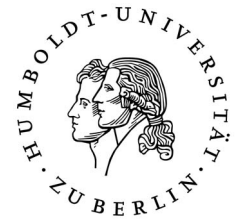


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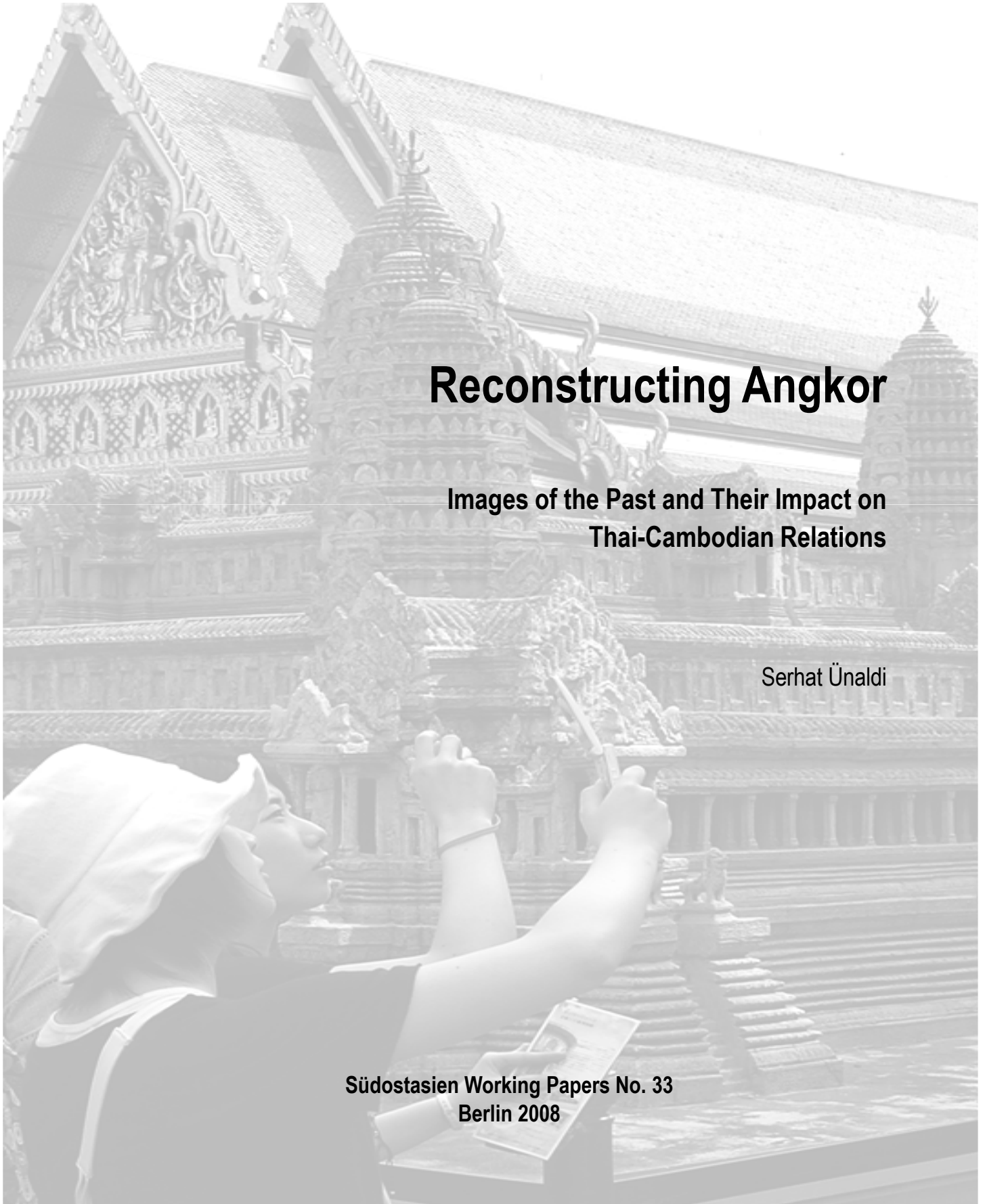


Reconstructing Angkor

**Images of the Past and Their Impact on
Thai-Cambodian Relations**

Serhat Ünaldi

Südostasien Working Papers No. 33
Berlin 2008



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To restore a building is not to maintain it, to repair it, or remake it, but to reestablish it in a state of completeness that can never have existed at a given moment.

Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879), french architect¹

Introduction

Visiting Angkor nowadays bears resemblance to exploring some kind of Disneyland, with masses of tourists mounting up to the towers of Angkor Wat as the Central Castle in the midst of a Fantasyland inhabited by mythical creatures hidden in an enchanted forest.

It is exactly this fantastical appeal that stimulates imagination and makes Angkor thus vulnerable to ideological exploitation. Because so little is known about what Angkor really was, it is easy to project own views onto it which more than once were meant to serve the interests of the interpreter. This paper tries to examine the various ways in which an archaeological site can be (mis-)used to enforce political agendas. It is also an attempt to show how a reputed “World Heritage” can be highly contested at the local level due to its significance for personal and national identities. Nationalists in Thailand and Cambodia claim the exclusive right to call Angkor their heritage. To advance their cause, they had to construct the past to jam it into their line of argument. Starting from their present interest they cut a pass through the shades of history. This anachronistic projection back in time was always highly selective. What follows is an attempt to explore different histories of Angkor in general and to show what had been left out by their respective authors in particular. The paper examines especially the destructive aspects of nationalism.

The starting-point of my approach is 29 January 2003, known as the day of the anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh that led to the burning down of the Thai embassy by an angry crowd of students. Without an understanding of the ideological construction of Angkor as *the* focal point of Cambodian identity it is not possible to comprehend the driving force behind the incident. The question is: How could a remark on Angkor trigger such a reaction? To answer that, one has to look at how Angkor is represented in the national narratives of Cambodia and Thailand, respectively.

There have been few in-depth studies of those riots until lately. In his paper “Khmerness and the Thai ‘Other’” Alexander Hinton analyzed, inter alia, a revealing cyber-discussion on a web-board of a Thai-newspaper with comments about the incident in real-time. A recent paper by Duncan McCargo is the first study to extensively theorize the riots and their root causes.²

Contemporary writing about Cambodia has been generally limited due to restraints on information flows from inside the country during the past decades as well as the ideological implications for Cambodia as a frontline of the Cold War. Both “limited the availability of scholars to develop sensitive conceptual lenses”.³ This analysis takes the works of post-modernist scholars – especially of Penny Edwards, Anthony Barnett and Thongchai Winichakul – about processes of historical constructions in Cambodia and Thailand as its background. As primary sources I resorted to a colonial description of Angkor by Henri Mouhot as well as answers by Cambodians to a questionnaire.⁴ In

¹ Cited in: Edwards 2007, p. 125.

² McCargo’s paper was presented at the “10th International Conference on Thai Studies”. He kindly provided me with his presentation since the paper wasn’t ready for distribution, yet.

³ Hughes, Öjendal 2006, p. 415.

⁴ Communication between me and my Cambodian informants was carried out via E-Mail at the end of 2006. I used questionnaires. Answers were partly translated by a development worker at Siem Reap. I had three informants, all working around Angkor. None of them has received higher education, all are in their late 20s / early 30s. They asked to remain anonymous due to the politically charged issue.

addition, general works about the history of Thailand and Cambodia as well as about certain critical phases and problems proved to be of use.

