

**CAMBODIA'S RELATIONS WITH SIAM  
IN THE EARLY BANGKOK PERIOD :  
THE POLITICS OF A TRIBUTARY STATE\***

by

David P. Chandler

Whenever the King of Siam and the Emperor of Vietnam wrote to each other about Cambodia in the early nineteenth century, they referred to it as a servant and as a child.<sup>1</sup> Officially, they both saw Cambodia, and especially its court, as an unruly dependent they should nourish and control. Privately, as they did in Laos in the 1820s, both monarchs sought the upper hand. When neither enjoyed a clear advantage, they agreed in writing to "raise" Cambodia together. Siam at these times called itself Cambodia's "father". Its "mother" was Vietnam.<sup>2</sup>

This adoption of Cambodia was part of a system of tributary diplomacy, derived from China, which was in use in most of eastern Asia at this time.<sup>3</sup> The newly constituted dynasties in Bangkok and Hué used the system to legitimize themselves and to restore their nations' traditional influence over bordering areas. In Cambodia, as in much of what is now Laos, their tributary networks overlapped.

---

\* This paper was delivered as a talk to the Siam Society on May 26, 1971.

- 1) See, for example, the Thai manuscripts catalogued in the National Library in Bangkok as *cotmai het ratchakan thi 2* (Documents from the second reign of the Bangkok period) *culasakaraj* 1173 (AD 1811)/19 K. This series of mss. is discussed in David K. Wyatt and Constance M. Wilson, "Thai Historical Materials in Bangkok", *Journal of Asian Studies (JAS)* XXV. 1 (November, 1965), 105-118. Subsequent references to them will take the form of e.g. CH 2/1173/19K.
- 2) CH 2/1174/25 and Phrabatsomdet phra nangklao chao yu hua (King Rama III), *Prachum Phraratchaniphon* (Collected writings), Bangkok, 1968, 141.
- 3) The best description of the Thai tributary system is in Neon Snidwongs, "The Development of Siam's Relations with Britain and France in the Reign of King Mongkut, 1851-1868", unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London (School of Oriental and African Studies), 1961, 38-101. For a discussion of the Vietnamese system, see Alexander B. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, Cambridge, Mass. 1971, 234-246.

As a client state, Cambodia was expected to provide its patrons with "barbarian" goods, such as bees' wax and cardamom, at specified intervals of time—usually once a year to Bangkok and once every three years to Hué. In exchange, the Thai and Vietnamese rulers recognized the Cambodian King, provided his court with "civilized" goods like paper and Vietnamese bureaucratic uniforms, and promised military aid against invasions. The patron states could also demand men for their own wars and public works; in the early nineteenth century, Cambodian workers were made to dig canals in Bangkok and Vietnam.

The ideological content of these arrangements—that is, the way they expressed servility and grandeur—was important to the Vietnamese, who saw themselves as a civilizing power, like China. The Thai, on the other hand, used the system largely as a practical and inexpensive way of obtaining certain goods and of keeping peace along their extensive frontiers. Cambodia was one of the poorest of Siam's tributary states—the goods it sent were almost all forest products. Many Lao and Malay states, on the other hand, sent ornamental gold and silver trees to Bangkok, worth many thousand pounds.<sup>4</sup>

Because the tributary system expressed relative status, it made no provision for diplomacy between two states, like Siam and Vietnam, with roughly the same power, and similar ambitions. In Cambodia, these two sidestepped the problem of relative position, during the times when neither enjoyed complete control, by awarding themselves equal rights over the Cambodian court. The ambiguities of dual control and dual allegiance suited everyone's short-term interests, but had for Cambodia unfortunate long-term effects.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Cambodia was lightly populated, poor, and socially disorganized.<sup>5</sup> Less than half a million

4) Snidwongs, "Development of Siam's Relations" 98-99 and Walter F. Vella, *Siam under Rama III*, Locust Valley, N.Y. 1957, 60. Cambodia's principal tributary product, to Siam at least, was *kravanh* cardamom, still highly valued in the twentieth century and used for Chinese medicine. See Jean Brenguès, "Notes sur la population de la région des montagnes des cardamoms", *Journal of the Siam Society (JSS)* II. 1 (1905), 57.

5) For some educated guesses about Cambodia's population in the nineteenth century, see Jean Delvert, *Le Paysan Cambodgien*, Paris, 1961, 449-450,



people, living for the most part in very small, isolated villages, were scattered throughout the lower Mekong basin. Phnom Penh had only 10,000 people, and the royal capital at Udong, thirty miles or so to the northwest, had less. The King, cut off from the countryside by poor communications, protocol, and his own advisors, generally busied himself with intrigue, pleasure, and the performance of religious ceremonies. In the provinces, virtually independent governors were unresponsive to the court, and derived their wealth from the relatively large numbers of slaves whom they controlled. On either side of Cambodia, extending their influence across its poorly defined and largely indefensible frontiers, were two powerful, and recently reorganized states.

