

# A Siamese Prince Journeys to Angkor: Encounters with a Shared Heritage

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**ABSTRACT**—This article presents an analysis of *Nirat Nakhon Wat (Journey to Angkor)*—Prince Damrong’s account of his visit to Cambodia in 1924. On the one hand, considering the scholarship on the role of travel during the era of high imperialism, I argue that the prince’s journey to Angkor was part of the Siamese ruling elite’s strategy for projecting an image of civility in a new imperial world order comprised of colonial masters and their “not yet civilized” colonies. On the other hand, by reading *Journey to Angkor* through a local lens, we find that it is shaped by a precolonial perception of culture and power among *mandala* polities that recognized centuries of mutual cultural influence between the Cambodian and Siamese courts. While acknowledging that *Journey to Angkor* can be critiqued as an irredentist lament for Siam’s “lost territories”, this article argues that Damrong’s text speaks to the abiding problem of endeavoring to contain shared forms of cultural heritage within the fixed boundaries of the nation-state.

## Introduction

Numerous Thai studies scholars have shown how the Siamese aristocracy participated in travel during the era of high imperialism as a strategic means of demonstrating their cosmopolitanism and civility. As argued by Peleggi (2002), through their well-documented diplomatic visits to Europe and the European colonies, Siam’s ruling elite projected an image of sophisticated modernity, thus establishing their status as equals to European colonial powers. Moreover, as illustrated by Thongchai (2000a, 2000b), traveling to study and classify the “others within” Siam was one of the tools used by the ruling Chakri dynasty to cement their authority over a diverse, multi-ethnic populace of former tributary and vassal states.

Reflecting on the role of travel during the imperial era, this article presents an analysis of *Nirat Nakhon Wat (Journey to Angkor)*—Prince Damrong’s account of his visit to Cambodia in 1924. Drawing on Thongchai (2000a; 2000b) and Peleggi (2002), I will illustrate that the prince’s journey to Angkor was a means of substantiating the Siamese court’s civility in a new imperial world order comprised of colonial masters and their “not yet civilized” colonies.

Going beyond this framework, however, I will also argue that by reading *Journey to Angkor* through a local lens, we find that Prince Damrong’s experience of Angkor

differed in profound ways from that of the European explorers and tourists who flocked to the ruins. As we shall see, *Journey to Angkor* is inflected throughout with a precolonial logic based on *mandala* statecraft (Wolters, 1999) which disrupted the fixed boundaries of nationhood and unsettled the categories of race imposed by the French. Indeed, while Prince Damrong initially undertook the voyage to Angkor to share in the French colonial experience of exploration and discovery, I shall show that many of the prince's observations are better described as rediscoveries of Siam's and Cambodia's overlapping social and symbolic field. Thus, despite its structural similarities to the genre of colonial travelogues, Prince Damrong's text differed markedly from its European prototypes, in that rather than seeking to discover and document the attributes of clearly demarcated races and cultures, *Nirat Nakhon Wat* revealed forms of cultural hybridity produced over the centuries of cultural transmission back and forth between the neighboring Cambodian and Siamese courts.

Upon closer examination of the text, however, it becomes clear that *Journey to Angkor* did not merely express a neutral and objective view of this hybridity. On the contrary, Damrong's particular reading of this shared past was one which reasserted both Siam's historical status as Cambodia's overlord and its extant claims of entitlement to Angkor. Drawing on examples from the text, this article aims to show that *Nirat Nakhon Wat* articulated precolonial conceptions of how the rights to symbolic capital such as the Khmer ruins of Angkor were determined. Rights to symbolic capital were not governed by the ostensibly empirical category of race, but rather by processes of conquest and incorporation, which Davis has called "the rhetoric of appropriation" (1999: 62).

Writing about the "lives of Indian images" as they moved through different socio-historical "regimes of value" (Appadurai, 1986), Davis (1999) showed how the "capture and display" of sacred images and architectural motifs in medieval India were a means of visually substantiating the regional supremacy of a victorious king. Within this "rhetoric of appropriated images" (Davis, 1999: 62), sacred objects became more than mere symbols of a ruler's power. As Davis explains:

To call them "symbols" representing the king's dominion does not do justice. Rather, they were viewed as physical instantiations of a king's authority, inseparable from his capacity to rule rightfully. Accordingly, appropriating them on the field of battle was equivalent to "plucking out" the opponent's sovereignty and incorporating it into one's own. This is why medieval inscriptions were so careful to list the exact objects taken from defeated kings. They were making specific substantive claims to authority, in a discourse of objects understood by all involved (63).

Similar observations have been made about the political function of sacred objects in precolonial Southeast Asia, and there is an extensive body of scholarship focusing on the role that the capture and appropriation of Buddha images and relics played in cementing the legitimacy of kings (Chiu, 2017; Notton, 1932; Peleggi, 2017; Reynolds, 1978; Tambiah, 1982). As Chiu (2017) noted in her discussion of Tambiah (1982), "certain Buddha images were presented as 'authentic' portraits of the Buddha and therefore magically powerful; a king in possession of such a statue could claim rights to

supremacy over other regional kings” (7). Similarly, Peleggi (2017) stated that “[o]wing to social perception of palladia as embodiments of the polity under their tutelage, their immovability and material integrity stood synecdochically for a realm’s stability; their seizure and relocation, on the other hand, foreshadowed subjugation and collapse” (43). Furthermore, Peleggi described the captured palladium as a “de facto hostage” (43) that had to be protected from vengeful rivals seeking to reassert power.<sup>1</sup>

