

THE ASSASSINATION OF RESIDENT BARDEZ (1925): A PREMONITION OF REVOLT IN COLONIAL CAMBODIA*

By

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On Saturday April 18, 1925, at about one in the afternoon, Felix Louis Bardez, the French *resident* in the Cambodian province of Kompong Chhang, about a hundred kilometers north of Phnom Penh, was beaten to death by the villagers of Kraang Laev, where he had been attempting to collect delinquent taxes. Bardez was an experienced administrator, with over ten years of service in the Protectorate. He was forty-two years old. Two Cambodians who had accompanied him to the village, a militiaman and an interpreter, were killed at the same time.

Over the next few weeks, nineteen suspects were swiftly rounded up. All were men, ranging in age from seventeen to forty-five; thirteen of them were in their twenties. All but two were natives of the village. After what the French picturesquely refer to as *apassage à tabac*, or roughing up, the prisoners admitted they were guilty, but they withdrew their confessions, and pleaded not guilty, when the trial opened in Phnom Penh at the end of 1925. By then, one of them had died in prison. There were many witnesses to the killings, well-briefed by the prosecution, and the defense lawyers made little effort to prove the innocence of most of the defendants. They pleaded instead that the crime was a political one, a collective response to unbearable economic pressure. The explanation, of course, did not excuse the murders, and the presiding judge sentenced one defendant to death, four to life imprisonment, three to fifteen years and one to five; the other nine were released.

Soon after the killings, and long before the trial, the name of the village was changed, by royal decree, to *Direchan* ("Bestial"); the decree required villagers to conduct expiatory Buddhist ceremonies, on the anniversary of the killings, for the next ten years¹. It is unclear if the ordinance originated in the royal palace, or responded

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1. The text of the decree is printed as an appendix to Dik Keam, *Phum Direchan* (Bestial Village") Phnom Penh, 1971.

to French pressure; in any case the ordinance conformed to precedents from precolonial times, and probably reflected King Sisowath's own response to the events, as the manuscript chronicle of his reign suggests.

L'affaire Bardez deserves our attention for several reasons. One is its uniqueness. As far as I know, it was the only occasion, in the twentieth century at least, when a French official was killed by ethnic Khmer while carrying out his official duties. Its uniqueness leads us to two questions, or even three. Why did the killings happen when and where they did? If conditions were as bad throughout Cambodia as the defense lawyers and anti-colonial journalists at the time maintained, why had no Frenchmen been assassinated before? To this we may add, why were none killed thereafter?

Another approach to the affair is to place it inside the framework of French economic policies toward Cambodia in 1925. Were these so severe, in other words, as to explain the killings? A third is to see the incident in an even broader context, namely the enactment of French colonialism in Indo-China. This is the view taken by some anti-colonial journalists, like André Malraux, who covered the trial in Phnom Penh.²

Now approaching the Bardez affair in terms of its uniqueness, in terms of the *zeitgeist* of 1925, or in terms of French policy are ways of looking back at the killings, while trying to reduce our dependency on what has happened since. Another approach, leading *away* from them, is to assess them in terms of the iconography of Cambodian nationalism, which we can date, in recognizable form, only from the 1940s. In 1945, a nationalist orator placed the killings in a long list of heroic anti-French (and anti-dynastic) uprisings, going back to the 1860s.³ Five years later, a Communist guerilla leader referred to the assailants, in a radio interview, as "heroes".⁴ They were cast in a similar light in a fictionalized treatment of the affair, written by a republican nationalist in 1971.⁵ These judgements are interpretations of the killings. In the

2. See Walter Langlois, *Andre Malraux: the Indo-China Adventure*. New York, 1966, pp. 190-196.

3. Manuscript chronicle of Norodom Sihanouk (microfilm available from the Centre of East Asian Studies in Tokyo) pp. 546-547.

4. United States Foreign Broadcasting Service (FBIS) *Daily Report* 2 March 1951.

5. Dik Keam *Direchan*, op. cit.; see also Republique Populaire du Kampuchea, "Rapport politique du comité central du Parti Populaire Revolutionnaire du Kampuchea (26-31 Mai, 1981)", p. 3, where the First Secretary of the Party, Pen Sovan, dating the incident to 15 November (*sic*) 1925, writes in the official French translation of his Cambodian speech that "le résident Bardez ainsi que ses subordonnés adulateurs, responsables de la tentative de repression des paysans, et contre les tentatives de revolte hostiles au systeme d'augmentation des impôts, furent exterminés".

context of 1925, however, they are not descriptive, because as we'll see the killings weren't considered patriotic, or progressive, by many Cambodians at the time.

