

The Thai's Unique View Of The Khmer People And History

by

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(Bora Touch is a Khmer living in Sydney, Australia, continues the discussion on the Khmer home in Southeast Asia prompted by a reported statement of Don Pramudwinai of the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

I AGREE with the historical description by Kenneth T So in "The Khmer home in Southeast Asia: A Wider View", (Post August 6-19, 1999). I do not think that Mr So is obsessed about the Khmer past, as C Rabour has alleged. Rather, Mr So was provoked by Don Pramudwinai who has asserted that Battambang and Siem Reap were historically part of Thailand or Siam.

Battambang, Siem Reap and Srei Sophorn, (later Serei Sophom, or Sisophon as the Thai pronunciation of it) never belonged to Siam (known as Thailand since 1939). Those regions have always belonged to Cambodia, but have been attacked and at certain times in history, annexed by Thailand. Most recently, these regions were invaded and taken by Siam/Thailand in 1795 and 1941. They remained under Thai control until 1946.

The first Siamese invasion and looting of Angkor was in about 1352 and again in the 1430s. Ayuthaya, the Siamese capital, itself was built on top of the demise of Sri Dvaravati, former kingdom of the Mons.

The provinces taken from the Khmers in 1795 were Battambang, Siem Reap/Angkor, Bongkol-borei, Srei Sophorn, Siem Pang. In 1814 more provinces were annexed by Siam, namely Mlou Prei, Tole Peou, and Stung Treng.

Only in 1907 were most of these provinces returned to Cambodia. However, other Khmer borei, now called provinces or khet, such as Norkor Reachborie (Korat), Boreirom (Buriram), Sorint (Surin), Korkhan, Sisaket, Bascemborie (Prachinburi), Chantaborie (Chantaburi), Champasak and Trat annexed

before 1790, have remained under Thai occupation till today.

Under the French-Thai treaty executed in 1907, the Thais were required to return to Cambodia only those provinces taken by the Thais after 1790. For this, Thais should thank the Anglo-French conflict, because Thailand was not part of French Indochina but was an ally of the English.

History from the Thai point of view, especially relating to the Angkorian legacy, was cultivated by King Mongkut and later his son, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the "father of Thai modern history" and the architect of the Thai modern state.

It has been reinforced by people like Luang Vichitr Vadhakarn, the director of Department of Fine Arts in 1932 and his successor Dhanit Yupho in the 1960s when the Thais were engaged in nationalist and prejudicial policies toward their neighbors, especially the Khmers.

History as told by the leaders of Thailand has been an attempt to reinforce Thai nationalism and to clarify the confused national identity of the Thai people. Confused because the Yunan Thais, the Vietnamese and the Chinese have, to use David Chandler's phrase, an identity crisis. The Chinese are not worried but the other two are. The Thais began their identity crisis during the 1908-1910 riots when Chinese residents refused to pay Thai taxes. The Vietnamese crisis started when they split from Qin or China. One way to try to distinguish themselves from Chinese, Vietnamese women dyed their teeth black, a very painful process.

After the Siamese victory, with Khmer military assistance, in the long and destructive wars with Burma (1548-1592, 1760-1767); and the founding of the current Chakkri dynasty in 1782 (the current King is the ninth King of the dynasty) the Siamese began to attack the traditional boundaries of Cambodia.

In the 1850s, King Mongkut hired a Welsh governess, Anna Leonowens, to educate his children. As a result of this different education, lifestyle and

Western way of thinking, successive Thai kings began to view Khmer traditions and lifestyle as outdated. The Chakkri kings began to view the Khmers to be Khmamen padong or "the jungle Khmers", hence the uncivilized Khmers.

The term "contemptible Khmamen" lives on today. This prejudice was so strong that many of the successive Thai generations did not want to have any thing to do with the Khmer people, which has led to the propagation in Thailand of a uniquely Thai version of history relating to the Khmers. History as taught to Thai children has encouraged a terrible prejudicial stereotyping of Khmers which continues, in my experience, to this day.

I personally experienced discrimination by Thais. I was invited to the Thailand home of a Thai of Khmer origin. At first the whole family was nice and friendly, but once I was introduced as Khmer, the youngsters began to treat me with contempt. The parents were quite embarrassed and had to apologize, whispering to me that it was sad that the children did not know that they were of Khmer origin. When I asked if they told their children they were of Khmer origin, they told me that "it is not wise to do so in the circumstances".