The symbolic absorption of a rival court’s power was not limited to the appropriation of movable objects, however. It also involved the emulation and incorporation of myriad aesthetic forms, including architectural motifs, literature, ritual, and performance. As area studies scholars have demonstrated, in the precolonial politics of Southeast Asian “*mandala* statecraft” (Wolters, 1999), the appropriation and imitation of symbolic and material capital were endemic features of the ongoing rivalries between proximate “galactic polities” (Tambiah, 2013). In their competition for regional supremacy, rulers of Southeast Asian polities asserted their paramount status in part by encompassing the symbolic and material potency of their rivals.<sup>2</sup> Stated otherwise, the identity of a given *mandala* polity was constituted dialectically in relation to proximate *mandalas*, via what were frequently violent processes of contestation, emulation and encompassment of sacred symbols, texts, practices, and objects.<sup>3</sup> Through an examination of Prince Damrong’s account of his visit to Angkor, this article aims to suggest that a richer theorization of these historical practices of cultural appropriation is vital for if we seek to understand the complexity of contested claims to heritage in Southeast Asia today.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most famous of these images is the Emerald Buddha at Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok. Through its repeated capture and relocation by ambitious monarchs vying for regional power, this auspicious Buddha image traveled to the ancient capitals of Pagan (Bagan), Angkor, Ayutthaya, Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang and Vientiane before arriving in Bangkok, where it stands as the palladium of the Chakri dynasty and the most revered Buddha image in the Thai nation (Notton, 1932, Reynolds, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Scholars have described how the historical rivalries between Siamese and Khmer courts led to the emulation and appropriation of cultural capital (See Chandler, 2000; Charnvit, 2003; Pasuk and Baker, 2014). David Chandler (2008) wrote that following Siam’s conquest of Angkor in the 15th century, “people, ideas, texts, and institutions migrated west from Angkor to Ayudhaya where they were modified and eventually re-exported into Cambodia to survive its genuine decline from the eighteenth century onward” (93). Furthermore, scholars of Cambodia (Ang Chouléan, 1997; Chandler, 2008; Smith, 1989) concur that Siam’s appropriation of Khmer palladia has taken the form of a folk memory in the Khmer legend of *Preah Ko Preah Kaeo*, which recounts Siamese invasions of Lovek in 1594 CE and seizure of the royal palladia, wherein *Preah Ko* represents the corporeal guardian of Hindu-Brahmin politico-religious potency.

<sup>3</sup> In his useful synthesis of the area studies literature on precolonial statecraft in Southeast Asia, Spruyt (2020) observed that Southeast Asia was “a decidedly poly-centric region with multiple powers vying with one another” (254). He further argued that while populations of the region shared a “collective imagination” grounded in Buddhism and Hindu-Brahmin cosmologies, these commonalities did not lead to harmonious relations. “Quite the contrary: these shared collective belief systems, these ‘mentalités collectives,’ did not lead to stable and peaceful relations within or between polities. The cultural schemas that informed the political order created conditions that led to internecine struggles, civil war, and conflict” (257).

## Part I: Travel and colonial cosmopolitanism

In November 1924, the Siamese Prince Damrong Rajanuphap, who was then serving in three official positions as the Chairman of the Wachirayan National Library, Director of the Royal Academy, and Director of the National Museum, embarked on a trip to neighboring Cambodia and the temples of Angkor; a voyage which he would publish a few months later as a travelogue entitled *Nirat Nakhon Wat*, or *Journey to Angkor*. As the first pages of his account made clear, Prince Damrong's inspiration to visit Cambodia was sparked by Angkor's reputation as an exotic destination for international tourists seeking to experience the celebrated grandeur of this ancient civilization. Since the "discovery" of Angkor by Henri Mouhot in 1860, illustrated accounts by French explorers had popularized Angkor in the colonial imaginary of the metropole as a site of mystery and forgotten splendor. Augmenting these literary representations of Angkor, in the five decades prior to Prince Damrong's visit, French colonial expositions in Paris and Marseilles had featured architectural replicas of the edifices as well as artifacts from the temples, representing Angkor as France's own "jewel in the crown" (Edwards, 2008: 20). Given the international eminence surrounding Angkor during the colonial era, it is hardly surprising that Prince Damrong wished to join the growing throngs of visitors from the metropole to witness the wonders of Angkor for himself.

Together with an entourage of family members, translators, scholars, and officials, Prince Damrong boarded a steamer from Bangkok bound for the Cambodian port town of Kampot, from where he and his group would travel overland to Phnom Penh and then on to the site of Angkor Wat. In the Thai poem (*klon*) which opened the travelogue of his journey, Prince Damrong explained the impetus behind the voyage, and his decision to write an account of his experience.

### A Journey to Angkor<sup>4</sup>

For a long time, I have heard from those who have been to Cambodia that the sandstone temples are an extraordinary sight.

They say that there are giant edifices built by the skilled hands of the ancient *Khom* [ancient Khmer] with elaborate designs curving in all directions.

Many have invited us to see them, but each time, duties have obstructed, and I have had to put off many well-laid plans.

Until this year of the Rat, there was a break—a rare opportunity to go to Nakhon (Angkor) Wat.

My sweet daughters also wished to go, and as I know well, their wishes cannot be thwarted.

Wherever I travel, they travel too.

And so it was that these delightful young ladies accompanied me, and we took

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<sup>4</sup> Author's translation.

leave from the city of heaven.

From the month of November until December, we were traveling in Cambodia.

The French generously welcomed us and helped us to arrange our stay.

Wherever we went, we encountered pleasure and happiness for which we are thankful to our hosts.

The lords and nobles of Cambodia also welcomed us with open arms.

They spoke with us so graciously that we felt we were among family, which filled our hearts with gratitude.

During our pleasurable travels, we are always thinking of our dear friends left behind in the big city.

Thinking of you, I am reminded that I must find you a souvenir, but I am at a loss at what to bring you.

I can't buy you any gifts as our funds are in short supply.

With more than 100 friends, the question of what mementos to bring home wracks my mind.

How can I overcome this problem wisely? I shall write a *Nirat*—a travelogue of my journey.

I will tell the story of my trip to Cambodia for all my dear friends to hear.

I will print up copies for distribution, and I suspect this will fulfill people's desires.

But writing poetry (*klon*) bores and exhausts me, and I have tried for years without success.

Because of this lack of proficiency in poetic rhyme and meter, I will write instead in prose.

There is this just this small bit of poetry to add sparkle, reminiscent of the ancient's wisdom and skill for verse.

After all, if not for this small token of poetry, my readers would say this is not a *Nirat*.

So having offered this short piece, I invite you to read the story that follows.