Up to now, most works have been limited either to the Cambodian or the Thai view of Angkor. Charnvit Kasetsiri has already pointed out that “there is a need for an earnest and systematic study of history of relations between these countries”.⁵ Accordingly, my particular approach is to contrast the ideological constructions on both sides. That should help to underline the artificial nature of the related images of the past. Moreover, the study would otherwise be limited to the national space it is implicitly challenging. Hence, this paper closes with the description of a colonial counter-project that never came into effect because history took another course.

Rioting against the “Other”

On 18 January 2003, the pro-government newspaper *Rasmei Angkor* printed what had been circulating through Cambodia by hearsay for months. The famous Thai actress Suvanan Kongying (“Morning Star” or Phkay Proek) was accused of having said she “would only accept an invitation to perform in Cambodia if the famous Angkor Wat was returned to Thailand and she looked down [on] Cambodian[s] by saying that if she was reincarnated, she would rather be a dog than be a Cambodian national.”⁶

This quotation was then printed on fliers and distributed by students in Phnom Penh.

One of my Cambodian informants, a tuk tuk driver for tourists at Angkor, remembers the tensions during those days and recounts a scene his friend had allegedly observed:

Just before the incident in Phnom Penh, a large group of Thai tourists arrived at Angkor Wat and sat down and cried saying: “I can’t believe that Angkor Wat now belongs to Cambodia.” The Cambodian tour guide [...] didn’t say anything because he needed the money. But some other Cambodian moto and tuk tuk drivers overheard and said: “No, that’s not true, the temples belong to Cambodia.” Fights then broke out between the Thais and the drivers outside in front of Angkor Wat. This was one or two days before the demonstration.⁷

Prime Minister Hun Sen added fuel to the flames on the widely televised occasion of an inauguration of a school for the blind and deaf on 27 January: “[...] the value of Morning Star is cheaper than a few clumps of grass at Angkor Wat. [...] TV channels in Cambodia must reduce or stop showing Thai movies, especially movies starring Morning Star.”⁸

The 29 January was then dominated by riots of hundreds of Cambodian students against Thai businesses and properties culminating in the burning down of the Thai embassy that forced the staff to escape out of the backdoor and over a fence. Although Thailand’s Prime Minister Thaksin had called his Cambodian colleague to ask for protection of the embassy, Hun Sen hesitated to take action. Diplomatic ties between the countries had been severely damaged with Thai-aid being held back and borders being closed. Although after some weeks the political pressure eased, tensions remained.

As the tuk tuk driver puts it: “I thought the reaction of the Cambodians was reasonable because saying Angkor Wat belongs to them is not a small mistake. Even though the two governments still have a

⁵ Charnvit 2003.

⁶ ADHOC 2003, see also U.S. Department of State and Taylor for details.

⁷ McCargo uncovered further anti-Thai gossip preceding the riots, amongst others a rumour about “Thai planes which may one day crash into Angkor Wat in a 9/11 style”. McCargo 2008.

⁸ ADHOC 2003.

relationship the people are completely finished. I don't like Thailand at all." His wife stopped watching Thai-TV, but after a while she started watching it again. "When she does this I get very angry with her and turn it off." Another Cambodian – a guide at a workshop for traditional handicrafts – states: "Any attack on [Angkor Wat] is an attack on all Cambodians." And his colleague adds: "I don't feel well about the word 'Thai' [...] When someone reminds [me of] 'Thai' or we hear [a] 'Thai' word, we always get angry and feel repent what happened to Khmer."

What happened to the Khmer – the colonial/Cambodian construction

The tradition of "Othering" to integrate the community is far from being alien to the Khmer. It started long before the French began to exert their influence on Cambodia with the aim to form another entity they could absorb into their Indochinese possessions.

Jayavarman II (r. 802-850) was the first king who "welded together an assortment of disparate regions into some sort of self-aware community" in the 9th century.⁹ However, the concept of "nationhood" was limited to the sense of belonging to the king of "Kambujadesa". People who owed allegiance to someone else were "outsiders".

While depicting their Angkorean kingdom as an earthly version of the world of the gods with the temple-mountain as the centre of the universe and the king bearing resemblance to lord Śiva, the rulers tried to integrate their subjects into their realm.

But an imagined community can only exist if it also defines what it is *not*. If one studies the symbols of Angkor we can easily find examples of an early process of "Othering". Hence, it is obvious why Suryavarman II (r. 1113-1150) chose to depict the battle of Lanka, a scene from the *Ramayana*, on one of the galleries of Angkor Wat. The story provides a pool of dichotomies, with the *rakshasas* (demons) as the ultimate evil, the monkeys as the cooperative savage tribes and Rama and his companions as the incarnation of righteousness. It is likely that the myth reflects the conquest of Dravidian South India by Aryans from the North. The Angkorean Khmer applied the Indian story to their own conditions, i.e. their constant struggle against the enemies of the kingdom of Champa.¹⁰

Similarly, Jayavarman VII (r. 1181-1220?) depicted the Chams as *asuras* (demons or giants) and the Khmer as *devatas* (angels) in front of the gateways leading up to the Bayon-temple. As Chandler noted, "the struggle between the Cambodians and the Chams [...] can be seen as bringing to birth the new, converted nation of Cambodia..."¹¹

Looking at the bas-reliefs of the Bayon or Angkor Wat it is obvious that the Khmer elite had a distinct sense of ethnicity. Visitors admire the precise manner in which the portrayals depicted different peoples, while some ethnic groups were presented, and thus regarded, as evil. But the absence of popular literature dating from the Angkorean era, sources that could give an insight into the mindset of ordinary people, makes it impossible to detect if these elitist ideas were shared by the society as a whole.

While at certain points in history the kings of Angkor extracted tribute from large areas of mainland Southeast Asia, it was the Thai-kingdom of Ayudhya that emerged as the major power in the region

⁹ Chandler 2000, pp. 35-36.

¹⁰ Roveda 2005, pp. 18-19.

¹¹ Chandler 2000, p. 67.

during the 14th century. Angkor had to stand the attacks of its western neighbour. This became a source of hatred and grief on the Cambodian side:

However, during the Thai retreat [from Angkor], they took with them thousands of Khmer families, including intellectuals and strong, able bodies, as prisoners - leaving the capital city empty of all but the tired, the weak, and the sick. [...] In addition, the breeding between the Thai and Khmer yielded offspring of strong physique and intellect [for the Thai].¹²

Today, Khmer nationalists mourn the “loss” of the “Khmer territories” like Chantaburi, Prachinburi and Nakhon Ratchasima during that time. Subsequently, the centre of Khmer-power shifted southwards towards Lovek, Udong and Phnom Penh, the latter being especially suitable for trade. However, the intrusion of the Vietnamese into the, until then, Khmer-dominated Mekong Delta by the 1620s cut the Khmer kingdom off of maritime access. Surrounded by Thai and the Nguyen, it had to resist attacks from both sides. From the 1770s onwards, the Khmer were dominated by Siam, with King Eng (r. 1794-97) being the first Khmer ruler anointed by the Thai. His son, King Chan (r. 1806-1835), was pro-Vietnamese to the effect that the kingdom was nearly absorbed into the Vietnamese realm by the end of the 1830s. In 1848, Thai forces brought Prince Duang to the throne and thus revived Thai-sponsored kingship in Cambodia.