Because of its poverty, disorganization and location, Cambodia's survival in this period clearly depended to a great extent on the actions or tolerance of its neighbors. The wisest course for the Cambodian court to follow, we see now, would have been to try to negotiate some form of overlapping allegiance to both states, although in practice this would have been difficult to achieve. As it was, however, the court and the provincial leaders pursued interests of their own, which were temporarily served by calling for assistance from one patron state or the other.

There were many reasons for Cambodians to choose sides. One was regionalism; the leaders of areas close to Siam, for example, were usually pro-Thai. Another reason was loyalty to a pro-Thai or temporarily pro-Vietnamese monarch or pretender. In still other cases, the Vietnamese and the Thai rented their allies, and indeed many loyalties in Cambodia in this period seem to have been negotiable.

By the 1840s, however, another set of values was at work. The Cambodian provincial leaders, going into rebellion against the Vietnamese, at first without any help from Siam, were motivated largely by loyalty to themselves as a group, and by their definition of themselves as Cambodians in the face of Vietnam's relentless *mission civilisatrice*.<sup>6</sup>

6) The best printed description of the rebellion is Royal Institute (compiler) *Cotmaihet ruang thap yuan khrang ratchakan thi 3* (Documents concerning the Vietnamese army in the third reign of the Bangkok period), Bangkok, 1933. See also the Cambodian manuscript, *Phongsawadar Khmaer* (Khmer Chronicle) in the National Library in Bangkok, hereafter referred to as PK. This manuscript was translated into Thai as *Ratchaphongsawadan Krung Kamputcha* (Royal Chronicle of the kingdom of Cambodia), Bangkok 1917, reprinted 1970. The Thai version, although linguistically accurate, frequently cuts or embellishes the Khmer text.

The notion that what makes a man Cambodian is his non-Vietnameseness has been a component of Cambodian nationalism ever since.<sup>7</sup> The revolt, however, succeeded only after Thai armies had fought the Vietnamese inside Cambodia for six years.

This gloomy and confusing period of Cambodian history has not been studied from a Cambodian point of view, using Cambodian documents, for nearly sixty years.<sup>8</sup> Cambodia's relations with Siam, in turn, have nearly always been written about by people with a pro-Thai or pro-French point of view. Trying to find out what really happened, and what forces were at work, is the best reason for studying this period and this relationship, but there are others. One is to see how two Cambodian institutions—the monarchy and the provincial leadership—affected the country's foreign relations. Another is to examine the way relations between states were carried out on the mainland of Southeast Asia just before the West arrived in force. A third is to isolate some themes from this period which have carried forward into the present.

Thai ambitions to exercise tight political control over the Cambodian court seem to date from the Thonburi period, during which King Taksin invaded Cambodia three times. He was moved to do so in part because in 1768 the Cambodian King refused to resume tributary payments to Siam, on the grounds that Taksin was non-royal, a usurper, and half Chinese.<sup>9</sup> In the 1770s, dynastic wars and factional quarrels among the Cambodians themselves had killed off most of the Cambodian royal family. By 1779, the only male survivor was a seven-year-old prince named Eng. Four years later, Vietnamese attacks forced Eng to take refuge in Bangkok with the newly enthroned founder of the Chakri

7) See, for example, On Ram, *Sunthaji khmaer nak jiat nyum* (Sunthaji, a Khmer Nationalist) Phnom Penh, 1969, a novel which deals with this period. See also Charles Meyer, *Derrière le Sourire Khmer*, Paris, 1971, 326 ff.

8) Adh'mard Leclère, *Histoire du Cambodge*, Paris, 1915, is full of inaccuracies and often uses its uncited sources in a cavalier fashion; see George Coedès' review in *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient* (BEFEO) XIV. 9 (1914) 47-54. Jean Moura, *Royaume du Cambodge*, 2 vols. Paris 1884 draws heavily on one manuscript chronicle (number 1403 in the Institut Bouddhique in Phnom Penh) which has only recently been printed in full as Eng Sut (ed.) *Akkasar Mahaboros Khmaer* (Documents about Cambodian Heroes), Phnom Penh, 1969.

9) See PK, 105, and Eng Sut, *Akkasar*, 904 ff.