The sources we can use include the French-language press of Saigon and Phnom Penh. The Saigon papers—at least the five available on micro-film in Australia—cover a wide range of views, although I've been unable to consult the most pro-government of them, ironically entitled *L'Impartial*.⁶ The Phnom Penh paper, *l'Echo du Cambodge*, however, is unblinkingly pro-colonial in its coverage of the killings and the trial.

A second contemporary source is the manuscript chronicle prepared by scribes in the royal palace for Cambodia's octagenarian king. Its brief references to the affair are interesting because they imply collective, communal guilt, rather than supporting the prosecution's contention that the killings had been the work of outsiders to the village, eager to rob Bardez.⁷ In fact, all but two of the defendants came from Kraang Laev, and Bardez's wallet was found on his body, untouched.

I have also consulted Bardez' quarterly reports from Kompong Chhnang and from his previous post as *resident* in the southeastern province of Prey Veng; these are available in the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence. They tell us something about his working style, and help to explain why as an *administrateur de 3e classe* in 1924 he had been sent to replace a person two ranks higher in assuming his position at Kompong Chhang. Happily, too, the Monash Library has a complete run of an administrative yearbook from Indo-China, which enabled me to trace Bardez' colonial career.⁸

This combination of more or less contemporary sources enabled me, in 1979, to assemble two or three pages about the affair in a chapter I was writing about French colonialism in Cambodia. What convinced me to go further was an extraordinary piece of luck. When Ben Kiernan was in Cambodia in September 1980, doing research for his dissertation on the Pol Pot period, he inquired locally and learned that one of Bardez' assailants, an eighty-year old farmer named Sok Bith, was still alive. Bith,

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6. These newspapers include *La presse indochinoise*, *L'Echo Annamite*, *L'Echo du Cambodge*, *Indochine Enchaînée*, *La Cloche Felée*, *Le voix libre*. Archival materials on the incident were impossible to locate in Phnom Penh (Ben Kiernan, personal communication), while the archives in Aix-en-Provence apparently contain only funeral orations (Archives d'outremer, Cambodge, F-69, Attenants politiques). Other archival sources are cited below.
 7. The manuscript chronicle from Sisowath's reign, p. 1207, uses a collective noun (*bandaras*) to describe the assassins, as well as the verb *no'm knea* (literally, to "lead together" or "join", to describe the action).
 8. Indochine Francaise. *Annuaire générale de l'Indochine*, Hanoi, 1877- I have consulted the volumes for 1907-1925.

alert and active in Kraang Laev, had served a fifteen-year sentence for the crime and he recalled it vividly to Kiernan, in a half-hour interview, preserved on tape. The interview is useful in confirming or contradicting other sources which Bith, illiterate and knowing no French, cannot be expected to have seen. Its value also lies in providing a participant's assessment, however blurred or tinted by the passage of time, of the important issues of sequence, coincidence, guilt and motivation.

In reconstructing the story, we can begin with *resident* Bardez. He was born in Paris in 1882. By the time he died, he left a widowed mother, a widow of his own, a brother old enough to have a married son, and a brother-in-law employed elsewhere in Indo-China. Another Bardez, possibly a relative, had worked in the Saigon post-office at the beginning of the century. We know nothing about Bardez' schooling, appearance, or hobbies. Witnesses agreed that he was fearless—perhaps a euphemism covering an essentially aggressive personality—and one Cambodian colleague testified at the trial that for all his kindness, he “shouted a bit”. Bardez had entered the colonial service in 1907, and reached Indo-China the following year; until 1912, he served in Cochinchina (later to comprise a large part of South Vietnam). In 1913, he was transferred to an adjoining Cambodian province, Svay Rieng, as a junior administrator, before being shifted to Phnom Penh, in 1915, as the *secrétaire particulier* of the *chef du cabinet* of the *resident supérieur*, a politically sensitive position, where he came to the attention of the long-serving *resident supérieur*, Baudouin, who later seems to have played a role in shepherding his career.