Angkor, however, never ceded to be a place of worship and by the time of the French arrival the city was still used as a ritual site to worship kings, gods and Buddha.¹³ It was only forgotten in terms of its concrete history. If at all, the Khmer attributed little political significance for the present to the ruins – in contrast to what the French would do. Ironically, in breaching with existing traditions the colonizers would attempt to establish continuity between the 19th century Khmer and their Angkorean past.

In January 1860 the French naturalist Henri Mouhot travelled to the “famous ruins of Ongkor”¹⁴. He was impressed:

[...] there are [...] ruins of such grandeur, remains of structures which must have been raised at such an immense cost of labour, that, at first view, one is filled with profound admiration, and cannot but ask what has become of this powerful race, so civilised, so enlightened, the authors of these gigantic works.¹⁵

Unlike his admiration for Angkor he was deeply grieved about what happened to Cambodia in the meantime. But he had a solution in mind:

The present state of Cambodia is deplorable, and its future menacing. [...] the population is excessively reduced by incessant wars carried on against neighbouring states. [...] European conquest, abolition of slavery, wise and protecting laws [...] would alone effect the regeneration of this state. It lies near to Cochin China, the subjection of which France is now aiming at [...]. I wish her to possess this land, which would add a magnificent jewel to her crown.¹⁶

These quotations bear the essence of the French strategy to legitimize their domination of the Khmer. The Cambodian past was great, the present miserable. Between those stages lay a continuous decline from former splendour through attacks of evil forces from *outside*. But, fortunately, France would be capable of saving the country from extinction.¹⁷

¹² T So 1999. He is a Khmer living in America. This quotation was taken from a letter to the editor that was published by the Phnom Penh Post. He argued against claims of a Thai politician who stated that the three Cambodian provinces of Siem Reap, Battambang, and Sisophon belonged to Thailand.

¹³ Edwards 2007, p. 26.

¹⁴ Mouhot 1992, p. 248/Vol. II. He obviously did not “discover” Angkor. It was already “famous”.

¹⁵ *ibid*, pp. 278-279/Vol I.

¹⁶ *ibid*, pp. 274-275/Vol I.

¹⁷ To illustrate the vanishing state of the Khmer race, all human figures depicted in Mouhot’s original sketches of Angkor were excluded in later publications of his diary. Edwards 2007, p. 20, 61.

The legend of the two statues *preah ko* and *preah kaev* became part of this construction. It was first published by a French scholar in the 1860s and is still used to emphasize the unjust actions of the Thai neighbours that led to the decline of the Khmer. According to the legend, the statues contained books that had been the sources of great wisdom ever since. The king of Siam wanted to get these and took the Khmer capital of Lovek using a trick. He fired coins into the forest that served as the capitals fortification. To get the coins, the Khmer came out and cut the trees. Hence, the Thai were able to capture Lovek and to take the sacred books of wisdom with them. Thereby, it was explained why the Thai had become superior to the Cambodians, who lost their former power because they acted in greed and thus against *dhamma*.¹⁸ In this context it was not mentioned that the Thai King Naresuan took Lovek in 1593 because he wanted to take revenge for an attack by the Cambodian King Sattha who took advantage of the weakness of the Thai when the latter were once again fighting the Burmese. The French scholar had his reasons not to mention this background because active Cambodians who *start* a war did not fit into the French line of thought. They had to depict the Khmer as weak, passive and dormant. They used Angkor to “give Cambodian nationalism an ideological form which in fact oppressed the people it claimed to represent”¹⁹, as Anthony Barnett puts it.

For if we think of today’s Cambodia as the political descendent of Angkor, reality is already on the run. [...] to suggest that there is a national (in the sense of a nation-state) continuity projects the Khmer as a people sliding down a millennial decline.²⁰

However, the indianized Angkoreans were depicted by the French as the ideal Khmer who have been “contaminated” by Siamese and Vietnamese influence. But where does Khmer culture begin? Even Angkor was the result of the cultural dominance of India. The French presented the Angkorean Hindu-tradition as “authentic” to the Khmer as opposed to the Theravada Buddhist version they observed. They measured the value of a culture in terms of the extent of territory it was able to dominate, thereby, perhaps unconsciously, revealing their own nostalgic feelings towards rise and fall. A factor contributing to the French concept of being on a *mission civilisatrice* was their own decline since the fall of the First French Empire. To compensate their inferiority of power in relation to Britain they highlighted their moral strength and declared themselves saviours of the east.

Therefore, it was necessary to establish a monopoly of influence over the Khmer territory through cutting historical links with the Siamese and depicting them as the destroyers of a once glorious civilization. Accordingly, in 1871 the governor of Cochinchina, Marie-Jules Duprés, criticised the Siamese for not conserving the temples of Angkor since they claimed to be in charge of the territory. Duprés declared “that France alone could and should preserve Angkor for posterity.”²¹ Perhaps more disturbing than the lack of conservatory efforts was the obvious presence of Siamese Buddhist objects in the compound of the temple. Penny Edwards notes that

[...] the practice of Buddhist worship at Angkor presented unwelcome challenges to colonial desires to compartmentalize Cambodia both vertically, through time, and horizontally, through the categorization of religion. A key goal in this partitioning was the political and cultural severing of

¹⁸ Chandler 2000, pp. 85-86. It is easy to uncover this myth in T So’s letter to the editor (T So 1999). There he states: “Greed, power, and selfishness have been the downfall of the Khmer race. [...] Yes, Cambodia right now is poor, drunk, and undisciplined.” However, he does not refer to the legend but to alleged historical facts of royal struggles in the 1470s.

¹⁹ Barnett 1990, p. 102.

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 106. Yet, if the visitor today leaves the compound of the royal Silver Pagoda in Phnom Penh, he still finds himself standing in front of a statue of Jayavarman VII sitting in front of a map of “Le péninsule indochinoise aux XII-XIII.s”. A huge area including almost the whole of present-day Thailand, South-Vietnam and parts of Laos is coloured in orange, showing “l’Empire Khmer”. The light-brown silhouette of present-day Cambodia is perishing in this sea of orange and appears as an insignificant spot. This map evokes a sensitive feeling of loss. A study of Cambodia’s mapped “geo-body” waits to be done.

²¹ Edwards 2007, p. 30.

Cambodge from Siam, with which it had enjoyed a centuries' long traffic of knowledge, manuscripts, and other ritual objects both within the Buddhist sphere and between royalty.²²

Subsequently, the longstanding religious exchange between the Khmer and the Siamese was undermined by the colonial policy to establish a rational, orthodox and genuine Cambodian Buddhism while at the same time limiting the influence of the supposedly British leaning Siamese kingdom over their Cambodian possessions. The French established Pali schools in order to keep Khmer monks, who habitually sought religious education in Bangkok, in the protectorate. Finally, in 1914, a new travel restriction prohibited members of the Khmer monkhood from travelling to Siam for language studies.²³ The removal of signs of Buddhist worship from Angkor and the simultaneous establishment of a distinct Cambodian Buddhism highlights the inconsistency of French historical constructions.