Dynasty, King Rama I, who provided him with a house. Eng stayed there for eleven years. When Cambodian leaders in the early 1790s asked Rama I to send him back as King, Rama I refused, on the grounds that if Eng died there the Cambodian royal family would become extinct.<sup>10</sup>

In 1794, however, when Eng reached his majority, Rama I provided him, in Bangkok, with official royal titles<sup>11</sup>—a gesture which in effect permitted Eng to be King, and represented a new kind of Thai control over the Cambodian court. Eng was then allowed to go back to Udong (at his departure, a Cambodian source asserts, thunder boomed in a cloudless sky)<sup>12</sup>—where he was crowned by Cambodian officials.

Eng paid dearly to be King. He was taken home by a pro-Thai minister named Pok, who had been his guardian in Bangkok and who now enjoyed wide administrative powers. Rama I also used Eng's coronation as an excuse to remove the northwestern quarter of Cambodia from Eng's control, bestowing the governorship on a Cambodian official named Baen, who had served as *de facto* ruler of northern Cambodia, under loose Thai supervision, through most of the 1780s. The region consisted of the extensive provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap (Maha Nokor) and included most of Cambodia's frontier with Siam.<sup>13</sup>

In placing Baen in charge of this area, Rama I accomplished several objectives. He secured a friendly buffer zone along a vulnerable frontier, he emphasized (to Eng) the fragility of Eng's power, and he probably saved Baen's life, for the new governor had made many enemies during his rule. Rama I could not foresee, of course, the depth of the resentment his action would cause for over a century among the Cambodian elite.

10) Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Phraratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 2* (the Royal Chronicle of the second reign of the Bangkok period), Bangkok, Khrusapha edition, 2 vols. 1961, I. 97-98.

11) Eng Sut, 1013.

12) For Eng's full title, see CH 3/1209/15.

13) Baen's oath of allegiance to Rama I has survived as CH 1/1156/7. See also caophraya Khathathon Thoranin, *Phongsawadan muang phratabong* (Chronicle of the region of Battambang), number 16 in the collection *Prachum Phongsawadan* (Collected Chronicles), Bangkok, Khrusapha edition, 1964, 119-149.

Eng reigned at Udong for barely two years, and died in 1796 after paying a ceremonial visit to Bangkok. Cambodians popularly believe that the Thai poisoned him there, but this is unlikely, since all the evidence suggests that he was exemplary in his loyalty to Rama I. His early death, however, certainly allowed the Thai to tighten their administrative control over Cambodia, for Eng's advisor, Pok, now became Regent with full powers to act for Eng's six-year-old son, Prince Chan.

Chan is a key figure in this period of Cambodian history. During his reign (1806-1835), he led his country away from Thai influence and into direct Vietnamese control. The years he spent as a boy are crucial to an understanding of his attitudes when he assumed the throne. As Prince Damrong pointed out, Chan spent his youth under close supervision among the bitter, faction-ridden and flattering Cambodian court, rather than under Rama I's more fatherly control.<sup>14</sup> His courtiers resented Chan's dependency on Pok and Rama I, regretted the loss of the northwest, and remembered the Thai invasions of the 1770s and 1780s. They communicated these resentments to Chan, who on his own visits to Bangkok, in 1802 and 1805, personally antagonized Rama I by associating with gamblers and by offenses against palace protocol.<sup>15</sup>

The most important event affecting Thai-Cambodian relations in this period, however, did not take place in either country, but to the east, where a new emperor, Gia Long, re-established the Nguyen dynasty at Hué, and gave it the new name of Vietnam. For the first time in its history, this empire extended from the borders of China to the Mekong Delta, where it was now able to direct and supervise the colonizing and military pressures which the rulers of this area had for two hundred years or so brought to bear against Cambodia.

In his years of struggling for the throne, Gia Long had frequently sent tribute to Bangkok in exchange for military aid and political support. Upon becoming an emperor himself, he stopped sending tribute and instead began to seek it. In 1805, he sent a ninety-eight man embassy to Udong.<sup>16</sup> The embassy apparently carried a letter from Gia Long

14) Prince Damrong, *Chronicle*, I, 109-110.

15) CH 2/1174/24 and CH 3/undated/58.

16) PK, 136-137; Eng Sut, 1028.



offering to place Cambodia under his protection. Although Pok and Prince Chan greeted it warmly, they made no promises. Less than a month after the embassy had left, the young prince and his advisor hurried off to Bangkok, undoubtedly to discuss it with Rama I.

Although Thai and Cambodian sources are not specific on this point, it seems likely that Rama I gave Pok and Chan permission to send tribute to Vietnam. He was eager to maintain friendly relations with Gia Long, and he probably assumed that Chan's gesture would not undermine his own position at the Cambodian court.