In 1917, Bardez enlisted in the French Army. He saw service in the colonial infantry on the Western Front, where he was slightly wounded, and he was mentioned in a regimental despatch, for bravery, during the final offensive of August, 1918. In 1920, he was back in Phnom Penh, in charge of the Protectorate's personnel section, presumably another favored post. He became acting *resident* in Prey Veng in 1923, while still an *administrateur de 3e classe*, two ranks lower than the majority of residents. He seems to have seen his first posting to the field, in five years, as an opportunity for advancement, or perhaps merely as an opportunity to give vent to his energies, and his fondness for command. He saw the job, his reports to the capital suggest, as centering on the steadfast and unrelenting collection of taxes.

We should look for a moment at the taxes he was empowered to collect.

Some of these like those on opium, alcohol and salt, were paid directly into the budget for all of Indo-China, and were collected by customs officials. Others were levied on fishermen and merchants; still others, in lieu of corvée, and in exchange for identity cards, which functioned as receipts. Other taxes were levied on all the crops

that were grown in the province. In most of Cambodia, the crop most heavily taxed was harvested rice, or *padi*. The *padi* tax affected nearly all Cambodian families. Bardez was collecting it when he was killed.

Before 1920, taxes on *padi* had been collected by delegates sent out from the capital on the king's behalf. These men, known as *akhna luang*, negotiated with local officials for a cash payment in lieu of a fixed percentage—generally 10%—of the year's rice harvest, taking into account such matters as the amount of land under cultivation, meteorological conditions during the year just past, soil quality, the availability of water, and so on.⁹ In fact, it's doubtful if their conversations ever covered these matters in much detail. The system flourished on abuse. Cultivators and local officials tended to under-report land under cultivation and the size of harvests; they also exaggerated catastrophes. The delegates, in turn, were happy to be paid off, so long as an appropriate amount of cash went forward to Phnom Penh. After 1920, the French "modernized" the collection of *padi* taxes, authorizing local officials, rather than visitors from Phnom Penh, to negotiate with landowners. Naturally enough, the removal of one layer of officials did little to reduce malpractice on the part of the remaining parties. In several provinces, in fact, *padi*-tax revenues actually declined under the new arrangements.¹⁰

Most *residents*, apparently, were content to let the system run its course, so long as a steady amount of revenue, roughly consistent from year to year, could be applied to meet the exigencies of their local budget, as well as the demands placed on them by Phnom Penh. Bardez was cut from different cloth. One of his first reports from Prey Veng analyzed economic conditions in the province between 1914 and 1923.¹¹ Head taxes, he observed, had kept pace with gains in population, and had risen from 150,000 piasters to 248,000. Taxes on *padi*, on the other hand, had dropped from a quarter of a million piasters in 1914 (admittedly an excellent year), to barely 102,000 piasters in 1923. Commenting on the decline, Bardez wrote:

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9. For a run-down of the tax system, see A. Silvestre, *Le Cambodge administratif*, Phnom Penh, 1924. The disparity between taxes paid by Frenchmen and Cambodians was very wide. A Frenchman earning 12,000 piastres per year paid only 30 piastres tax. A rural Cambodian, out of whatever earnings he could accumulate, often paid as much as 9 piastres *per annum* in various forms of tax.
 10. Silvestre, *Le Cambodge*, op. cit., pp. 524-525. See also A. Pompei, "La notion de propriété foncière au Cambodge" *Revue Indochinoise Juridique et Economique* 19/20 (1943) p. 438 n.
 11. AOM 3 E 8 (3) Report on period 1914-1923, Prey Veng.

It's not hard to find the reasons: complete inactivity on the part of Cambodian authorities, complete lack of supervision over local officials [i.e. those empowered since 1920 to collect the taxes] and a lack of systematic collection procedures.

Eager to correct abuses, and to make an impression on his superiors, Bardez was able to collect an additional 100,000 piasters (including 25,000 new piasters of revenue from *padi* taxes) by the middle of 1924.¹²

Results like these probably shamed his French colleagues, fatigued his Cambodian associates, and pleased the powers that were, but Bardez' effect on local inhabitants is ambiguous. He acted promptly, for instance, when 100 peasants petitioned him to remove a corrupt village headman.¹³ A month or so later, on the other hand, he admitted, in an official report, that he enjoyed being feted as a *luc thom* (i.e. "big master") in his *tournées en province*.¹⁴ According to Sok Bith, his spoken Cambodian was rudimentary, after more than a decade in the country.