Admittedly, the task the French set themselves was far from being easy. To link the Cambodians of the present with the Angkoreans of the past meant to highlight the *continuity* of culture, therefore traditions had to be invented. At the same time it was necessary to emphasize *changes* to evoke a feeling of decline that would legitimate the role of the French as guardians of the Khmer. Sasagawa Hideo revealed this contradiction in reference to the Cambodian court dance. He explains how the Orientalist George Groslier traced the dance to Angkor in comparing the movements and gestures of the early 20th century dancers with the *apsaras* depicted on the bas-reliefs. Thus, he argued that the “tradition” had been preserved through the ages of Siamese dominance. However, Groslier was aiming at the control over the royal troupe to “restore” the tradition and therefore he underlined at the same time the “decline” of Cambodian arts through the destruction by the Siamese. In 1927 Groslier assumed the management over the royal troupe.²⁴

This inconsistency of arguments exemplifies how the tradition of Angkor and the “threat from outside” had been used to construct a history that served French interests.

These representations of the past are being contested today. Myths of the “decline” of Angkor are deconstructed by scholars who argue for a “shift” instead. It is evident that at certain points Angkor was disintegrated and fragmented, far from being an orderly “heaven on earth”. In fact, it were not the Thai who brought Angkor to its knees, for “a great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within”, as Will Durant once stated. Michael Vickery suggested that the maritime trade with the Chinese became more important and therefore the centre of Khmer-power moved from Angkor to lower rivers with better access to the sea.²⁵ Seen from this perspective, it was Angkor that was in decline, while the Khmer adapted themselves quite smart to new conditions.

Scholars like Penny Edwards uncover the colonial construction of the “geo-cultural-body”²⁶ of Cambodia (following the term of Thongchais *geo-body*) which was achieved through the constant replication of Angkorean imagery and the refashioning of arts, monuments, religious practices and administration. Theories that were once presented as facts are now uncovered as myths. The focus shifts from colonial stereotyping of Khmers as being obedient and passive to their tradition of mobility and insurgence. In fact, the French had to cope with unrests like the rebellion of 1884-86 against the tightening of French control, the 1916 affair with thousands of Cambodians demonstrating in Phnom Penh against financial burdens imposed by their “protectors”, or the murderer of a French *résident* in 1925.

²² Ibid, p. 134.

²³ Ibid, pp. 108-114.

²⁴ Sasagawa 2005, pp. 424-425, 427.

²⁵ Barnett 1990, p. 104.

²⁶ Edwards 2006, p. 423.

Barnett reproduced a debate about one of the most pervading assertions about Angkor: the perfect control over water through a system of canals and *barays* (reservoirs) that allegedly provided the agricultural surplus for the growth of Angkor. But this was unlikely the case because “the *barays* did not hold nearly enough water, the dams had no mechanisms to control the release of water”.²⁷

However, French constructions were internalized by the Cambodian elite and became an integral part of post-colonial Cambodia. In contrast to the Vietnamese and the Thai, who could borrow a national identity from their long tradition of indigenous literacy and chronicles, Cambodian nationalists, in search of *their* history, had to accept the French view due to the disappearance of Cambodian archives after the Angkorean period and the advanced state of French sciences. The lack of sources made Angkor and its successors vulnerable to orientalist interpretations. The temples may already have played an ideological role in their heyday as depicted in their iconography, but their all pervading dominance was clearly the outcome of the colonialist discourse. As Penny Edwards noticed:

In Cambodge, nationalists did not *produce* a national culture. Rather, the elaboration of a national culture by French and Cambodian literati eventually produced nationalists.²⁸

During the war with Thailand in the early 1940’s, the value of Angkor as a “fortress of the Khmer soul” intensified. In a time of declining French power over Cambodia, the Khmer staged demonstrations and claimed Angkor for themselves as a genuine testimony of their own, intrinsic greatness.²⁹

After independence, Prince Norodom Sihanouk and his successors made use of Cambodia’s “glorious” past and used the threat of decline and invasion to legitimate their grip on power. A constant scepticism – sometimes hate – towards neighbouring countries arose from that. Sihanouk presented himself as the personification of the nation and placed himself in line with Angkorean god-kings. He pointed to the constancy of the country’s culture to prevent social change and depicted Cambodia as the victim of foreign intervention in harking back to the myth of decline.³⁰

The Communists resorted to the martial “tradition” of Angkor and the ability of Cambodians to struggle against the enemy. Even the Khmer Rouge depicted Angkor Wat on the national flag of Democratic Kampuchea. Similarly, the Pol Pot-Regime praised the ability of Jayavarman VII to mobilize the masses with his huge building programs and his break with the past in introducing Mahayana Buddhism and thus a new “ideology”. The myth of the *agricultural revolution* at Angkor, as noted above, found its tragic repercussion in Pol Pots agricultural programs that were aimed at leading Cambodia to past greatness.³¹

Keeping in mind that those historical myths persist well into our days it is now possible to uncover the roots of the anti-Thai riots. Like his predecessors, Hun Sen makes political use of the legend of decline and the hanging Thai sword over the Cambodian’s heads, coined as the “historical and economic grievance theory” by Duncan McCargo. Its main feature is the “emphasis on [the] perfidy of Thais, [their] neo-colonial involvement in [Cambodian] economy [and] attempts to reassert sovereignty”.³²

²⁷ Barnett 1990, p. 120. The myth was advanced by Bernard-Philippe Groslier, son of George Groslier.

²⁸ Edwards 2007, p 7.

²⁹ Edwards 2007, pp. 232-233.

³⁰ Barnett 1990, pp. 121-123; Chandler 2000, pp. 182-187.

³¹ Anderson 2006, about the inheritance of colonial “museumizing” in Cambodia and Indonesia pp. 182-184, about the Khmer Rouge as heirs to official nationalism pp. 159-160; Barnett 1990, p. 106, 121; Chandler 2000, pp. 68-69, pp. 182-183.

³² McCargo 2008. Besides the idea of the riots as a deliberate government plot, McCargo’s insightful paper develops further theories, including conspiracy theories about a Vietnamese plan to damage Thai-Cambodian ties, an effort to reduce the influence of Thai economy on Cambodia, an oppositional attempt to destabilize the government and intra-elite conflicts.

In order to draw off the attention from internal shortcomings Hun Sen tries to unite the Cambodians behind the threat from “outside”. It is no coincidence that the riots were provoked by a pro-government paper a few months ahead of the parliamentary elections in July. Moreover, the violent protest provided the authorities with legitimacy to crack down on anti-government demonstrations in the run-up to the elections to keep “order and stability”.³³

Whoever published Suvanan’s alleged remarks was well aware of the consequences. Angkor is the national pride of a people whose feeling of decline and external threat has been internalized since more than a century. At the same time, the Cambodians had reasons to feel threatened by the Thai.

The Thai claim to Angkor – the Thai construction

Long time it had been assumed that the Thai made their first physical appearance in Southeast-Asian sources on one of the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat. There, the *Syām Kuk* are depicted as an unordered troupe of forest-dwelling mercenaries heading a much more disciplined Khmer-army of Suryavarman II. Thai nationalists refused to see their ancestors in those enslaved savages who “could easily be made to work for their overlords, the Khmers”.³⁴ In fact, as Bernard-Philippe Groslier argued, it is more likely that *Syām* was used as a general term for people with darker skin, and that *Kuk* may have been an ornithological term hinting to tribes practicing some kind of bird cult.³⁵ At the time of Suryavarman II the Tai had not moved into the lowland plain of the Chao-Phraya Basin, yet.