As we can see from the opening lines of the poem, Prince Damrong's desire to visit Cambodia must be understood in relation to Angkor's fame as a recently discovered wonder of world civilization. Considering the international eminence surrounding Angkor during this era of high imperialism, Prince Damrong's wish to visit the site reflected his desire to participate in the colonial imaginary as an intellectual equal, alongside the French explorers and the growing multitude of visitors from the metropole. Indeed, by engaging in this colonial pastime of travel for the sake of knowledge and pleasure, Damrong was effectively substantiating his own dynasty's civility in the colonial world order.



Figure 1. Cover of the first edition of *Nirat Nakhon Wat* published in 1925

Prince Damrong's journey to Angkor was not the first time that a member of the Chakri dynasty in Bangkok had emulated the colonial practice of travel to affirm the worldly cosmopolitanism of the ruling class. As Thongchai (2000a) has illustrated, beginning with the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910), travel became an indispensable tool for encompassing Siam's ethnically diverse, former tributary principalities within the "geo-body" of the nation. During this era of far-reaching administrative reform, travel rendered the remote and unknown periphery legible and hence governable by the central regime. Situating themselves as authors and scholarly observers vis-à-vis a largely rural and ethnically diverse populace, Siamese monarchs and nobles recast the traditional hierarchical relations between the king and his subjects as a relationship between a paternal bureaucratic authority and the uncivilized "others within" (Thongchai, 2000a).

Whereas travel within Siam rendered the geo-body legible to the ruling elite and validated the parity between the Chakri regime and European colonial regimes, international travel exposed the Siamese ruling elite to the imperial world order beyond Siam's borders. King Chulalongkorn took educational tours to neighboring colonies such as Java and Singapore, where he studied European forms of colonial administration and institutions, such as the museum and the prison (Thongchai, 2000b: 538). While the nationalist narrative celebrates Rama V for his tactical genius in undermining the pretext

of direct colonization by co-opting the tools and civilizing discourses of the colonizer, Peleggi (2002) and Thongchai (2000b) have both made the significant point that the Siamese court's appropriation of European notions of "civility" and the implementation of modernizing reforms of the bureaucratic and economic infrastructure were not merely skillful strategies for offsetting the 19th century British and French colonial threat. Rather, they were also born of a desire to be regarded as a sophisticated and worldly equal within the new international order.

Prince Damrong was the younger half-brother of King Chulalongkorn, and the second most important statesman of the colonial era in Siam after the king. During his tenure as Minister of the Interior between 1892 and 1915, Prince Damrong undertook exploratory missions into all regions of Siam as part of the state's effort to incorporate the outer provinces into the newly centralized administration. As for his travels further afield, between 1891 and 1892 alone, Prince Damrong paid visits to the Turkish, Russian, and British courts, as well as the colonies of Egypt, India, and Burma (Myanmar), whose educational systems he had been instructed to study and report on upon his return (Breazeale, 1971). After retiring as Minister of the Interior in 1915, Damrong was appointed Chairman of the Wachirayan National Library by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, reigned 1910-1925), and soon after, he took on the responsibilities of Director of the Royal Academy and the National Museum. Throughout his career, but especially in his position as Chairman of the National Library, Prince Damrong collected data zealously and wrote prolifically on all aspects of Thai history, culture, and society—an industriousness fueled by a passion for scholarship which earned him the title of "father of Thai history." Although the total number of his published works is still uncertain, in 1962 the National Library listed more than 1,000 titles on subjects ranging from Buddhist architecture to revised chronicles to individual biographies (Breazeale, 1971: 36).

Considering *Nirat Nakhon Wat* in light of this brief biography, there can be little doubt that Prince Damrong's travelogue exemplified the Siamese elites' desire to participate as equals in the discursive and disciplinary regimes which had come to constitute the global arena of imperial power. As we shall see, the pages of his travelogue were a public stage upon which he performed his scholarly mastery and diplomatic skill as a statesman to a public readership in Siam, thereby affirming the Siamese nobility's place as contemporaries in a new world order. In contrast to European accounts of Angkor, however, *Nirat Nakhon Wat* described precolonial hierarchical relations between the neighboring Cambodian and Siamese courts and a rediscovery of the shared heritage produced over the centuries of cultural transmission back and forth between them.

## Part II: Phnom Penh and King Sisowath

Upon his arrival in Cambodia on 12 November, Prince Damrong's first stop was the capital city of Phnom Penh, where he and his entourage were welcomed by the French *Resident Supérieur*, who was the official host during their stay. Even on these first days of his visit, Prince Damrong's journal entries already expressed a detailed scholarly mastery of the history of Cambodia, its political structure, and its religious landscape. In

striking contrast to earlier French travelogues which described the city and recounted the meetings with Cambodian nobility using the Orientalizing language of exotic difference (see Loti, 2002), Prince Damrong's descriptions of Phnom Penh expressed a profound sense of familiarity with all that he surveyed.

Indicative of one whose sense of space had been formed by Buddhist conceptions of sacred geography, the first place visited by Damrong was the city's central stupa, or *phra that*, located at the highest point within Phnom Penh's landscape. Indeed, by beginning his own journey at the city's central stupa, Prince Damrong was situating Cambodia within a shared socio-historical space constituted by Theravada Buddhist belief and practice. Beyond this, to Prince Damrong, the stupa also commemorated a specific historical event. The stupa was believed to contain the ashes of the Khmer king, Ponhea Yat, who had moved the capital to Phnom Penh to escape further advances of the Siamese armies after their conquest of Angkor circa 1431 CE. As such, it also served as a physical reminder both for Damrong and his readers of the historical turning point when the Khmer overlords of the region were militarily subordinated by their former vassals, the Siamese. This was the first instance in Damrong's text which clearly indicated how his view of Cambodia was shaped by the knowledge that Siam's conquest of Angkor had initiated a shift in the Khmers' status from a regional power to a tributary dependency of the Siamese court.