Pok died during this visit, and a month later Chan received his royal titles in Bangkok from Rama I.<sup>17</sup>

Soon after Chan returned to Udong, in early 1807, Gia Long sent him a golden seal of investiture, closely resembling the camel-shaped one he himself had received from his own patron, the Chinese Emperor in Peking. The Vietnamese made no effort, for the time being, to follow up this action with attempts at political control. Nonetheless, Prince Chan, his own master at last, was probably quick to see the short-term advantages of playing one patron off against the other.<sup>18</sup>

Two years later, Rama I and Baen, the governor of Battambang, died within months of each other. One of Rama II's first actions as King was to appoint Baen's son as ruler of Battambang, thus sealing Thai political influence over this region.<sup>19</sup> Rama II's action angered Chan, who seems to have thought that Battambang would revert to Cambodia after Baen's death. In a move that had a deep effect on what happened later, Chan failed to go to Rama I's cremation ceremony in Bangkok. He sent his three brothers Snguon, Im and Duang in his place.<sup>20</sup> Rama

17) PK, 138.

18) See the Khmer manuscript, *Phongsawadar bei khsae wat Prek Kuy* (three-volume chronicle from Wat Prek Kuy), number 1049 in the Institut Bouddhique in Phnom Penh, 23. This document, composed in verse in 1874, covers the period 1780-1847, and is a rich source for local history. The chronicle envisages Chan as telling his advisors in 1807 that "when a child has trouble with his father, he gets rid of suffering by embracing his mother; when he has difficulty with his mother, he runs to his father for protection".

19) PK, 159. For some demographic data, see CH 3/1192/4.

20) Chan was born in 1791, Im and Snguon (of different mothers) in 1794, and Duang in 1796.

II's response to this rebuke was to raise the brothers in rank without consulting Chan.<sup>21</sup> The timing of this action suggests that Rama II intended it as a reassertion of Chakri influence over the Cambodian court, and hoped to gain the personal loyalty of Chan's brothers, who were all under twenty years of age. In May 1810, Rama II sent them back to Udong, bearing an order to Chan to send 5,000 troops to Bangkok to help in a war against Burma.

From Rama II's point of view, these actions were within his rights. Chan, however, found them insulting, and ignored the order to levy troops. When two of his ministers raised them on their own, Chan had them killed, and wrote Gia Long that he might soon require some military assistance.<sup>22</sup> Thai and Cambodian sources agree that these actions marked a turning-point in Cambodia's relations with Siam. From then on, Chan's court polarized into pro-Thai and anti-Thai factions. His brother Snguon, whom Rama II had named Viceroy of Cambodia in 1810, was openly pro-Thai; in early 1811, he fled to the northwest, and formally offered his allegiance to Rama II.<sup>23</sup>

Chan guessed correctly that Snguon's flight would lead to a Thai invasion. To counter it, he asked for Vietnamese help, and took refuge in Vietnam. At this point his other brothers, Im and Duang, went over to the Thai.

The Thai force that reached Udong in May, 1811 was too small to garrison the country or to defeat the Vietnamese, who had not yet attacked. The Thai withdrew in June, after burning down Udong and Phnom Penh. Soon afterwards, Chan came back to Cambodia, accompanied by a contingent of Vietnamese advisors; at their request, for strategic reasons, he moved his capital to Phnom Penh.

The Vietnamese benefited most from the events of 1810-1811, for although the Thai had failed to capture Chan and to place Snguon on the throne, Chan himself had merely exchanged one form of dependency for

21) PK, 143 and Wat Prek Kuy ms., 15. See also Prince Damrong, *Chronicle*, I. 115.

22) CH 2/1172/11, Wat Prek Kuy ms., 18-21, and Rama III, *Collected Writings*, 141.

23) CH 2/1172/18.



another, and his three brothers, in Bangkok, were now political threats to him. Chan had purged his court, for the time being, of its pro-Thai faction, but at a price, for the political and economic controls which the Vietnamese now began to impose on his country were painful and expensive.

Thai and Cambodian sources say little about what happened in Cambodia in the twenty-odd years of Vietnamese control. One point of interest is that Chan continued to send tributary missions to Bangkok as well as to Hué. Except for 1820, when an anti-Vietnamese rebellion broke out along the coast of Cambodia, missions travelled to Bangkok annually between 1816 and 1828.<sup>24</sup> On the first of these, Chan sent two hundred jars of lacquer;<sup>25</sup> the goods transmitted by other missions are unknown.