According to Groslier, the “descent” of the Thai into Central Indochina

[...] ne se déclenche qu’à l’aurore du XIIIe. Pour moi, elle [la descente thaï] profite essentiellement de la dislocation de l’empire de Jayavarman VII. Le contre-choc de la conquête mongole, généralement considéré comme moteur principal, n’aurait fait que la précipiter.³⁶

Following Grosliers line of argument, the Tai – who later became the Thai – filled a gap that was starting to open during the reign of Jayavarman VII. Whether the extensive building programs of this king exhausted the capacities of Angkor or ecological depletion and religious upheavals had been at work remains debatable. What seems obvious is a power-shift from Angkor to the West and the Southeast from the 13th century onwards. However, the ages of Khmer dominance over the region had a deep impact on what was to become Thai culture – besides the influence of other ethnic groups who had settled in this area before the “descent” of the Tai. The development of the Thai script based on Khmer and the absorption of vocabulary, grammatical rules, and syntactical principles into Thai indicates the continuing influence the Khmer exerted on “Thai”-land. Despite (or because of) that, the Thai refer to themselves as the conquerors of Angkor.

The only comparative study of Cambodian and Thai history comes from Brigadier General Manich Jumsai, a Thai historian. His work is especially useful due to its nationalistic rhetoric. Thus, his account is interpreted here more as a primary source revealing the Thai-view on history than as a secondary source for the events it describes. Introducing the Khmer at the beginning of his book he states that

Old Cambodians, or Khmers, acted as forerunners of Western colonizing powers, and when they lost the territory once they conquered, their ruler began to fear whether the people whom they once continually harassed, would not now harass them in turn, since they have become more powerful,

³³ Springer 2005, pp. 31-32. Edwards 1996, pp. 57-62, about the political use of “Othering”, esp. p. 62.

³⁴ Manich 1970, p. 2.

³⁵ Groslier 1981, pp. 122-123.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 113-114.

and also to moan the loss of her past glory. [...] [T]he Khmers [...] always seized chances to annex a defenceless country...³⁷

Thus legitimizing Thai attacks against the exploitative imperialists in the East, Manich describes how the Thai “fought their way to independence” and how the Khmer king felt “that the Thai were getting too clever”. He mentions a first devastation of Angkor by the Thai in 1296 under King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai who “[had] not only made the Thai people free but had made it quite strong and impossible for the Khmers to ever regain the mastery of Sukhothai”. But “if King Rama Khamhaeng has once and for all crippled the imperialistic powers of the once dominating sovereignty [...], the Thai kingdom of Ayudhya put an end to the dreams and aspirations of Cambodia to soar up again...”³⁸

We will soon come back to Manich’s revealing accounts. To put them into a context one has to ask why Angkor has to be described in such negative terms by Thai nationalists. In presenting the Khmer as imperialists, the Thai invasion of Angkor appears as a justified *reaction*. Thus, the Thai legitimize their successive wars against the Khmer – a legitimacy that was questioned by the French and used against the Thai during conflicts over Siamese possessions in the Angkorean region. The Thai prefer to explain away their own expansionism. This tactic has been described by Thongchai in relation to the French-Siamese crisis of 1893.³⁹ In projecting the “geo-body” of Thailand back in time it appears as if the Khmer occupied a country that belonged to others (as the French accordingly did in 1893). Hence, the myth of the harmony-loving Thai fighting in self-defence is saved and an irritating chapter of what could be described as Thai imperialism is rewritten. Keeping in mind that the Thai entered the stage at a time when the Angkorean influence was diminishing, the heroic appeal of this account fades away.

Manich goes on to justify Thai actions, otherwise he could not defend the Siamese cause when it comes to the question of the “Alsace-Lorraine” of Cambodia (see below). He explains how the “Cambodians came to be recorded in Thai history as treacherous, because whenever the Thais were engaged at war [...] or there was a change in the reign, then Cambodia would attack”. He gets straight to the point:

This led the Thai to rule Cambodia as a tributary state, and of course not always with success since Cambodia revolted from time to time, and at last brought in the Vietnamese and then the French, which further complicated the issue, because it led to the dismemberment of Cambodia little by little and at last complete loss of independence under French rule.⁴⁰

Here one meets again the all pervading myth of Cambodia’s steady decline, although Manich acknowledges that Cambodia was at times capable of hitting back. He recounts, for example, how King Chan of Cambodia subdued the Thai in the mid-16th-century near a town that was called Siem Reap (defeat of the Siamese) thereafter.

Manich also emphasizes that Thai domination was to be preferred to French colonial rule because it was less demanding. Seen from this angle, the Thai suddenly appear as the guardians of Cambodia. In resorting to the myth of decline to legitimize their role as “saviours”, the Thai did it just like the French. Accordingly, it was the Khmers’ own fault that they fell victim to imperialism – as opposed to Thailand –, because the Cambodian king lacked the education and the enlightenment of Rama IV. He

³⁷ Manich 1970, p. 13, 17.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 19-21.

³⁹ Thongchai 1997, pp. 140-163 (chapter eight).

⁴⁰ Manich 1970, p. 26.

was not clever enough to play the game of balancing powers.⁴¹ Thus, the Khmer should have been thankful to Bangkok instead of resorting to Vietnamese and French help against Thai demands.

Those demands led to the transfer of control over Battambang and Mahanokor (the region around Angkor) to Siam in 1795. In exchange for the restoration of Prince Eng as the King of Cambodia by Thai hands, Rama I rewarded himself in putting a loyal official in charge of the region. Manich describes this as the wise action of a righteous king whose *proposal* was “willingly consented” to by King Eng.⁴²

The French officials in Indochina later referred to these “lost territories” as the “Alsace-Lorraine” of Cambodia. Emphasizing that the Thai had no written document at hand to prove their claim to Battambang and Angkor, the French on the spot got furious when the Quai d’Orsay in Paris acknowledged the Siamese possessions by treaty in exchange for the acceptance of the French protectorate over Cambodia.⁴³ Still in 1996, Pierre Lamant lamented over this “*erreur historique et faute politique*” because Thailand never ceased to consider those provinces as part of their assets due to this official acknowledgement of their claim.⁴⁴ However, with the rise of the French *parti colonial* in the 1890s the French reversed the horse trade until they eventually “got back” Angkor for Cambodia in 1907.