Later in the day on his visit to the museum, Prince Damrong observed that the structure of the building had been modeled on Angkorian architecture. He also noticed that unlike in Thailand, where Khmer bronzes were plentiful, the collection in Phnom Penh had few good examples of bronze sculpture from the Angkorian period, and he mentioned that people in Phnom Penh attributed this dearth to the fact that Siam had pillaged all the ancient Khmer bronzes. Even though he made a note of the fact that the Khmer blamed the Thais for having stolen their bronzes, nothing in his language registered the least indication of remorse for Siam's appropriation of these sacred objects that had once belonged to the Khmer. On the contrary, by pointing out the absence of these bronzes in Phnom Penh and their presence in Bangkok, Damrong was expressing the Siamese court's historical authority and power over the Khmer as determined by a precolonial logic described above, wherein a king's possession of certain powerful and magical objects was the basis of asserting political supremacy over rival courts and tributary states.

To further substantiate this argument, let me now turn to another important encounter from the text: Prince Damrong's visit to the royal palace and meeting with his contemporary in the Khmer court, King Sisowath. Prince Damrong wrote that in this first meeting, King Sisowath introduced him to the audience of Khmer officials as the "son of my former master, *Phra Chom Klao* (Rama IV)" (29).<sup>5</sup> He then proceeded to describe the meeting as warm and familial, owing to the fact that King Sisowath fondly recalled the kindness and generosity of his former Siamese overlord, King Mongkut (Rama IV, reigned 1851-1868). Here, Prince Damrong reminded his readers

<sup>5</sup> King Sisowath introduced Prince Damrong as follows: "นี่ลูกเจ้านายของข้า ข้าเป็นข้าพระบาทสมเด็จพระจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัวมาแต่ก่อน." (29)



that King Sisowath's father was the Khmer monarch, King Duang—known within the Siamese court as King Somdet Phra Harirak Ramathibodi—who had lived in exile at the Siamese court in Bangkok until he was placed on the Cambodian throne at Udong in 1848. His three sons, Norodom, Sisowath, and Siritwong had been raised at the Siamese court by Rama IV “as through they were his own sons” (31). These bonds of kinship were strengthened by the fact that King Duang's three sons were ordained in the temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok—a temple reserved for ordinations of nobles and members of the Siamese king's lineage, after which they joined the monkhood at Bowonniwet temple, where they learned the reform Buddhism of the Thammayut sect which they later brought back with them to Cambodia. As the description of this encounter vividly illustrates, the terms of protocol between the courts of Siam and Cambodia were not defined by a conception of sovereign statehood or by the racial categories imposed by the French, but rather by the local history of hierarchical political relations between the Siamese overlord and its former vassal state. At least from Prince Damrong's vantage point, the local politics and the sacred geography comprised of shared signs and practices took precedence over the foreign order.

While Prince Damrong's interactions with the Khmer royal family clearly demonstrated his sense of Siam's enduring superiority vis-à-vis Cambodia, his observations of the built landscape and material artifacts illustrated another facet of this local logic. After the audience with King Sisowath, Prince Damrong was given a tour of the palace grounds. Via his architectural history of the construction of the royal palace and informed description of its stylistic motifs, the prince demonstrated that inter-court political linkages and borrowings had constituted a shared symbolic and religious space, albeit one wherein Siam was the sovereign power. As Damrong explained, Cambodia's previous monarch, King Norodom, had moved the capital from Udong to Phnom Penh in 1859 CE following the advice of the French, and with the latter's financial support, King Norodom had overseen the construction of a new palace. As a model for the structure, the Khmer king chose the royal palace of Bangkok. Prince Damrong underscored the fact that King Norodom had endeavored to copy the features of the Siamese throne hall down to the finest details, from the structure of the citadel wall (*pomprakan*) to the roof structure of the throne hall (*montian sathan*). Even the names given to the various structures were reminiscent of the Siamese prototype, so that whereas the latter called the throne hall *phra thi nang amarin winichai*, the Khmer king called his throne hall *phra thi nang thewa winichai* (34). All in all, Prince Damrong counted twenty-one buildings in the palace complex which bore names identical to the Siamese structures in Bangkok. Inside the royal shrine of Buddha images (*ho phra*), Prince Damrong made note of the fact that there were no old or beautiful Buddha images and added that even the urn holding the ashes of King Duang, King Norodom's father, was most certainly of Siamese craftsmanship dating to the Fifth Reign. Another replica from Bangkok included the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (*Wat Phra Kaew*)—complete with a simulated Emerald Buddha image and mural paintings reminiscent of the originals in Bangkok.

Amidst this long inventory of copies derived from the Siamese capital, Prince

Damrong found a few items which he classified as “authentic” (*thae*), both in an aesthetic and historical sense. These were two bronze images of Hindu deities (*thewarup*) and an ancient sword (*phra khan*), which according to local legend, was given to Jayavarman II by the god Indra circa 857 CE (43). He was particularly intrigued with this latter artifact because he had seen an identical sword in the court of Bangkok, which had been acquired from Cambodia by Rama I (reigned 1782-1809).

With respect to Damrong’s keen eye for the authentic, it is important to examine the terms that Prince Damrong employed to distinguish between the producers of authentic artifacts versus the producers of what he regarded as derivative cultural forms. When speaking about the creators of the ancient swords and other Angkorian era artifacts, Prince Damrong used the label *Khom*, in contrast to the producers of the new religious objects and architectural edifices in Phnom Penh, whom he called Khmer. The term *Khom* has a complex etymology which is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, with respects to its usage in *Journey to Angkor*, I argue that this categorical distinction between the authenticity of the ancient *Khom* and the derivative culture of the contemporary Khmer represents a clear example of Prince Damrong’s refusal to accept the colonial conflation of the Khmer race, nation, and Angkorian heritage. By distinguishing the ancient *Khom* from the contemporary Khmer, Prince Damrong cleared a temporal space for the Siamese court’s claims of succession to Angkor.<sup>7</sup> In Damrong’s view, the Siamese were the cultural intermediaries bridging the temporal gap between the ancient *Khom* and their Khmer contemporaries. Having become the custodians of many of Angkor’s antiquities acquired via conquest, the Siamese court had also become a repository of ancient Khmer authenticity. Herein, Damrong’s recognition of the relative absence of authentic artifacts in the Cambodian court simultaneously signified an abundant presence located elsewhere—this elsewhere was the court of Siam.