Although it seems unusual that Chan, who had openly defied Rama II, continued to send tribute to him and to Rama III, these missions accomplished several Cambodian objectives. They helped to forestall Thai military interference, provided useful political and military intelligence, and probably allowed Chan to maintain liaison with his brothers. In 1829, apparently, a similar mission provided a channel for requesting assistance from the Thai.<sup>26</sup> Another benefit of the missions were the luxury goods—principally embroidered silk—which the Thai awarded the ambassadors. The fact that a different high official led the mission each year suggests that Chan used the embassies to reward his friends. In any case, there is no reason to suppose that these missions, which were well-known to the Vietnamese, represented a change of heart. As Chan showed in 1833-1834, his anti-Thai biases remained intact.

From the Thai point of view, the missions were a good way of obtaining such goods as lacquer and cardamom, of getting information about the Cambodians and the Vietnamese, and of keeping in touch with Cambodian officials whose loyalty to Chan, in some cases, might be deflected.

24) These missions are listed in CH 3/1192/4. Each one included, on the average, seventy officials and retainers, who stayed in Bangkok for about two months.

25) PK, 165.

26) *Chaophraya Thipakarawongs, Phraratchaphongsawadan krung ratanakosin ratchakan thi 3* (The Royal Chronicle of the Third Reign of the Bangkok Period), Bangkok, Khrusapha edition, 2 vols. 1961, I. 99. See also Charles Gutzlaff, *Journal of Three Voyages Along the Coast of China*, London, 1834, reprinted Taipei 1968, 48-49.

Rama III, who had succeeded his father in 1824, was eager to avenge Vietnamese participation in the Lao rebellion of 1826-1827.<sup>27</sup> In 1833, he saw his chance, when a revolt against the second Nguyen emperor, Minh Mang, broke out in southern Vietnam. Rama III now decided to attack the depleted Vietnamese garrison in Cambodia, place Prince Im on the throne there (Snguon had died in Bangkok in 1823), and to push on into southern Vietnam to aid the anti-Hu  rebellion. To accomplish these objectives, he chose an experienced commander, *chaophraya* Bodin Decha, to lead the expeditionary force.<sup>28</sup>

The Thai invasion was short-lived and unsuccessful, although at the outset Cambodia's own defenses collapsed. The Thai fought several battles inside Vietnam in early 1834, but the naval elements of the Thai expedition made serious mistakes, and by March 1834 their army was in full retreat, falling back through Cambodia, burning Phnom Penh and razing the countryside as it went. On the way, they were harrassed and ambushed by Cambodian guerrilla bands, acting on orders from their provincial leaders and from Chan.<sup>29</sup>

The depth of Cambodia's "treachery" surprised Bodin, who also realized now that Im and his brother, Duang, who had both been in Thailand for over twenty years, had little knowledge of Cambodia and very little Cambodian support. To prepare Im for the throne, Bodin gave him some responsibilities in Battambang, where the Thai-appointed governor had recently died. Duang was given a smaller province that had formerly belonged to Cambodia. The Princes took up their posts in 1834.<sup>30</sup>

27) Thipakarawongs, *Chronicle*, 58 ff. and Department of Fine Arts (comp.) *Cotmai et ruang praab khabot wiangchan* (Documents of the suppression of the Vientiane revolt) Bangkok, 1958. See also Bui Quang Tung, "Cao Anu Roi de Vientiane   travers les documents vietnamiens", *Bulletin de la Soci t  des  tudes Indochinoises* (BSEI) XXX (1958), 401-406.

28) For biographic data on Bodin, see Akin Rabibhadana, *Organization of Thai Society in the Early Bangkok Period*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1969, Appendix H.

29) The best account of this guerrilla activity is in the Wat Prek Kuy ms., 71-80. See also Thipakarawongs, I. 148-149, and PK, 179-180.

30) Thipakarawongs, I. 154, and Eng Sut, 1050. See also Department of Fine Arts (comp.) *Cotmai et kiewkap khamen le yuon nai ratchakan thi 3* (Documents about relations with the Khmer and the Vietnamese in the third reign), Volume 67 in the collection *Prachum Phongsawadan* (Collected Chronicles), Bangkok, Khrusapha edition, 1969, volume 42. 376-381.



Again, as in 1811, the beneficiaries were the Vietnamese. When Chan died in early 1835, they named his eldest daughter (he left no sons) Queen on a provisional basis.<sup>31</sup> This bewildered girl, a nineteen year-old named Mei, spent her twelve-year "reign" under various forms of house arrest, and had little influence on events. Administrative power in the capital now fell into the hands of Vietnamese bureaucrats sent up from Saigon to manage Cambodia as a possession of Vietnam.<sup>32</sup> Tributary missions to Siam seem to have stopped. Provincial governors, however, remained at their posts,<sup>33</sup> and for the time being offered no significant resistance.