Turning from Bardez' achievements in Prey Veng we should look for a moment at the destination of the funds he was so eager to collect. Throughout the immediate post-war period, Baudouin's government had been attempting to increase tax revenues, primarily to underwrite an ever more extensive programme of public works. To a large extent, these took the form of roads. Between 1922 and 1924, 400 kilometers of hard-surfaced roads were built in Cambodia.¹⁵ In 1912, there had been only 430 kilometers of such roads in the entire Protectorate. Labour for the roads was drawn from Cambodia's convict population, from people unable to meet their tax obligations in cash, and from impoverished rice-farmers in the off-season. An even more impressive, and expensive project was the newly completed resort complex at Bokor, atop a windswept plateau overlooking the Gulf of Siam.¹⁶ Anti-Baudouin newspapers in Saigon and Hanoi referred to the complex, intended primarily for the French, as "Baudouin's Folly". The road to the hill-station wound through a malarial forest. In the nine months it took to build it, nearly 900 convicts and coolie labourers died

12. AOM 3 E 8b (3) Second trimester report, 1924, Prey Veng.

13. AOM 3 E 8 (3) Third Trimester report, 1924, Prey Veng.

14. AOM 3 E 8 (3) Second Trimester report, 1924, Prey Veng.

15. See *La presse indochinoise*, 22 April 1925 and *La voix libre* 7 January 1926.

16. *Echo du Cambodge* 18 Apr. 1925, and *La voix libre* 9 January 1926, quoting from *Le livre Cochinchine* 9 January 1926. Marguerite Duras, *Un barrage contre la Pacifique* (Paris, 1950) is a thinly fictionalised account of life among less privileged Frenchmen, near Bokor, in the 1920s.

from the disease. A speaker at the Bardez trial went so far as to suggest that the hotels at the resort should fly the skull and crossbones, rather than the *tricolore*.¹⁷

Partly to pay for Bokor, and perhaps also to meet such additional expenses as a new yacht for the Cambodian king, launched in May, 1925, and a new *palais de justice* inaugurated later in the year, French administrators and their rubber-stamp Cambodian advisors, drawn from the royal family and the Phnom Penh commercial elite, proclaimed a new tax at the end of 1924, increasing charges levied on uncultivated land.¹⁸ They did so to close the loop-hole of under-reported land-holdings and harvests. They tempted people to pay the new tax by promising that receipts would be taken as proof of ownership, when and if a full-scale cadastral survey was carried out. As the law was coming into effect, in November, 1924, Bardez was transferred to a more "difficult" province, Kompong Chhnang, on the southern shore of the Tonle Sap. The province had a reputation for banditry. One bandit in particular, a Vietnamese named Tinh, was at large there in 1923-1924, and Bardez was active in driving him eastward from the province, into Cochinchina, in the early months of 1925. Because so many of its people were engaged in fishing Kompong Chhnang was a rice-deficit area, although most of its primarily agricultural districts were prosperous enough.

Kraang Laev was one of these. Its name appears three times in French reports from the early 1920s. In 1922, it had been visited by a charlatan who claimed royal descent, and was soon arrested for selling charms and potions.¹⁹ A year later, a Cambodian accused of murder was found hiding in the village *wat*.²⁰ In early 1925, a Cambodian official, sent to collect delinquent taxes in a nearby commune was set upon and beaten by what he called "fifty or sixty" local people.²¹ Interestingly, Bardez refused to press charges against the assailants, blaming the official for tactless and bullying behavior. Allegedly the official had harangued the people, saying the taxes must be paid, and suggested that village women could prostitute themselves, if necessary, to raise the money. In one account at the trial, this suggestion drew an astute reply:

No one would want us. We are ugly and dirty. But your wife, who's beautiful, and wears jewelry, and perfumes herself, could easily do what you suggest.²²

17. *La cloche fêlée* 24 January 1926.

18. *Echo annamite*, 12 December 1925.

19. AOM 3 E 11 (4) Second trimester report, 1922, Kompong Chhnang.

20. AOM 3 E (4) First trimester report, 1923, Kompong Chhnang.

21. AOM 3 E (4) First trimester report, 1925, Kompong Chhnang.

22. *La voix libre* 16 December 1925.