As these examples illustrate, Prince Damrong’s text was far more than a descriptive travelogue. Rather, his keen eye for reading the built landscape and material culture of Phnom Penh reasserted a local logic wherein regional hierarchies of power between

<sup>6</sup> As Jit Phoumisak (2004) illustrated in his seminal book entitled *Evidence about the Khom People [Khotet ching wa duai chonchat Khom]*, *Khom* is a marker which has generated a great deal of confusion and debate in area studies scholarship because it is an identity label with such a broad and seemingly inconsistent range of applications (see Vickery, 1977). In his attempt to clarify its meaning, Jit undertook a comparative analysis of the historical development of this term’s usage among neighboring ethnic groups in mainland Southeast Asia. Jit demonstrated that *Khom* referred to the indigenous populations of mainland Southeast Asia who had adopted the Hindu cosmology and the Brahmin cult of the god-king, or *devaraja*, from Indian merchants and priests who began traveling to Southeast Asia around the 1st century CE. Not only the peoples of Angkor, but also the inhabitants of early Siamese courts within this realm, such as Lopburi, were called *Khom*, indicating the cultural and linguistic dominance of Angkor in the central Chao Phraya valley during this period (8th-15th centuries CE).

<sup>7</sup> This trope of the temporal rupture separating the ancient and contemporary Khmer bore similarities to earlier French theories, such as those of Paul Doumer, Francis Garnier and others who maintained that the builders of Angkor were another race than the contemporary Khmer (See Edwards, 2008: 44). It could also be found decades later in the writings of Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram’s indispensable propagandist, Luang Wichit Wathakan, who went so far as to suggest that the Thais had absorbed the ancient Khmer and thus the Thai and the Khmer were actually the same race (Barmé, 1993).

*mandala* states were inscribed in built space and concentrated in sacred artifacts. By contextualizing his meeting with King Sisowath within his reading of Phnom Penh's built space as derivative of Siam and his observation of the current Khmer court's relative absence of "authentic" material objects, Prince Damrong was conveying to his Thai audience that the contemporary Khmer state—even though now under the French—still bore the imprint of its former status as a dependency of Siam.

### Part III: Angkor

After his stay in Phnom Penh, the prince and his entourage made their way by boat to the temples of Angkor. In the prince's account of his visit to the temples, the temporal separation between the ancient *Khom* and the contemporary Khmer became even more distinct. In his description of the temples of Angkor Wat and Nakhon Thom, Prince Damrong's observational skills are just as acute and fine-grained as in Phnom Penh. In contrast to the latter, where nearly every feature of the built landscape was derived from Siam, however, in the case of the 8th-12th century temple complexes, we find that the direction of borrowing had reversed. Now, rather than seeing a royal city which was modeled on Bangkok as was the case with Phnom Penh, Prince Damrong saw an ancient civilization which was the potent source and creative inspiration for much of the symbolism, art, architecture, and ritual practice found in Ayutthaya and later reproduced in Bangkok.

Upon seeing Angkor Wat for the first time, Prince Damrong remarked that the temple was far more impressive in person than it was in the pictures, and he praised the architectural brilliance of its creator. After describing many of the features of the temple and explaining its original function as a Brahminical shrine honoring King Suryavarman II, the prince examined the bas-relief carvings on the lower-level galleries at Angkor Wat. Recognizing that some depicted scenes from the story of the *Ramakian* (Khmer: *Reamker*)—the epic poem adapted from the Sanskrit text, the *Ramayana*, he suggested that these carvings were the likely source of inspiration for the wall paintings of the *Ramakian* found in the gallery of Wat Phra Sriratanasasadaram (*Wat Phra Kaew* in Bangkok). He further surmised that King Norodom had drawn on the *Ramakian* paintings from Bangkok as a model for the paintings at Wat Phreah Kao in Phnom Penh. While his comments were brief, Prince Damrong's observations amounted to an open acknowledgement that one of the centerpieces of Siam's literary and artistic heritage—the *Ramakian* epic—derived from the civilization of Angkor.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, his remark that the Khmer King Norodom had borrowed stylistically from the Siamese version of the *Ramakian* reinforces the argument made above, namely that the Siamese elite

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<sup>8</sup> Many scholars have traced the transmission of sculptural, literary, and ritual forms of the *Ramayana* epic from Angkor to Siam. The Thai dance scholar, Mattani Rutmin, argued that ritual performances of scenes from the *Ramayana* described in the *Royal Chronicles of Ayutthaya* most likely derived from Angkor (Mattani, 2012). Mietinen (2008) has shown how the dance poses and performance traditions represented in the bas-reliefs and sculptures of Angkor Wat later appeared in temple mural imagery and *Khon* classical dance performances of the Siamese courts of Ayutthaya and Bangkok, thus substantiating Siam's emulation of earlier Khmer dance forms.



Figure 2. Prince Damrong and his daughters photographed at the Bayon in November 1924

regarded themselves as the heirs and custodians of Angkorian culture, which was then retransmitted back to the Khmer.

The next stop in his journey was the Bayon temple, where Prince Damrong related the following anecdote. In 1904, during the reign of Rama V, Prince Damrong attended a royal ceremony held in the ancient capital of Ayutthaya. On this occasion, the governor of Ayutthaya had ordered some of his men to dig in the vicinity of the ancient palace, whereupon they unearthed the pointed spire of a doorway (*yod pratu*) with four aspects, each aspect with the face of an unknown god. Upon seeing the unearthed spire, Prince Damrong had speculated that this architectural fragment had probably once adorned the doorway to the royal palace of Ayutthaya, and he also realized that it was the prototype

for a similar spire reproduced in the palace of Bangkok. Now that he had seen Bayon, however, Prince Damrong explained that he had finally discovered the last piece of the puzzle of this spire's architectural origin—it had come from Angkor.<sup>9</sup>