The dinner went on. The children chose not to join us at the dinner table. I wondered why they would treat me this way. I realized that I was the "contemptible Khmer" they had heard about in classes on Thai history. Racial discrimination comes from two things: fear and/or ignorance. In the case of Thais, it stems from an ignorance about Khmer civilization.

Another reason for the manipulation of history by the Thais came from the amazing evidence of Khmer civilization which, according to historians, was well advanced by the time Christianity came into existence.

This civilization encompassed the lands taken by Thailand from Cambodia - the architecture, court etiquette, culture and traditional religion and language. (The Pali language, used in Khmer scripts, was used by the Siamese until the 19th century.)

The Thais have adopted or appropriated much of the great Khmer legacy as their own and due to their view of Khmers as uncivilized, refuse to link their "history" with Cambodian history.

A more recent example of appropriation of Khmer history by Thailand is found in Luang Vichitr Vadhakarn's book, Thailand's case, and Prince Damrong's Nirat Nakhorn Wat (Trip to Angkor Wat), treated as official historical texts by Thailand.

According to Vadhakarn's theory, the place now called Cambodia once belonged to an ethnic group called "Khom". They were eliminated by the Thais. The Khmers who lived in present-day Cambodia were part of the Thai race. This is, according to Vadhakarn, proven by the identical-ly similar civilization, culture, tradition and arts of the two countries.

Vadhakarn was not alone in this theory. A Thai nationalist newspaper, Chaothai, on 31 October 1959, stated the same thing. The newspaper quoted an opposition party leader, Seni Pramroj, a Thai lawyer in the Khmer-Thai dispute in the Preah Vihear case (1962), saying that there was an ethnic group called "Khom" living in the areas now called Thailand and Cambodia. The article continued to say that Thais had killed most of them and the rest were chased away, retreating to India where they once belonged. As a result of this Thai victory, the Thais were divided into groups: one group was concentrated in the lower part, now called Cambodia; and the other one lived in upper part now called Thailand. The proof of this was that the arts and the traditions were strikingly similar.

Vadhakarn also stated "it is an established fact that the Khmers and Cambodians are not the same people... The coming into existence of this new name 'Cambodja' marked the end of the old Khmer Race and the birth of a new people who have 90% of Thai blood". (Thailand's Case, p129).

Contrary to Vadharkarn's assertion, the term "Khom" was an ancient word

used by Thais and Laos for the Khmer people. According to the historian Charles Keyes, in his article "The Case of the Purloined Lintel: The Politics of a Khmer Shrine as a Thai National Treasure", this term was used in "the popular press - with semi-official backing - to disassociate the modern Khmer from the heritage of Angkor" (p278). The term "Khom" was Thai and Laotian pronunciation and transliteration of "Khmer".

Many peoples have used different terms or pronunciations to describe the Khmer: in about AD 70, Pliny, the Roman author and his exploring son called the Khmer Camarini (*Historica Naturalis*), they were called Kumar by the Arabs; Kui kmi by the Chams, Coa Mein, or Mein, by the Vietnamese.

Khom have not been terminated as some Thais have claimed. The current Cambodians are the Khom.

In my view, the statement made by Don Pramudwinai of the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs in July in the Nation newspaper indicates that Mr Don has been taught history from a Thai perspective.

His statement is indicative of the continuation of the Thai policy of expansionism of his previous leaders, especially the late Phibul Sangkram, the Thai Prime Minister who in World War II, with Japanese assistance, again occupied the Battambang, Serei Sophoan (Sisophon) and Siem Reap provinces between 1941-1946.

Hopefully, the traditional Thai take on history will not prevail in the current Thai-Cambodian border discussions. The Thais may think that saying that these provinces traditionally belonged to Thailand would pressure the Khmers, inducing them to agree to the border proposed by the Thais rather than the original map drawn by the French in 1904.

This Thai attitude arises not from facts, rather from arrogance. It is a rule of thumb now that when you are rich and you have power you can manage to be arrogant. You don't need to care what you utter.

The Khmers, the Thais and the Vietnamese all have suffered more than enough. Live and let live. The three are stronger when together and all should, according to the current progressive Chinese nationalism, be aware that the One-China Policy may not be restricted to Taiwan only.