As already mentioned, this period has been analysed by Thongchai in his influential study about the construction of what he called the “geo-body” of Siam, i.e. a border-bound and “mapped” territory which provides a source of pride, loyalty and a collective concept of the self. The “geo-body” replaced indigenous concepts of political space that were much more ambiguous. To appear as victims of western imperialist powers the Thai had to explain away these ambiguities and to extend the existence of the geo-body back in time. Thus, the “loss” of territories could be mourned.⁴⁵ In the Cambodian case the pre-colonial ambiguity is obvious. The king of Cambodia had to send tributes to both countries, Vietnam and Thailand. However, Manich is not reluctant to state that “the French wrested” the Thai king of his *sovereign* rights over Cambodia. To emphasize this claim he repeats that Thailand received annual tributes whereas Vietnam was paid only a triennial tribute.⁴⁶ Hence, to Manich, the Thai held more rights over the territory. But the French did not hesitate to make use of this ambiguity and as inheritors of the Vietnamese claims they pushed for an own stake in Cambodian affairs. Manich fails to see the conflict as a dispute between two imperial powers but rather prefers to overlook the flimsiness of Thai argumentation. In fact, “it is impossible to figure out exactly what Siam had been before the ‘loss’ or even whether there was really a loss of territory”.⁴⁷

Yet, many Thais felt that they had been deprived of an asset. Under the government of Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram this feeling gave way to a renewed annexation of the provinces of Battambang and Sisophon. Manich puts it like that:

Now that it looked as though France was going to lose all her colonies to the Axis Powers, it would be unfair that an old territory, once belonging to Thailand for centuries should pass to third hands [...] instead of being returned to her.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 96.

⁴² Ibid, p. 62.

⁴³ Manich 1970, 175-180; Tuck 1995, pp. 28-30.

⁴⁴ Lamant 1998, p. 226.

⁴⁵ Thongchai 1997, p. 147.

⁴⁶ Manich 1970, p. 82, 89, 106.

⁴⁷ Thongchai 1997, pp. 151, 152.

⁴⁸ Manich 1970, p. 203.

Hence, in 1941 a treaty was signed between France and Thailand through Japanese mediation in favour of the Thai. Let us end the account of this dispute with Manich's sarcastic remark on the retrocession of these territories after the World War 2: "France did not recognize the treaty signed at Tokyo because it was done under duress (as though the territory given to France [...] was done out of Thailand's own free will...)"⁴⁹

Like the French construction, the Thai image of the past is inconsistent. Although they are depicting Angkor as treacherous they are claiming to be her legitimate heirs. Thus, they are highlighting a clear-cut break between Angkor and the post-Angkorean period in Cambodia. Some refer to a legend, telling that the Khmer king who moved the capital from Angkor to Phnom Penh descended from the gardener of the last Angkorean ruler. This gardener had killed the king by accident, seized the throne himself and "therefore did not belong to the Angkor or Khmer dynasty of the old Khmer Empire".⁵⁰ Moreover, the metaphor of a new kingdom founded by a gardener fits nicely into the Thai-image of the Khmer as uncivilized, nature-bound barbarians.

Somehow the Thai *were* the heirs to Angkor. Khmer kings bestowed royal titles to Tai leaders even before the foundation of Sukhothai. Khun Pha Muang, one of the "founders" of Sukhothai, owed his title, his royal regalia and even his wife to King Jayavarman VIII. The Thai created a cult around the monarchy that was derived directly from Angkor. Their principles of statecraft with its vocabulary, the seclusion of a mysterious monarch and its brahmanical court ceremonial led David Wyatt to proclaim: Ayudhya "is the successor of Angkor".⁵¹ In its heyday, Ayudhya reinvented its "traditional links to Khmer civilization. The dynasty claimed distant roots in Angkorean Cambodia. More Brahmins were imported [...]. New temples were built on plans inspired by Angkor Wat."⁵² Later, King Mongkut tried to strengthen the monarchy for upcoming changes of modernization by reviving Ayudhyan – and thus Angkorean – rituals. Anticipating French aspirations he ordered the disassembly of the Angkorean temple of Ta Phrom to rebuild it in Siam. Mouhot was an eyewitness to the dismantling of towers during his stop at Angkor:

The mandarins of the provinces of Ongkor and Battambang are at present occupied of taking two of them to pieces, in order to transport them to Bangkok, the king having issued orders to that effect.⁵³

Rama IV was obviously trying to symbolically reinforce his claim to Angkor in the face of colonial threat. However, he was not successful. The work was stopped by furious Khmer attacking the men who tried to take the stones away – this, by the way, does not mean that the Khmer were conscious about the temple as their "national" heritage; but, as a religious site, there was obviously a feeling about the temple belonging to them.

Mongkut's plan could not be carried out. Hence, he ordered the construction of a miniature replica of Angkor Wat. Even if that model was small, the king lifted its symbolic value sky-high by placing it in the compound of the centre of the kingdom's power and potency, the Wat Phra Kaew which houses the royal palladium, the Emerald Buddha. At that time, the Thai-view of Cambodia was already that of a "savage country"⁵⁴. Thus, the Siamese did not acknowledge any Cambodian claim to Angkor.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 207.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 26.

⁵¹ Keyes 1991, p. 264, Wyatt cited in Charnvit 2003.

⁵² Baker, Pasuk 2005, pp. 14-15.

⁵³ Mouhot 1992, p. 14/Vol. II.

⁵⁴ Manich 1970, p. 103.

This idea became more sophisticated during the time of military rule under Phibun. The ideological foundations of his fascist-leaning policies were laid by the Thai thinker Luang Wichit Wathakan, whose officially sanctioned ideas about Thai nationalism have been pervasive until today. One of the theories he put forward was, that the Khmer of today have no connection to the ethnic group that built Angkor, which he termed *khom*. Although *khom* is simply derived from the ancient Thai word *Khmer krom* for “lowland Khmer”, Wichit used the old term to invent a new ethnicity to emphasize a clear-cut break between Angkor and Cambodia. At the same time, he tried to incorporate the Khmer into the Thai race to raise popular support for upcoming military undertakings in Cambodia. In Wichits play *Ratchamanu* about a military commander who led an army against Lovek, the main character proclaims that the Khmer used to occupy the old *khom* territory and “came to be called Khmers. In fact, we’re all really Thai brothers”. He goes on to explain that “all of us on the Golden Peninsula are the same... [but remember] the Siamese Thais are the elder brothers [...]”.⁵⁵

Although the ethnic continuity between the builders of Angkor and today’s Khmer is beyond doubt, Wichit was successful in enforcing Thai claims to Cambodia.

During the 1950s and early 1960s those claims led to a crisis between the countries whose dimension can be compared to the anti-Thai riots of 2003. The point at issue was whether the Khmer temple of Preah Vihear (Thai: Phra Viharn) belonged to Thailand or Cambodia. At a time when both countries were wrapped up in the Cold War with differing loyalties, the temple situated on a hill top near the border became a political issue. To strengthen its boundaries, Thailand had established a police post in the Dangrek mountains north of the ruins. The Thai insisted that the temple lay to the west of a watershed that – according to the treaty of 1907 – demarcated the frontier between Thailand and Cambodia. The latter brought the case before the International Court of Justice which, in 1962, ruled in favour of Cambodia pointing at a map that had been attached to the treaty indicating that the temple is situated on Cambodian soil. Violent protests emerged in Bangkok and throughout the country, borders were closed and a trade delegation from Poland, the home of the President of the court (who was labelled a “Polish communist” by the Foreign Minister of Thailand), was sent back.⁵⁶ Still in June 2007 Preah Vihear made headlines when the Unesco suspended its decision to list the temple as a World Heritage Site due to Thailand’s concern over unsettled border issues. When at the beginning of 2008 the Thai military domestically lost face after the electoral victory of the PPP, the follow-up party of the disbanded TRT whose leader Thaksin had been ousted as prime minister by a coup in 2006, the generals put Preah Vihear back on their agenda to stir up anti-Cambodian and nationalistic sentiments in favour of the military. Similar to rumours that the unrest in Thailand’s South had been provoked by Thai soldiers to boost their political and economic standing, the recent attempts to misuse Preah Vihear for ideological purposes raised similar questions “whether there is an ulterior motive behind this uncalled-for protest”.⁵⁷ Whereas the defence ministry’s spokesman warned that Cambodia’s unilateral attempt to get the mountaintop temple registered with the Unesco “could affect diplomatic relations between the two nations” and that Thailand “should... prepare for unrest which could arise from the dispute, which could provoke military hostilities along the border”, his superiors responded quickly in dismissing the statement as a misunderstanding.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Barmé 1993, p. 125. The Golden Peninsular is also known as *Suvarnabhumi*. This name was chosen for the new Bangkok International Airport and is far from being apolitical because the location of this ancient kingdom is debated. Thus, the name of the airport is an expression of a Thai-claim to *Suvarnabhumi*.