At the end of 1839, the Vietnamese lured Im from Battambang to Phnom Penh by promising him the throne.<sup>34</sup> When he got there, however, the Vietnamese put him in a cage and sent him to Hué.<sup>35</sup> Fearing Duang's complicity, the Thai arrested him, and confined him to Bangkok.<sup>36</sup> At this time, Battambang returned to Thai control.

By imprisoning Im and Mei, the Vietnamese assumed that they had increased their influence over Cambodia by snuffing out the source of its political vitality. In fact, such political power as there was in Cambodia—that is, the capacity to mobilize support—seems at this time to have been very largely in the hands of the virtually independent provincial governors and their assistants. There were about five hundred of these, scattered through Cambodia's thirty-four provinces; each controlled anywhere from twenty to several hundred men.<sup>37</sup> The

31) Wat Prek Kuy ms., 84, PK, 182. Her name does not appear in the official list of Cambodian monarchs, prepared in the 1860s. See E. Doudart de Lagrée, *Explorations et Missions*, Paris 1883, 17.

32) Thipakarawongs, I. 173, CH 3/1202/43 and CH 3/1202/43 K 5.

33) Wat Prek Kuy ms., 95-96, PK, 185, and Eng Sut, 1051.

34) CH 3/1200/94 and *Cot maihet ruang thap yuan*, 37. For an eye-witness account of Im's departure, see *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* XIV (1842), 320-325.

35) For the rather humane conditions of his captivity there, see CH 3/1202/43 K 15.

36) Thipakarawongs, I. 186, PK, 186, says that Duang was "invited" to Bangkok to "stay at the palace". For Duang's oath of loyalty to Rama III at about this time, see CH 3/undated/56.

37) See Prince Damrong Rajanuphab (ed.) *Tamnan thamniap bandasakdi krung kamputcha* (The system of rankings in the kingdom of Cambodia), Bangkok, 1922, and A. Fourès, "Royaume de Cambodge. Organisation Politique", *Excursions et Reconnaissances* (E & R) III (1880), 168-211.

Cambodian monarch awarded them with titles, and they served at his pleasure, for indefinite terms of office.<sup>38</sup> The titles, in turn, gave them undisputed day-to-day control over the people and goods in their districts. They were not, however, landowners, for aside from some abortive efforts by the Vietnamese to establish land titles (and land taxes) in Cambodia, none existed until the 1850s.<sup>39</sup> Theoretically, the governors were clients of the King, who expected them to provide him with soldiers, food and luxury goods in exchange for their titles and his protection. Under a weak monarchy, however, the provincial leaders were unresponsive to the throne, once they had obtained their seals of office. In many cases, they were indistinguishable from bandits, and their titles often passed from father to son in what the Vietnamese considered to be "aboriginal" fashion.<sup>40</sup>

Throughout the years of Vietnamese domination, Cambodia's provincial leaders were quiescent as long as their own power remained more or less intact and as long as a monarch, even as weak as Mei, remained in the capital with power to bestow official ranks and titles. The regional leaders were scattered, badly armed, and independent of each other. Communications between provinces were poor, and social mechanisms for any coordinated action, such as a rebellion, were undeveloped. Although the leaders needed outside assistance to overthrow the Vietnamese, many of them were in no hurry to ask for it, remembering the ravages of the Thai retreat in 1834.

Throughout the 1830s, the leaders in the countryside had not been seriously disturbed. In the middle of 1840, however, the Vietnamese attacked them directly, and thus upset the balance of forces which allowed them—or anyone else—to rule Cambodia. Acting on orders from Minh Mang, the Vietnamese now divided the Kingdom into three administrative districts, eliminating the provinces,<sup>41</sup> whose governors

38) On the importance of these seals see Tiounn, "Cérémonial Cambodgien concernant la prise des fonctions des mandarins nouvellement promus" *Revue Indochinoise (RI)* 1907, 71-75.

39) Etienne Aymonier, "Critique du Royaume du Cambodge de M. Moura", *E & R VII* (1883) 213, and Gustave Janneau, "Le Cambodge d'autrefois", *RI*, 1914, 409-410.

40) Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, 251.

41) CH 3/1202 43 K 5 and CH 3/1203/43.



were told to turn in their seals of office.<sup>42</sup> Everyone was ordered to wear Vietnamese clothes. The Vietnamese also removed Mei and her younger sisters from Phnom Penh.