This moment of insight sparked yet another realization. Reflecting on the royal Siamese chronicles, Prince Damrong remembered that during the reign of the Siamese King Prasat Thong (1629-1656), a golden sanctuary had been built on the palace grounds of Ayutthaya, initially named *Phra Thi Nang Si Yasothon Phiman Banyong*, which roughly translates as the Yasothon Bayon Throne Hall. Shortly after the structure was built, King Prasat Thong had a dream of the god Indra. Wishing to commemorate this auspicious dream, the king renamed the golden sanctuary *Chakawan Phaichayon*, or the “divine disc of the universe,” in honor of the Lord Indra's magical weapon, the disc. Visiting the site of Bayon, Prince Damrong finally came to understand that despite the fact that King Prasat Thong had changed the name of this structure after his divine dream, it was originally named the Yasothon Bayon Throne Hall for a very specific historical reason. That is, after King Naresuan (reigned 1590-1605) of Ayutthaya conquered Lovek in 1593 CE, the Khmer court became a tributary state of Siam (*prathetsarat*), which lasted until the reign of King Songtham (1611-1628 CE), when the Khmer King Chey Chettha refused to pay tribute to Ayutthaya. When King Prasat Thong ascended the throne in 1629, he led his troops in a successful overthrow and subordination of the Khmer court, and it was because of this military triumph that he wished to build a throne hall named after the temples of Angkor (95).<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting here that Prince Damrong's analysis of this artifact was corroborated by Vickery (1976):

[I]t is known that both Song Tham and Prasat Thong were frequently preoccupied with Cambodia, attempting to assert suzerainty which the Cambodians denied and were strong enough to resist. Prasat Thong, moreover, seems to have had a deeper interest in his neighbor, for he copied the plan of Angkor Wat, built two temples modeled on it, and at one point planned to give the classical name for Angkor, Yasodhara, to one of his palaces. (231)

This latter case presents the first in a series of illustrations demonstrating that Prince Damrong's interpretation of Angkor was informed by what Davis calls “the rhetoric of appropriated images” (1999: 62), wherein the appropriation of cultural motifs and artifacts represented a mode of signifying triumph and absorbing the power of the conquered. Indeed, this practice of transferring and replicating Angkorian architecture to signify the suzerainty of Siam persisted long after Prasat Thong's reign, as we can see

<sup>9</sup> “มาได้ความรู้ครั้งนี้ว่าปราสาทประตูประราชวังกรุงศรีอยุธยา นั้น คงถ่ายแบบไปจากปราสาทเทวสถานบรยงกันี้เอง” (91)

<sup>10</sup> “รัชกาลพระเจ้าปราสาททองจึงสามารถเอากรุงกัมพูชากลับไปขึ้นกรุงศรีอยุธยาได้ตั้งแต่ก่อน เพื่อจะเฉลิมพระเกียรติยศในเรื่องนี้ พระเจ้าปราสาททองจึงให้ถ่ายแบบอย่างสถานที่ต่างๆ ในกรุงกัมพูชา เอาไปสร้างไว้ให้ปรากฏในที่ในกรุงศรีอยุธยา คือสร้างพระนครหลวง (นครธม) ที่ตำหนักริมน้ำสัก ทางเสด็จขึ้นพระพุทธรูปเป็นต้น มาได้ความรู้คราวนี้ว่าพลับพลาสูง และสนามชัยก็ถ่ายแบบไปจากนครธมนี่เอง จึงทำรูปครุฑและรูปสิงห์แบกตัวใหญ่ๆ ประดับฐานอย่างเดียวกัน ชื่อพระที่นั่งที่เรียกแต่แรกว่าศรียศธรรมาภิบาลก็เอาชื่อเมืองยศธรรมาภิบาลบรยงกั ก็คือชื่อเทวสถานบรยงกัในนครธม แมื่อยอดประตูประราชวังซึ่งกล่าวมาแล้วก็เห็นจะสร้างในครั้งนั้นนี่เอง” (95)

from King Mongkut, Rama IV's construction of a replica of Angkor on the grounds of the royal palace in Bangkok (Keyes, 1991), as well as the latter monarch's unrealized plans to transfer several Angkorian sanctuaries to Bangkok in 1859 CE.<sup>11</sup>

In yet another anecdote, Prince Damrong elaborated on the theme of the Angkorian source of Siam's sacred objects. Even before embarking on his journey, Prince Damrong had hoped to trace the origin of two small Buddha amulets in his possession called *Phra Kring*, which were believed to be images dating to the reign of the Khmer King Pathumsuriyawong, circa the 13th century CE (117). As Prince Damrong explained, he had acquired the first of these powerful amulets from his grandfather, who in turn had acquired the image from a Buddhist monk named Phra Amonmoli who had been the first to establish the Thammayut sect of Buddhism in Cambodia during the reign of King Mongkut, Rama IV. Prince Damrong later acquired the second image from a monk who had come to Bangkok from Surin Province. In his discussions with Monsieur Marchal, a French archaeologist in charge of research and conservation at Angkor, Prince Damrong discovered that the same images had been found in the region of a Buddhist sanctuary near the Bakeng mountain temple, thereby confirming their ancient Khmer (*Khom*) provenance.

Aside from the architectural edifices and artifacts, another source of insight into this shared past were the bas-reliefs, which depicted daily life in the ancient capital, processions, warfare, and Hindu and Buddhist mythology. In one such bas-relief, for instance, Prince Damrong found the representation of two kinds of boats (*ruea king* and *ruea ekachai*) which he had initially believed to be indigenous to the capital of Ayutthaya. Indeed, the more Prince Damrong explored the expansive ruins of Angkor, the more revelations he had regarding the historical links between Cambodia and Siam and the origins of Siamese cultural practices and sacred artifacts.