With hindsight, another premonition of the killings occurred in January, 1925, when a delegation of about a hundred peasants visited Bardez in Kompong Chhnang to complain that taxes were too heavy, and that they had no cash.²³ On this occasion, Bardez promised to give them extra time to pay, and the petitioners went home.

It is unclear why Bardez decided to tour the province himself in April, 1925. Baudouin, disturbed by the two incidents just mentioned, may have ordered his protege to take a firmer stand. For at least two reasons, it seems unlikely that the fatal *tournee* was entirely Bardez' idea. The timing was unfortunate, for one thing, because it coincided with the week-long celebrations, taking place throughout the kingdom, of Buddhist New Year. Moreover, Bardez does not seem to have been certain of success. Testifying at the trial, a colleague said that Bardez had told him, shortly before setting out:

The situation is serious. I'm harrassed with the Tinh affair, and there's no money ... What's to be done? Can the Governor General help us?²⁴

Whatever had impelled him to visit the countryside, when he got there he behaved with efficiency, doggedness, and flair. In each *khum*, or group of villages, he followed a set routine. People from outlying villages had been summoned several days before by messages from the *mekhum*, or communal headman. Many would have been planning to visit each *khum* in any case, for the new year celebrations; In two visits preceding the fatal one, Bardez had consulted with local elite figures—particularly the *mekhum* and the monks of the local *wat*—before asking delinquent taxes be paid in the open-sided communal meeting hall, or *sala*, usually located along-side the *wat*. These visits appear to have gone smoothly enough, but after visiting these other villages, Bardez sent a note to his assistant in Kompong Chhnang, asking that a detachment of militia be readied to accompany him on the rest of the tour, in view of the difficulties he expected to encounter. He made notes of the tour, to be included in a subsequent report, that probably stressed his pessimism and the stubborn response of local people, for the notebook was impounded by the prosecution, and denied to the defense, on the grounds that it was “confidential” and “political”.²⁵ As far as I can tell, no one has consulted it since the trial, and it may well have disappeared.

Bardez arrived at Kraang Laev at around 8:00 a.m. on April 18.²⁶ He was accompanied by an interpreter, Suon, a militiaman, Lach, and a Vietnamese cook.

23. *Echo annamite* 14 December 1925.

24. *Echo du Cambodge*, 23 December 1925.

25. *Echo du Cambodge*, 18 December 1925.

26. The following account is drawn from stenographic accounts of the trial; these have been checked against the remarkably accurate memories of Sok Bith.

The village headman, Phal, had already assembled between fifty and sixty village elders in the *sala*; a crowd estimated by several witnesses as 500, summoned for the occasion, were seated outside, in the sun.

When he arrived, Bardez told the headman that the village had paid few of its taxes for several years. When Phal and the abbot of the *wat* pleaded that this was because no one had any money, Bardez pointed ironically at the newly redecorated *wat*, which had been paid for by public subscription. He then made the *mekhum* read out the royal ordinance of November 1924 to the assembled crowd. The *mekhum* was followed by the abbot, who told the crowd that the taxes should be paid because people should always honour their parents, and the French were now playing this role.

But no money was forthcoming and Bardez now ordered that three men in the *sala*, picked at random, be tied up as hostages until all the outstanding taxes had been paid. At around 10:00 a.m., he sent a message to Kompong Chhnang, some 14 kilometers away, requesting a detachment of militia. These reinforcements left Kompong Chhang around noon, but were too late to avert the killings at Kraang Laev.

Toward 11:00 a.m., the situation in the *sala* seems to have been calm enough for Bardez to eat a meal prepared for him by his cook. The hostages in the *sala* were not released. Soon after Bardez returned, however, the wife of one of them approached *mekhum* with the money for her husband's taxes. She had borrowed the sum—\$5.35—from the *mekhum's* wife, and now begged that her husband be released, so he could go home for lunch. According to the defense, Bardez told her rudely to *fouter le camp*; the prosecution alleged that he asked her politely to wait; Bith insists that Bardez told her that none of the hostages would be released until all the taxes owing had been paid. In any case, all of the sources agree that no one was released. At this point, Bith says:

I told her . . . the table was there; and the French . . . we were over here, on this side . . . I told her, "Take your husband away", and she touched her husband on the arm. When I said this the soldier raised his rifle, and pointed it at me, and cocked it, *pruk pruk*, so we pushed the rifle away and punched him. Soon everyone was punching *plup plup* and fighting; the three had fallen to the ground [i.e. outside the *sala*], and people came up and beat them some more, until the three were dead on the ground.

