang) and where he took a Khmer consort (Mahesi) before establishing his supremacy over all the Lao people (A.D. 1353).

This respect and admiration for anything Khmer also characterized the Ayutthaya period from the mid-fourteenth century onward. Interestingly, the flourishing of Khmer art and culture at the Thai court was the result of war, a war in which the victors adopted elements of the superior civilization of the losing side.

The glorious Khom-Khmer civilization ultimately sank into decline, as Sri Sothonpura (Angkor Thom or Sri Yasodharapura), seat of the kingdom, fell three times to invading armies – first to King U-Thong in 1369, second to King Ramesuan in 1388/9, and finally in 1431 to King Sam Phraya. The sacking of Sri Sothonpura can be compared to the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767, but Thai historians are reluctant to make this analogy as it casts Thais in the role of “villains,” a role more comfortably attributed to the Burmese.

However, the Thai conquest of Sri Sothonpura led to a burgeoning of Khmer art and culture in Ayutthaya, just as the Mongol conquest of China led to the Mongol adoption of Chinese customs and culture (the founding of the Yuan dynasty at Peking). As Professor David Wyatt of Cornell University once noted, in fact, “Ayutthaya is the successor of Angkor.”

Another example from the Ayutthaya period is the decision by King Prasat Thong (1630-1656) to build the principal *prang* at Wat Chaiyawanaram in the Khmer style and to bestow on the Khmer-style palace he constructed on the banks of the Pasak River (located today in Nakhon Luang district of Ayutthaya province) the name “Nakhon Luang.” This is a name taken directly from Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, as Thais at the time referred to the Khmer capital as (Phra) “Nakhon Luang” or in Pali-Sanskrit, Nagara, the City.

The admiration of the Thai ruling classes for things Khmer-Khom remained in evidence even into the Ratanakosin (Bangkok) period. King Rama IV, or King Mongkut (r.1851-1868), for instance, ordered a Khmer stone temple disassembled and reconstructed on Thai soil, but “Phra Suphanphisan, after a trip to the ancient Khmer capital at Angkor, informed the King that all the stone temples were too enormous to be taken apart and transported to Siam. Hearing this, the King ordered that Prasat Ta Prohm, a relatively smaller temple, be relocated instead. Four groups of 500 men each were dispatched...to deconstruct the *prasat* on the ninth day of the sixth lunar month.”

The account of this event, which appears in “The Royal Chronicles of King Rama IV” by Chao Phraya Thipakorawong, occurred in 1860, before the Siamese ceded “sovereignty” over Cambodia to the French in 1867.

It is unclear to us precisely why King Mongkut wished to have an enormous Khmer temple reconstructed in Siam at a time when the French were gradually extending their control over much of Indochina. What is interesting, however, is that the attempt to move the temple structure failed when “some 300 Khmers came out of the forest and attacked the men who had come to disassemble the temple, killing Phra Suphanphisan, Phra Wang and one of Phra Suphanphisan’s sons. Phra Mahatthai was stabbed, and Phra Yokkrabat was injured. The *phrai* commoners, however, escaped injury by fleeing into the forest.”

It was obvious that the Khmer were angered by the theft of their property and responded violently. The incident convinced King Mongkut to abandon the plan to “disassemble” the *prasat* and instead to construct a small model of the Angkor Wat temple complex. “Craftsmen constructed a model of Angkor Wat and installed it at Wat Phra Sri Ratanasasadaram (the Temple of the Emerald Buddha), where it remains to this very day.” (Prime Minister Hun Sen visited the model at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in early 1990s during an official visit to Thailand for discussions with then-Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan.)

Despite the Thai love and admiration for anything Khmer, the Thais have also felt considerable hatred for the Khmer, as evidenced by a ritual called the *phithi pathomkam*. While Ayutthaya was busy fending off Burmese incursions, the Khmer King Satha (Chetta I, r.1576-1596) took the opportunity to attack Ayutthaya from the east. In revenge, so the chronicles say, King Naresuan ordered the capture of Khmer ruler to be beheaded and washed his feet with the blood.

The *phithi pathomkam* ritual re-enacts this story of revenge. However, Professor Kajorn Sukhapanich, a noted Thai historian, did not believe that the ritual, as recorded in the royal chronicles, ever really occurred. He claimed that Khmer King Satha fled and took refuge in Laos.

In general, present-day Thai view Khmer leaders and kings as traitors and ingrates. This idea was probably started by King Vajiravudh, or Rama VI (r.1910-1925), in his official nationalism campaign. It was handed down and developed by Field Marshal Phinbun and Luang Wichit in the 1930s-1940s when Thailand, with Japanese help, seized Siemreap and Battambang from French Indochina. It was also heightened by the dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit when the International Court of Justice ruled that the great temple of Phra Viharn on the border belonged to Cambodia. The pro-Americanism of Thailand and the neutrality of Sihanouk Cambodia during the Cold War further encouraged mutual dislike between the two countries and peoples.