Considering the many Khmer origins of Siamese literature, architecture, religious practice, and artifacts that Prince Damrong uncovered in the temples of Angkor, one cannot help but wonder why Prince Damrong did not view the emulation of Angkor by the Siamese courts of Ayutthaya and Bangkok as derivative or inauthentic. Here we will recall that in his visit to the palace in Phnom Penh, Damrong was keenly observant about the architectural borrowings from Siam, and the relative absence of "authentic" artifacts. To explain this apparent paradox, I argue that the historical circumstances surrounding the emulation and incorporation of cultural forms and sacred objects from a rival court are important factors determining the meaning—and indeed the "authenticity"—of those recontextualized borrowed signs and objects.<sup>12</sup> For instance, with respect to the myriad cultural influences within the Siamese court which Prince Damrong attributed to the *Khom*, these were not indicative of Siam's inferiority or weakness vis-à-vis

<sup>11</sup> A record of King Mongkut's plans to transfer the actual edifices can be found in the Royal Siamese Chronicles of the Fourth Reign of the Chakri Dynasty, written by Phra Chao Thipakorawong (1961). On page 224 of the chronicle, the author states that the king ordered a number of edifices to be transferred to Bangkok as they would bring prestige (*pen kiad yod pai khang na*). This case was also discussed by Pasuk and Baker (2014: 48) and Peleggi (2017: 74-75).

<sup>12</sup> Chiu (2017) and Peleggi (2017) have discussed the issue of the authenticity and emulation of sacred objects in Thailand. As Peleggi pointed out, while authentic sacred objects were coveted for their perceived inherent powers, a copy could acquire the status of a genuine object if it was efficacious, i.e. if it had "the ability to perform miraculous deeds" (46).

Angkor because these attributes were subsumed within the new center of power located at Ayutthaya, where *Khom* motifs, artifacts, and practices in the court of Siam were incorporated under the ascendant sign of Theravada Buddhism.

In *Nirat Nakhon Wat*, Damrong's consideration of the causes of the collapse of Angkor illustrates this dialectic of incorporation. Even though he recognized the widespread existence of Buddhism alongside Hindu-Brahminism in Angkor, Prince Damrong noted the dominance of Hindu-Brahminism and attributed the extensive construction of monumental shrines to the Hindu-Brahmin belief that gods and kings had to be raised high above the earthly realm of humans.<sup>13</sup> He contrasted the elaborate and labor-intensive construction of Hindu-Brahmin temples with the simpler structures of Buddhist monasteries, which were generally made of wood and lower to the ground, and which served the purpose of honoring the Buddha and studying his teachings. Damrong then proceeded to challenge French theories of Angkor's decline which laid blame for the destruction of ancient Khmer civilization on the Siamese invasions circa 1431 CE, suggesting that one of the central weaknesses of this hypothesis was its failure to consider historical data from the Khmer chronicles. Had the French read these sources, they would have seen that the Khmer kings were constantly in the process of expanding, moving and rebuilding their capitals—a system which was not only taxing on the *corvée* laborers who had to construct new royal temples of heavy sandstone and limestone, but also had destructive effects on the architectural landscape of former capitals, as these old temples were often neglected by new kings eager to substantiate their own prowess by building new temples. Contrary to the French view of external invasion, therefore, Prince Damrong argued that it was the internal excesses of monument construction that rendered Angkor vulnerable to conquest by external powers.<sup>14</sup> The conquest and collapse of Angkor did not lead to its disappearance, however, and Damrong describes many features of Angkorian civilization that persisted in Siam, such as Hindu-Brahmin elements and architectural motifs, which were incorporated into the dominant Theravada Buddhism.<sup>15</sup>

We can see this logic operating again later in the same section, in Damrong's response to the popular Khmer complaint that the Thais had stolen all the Khmer's sacred objects. In keeping with the dialectical logic of encompassment described above, his justification for these acquisitions was implicitly framed in the same narrative of the waning of Hindu-Brahminism and the rise of Theravada Buddhism. As he explained, in the Royal Chronicles, it was written that forty bronze statues of lions and other animals were taken from the Khmer court of Nakhon Thom following the Siamese invasions in

<sup>13</sup> “เหตุที่สร้างติดกันเช่นนั้น สันนิษฐานว่าเพราะ คติสองศาสนาต่างกัน พุทธศาสนาก็คือเอาว่าพระพุทธเจ้าเสด็จดับสูญไปสู่ปรินิพพานแล้ว วัดเป็นแต่ที่สำหรับไปบูชาพระพุทธคุณและไปศึกษาพระธรรมคำสอนของพระพุทธเจ้า ฝ่ายศาสนาพราหมณ์ถือว่าพระอิศวรก็ตีพระนารายณ์ก็ตี ยังอยู่บนสวรรค์ การสร้างเทวสถาน เหมือนอย่างสร้างวิมานถวายพระเป็นเจ้า สำหรับประทับในเวลาเมื่อเสด็จมาเยี่ยมมนุษยโลก ที่สร้างเทวสถานให้สูงนั้นเพื่อจะมีให้พระเป็นเจ้ารังเกียจว่าต้องลงมาปะปนกับมนุษย์ ไหมมนุษย์ต้องขึ้นไปเฝ้า” (136)

<sup>14</sup> “นครวัดนับว่าเป็นอนุสาวรีย์โบราณซึ่งใหญ่โตและสง่างามอย่างที่สุดแห่งหนึ่งในโลก แต่เมื่อคิดถึงราคาที่ทำนุผู้สร้างต้องลงทุนก็น่าอนาถใจ ด้วยตามเรื่องพงศาวดารปรากฏว่า พอเสร็จสร้างนครวัดแล้ว ประเทศขอมก็สิ้นกำลัง ต่อมาไม่ช้านานเท่าใดก็ต้องตกอยู่ในอำนาจของชาติอื่น”

<sup>15</sup> Damrong mentions the royal ploughing ceremony, the swing ceremony, coronation rites and funerary rites as examples of Brahmin rites still practiced alongside the national religion of Buddhism (128).