It was revealed at the trial that none of the three died instantly. The militiaman, disarmed, injured, and attempting to escape, was beaten to death a hundred meters or so from the *sala*, while Bardez, already severely hurt, was being

nursed in the *wat* by the abbot and the *mekhum*. The people who had killed the militiaman returned and beat Bardez to death; twenty-four wounds were later found on his body, although no formal autopsy was performed. The interpreter was killed last. The weapons used against the three included the militiaman's rifle-butt, staves from the fence around the *sala*, and (in two cases) knives.

When the three were dead, all the villagers streamed out of Kraang Laev apparently leaving only the monks behind. According to Sok Bith, they were headed for Kompong Chhnang, on foot and using "over a hundred" ox carts, with the vague idea, it seems of attacking the *residence*. They were intercepted *en route* by the militiamen summoned earlier by Bardez, after their numbers had swollen to perhaps a thousand. They scattered and returned to Kraang Laev, when shots were fired into the air. Bith took advantage of the confusion to flee to Pursat, where he was arrested about a month later; the militiamen, on the other hand, proceeded to Kraang Laev, where the bodies were recovered, and taken to Kampong Chhnang.

The defense lawyers at the trial, and Bith fifty-five years later, stressed that the murders were communal actions. Bith says that "the whole village" took part; he blames the affair specifically on the *contretemps* involving the hostage's wife, and more generally on the hardship imposed by the *padi* taxes.

The French and their proteges in Phnom Penh moved swiftly to defuse and take control of the situation. The royal ordinance condemning the village was promulgated by the 23rd. By then, the French official in charge of political affairs in Cambodia, Chassang, had already visited the region, accompanied by the king's eldest son, Prince Monivong, who was himself to be crowned king two years later. Within two weeks, over two hundred villagers were rounded up for questioning. In an obscure incident, in June, the prime suspect, Neou, was shot and then beheaded by local officials while resisting arrest.²⁷ He soon became, for the prosecution, the mastermind of the incident, and the lynchpin of their case that lawless outsiders eager to rob Bardez had committed the crime, rather than local people disturbed by his conduct and by excessive taxes.

It is not clear how Neou and his accomplice, Chuon, both wanted by the police, had been able to obtain asylum in Kraang Laev; similarly, their presence at the incident (when they could have stayed concealed) suggests bravado on their part, although this is not the same as premeditation. Charged with using a lethal weapon in the attack (a charge substantiated by Sok Bith), Chuon was in due course condemned to death.

27. *Echo Annamite*, 12 December 1925. The event had occurred in June 1925. Neou had served a jail sentence for robbery, and was a fugitive from another, imposed for walking away from corvee labor engaged in building a landing strip near Kompong Chhnang earlier in 1925.

Eighteen suspects came to trial in Phnom Penh in December 1925. The proceedings attracted wide attention. A pro-government *claque* attended every day, applauding prosecution statements, and ridiculing the defense. Unfortunately for their ideas of justice, the trial was also attended by journalists from Saigon, including Andre Malraux, and others who were hostile to Baudouin and interested, more generally, in colonial reform.

Just as Malraux and others opposed to French colonial injustice sought to expand the focus of the trial, so too the French administrators, battling against intensifying nationalist pressures, particularly in the components of Vietnam, hastened to take a narrow view of Bardez' assassination. They were understandably nervous about the intentions of the recently appointed socialist governor-general of Indo-China Alexandre Varenne;²⁸ the trial of the Vietnamese patriot, Phan Boi Chau, was taking place at the same time as the trial in Phnom Penh;²⁹ and another Vietnamese nationalist, Phan Chu Trinh, recently returned from France, was agitating for extensive colonial reforms.³⁰ French officials saw little point in allowing the Bardez trial to become a political forum; the defense, however, found conditions ideal to make it one.

Although the guilt of most of the defendants was never seriously in doubt (and was admitted in 1980 by Bith) the tactics of the prosecution at the trial were heavy-handed and often farcical. as they tried to head off any discussion of French taxation policies, any criticism of Bardez, or any evidence which contradicted their argument that the culprits were outsiders, who had wanted to rob the *resident*. There was even a clumsy attempt by someone to poison the principal lawyer for the defense, Gallet, and a stenographer hired by the defense was forced to return to her former employer while the trial was still going on, probably to prevent further transcripts of testimony appearing in the anti-government Saigon press.

