

**THAI MUSIC AT THE COURT OF CAMBODIA—
A PERSONAL SOUVENIR OF
LUANG PRADIT PHAIROH'S VISIT IN 1930**

by

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In 1930 His Majesty King Rama VII and Her Majesty Queen Rambhai made a royal tour of Indochina. While Their Majesties were visiting the areas now known as Vietnam and Cambodia, the rulers of these countries expressed such interest in Thai music that King Rama VII realized that he should have brought with him some of his court musicians. So His Majesty cabled the royal court of Thailand to send the best musicians to join his party. At that time Luang Pradit Phairoh was in charge of music in the royal court. He was also one of His Majesty's favorite musicians as well as His Majesty's teacher of music and composition.

Preparing to join the royal party, Luang Pradit, my father, told me that as his eldest son I was to accompany him as his personal attendant and to help in interpreting. I was eighteen and knew a little English, but I was apprehensive because I had not been abroad before and knew that my English was rather limited. In spite of this, however, my father preferred to take me as he did not feel he could rely on someone other than a member of his own family for a royal tour. So, of course, I obeyed.

We started out on May 2nd, a foreign affairs officer escorting us to the railway station where we boarded a train for Aranya Prades. We arrived there late in the evening of the same day, and a Thai officer arranged a car to take us to Phnom Penh, a few hundred kilometres further on. We drove all night, reaching the capital early the next morning where we were taken to the Palais Royale, the best hotel in the city. The next day His Majesty sent an order requesting

my father to join the royal party at Angkor Wat on the evening of the following day because a reception was to be given for His Majesty, and he wished my father to perform for the Cambodian and French dignitaries. The authorities in Phnom Penh provided a Frenchman as escort to drive us to Angkor Wat, where we arrived the next day at dusk, only about an hour before His Majesty's party.

As soon as His Majesty arrived, he ordered my father to play a solo at the banquet. "You must do your best," he said, "as your name is already known to these important people." That night my father played several solo compositions on the *ranat ek* to a most enthusiastic audience. I hid at the back of the hall, feeling too unimportant and too nervous to appear among such important people.

The following morning His Majesty was taken to see the ruins at Angkor Wat, and my father joined the royal party sightseeing. Since I was a minor member of our group, I did not join the party, but wandered around outside the great temple, seeing what I could. Later, realizing how much I had missed, I promised myself to return one day to Angkor to see the ruins properly.

Around noon of that day the whole party set out for the capital. On the way His Majesty stopped for lunch at a hotel, but we all ate outside in the Chinese shops nearby. While we were eating, one of His Majesty's relatives came out of the hotel and said that he would prefer to eat with us: he was tired of French food.

At last we arrived in Phnom Penh. His Majesty was invited to stay at the Royal Palace, and we returned to our hotel. Next evening a royal banquet was given by the King of Cambodia Srisawat Maniwongse for His Majesty, and after the banquet we were all invited to watch Cambodian dancing, which is very similar to Thai. Thai and Cambodian music, too, are similar. The Cambodian court had a *pi phat* ensemble like ours.

During His Majesty's short stay a private *ranat* recital was given by my father in the Royal Palace at His Majesty's command as

a return of hospitality to the King of Cambodia. After the recital the King of Cambodia told His Majesty that he would like very much to have such a wonderful musician in his own country to teach his court musicians. His Majesty's answer was, "If Your Majesty would like to have Luang Pradit stay here and teach, I should be most happy to lend him to you for a month." The King of Cambodia was most pleased and accepted the offer. So when His Majesty left Cambodia to return to Thailand, my father had to stay on in Cambodia. He was reluctant to be parted from His Majesty even for one month and was very sad at the moment of parting. His Majesty noticed this and smiled kindly as if to say, "Do your duty well and return to us soon."

After a few days my father, seeing how expensive it was to live at the Palais Royale Hotel and not wanting His Majesty to have to pay for it, asked the King of Cambodia if he could stay in the musicians' quarters in the Royal Palace as this would be more like what he was used to in Thailand. The King of Cambodia arranged for us to stay at a small hotel near the palace, just a few minutes' walk away, and that is where we lived for the rest of the time.

Our daily work was easy. My father coached the palace musicians and teachers every day until noon. Sometimes the King of Cambodia called my father in to talk with him, sometimes he would invite us to lunch. On other days the Chief Minister invited us to lunch or dinner along with important people close to the king. During the time my father was often asked to perform on the *ranat ek* or other instruments, such as the *pi nai* or *s̄ duang*, to demonstrate Thai music.

By the time the month was up and we had fulfilled His Majesty's offer, my father had coached many of the Cambodian musicians. He also learned many Cambodian compositions. I helped to notate them. One of the most popular of these is "*Nok Khao Khamae*," a set of variations my father composed based on an old Cambodian melody. The title means "Cambodian Dove." The Cambodian melodies

were used mostly as "middle versions" (*sōng chan*), which my father arranged in the longer, or "extended version" (*sām chan*) or else composed both an extended version and a "short version" (*chan dio*), making a full *thao* composition.

The King of Cambodia was very sorry to see us go. He appreciated my father's work and gave us several presents—some pieces of Cambodian silk for my father and two pieces for me, one red and one blue. As we were going, the King of Cambodia said to my father in broken Thai, "Please pay my deepest respects to His Majesty of Thailand." We could see that his eyes were filled with tears, and we realized how profound was his affection for His Majesty; they were very close friends. And of course, when my father returned to Thailand, he repeated these exact words to His Majesty.