⁵⁶ Singh 1962 pp. 23-25; Manich 1970, p. 214. Manich denies any military or police occupation of the temple by the Thai. He recounts that a “group of police constables, without instruction from anybody, and following in the wake of a flow of tourists, went to see the temple [...] as simple private individuals. [...] The Cambodian Government, or rather Prince Sihanouk, took this to be Thai occupation...”.

⁵⁷ *The Nation*, N.N. 2008.

⁵⁸ Wassana 2008a, b.

In such cases, Thainess is manipulated for political purposes and “culturally extended beyond Thailand to include the threshold of the Angkorean Empire”, as Thongchai analysed for the debate about the “purloined lintel”, a piece of Khmer art that was demanded back in 1988 by the Thai from the Art Institute in Chicago.⁵⁹ The Thai claimed that the lintel had been “stolen” by Americans and was to be reinstalled at Phnom Rung, a Khmer ruin in the Thai province of Buriram. As Keyes commented about the incident, the

lintel became the focus of a major campaign [...] because the shrine from which it was taken had been raised from one of local [...] importance to one representing an Angkorean heritage which Thai have incorporated into their national tradition... [And] it occurred at a time when some in Cambodia were once again bidding to have [...] recognition for an exclusive claim of the Khmer to this heritage.⁶⁰

Regarding the question of Prah Viharn, the Thai proved tough. On 11 February 1972 the cultural theme park “Ancient City” (Mueang Boran) was opened in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II in Samut Prakan, 33 km south of Bangkok. This open-air museum presents Thailand *en miniature* on 130 hectares. Besides the two undisputed Khmer monuments Phnom Rung and Phimai, a model of Phra Viharn occupies a large area in the east...

Today, Thailand is presenting its Angkorean heritage in various forms to the world. Phuket, for example, offers the Las-Vegas-style show “Phuket FantaSea” presenting the myths of Thailand in a theatre called “Palace of the Elephants” that is built mainly in Khmer style (though labelled as “Sukhothai-era” stone building). The model of Angkor Wat can still be found at Wat Phra Kaew, and Ancient City “opens a door to the cultural heritage of Siam” while displaying a temple that does legally not belong to Thailand.

At the same time, ethno-chauvinism towards Cambodia persists. “Khmer” is used to label someone with bad habits, “because we think Khmer are not very civilized”, as one Thai puts it. The Thai are exhibiting a feeling of supremacy against the background of Cambodian insecurity. The term *khom* is still being used by a “considerable number of educated Thai and members of the ruling classes” for the builders of Angkor.⁶¹

In spring 2006, the Foreign Ministry of Thailand had to apologize twice to neighbouring countries about two movies that lacked cultural tactfulness. “Mak Tae” (Lucky Loser) was about a Laotian football team that made it to the World Cup. Vientiane found that it “mocks Laos and attributes the team’s success to its Thai coach”. The other film, “Ghost Game”, told the story of 10 candidates of a TV-Show who had to stay in a haunted prison where they must confront the atrocities that had happened there – the prison resembled Phnom Penh’s Tuol Sleng, the interrogation camp where the Khmer Rouge had tortured and executed nearly 13 000 people. The film-makers had been audacious enough to ask for a permission to shoot the film in Cambodia. Phnom Penh refused due to “cultural insensitivity”. Hence, the film was done in Thailand – without any alteration.⁶²

A third way - the French vision

The outcomes described above may seem inevitable. Yet, at times another version of Southeast Asian geopolitics seemed highly likely.

⁵⁹ Thongchai 1997, p. 169.

⁶⁰ Keyes 1991, p. 282.

⁶¹ Charnvit 2003.

⁶² Supalak 2006; *The Nation*, N.N. 2006. See also reports at www.nationmultimedia.com.

It is common knowledge that Siam owed her independence partly to her status as a buffer state between the French and the British spheres in Southeast Asia. Yet, while the British aimed at a consolidation of power and the restriction of the scope of frontier responsibilities, to the French colonialists it was less appealing to keep Siam as a buffer.⁶³ The long coast-line of their possessions in Indochina made them vulnerable to a potential attack by British naval forces anyway. To the French at the spot, an incorporation of Siam into their domain was tempting because it could protect the extending frontiers in the Mekong valley from possible British invasions. While the policies of the Quai d'Orsay in France were led by the necessities of European *realpolitik*, the French Navy, local diplomats, and later the colonial party followed an expansionist line that could be directed against British interests if needed. However, French attempts to provoke frictions at the Siamese court, to buy out British influence in Siam and, from the 1890s onwards, to annex the country, proved fruitless. The French and British foreign ministers resisted the pressure of their respective colonial interest groups. British mediation and Siamese resistance to French lobbying limited the outcome of French colonial policy.⁶⁴

Yet, with different actors on stage there could have been a Siam incorporated into Indochina, indeed. Whereas the cultural policies the French would have applied in this case can only be guessed, the strategies that were actually followed by the pro-expansionists at the spot give us some hints. One staunch advocate of the aggressive approach towards Siam was Auguste Pavie. Working for the colonial telegraph service in Cambodia he was asked to assist the Siamese government with a telegraph project from 1878 to 1879. Touring Siam, Pavie was at the same time trying to find archaeological evidence to prove that Siam once had been Khmer territory and thus belonged culturally and politically to Cambodia.

Another strategy to undermine the notion of Siam being a culturally and ethnically defined nation-state was the French *protégés*-policy. Article 9 of the “*traité d'amitié, de commerce et de navigation*”⁶⁵, concluded on 15 August 1856, granted extraterritorial rights to French citizens living in Siam. The rights of these *protégés* included the exemption from Siamese jurisdiction and freedom of trade. Later, in 1893, Article IV of the Convention annexed to the October-treaty obligated the Siamese to “place at the disposal of the French Minister at Bangkok [...] all French, Annamese and Lao subjects from the left bank [of the Mekong], and Cambodians detained for any reason whatsoever”.⁶⁶ This provision was used by the French to register former inhabitants of the left bank now living in Siam as French subjects to provide them with *protégé* status. Soon, the question arose about how Thainess was measured. As the French saw it, “the Siamese were not a proper race because they had become too intermixed [...]. Hence, the true Siamese were a minority within their country...”⁶⁶ Pavie, now minister at Bangkok, started to register anyone who claimed to be of Lao, Vietnamese or Khmer descent, even if his ancestors came to settle in Siam centuries ago, either by their own free will or as prisoners of war. The Siamese tried to limit the provision to people who were born to the east of the Mekong and immigrated to Siam after 1893 – all others were to be regarded as Siamese. However, as there were more and more commoners in Siam who wanted to escape *corvée* labour through French protection, the latter were about to control Siam without ever annexing it. “Even the King of Thailand could be proved to be of Cambodian descent”, as one English diplomat put it. In 1895 the French tried to extend their protection over Japanese and Chinese citizens because they belonged to their “friendly nations”.⁶⁷

⁶³ Tuck 1995, p. 10, about the British strategy.

