

THE DUTIES OF THE CORPS OF ROYAL SCRIBES:
AN UNDATED KHMER MANUSCRIPT
FROM THE COLONIAL ERA*

by

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Manuscript 74.002 in the archives of the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh consists of six sheets of foolscap paper in Khmer, signed by a Cambodian official named Yim who was in charge at the time of the corps of royal scribes.¹ The manuscript is undated, but internal evidence suggests that it was composed between 1928 and 1932, i.e. in the reign of King Sisowath Monivong (r. 1927–1941).²

The text lists eighteen duties of the corps of scribes. Some of these are linked to the colonial era, but most appear to date from earlier times. Their interest to an historian lies in the boundaries they place on the scribes' activities, in the world-picture and historiographical notions that these boundaries imply, and in the comparisons that might be made with

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- 1) In the early nineteenth century, the official's title (*ukya prannathipodei*) was borne by the *ukya* in charge of the 'right hand' contingent of royal clerks. See Prince Damrong Ratchanuphab, *Tamra tamniap bandasakdi krung kamputcha* (Royal rankings at the Cambodian court), (Bangkok, 1921) p. 5, and A. de Villemereuil, *Explorations et Missions de Doudart de Lagrée* (Paris, 1884) p. 69. In the 1870s, the royal clerks (*krom alak*) included thirty men, of whom eleven were "Siamese": Foures, "Royaume du Cambodge. Organisation Politique" Cochinchine Française, *Excursions & Reconnaissances No. 8* (1880) p. 191.
- 2) The eleventh paragraph of the text mentions the railroad between Phnom Penh and Battambang as incomplete. The line was begun in 1928 and finished in 1932. See Rene Morizon, *Monographie du Cambodge* (Hanoi, 1931) p. 233, and the plate at p. 254 for the unfinished bridge also mentioned in paragraph eleven of the text.

similar documents, when they come to light, composed at other Southeast Asian courts.

The rules themselves have at least two specific points of interest. One is that the scribes' duties apparently did not include recording and preserving a monarch's spoken words or writings. This fact, in itself difficult to explain, may explain, the absence of this kind of material in Cambodian official histories, or *bansavatar*—an absence that contrasts sharply with the abundance of such documents in the Vietnamese imperial annals.³ Another point is that most of the scribes' duties are linked to the king's life-cycle and his ceremonial activities and little is said about the way Cambodia was actually ruled. To the scribes, it was enough to note the arrival of a new French *résident supérieur* (rule nine) or the status of certain French-sponsored public works (rule eleven).⁴ What emerges from the rules, and the views which they suggest, is the isolation of the palace and the king from everyday life in the kingdom. This isolation had been encouraged by the French at least since the beginning of the century, but it was also accepted willingly enough, it would seem, by the king and his entourage.⁵

It should be noted, incidentally, that the archival materials (Khmer *jotmay haet*, cf. Thai *chotmai het*) referred to in the text no longer existed, in 1970-1971, either in the former royal palace or in the national

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- 3) On Cambodian chronicles, see G. Coedès, 'Etudes cambodgiennes XVI. Essai de classification des documents historiques cambodgiens conservés à la bibliothèque de l'EFEO', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient* XVIII/9 (September 1918) pp. 15-28. The nineteenth century Vietnamese annals are discussed in A.B. Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971) pp. 323-325.
 - 4) Two of the rules, however—the tenth and the sixteenth—are of more general interest.
 - 5) Monivong's grandson, Norodom Sihanouk, recalled in 1971 that the king 'n'avait rien à faire en ce qui concernait le travail de bureau. Il vivait entouré de ses favorites, de sa nombreuse progéniture. Il paraissait heureux...' Norodom Sihanouk, *Indochine vu de Peking* (Paris, 1972) p. 27.

library in Phnom Penh, although the palace, like the Buddhist Institute, then housed a large collection of manuscript *bansavatar*. Finally, students seeking details of the royal ceremonies that until 1970 punctuated the Cambodian year, in Phnom Penh at least and took up so much of the scribes' time (rules twelve through sixteen) should refer to the work of Mme. Porée-Maspero and other French and Cambodian scholars.⁶

TRANSLATION

1. The scribes must look after the sacred chronicles of Cambodia's kings, who reigned at various times. They must make sure the dates of the reigns are accurate, and they must verify the narrative portions of the text.
2. The scribes must write down the king's royal titles as these are inscribed on the strip of gold foil [that forms part of his coronation regalia]. They must also record the titles of his parents, of the heir apparent, and those of the queen and the king's other consorts. All these titles must be properly recorded.
3. From archival documents, the exact hour, day, month and year when the king took office should be recorded, as well as his birthday, his given names, and the location of his palace. Details of royal journeys should also be set down, and details of feasts and ceremonies held by the monarch in the palace.