Thais are not particularly fond of Norodom Sihanouk, for example. A Thai riddle asks, “What color (*si*) do Thai people hate?” The answer is neither red (*si daeng*) nor black (*si dam*), but “Si-hanouk.”

This, of course, is the Thai perspective, but how do the Khmer view their kings, such as Satha and Sihanouk? Certainly as national heroes and saviors, as men who fought to preserve their country’s independence in the face of Thai aggressors intent on seizing control of Cambodia. Much the same could be said about King Anu of Laos, r.1805-1828, considered by Lao historians as a national hero, whereas to the Thais, he was a “rebel” against the Bangkok monarch King Rama III (r.1824-1851).

The history of Thailand and its neighbors, especially Cambodia, Laos, and Burma, is one with both positive and negative elements. Some events have bred hatred, for instance of the Burmese by the Thais; others have generated contempt and feelings of superiority or inferiority, as in the case of Thailand’s relations with Cambodia and Laos. These feelings have led to significant misunderstandings.

Clearly, then, there is a need for an earnest and systematic study of the history of relations between these countries. This study deserves support from national and regional organizations such as ASEAN. Unfortunately, however, once the smoke clears from the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh, all that is likely to matter is the extent of the financial damage and how and when compensation will be paid.

Or if any analysis of the incident does take place, it is likely to reach the facile conclusion that the Khmers are “the villains” – they burned down Thai Embassy, after all – and the Thais are “the good guys” – we did not burn the Cambodian Embassy. It is convenient for Thais to forget that Ayutthaya rulers sacked Angkor three times. It would be far preferable, however, to examine the violent events of January 29 in order to draw lessons for solving the problems that continue to affect the neighboring countries of the Southeast Asian region.

Select Bibliography

The following texts shed some light for a better understanding of our Southeast Asian neighbors, especially Cambodia, its history, and the question of the Khmer legacy.

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. *เขมรสามยุค (Khamen sam yok / Cambodia: Three Times)*. 1993. A travel account of three trips made in 1992 and 1993, this book provides a day-by-day account of the Princess’s experiences in Cambodia, intending to give an understanding of the country and its customs. Filled with general information, the book is easy and pleasurable reading, and, importantly,

contains beautiful photographs which help clarify the descriptions of modern day Cambodia (to 1992), as well as the historical sites at Angkor. 309 pages. 500 baht.

George Coedes. *Angkor: An Introduction* (translated into Thai by Pranee Wongthes as เมืองพระนคร นครวัด นครธม). 1986. A popular book, currently in its seventh printing, written by an eminent French scholar from the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient. Coedes once worked in Thailand and was the first man to read the Ramkhamhaeng Inscription Stone in its entirety. This text is a “must read” for anyone wishing to gain an understanding of the history of the ancient Khmer and the concept of divine kingship which informed the building of the great *prasart*. The book traces the development of the magnificent Khmer civilization and its eventual collapse. A smooth translation of the original, easy to read. 228 pages. 195 baht.

David Chandler. *A History of Cambodia* (translated into Thai by Phanngam Ngaothamasarn, Sodsai Khantiworapong, and Wongduen Narasajja as ประวัติศาสตร์กัมพูชา / *Prawatsat Kamphucha*). 1997 (second printing, 2000). Chandler, an eminent American scholar, is a former professor at Monash University, Australia. The book recounts the history of Cambodia, beginning from ancient times (before and after Angkor) and continuing to the present day (before and after the Khmer Rouge). It provides the “best background” to Cambodian history currently available in Thai. The book received an award for best translation of a work of non-fiction in 1999. A valuable reference book, suitable for reports, articles and advanced study. 412 pages. 250 baht.

Nikhom Musikakhama. ประวัติศาสตร์โบราณคดี กัมพูชา (Archeological History of Cambodia). 1993. A text published by the Fine Arts Department to mark the official opening of the National Museum at Phimai by Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in 1993. The book is an attempt by the government to illustrate that: “Just as the two banks of the Mekhong River have not been able to separate the Thais from their Lao brothers and sisters, the Dongrak Hills have failed to separate Thailand from Cambodia.” This is a dense and fairly serious work, tracing the history of the Khmer people from before the founding of Angkor to the fall of the empire at the hands of Vietnamese and Thai invaders. The book serves as an excellent guide for determining what is “reliable” and what is “unreliable” in the study of historical “records.” Special attention should be paid to Chapter 5. 430 pages.

Jit Phumisak. ตำนานแห่งนครวัด (*Prawatsat Borankhadi Kamphucha* / The Legend of Angkor Wat). 1982 (second printing, 2002). This book, by an important Thai thinker and writer, is in the style of a cultural travel guide. It is an attempt to clear up misunderstandings and “overcome Thai prejudice and contempt for the Khmer.” Although it is somewhat romanticized, the book is full of insightful conversations between young men and women who ask questions and look for answers to the

mystery of the rise and fall of the Khmer empire. First printing B.E. 2525 (1982), second printing B.E. 2545 (2002). Beautiful illustrations. 196+ pages. 175 baht.