Coming after years of provocations by the Vietnamese—especially against Buddhist institutions—these actions infuriated the provincial leaders in Cambodia.<sup>43</sup> In September and October, 1840, they led most of the Kingdom, except the environs of Phnom Penh, into revolt, massacring isolated Vietnamese garrisons. In the absence of a monarch, some of the rebel leaders invented titles and seals of office for themselves far higher than they would otherwise have obtained.<sup>44</sup>

In November, 1840, two of the leaders went to Bangkok and asked Rama III for military help; they also asked him to allow Duang to return to Cambodia as king.<sup>45</sup> Rama III agreed to release the prince, and gave him a detailed letter, filled with political and military advice, which has survived.<sup>46</sup> In it, Rama III argued that a major reason for intervening in Cambodia was to forestall the disappearance of Buddhism there.

*Chaophraya* Bodin was once again put in charge of the Thai expeditionary force. After capturing the Vietnamese fort at Pursat and testing the depth of loyalty the provincial leaders had for Duang, the prince was allowed to return to the abandoned capital at Udong, where he built a wooden palace and began naming officials to specific posts.<sup>47</sup>

Alarmed by these events, and under orders from the new Vietnamese emperor, Thieu Tri, to reach a peaceful settlement in Cambodia, the Vietnamese now returned Mei, under guard, to Phnom Penh, where they apparently crowned her Queen, an action they had failed to take in 1835.<sup>48</sup> The Vietnamese then tried to calm the populace by sending out letters from Mei informing them of Thieu Tri's compassionate friendship for

42) *Cotmaihet ruang thap yuan*, 10-11.

43) CH 3/1202/42, Eng Sut, 1054-1055, and PK, 186-188.

44) PK, 186.

45) Thipakarawongs, II, 25. The full list of officials appears in CH 3/1202/25.

46) Rama III, *Collected Writings*, 144-148.

47) Thipakarawongs, II, 47, and CH 3/1203/105.

48) CH 3/1203/13/3.

Cambodia.<sup>49</sup> Privately, the Vietnamese hinted that peace might be possible if Duang married the Queen, who was his niece.<sup>50</sup> When these tactics failed, the Vietnamese dictated similar letters to Prince Im, whom they had brought along as "Prime Minister". All these messages, unsurprisingly, had no effect, largely because they promised the rebels neither power nor forgiveness. In November, 1841, the Vietnamese withdrew from Phnom Penh, taking their royal protégés with them. Im died soon afterwards, and the Vietnamese commander then committed suicide, following orders from Thieu Tri.<sup>51</sup>

In theory, Duang and Bodin had now fulfilled their mission, for the capital region was in their hands, most of the countryside was free of Vietnamese, and the rebel leaders had formally rallied to them in large numbers. In theory, Duang could now take the throne, and Bodin could lead the Thai army home.

In fact, however, several obstacles stood in their way. Diplomatically, the Vietnamese had not yet sued for peace, either locally or from Hué. Politically, the Cambodian royal regalia—a sword, a conch-shell and other Brahmanical symbols of a reigning monarch—remained in Vietnamese hands.<sup>52</sup> The countryside was desolate and empty after two years of heavy fighting, and local leaders now seemed less vehement about supporting Duang than they had been about expelling—or perhaps merely killing—the Vietnamese. Militarily, neither the Thai nor the Vietnamese had enough forces for a clear victory, although both sides had too much at stake to sue for peace. An uneasy truce took up most of 1843 and 1844, with Thai-Cambodian forces controlling the countryside while the Vietnamese held strategically located forts and controlled the navigable streams.

49) CH 3/1203/14/14.

50) CH 3/1203/1-24.

51) CH 3/1203/14/13.

52) Chan had taken the regalia with him to Saigon in 1812, according to Janneau, "Le Cambodge d'autrefois (*suite*)" *RI*, 1914, 632. For the importance of the Cambodian regalia, see Sachidanand Sahai, *Les institutions politiques et l'organisation administrative de Cambodge ancien* (Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient, LXXXV), Paris, 1970, 21.



In 1845, as both sides began to receive reinforcements, the Vietnamese worked through some anti-Thai Cambodian officials to recapture Phnom Penh without a shot.<sup>53</sup> Once again the Vietnamese brought Mei to Phnom Penh, attempting to win over Duang and the local leaders, without effect.<sup>54</sup> In 1845, Duang resumed formal tributary payments to Bangkok.<sup>55</sup>

In the following year, Thai reinforcements arrived, and the Vietnamese began negotiating for peace. One reason that they did so was to free troops for possible duty against the French, whose ships had recently shelled the coast of central Viet-Nam.<sup>56</sup> Although the Vietnamese declared that they wanted to resume the system of dual control, in fact they were relinquishing their influence over Cambodia, and they knew it. Even so, Duang sent a tributary mission to Hué in 1847.<sup>57</sup> When it returned six months later, the Vietnamese released Mei, relinquished the royal regalia, and withdrew their troops. On the fourth day of the week, the fourth day of the waxing moon of the fourth month (March 8, 1848) Duang paid homage to the royal titles that had been sent to him from Bangkok, inscribed on a golden plate.<sup>58</sup> Shortly afterwards, he was crowned. He was fifty-three. Although Bodin's army soon returned to Siam, Thai political advisors stayed behind. The Thai also extended their economic and political control over the Cambodian province of Pursat at this time.<sup>59</sup>

With Thai advisors at Udong, the Vietnamese preoccupied elsewhere, and another Cambodian province effectively in their hands, the Thai were in a stronger position than they had enjoyed for fifty years.