⁶⁴ For a detailed analysis of the “very real” French threat see Tuck 1995, pp. 239-253.

⁶⁵ For a full translation of the treaty and convention see *ibid.*, pp. 291-295.

⁶⁶ Baker, Pasuk 2005, p. 63.

⁶⁷ For a thorough account of the French *protégé*-policy see Manich, pp. 185-192.

In sum, the French strategy was aimed at cutting back cultural-based territorial claims of Siam and presenting it as a mere appendix to their Indochinese possessions. If the Quai d'Orsay had been less careful and the colonial party at critical points more present, a French absorption of Siam into Indochina would have been a possible option. Yet, even though this paper tries to challenge existing national constructs, it would be exaggerated to believe that a joint Thai-Khmer nation could have evolved – although the French would have tried to merge large parts of the Siamese and Cambodian dominion into one entity. At the same time, the colonialists would have suppressed Thai nationalism to secure their hegemony like they had done in Vietnam before.⁶⁸ As a reminder: In Cambodia, the French had to invent a national history to justify their exclusive occupation of the territory as an entity and to legitimize their role as saviours of a declining nation. In contrast, an already existing and strong historical consciousness in Siam and Vietnam put obstacles to French aims. In depicting the Thai as a mixture of Asian tribes, they tried to deprive them of their self-perception as a distinct power in the region.

However, due to the long historical tradition in Siam this strategy would not have been successful. A Thai realm in the Maenam valley could not be explained away. Thus, after colonial rule, there *would* still have been a Siam – but a different, smaller and insecure Siam. Cambodia would have gained all the “lost territories” it is longing for today. Out of sympathy for the “altruistic, innocent and morally superior” Khmer – the “fallen angels” of the Orient who reminded the French of their own painful history – the colonialists would have remapped the region in favour of the Cambodians.

The nationalists in the respective countries would have been challenged by the new state of affairs. The Cambodian elite could no longer have mourned alleged losses. It could no longer have exploited their alleged victimhood and decline. The Thai, on their part, would have found it difficult to handle this paralysing situation. There would have been a sensible feeling of decline and loss, but after the French crack-down on Thai identity it would have been of more importance to search for an own and exclusive Thai heritage. As already mentioned, the French would have depicted the Thai as an appendix to Indochina. To counter this image the Thai would have highlighted their own, distinct history and culture as different from their Eastern neighbours. The self-image as a superior power with Angkorean roots would hardly have emerged.

This version is by no means better than what actually happened, but was developed to emphasize two facts. First, nations and their ideologies often appear self-evident and as logical consequences of a linear history. In fact, they are constructed back in time to give a form to multi-linear historical developments that are guided by luck or misfortune. Second, if Siam would have been colonized by the French, the nationalist approaches could have been totally different. Cambodians would have won territory but would have lost their convenient role of the victim. Angkor would not have been an unachievable dreamland but a real life challenge. The Thai would have suffered from a sense of decline and “loss” while being in search of their identity – Angkor would not have played a decisive role in that process.

That proves how easily the ruins of Angkor can be ideologically reconstructed in any way to fit the political agendas of the present.

⁶⁸ The French tried to prevent a Vietnamese nation in banning the use of the word “Vietnamese” in favour of “Annamese” and by dividing it into the three territories Annam, Cochinchina and Tonkin.

Conclusion

Although with a fraudulent intent, the French were making an interesting point with their transnational policy towards Siam and Cambodia. In fact, both countries share more than they differ. As Charnvit Kasetsiri put it, “among the neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia, none seems more similar to Thailand than Cambodia”.⁶⁹ Both do have a share in Angkorean heritage due to cultural legacies like mythology, royal cults, dance or architecture. Just as Angkorean culture was based on Indian tradition, aspects of Thai culture were influenced by Angkorean customs. But at the same time, both countries are much closer to each other than they are to Angkor. Since the beginning of their relationship the two began to converge in a give-and-take process. Linguistically, Khmer had a deep impact on Thai, whereas in the course of time the Angkorean syntax of the Khmer language was displaced by its Thai counterpart.⁷⁰ Angkorean dance arrived at the Thai court where it was altered to be resumed later by the Cambodians. Whereas royal cults of the Khmer based on Hinduism were adopted by the Thais, the Theravada Buddhism gathered momentum in Cambodia through an (often forced) exchange with Ayudhya. David Chandler called the cause of these changes the “emulation factor”:

By the 1400s, Ayudhya and [...] Cambodian [trading] cities looked to each other rather than to a brahmanical past [...] “Phnom Penh” (or “Lovek” or “Udong”) and “Ayudhya” considered themselves not separate polities, but participants in a hybrid culture.⁷¹

Because they were aware of these cultural links, the Siamese never claimed to be on a “civilizing mission” in times of political dominance over Cambodia – contrary to Vietnam and France. However, with the emergence of new concepts of space, the Thai-Cambodian relations fell victim to myths of nationalism. These myths and their artificial nature have been described in this paper.

Just recently a collaboration between Cambodian and Thai researchers proved how fertile it is to overcome national boundaries in jointly tracing the ancient route linking Cambodia’s Angkor and Thailand’s Phimai. As Sanitsuda Ekachai commented on the project:

When relations between Thai and Cambodia are often strained by ultranationalism and conflicts over ownership of archaeological sites, it is refreshing to see how the researchers' sheer dedication to knowledge can free them from nationalism [...] which is also in line with the Buddha's teachings on letting go of self to attain peace and truth. If archaeological ruins can remind us of the law of impermanence to reduce our greed and ego, they will best serve our present.⁷²

Beyond academic cooperation, there seems to be an idea in the minds of many Thais and Cambodians of the bond that connects them. The tuk tuk driver at Angkor who won’t allow his wife to watch Thai-soaps admits that “many Cambodian women watched Thai-TV as we have very similar culture”. In Thailand, there are voices challenging the attitude of superiority, because “a Thai society that fails to teach its people cultural sensitivity should hang its head in shame”, as one journalist put it.⁷³ And even if one of the Cambodian workshop-guides does not like to buy Thai food because “they use chemical formula for their products”, as a Buddhist he tries to be calm and “feel normal” towards the Thais, because they are “like every people in the world. We can be friend. Some people are very kinky, like everywhere.”

⁶⁹ Charnvit 2003.

⁷⁰ Chandler 2000, p. 97.

⁷¹ Chandler 2000, p. 80.

⁷² Sanitsuda 2007.

⁷³ *The Nation*, NN. 2006.

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