Bernard Groslier. *นี้เสียมุก (Syam Kuk)*. (Translated into English by Benedict Anderson from the French “Les Syam Kuk des bas-reliefs d’Angkor Vat” in *Orients pour George-Condorinas*, Sud-est Asie/Privat, Paris, 1981; Thai version edited by Charnvit Kasetsiri). 2002. The book presents the debate over the identity of the figures known as “Syam” carved into the stone *prasat* at Angkor. “Were they Thai? Where they Siamese? Were they mercenaries? Were they primitive barbarians? Precisely who were they?” The book also discusses a new theory which posits that these figures were none other than the Kuay or Kui, one of the oldest indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia, who are somewhat disparagingly referred to as the “Suay” in Thai or the “Kha” in Lao. These people inhabited remote areas between the Khmer and the ancient Champa kingdoms. (M. Groslier was the French curator who remained at Angkor until the very last moment during the Khmer Rouge period. He believed that the flourishing of the ancient Khmer civilization was due to its ability to harness waterpower. To him the Angkorian Empire was a hydraulic society.) 165 baht.

Sujit Wongthes, editor. *พระนเรศวรตีเมืองละแวก แต่ไม่ได้ “ฆ่า” พระยาละแวก Phra Naresuan ti muang Lawaek dai tae maikai kha Phraya Lawaek / King Naresuan Captured the City of Lovek, But Did Not “Kill” its King*. A history text consisting of dense but readable academic articles by Janchai Phakattimkom, Boonteen Srivorapong, and Santi Pakdeekham, which present new information, new perspectives, and new theories which contrast with long-standing readings of “historical records.” According to these articles, King Naresuan, in 1593, did in fact attack Lovek, the capital of the Khmer empire after the fall of Angkor, but he did not kill the Cambodian monarch, and the Pathomkam ritual, in which the blood of the Khmer king was used to wash King Naresuan’s feet, did not occur. These writers contend that the Khmer King of Lovek fled to Laos where he lived out the rest of his days. This book is recommended for the way in which it opens up new perspectives on the past and for its rejection of old-fashioned “fanatical nationalism.” (The editor is a national artist and cultural treasure; Janchai is a history professor at Ramkhamhaeng University, and Santi is an instructor at Srinakharinwirot University – see his translation of the text on differences between Thai and Cambodian perspectives.) 184 pages. 155 baht.

Charnvit Kasetsiri. *วิถีไทย (Withi Thai / The Thai Way)*. 1997. This is an historical and cultural guidebook intended to give Thai readers an understanding of and respect for their Southeast Asian neighbors. It takes the approach that by understanding “them,” we can better understand “ourselves.” The book attempts to break down the barriers imposed by borders, prejudice, and outdated nationalistic attitudes. For information on Cambodia, readers are directed to the chapters entitled “Across Cambodia from

Atop Phra Viharn” and “Angkor Wat: Record of a Journey to the Celestial Palace of the Khom.” 321 pages. 230 baht.

Theeraphap Lohitakul. รัก ชื่น ชื่น ชัง อุซาคเนย์ (*Rak, chun, khun, chang Usakhane* / Love, Admiration, Resentment and Hatred in Southeast Asia). 2002. Written in a romantic style by one of the country’s most highly regarded travel writers, this book is a cultural guide to Southeast Asia with interesting historical asides. What is most noteworthy is the writer’s obvious respect and admiration for cultures and peoples different from the Thais. At the same time, however, the book’s title and chapter headings such as “Reassessing the Past: From Bang Rachan to Suranaree” and “To Whom Does Phra Viharn Belong? A Question We Should Perhaps Stop Asking” point to elements of love and hate in relations between neighboring countries in the region. Very easy to read, with beautiful illustrations, the book is an attack on ethnocentrism. 304 pages. 200 baht.

Apichart Kaweeephokha. ปราสาทสด๊กก๊อกธม ประวัติศาสตร์และอารยธรรมขอม สระแก้ว บันตัยเมียนจาย (*Prasat Sdok Kok Thom prawatsat lae arayatham khom sra keo bantai mainchai* / Prasat Sadok Kok Thom: Khom History and Civilization in Sra Kaew and Bantay Mian Jai). An admirable attempt to promote cross-cultural understanding at the local level. The book makes use of historical information, stone inscriptions, cultural travels, religious rituals, and other local activities to break down national barriers and promote cooperation between Sra Kaew province in Thailand (the location of the Prasat Sadok Kok Thom) and Bantia Mian Jai province in Cambodia (site of Prasat Bantay Chamar). The writer is the chief district officer in Khok Sung district, Sra Kaew. 190 pages. 100 baht.

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