53) CH 3/1207/4; Eng Sut, 1061 and PK, 197.

54) Three of these letters, in Cambodian and Vietnamese, have survived as CH 3/1205/1-3.

55) CH 3/1206/193.

56) John F. Cady, *The Roots of French Imperialism in Eastern Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1954), 74-75.

57) For the embassy's report, see Royal Institute (compiler) *Kamhaikan ruang thap yuan nai ratchakan thi 3* (Testimonies about the Vietnamese army in the third reign of the Bangkok period), Bangkok, 1932, 51-85.

58) CH 3/1209/26; Eng Sut, 1070; PK, 208.

59) CH 3/1211/2.

In some ways, indeed, Duang's position in 1848 resembled Eng's in 1794. There were differences, however. Duang was thirty years older than his father had been when he assumed the throne. Unlike Eng, he was an experienced administrator, and had a freer hand at making day-to-day decisions. His three eldest sons, who included the next two Kings of Cambodia, were in effect hostages of the Thai court.

Duang's administrative successes over the next few years were due in part to the fact that he had greater control over the provinces than either Chan or Mei. Because of his own unquestioned loyalty to Rama III, the Thai encouraged Duang to staff provincial posts with men who had been loyal to him, and to the Thai, in the early 1840s.<sup>60</sup> By starting from scratch, Duang restored some of the reciprocity between the capital and the countryside that had broken down in the 1830s, if not before.

However, the peace that Cambodia now enjoyed was due less to Thai resurgence or Duang's talents than to the fact that Vietnam was momentarily in no position to intervene. All Cambodian history, at least since the eighteenth century, is colored by the fact that Udong and Phnom Penh are more accessible to Saigon than to Bangkok. Unlike Chan, Duang was personally grateful for Thai protection. He was still forced, for military reasons at least, to remain friendly with Vietnam.<sup>61</sup>

Through most of the early Bangkok period Cambodian provincial leaders had access to more power and resources than the kings they intermittently obeyed. The monarch's main domestic functions, it seems, were to bestow titles and ranks and to perform religious ceremonies that symbolized and defined the unity of the kingdom. Internationally, the kings could ask for foreign intervention, but the fact that provincial leaders controlled the countryside determined what happened to the invaders. The Thai invasion of 1833-1834 and the Vietnamese reforms of 1840 alienated these men, who to protect themselves "betrayed" first one imperial power and then the other. The comparative success of the Thai, and the failure of the Vietnamese to mobilize and command popular support in Cambodia can be traced partly to cultural factors and partly to the Thai tendency to work through provincial leaders whom the

60) CH 3/1210/11-12.

61) Charles Méyniard, *Le Second Empire en Indochine*, Paris, 1891, I. 461.



Vietnamese bullied or ignored. The Thai understood the way Cambodian society was put together, while the Vietnamese were contemptuous of all of Cambodia's institutions.

In 1794, 1806 and 1848 the Thai placed a Cambodian prince on the Cambodian throne. All three had spent much of their lives under close Thai tutelage. Yet in 1812, 1833 and 1841 the Thai had to invade Cambodia to reassert what they took to be their "natural" authority. To be successful, these coronations and incursions needed more Thai involvement, more Cambodian support, and less Vietnamese opposition than they received. The Thai never managed to impose their will on Cambodia for more than a few years at a time.

This is also because Thai-Cambodian relations like other components of Cambodian history in this period, and ever since, have been shaped to a large extent by the actions of the empire of Vietnam and its successor states, against whom the Thai, for geographic and political reasons, have provided very little meaningful protection. Cambodia's rulers have always had to make arrangements with Vietnam, if only for their own safety, that "betray" Cambodia's longstanding and perhaps more deeply felt relationships with the Thai. Even today, in spite of significant progress, Cambodia's demographic weakness and its vulnerability to attack from the east are more or less what they were in the early nineteenth century, although the mechanisms of diplomacy have changed, and although the French, and then others, have replaced the Thai and Vietnamese courts as the patrons of Cambodia.