the early 15th century, which were later offered as sacred objects of Buddhist veneration (*khruelang phuthabucha*) at the temple of Wat Mahathat in Ayutthaya.<sup>16</sup> In the late 18th century the Siamese King Rama I acquired another pair of bronze lions after a military triumph over the Khmer court. As his predecessor had done several centuries prior, Rama I offered these Khmer bronze lions to a Buddhist temple, Wat Phrasirathanasadharam (*Wat Phra Kaew*), where they have been standing guard at the temple's ordination hall ever since (147). As this example illustrates, Prince Damrong viewed Ayutthaya's acquisition of sacred artifacts from Angkor very differently from the French, who espoused a racialized interpretation of Angkor where the Khmer had an intrinsic right to their cultural heritage. In Damrong's logic, such acts of appropriation did not qualify as theft, as they were embedded within a larger historical dialectic of the internal collapse of Hindu-Brahminism and the subsequent rise of Theravada Buddhism throughout the region beginning in the 13th century. Indeed, what is telling about this passage is that it exemplifies the fact that the rise of Theravada Buddhism did not bring about the total abandonment of Hindu-Brahmin forms and practices. Rather, by incorporating religious symbols, sacred objects, and practices from the Angkorian Empire within the new Theravada Buddhist order, they became signs of a reconfigured religious and political hierarchy, wherein the Hindu deities were subordinated to the Buddha.

## Conclusions

In the forgoing analysis, I have endeavored to make two main points about Prince Damrong's travelogue, *Journey to Angkor*. First, I have argued that both the journey itself and the travelogue were inspired by the prince's desire to participate in the colonial imaginary of "the Orient" through travel to the ancient civilization of Angkor. Indeed, by following in the footsteps of early French explorers and writing an erudite account of his travels, Prince Damrong was substantiating the intellectual parity between European colonial regimes and Siam's ruling elite. Secondly, I have suggested that despite the impetus for this journey, the long historical interrelationship between the courts of Siam and Cambodia made the prince's experience of Angkor incommensurable with that of the French and other visitors from the metropole. Unlike the French, whose project to restore Angkor entailed delineating the racial parameters of Khmer heritage, I have argued that Prince Damrong's experience of Angkor rearticulated a precolonial logic based upon regional hierarchies of power between *mandala* states. As we have seen, within this logic, processes of cultural appropriation were a rhetorical means of asserting hegemony by subsuming the symbolic embodiments of a rival court's power. I have also shown how through this logic, Prince Damrong posited the Siamese court as heir of Angkorian heritage, because as the regional center shifted away from Angkor to Ayutthaya, Khmer symbolic and cultural capital was transferred to Ayutthaya as an expression of Siam's hegemony. In Damrong's text, the transformation of Angkorian material and symbolic capital in the crucible of regional *mandala* politics is reflected

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<sup>16</sup> As he noted, these sculptures were carried off to a Burmese temple after King Burenong's attacks on Ayutthaya in 1569 CE, and later lost in a fire.



in his use of the label “*Khom*” to speak of the ancient Khmer empire of Siem Reap and “Khmer” to speak of the contemporary court at Udong (Oudong) and Phnom Penh.

And yet, by the time of Prince Damrong’s visit to Angkor, the precolonial logic which suffused his text would have been considered an anachronism, as cadastral maps and racial classifications of the new international order had replaced the regional conception of waxing and waning power among the *mandalas* with clearly demarcated territorial units comprised of races and their respective claims to national heritage. Why, then, did Prince Damrong choose to express this sense of Siam’s entitlement to Angkorian heritage in his travelogue, written some sixty years after the establishment of the French Protectorate of Cambodia and seventeen years after the retrocession of the provinces of Siem Reap, Battambang, and Sisophon to Cambodia?

Drawing on Thongchai (1994) and Strate (2015), I suggest that *Nirat Nakhon Wat* can be understood in part as an expression of the Siamese ruling elite’s emergent nationalist narrative that mourned the losses of former Siamese territories to the colonial regimes of France and Britain. By portraying the French acquisition of Cambodia as an illegitimate theft of Siam’s vassal dependency, the creators of this national narrative<sup>17</sup> set the precedent that the Thai populace would forever lament the Siamese nation that might have been, were it not for the colonial incursions.

On the other hand, I argue that *Nirat Nakhon Wat* does much more than lament the “lost territories,” in that it challenges readers to acknowledge the messy truth that Thai and Cambodian heritage are entangled in ways that are guaranteed to perennially disrupt the purified idea of the nation.<sup>18</sup> Through its disclosure of mutual cultural borrowings over centuries, Damrong’s text prompts us to recognize that precolonial societies defined by appropriation, emulation, and hybridity will never be neatly reconciled with the concept of the territorially and culturally bounded nation. One can only hope that revisionist histories of the region aimed at local audiences will one day foster greater mutual understanding by showing how these processes of appropriation gave rise to a shared cultural heritage that could be the basis of amity rather than contempt.

<sup>17</sup> These included Prince Damrong himself and Luang Wichit Wathakan.

<sup>18</sup> Thailand’s extant claims to the heritage of Angkor have contributed to political tensions and conflicts with neighboring Cambodia for decades, mostly recently in the case of an alleged replica of Angkor Wat constructed on the grounds of the Phu Man Fa temple in Buriram Province, which prompted the Cambodian Ministry of Culture to launch an investigation. See <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2145011/abbot-denies-new-temple-complex-is-copy-of-angkor-wat> (accessed 12 January 2022). In the 1960s, tensions between the Thai Sarit regime and the government of Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk manifested in a dispute over the 11th century Preah Vihear temple complex, which both regimes claimed as their national heritage. The settlement of the case in favor of Cambodia by the International Court of Justice in 1962 sparked a public outcry in Thailand and mass demonstrations in protest of the ruling (Keyes, 1991). In 2003, rioters attacked the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh prompted by spurious news reports that a Thai actress had made the claim that Angkor belonged to Thailand, and in 2008, the Thai-Khmer border dispute involving the Preah Vihear temple erupted in armed clashes between Thai and Cambodian soldiers (Hinton, 2006). With regards to living heritage, Thailand and Cambodia have been arguing over Thailand’s listing of *Khon* on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage since it was first proposed, with many Cambodians asserting that it derives from the Khmer traditional dance *Lakhon Khol* and thus should not be listed by Thailand. See <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/24596/thailand-reacts-to-dance-controversy/> (accessed 15 January 2022) and <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/7days/international-heebie-jeebies-over-jeeb> (accessed 15 January 2022).

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