6) See Eveline Porée-Maspero et al, *Ceremonies des douze mois* (Phnom Penh, n.d. but c. 1954), translated into Khmer, and revised, as Pech Sal and Nhun Soeun, *Puhi brajam dop pi khae* (Festivals of the twelve months) (Phnom Penh, 1966). Both books draw on Chap Pin (ed.) *Brah rajpithi tuas somas* (Royal festivals of the twelve months) 3 vols. (Phnom Penh, 1952-1960). For the *tang tok* ceremony discussed in rules fourteen and fifteen, see A. Menetrier, 'Les fêtes de Tang Tok à Phnom Penh', *Revue Indochinoise* XV/10 (October 1912) pp. 334-345. It would be interesting to compare these festivals with their counterparts in Siam, discussed by King Rama V in *Prah ratchapithi sip song duan* (Royal festivals of the twelve months), (Bangkok, various editions) and in H.G. Quaritch Wales, *Siamese State Ceremonies* (London, 1932).

4. If the queen or any of the king's consorts gives birth to a child, the scribes should set down the month, day and hour of the birth, as well as the names given to the child.
5. The scribes should record the circumstances whereby honorific titles are given to ministers, and to male and female civil servants, as well as to important councillors and ladies-in-waiting.
6. If a king dies, the scribes must compute and set down the exact hour, day, month and year of the occurrence, as well as the king's age at his death, and the number of years he had reigned.
7. The scribes must write the poetry recited at performances of the royal troupe...* When there are ceremonies at the palace associated with the king's children, the scribes must write appropriate songs for the troupe to sing, and the chief scribe himself should recite the titles given to the king's children [as a result of the particular ceremony].
8. If there is a royally-sponsored festival honoring a white elephant, the elephant's name and titles should be recorded, as well as the hymns intoned in its honor by the royal troupe. The chief scribe, in accordance with tradition should choose the titles and bestow them on the elephant.
9. If a new *gouverneur*** comes to look after Prey Nokor [the Khmer name for Saigon], or a new *résident supérieur*** comes to look after the kingdom of Cambodia, or if a new *comptolleur*** comes to look after the king's possessions, the scribes must record the exact day, month and year [of the official's arrival] and must write his name clearly in the palace archives.
10. If a high official commits a serious offence, and has to leave royal service, or be confined to prison, or be executed, the scribes must record the details of the event as clearly as possible.

* and assign costumes? three words illegible.

** French word appears transliterated in Khmer.

11. The scribes should record all the royal business that is transacted in the palace compound. They should also record progress on the steel bridge [across the Bassac] at Chroi Ambok, the railroad between Phnom Penh and Battambang, and the king's pavilion being built [by the French] at Phnom Prey Khieu, sometimes called Phnom Kotop, in the district of Thnol Totung in Kandal province. In recording these enterprises, the month and date [of their completion?] must be clearly stated, using French and Khmer systems of notation, so that they can be put in the royal chronicles.

12. Members of the corps of scribes should each have [proper writing equipment, viz] a metal stylus, thumb-guard, and chalk [on hand] at royal coronations and also during the festival in honor of the dead that takes place in the palace on the 14 and 15 waxing days of the month of *phatrobot* [August-September], in accordance with tradition.

13. The scribes must compose the prayers recited at the royal festivals associated with the water festival [in November], and those associated with the ceremonies honoring the moon that take place on the 14 and 15 waxing days of the same month. The scribes must also assemble the [court brahmins ?] so that they can recite prayers for three nights until dawn, at this time of year, according to tradition.

14. The scribes must ask the royal guards to bring the golden foil [inscribed with the king's titles] and place it on the throne in the great hall of the palace during the feast of Tang Tok [when officials offer gifts] in honor of the prosperity of the king, the lord of life, in the month of *ched* [May-June]. Indeed, the scribes should regulate the performance of this festival each year in accordance with tradition.

15. The scribes must recite the oath [repeated by all high officials] sworn to the king in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha [to the south of the royal palace] on the occasion of Tang Tok.

16. The scribes must supervise the manufacture of the sugarcane sticks used to expel evil spirits, and the cotton cords beaded with bits of paper

inscribed with sacred texts [that are handed out] on the 13, 14, and 15 days of the waxing moon in the month of *phalkun* [February-March]. At this time, the royal titles are [again] brought into the great hall of the palace. The corps of scribes regulates the performance of this festival each year according to tradition.

17. If violent disorder breaks out during a king's reign, the day, month and year of the occurrence, and the outcome, must be written down and kept in the palace archives.

18. From time to time, the scribes should collect and write down traditional tales and poems. They should also perform tasks in the *bureau*.*

[Signed] YIM

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