Andre Malraux, for one, was infuriated by the procedures followed by the court. When the trial was over, he parodied it in the pages of his Saigon journal, *Indochine Enchaînée* :

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28. See William Frederick, "Alexandre Varenne and Politics in Indochina 1925-1926", in Walter Vella (ed.) *Aspects of Vietnamese History*, Honolulu 1973, pp. 95-159. See also Langlois, *Andre Malraux*, op. cit. pp. 163-180.
29. See David Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism*, Berkeley, 1971, pp. 265-268.
30. Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism*, op. cit. pp. 269-271. The year 1927 was also the high-water mark of the Constitutionalist Party, which urged co-operation with the French authorities. See R.B. Smith, "Bui Quang Chieu and the Constitutionalist Party in Indo-China" *Modern Asian Studies*, III/2 (1969) 131-150.

1. Every defendant will have his head cut off.
2. Then he will be defended by a lawyer.
3. The lawyer will have his head cut off.
4. And so on.³¹

Another, much younger observer was Nhek Tioulong, then a student at the Collège Sisowath, and in later life a provincial governor, commander of the Cambodian army, and a trusted confidante of Sihanouk's throughout the Sihanouk era. Tioulong recently asserted that the defense lawyer, Gallet, was especially eloquent, "flapping his sleeves dramatically" when he made his points.³²

Sok Bith now feels that his trial was fair. One revelation in his testimony is that prosperous businessmen in Phnom Penh and Saigon (he uses the word *taokay*, suggesting that they were Chinese) anonymously aided the defense, providing "baskets of money" for the lawyers and presents of food and cigarettes to the prisoners. A crippled Cambodian lawyer named Nuon was also helpful to the defendants. Bith recalls Nuon's remark that it wasn't the village which was *direchhan* ("bestial"), but the king himself, a *mot* that still made him chuckle half a century after it had been made. Nhek Tioulong contends that Nuon's partisan behavior led to his being demoted by the French soon after the trial was over.

When Bith returned home, after serving fifteen years for what he calls "a single punch in the face" (this was, in fact, the charge made against him) he resumed work in Kraang Laev as a rice-farmer and an tapper of sugar-palms. Anti-French guerillas in the late 1940s, knowing of his implication in the affair, sought him out and tried, unsuccessfully, to recruit him. Apparently he has never been happy with being known as a revolutionary, preferring to view his conduct in the context of the day Bardez was killed. During the Pol Pot years, he told Kiernan, he was "an old man . . . concerned to stay alive, that's all".

In a 1971 novel about the killings, *Phum Direchan*, the republican writer Dik Keam argued that Neou and Chuon planned to kill Bardez, with the knowledge that they would be executed for the crime.³³ No evidence from 1925, or in Bith's recollections, can be cited in support of this contention although he admits that both of them used knives in the attack. And yet, rebellious peasants are a fixture in most

31. Quoted in Langlois, *op. cit.* p. 197.

32. Interview with Nhek Tioulong, Bangkok, 29 August 1981.

33. Dik Keam, *Phum Direchan*, *op. cit.* pp. 68-69. Although the book takes the form of a novel, Dik Keam claims to have interviewed survivors of the incident. Dik Keam was murdered as a "class enemy" in northeastern Cambodia in 1977. During my research in Cambodia in 1970-1971, he was unfailingly kind to me and to other scholars interested in Cambodia's past.

post-colonial ideologies, especially those which, like Cambodia's, contain a strong anti-monarchic component. In a sense, premeditation and heroes are essential, for such an iconographic incident to be legitimate, and events can often be transformed into something else by the need for a more useful interpretation, like the need for heroes.

Little can be said in defence of the French taxation system in Cambodia. Testimony at the trial, and information in contemporary sources, reveal that in some ways it placed exceptionally heavy burdens on ordinary people, while funds collected in Cambodia were often funnelled elsewhere in the Federation. Indeed, writing in 1935, a French *resident* suggested that anyone interested in stirring up trouble among Cambodians might do well to emphasize the inequities of the taxation system, *vis a vis* the other components of Indo-China.³⁴ Certainly they were outrageously heavy in comparison to what French citizens were asked to pay, and they were heavy in terms of any benefits from them returning to the peasants. At the same time, the persistence of abuse, and of short-falls between what was asked for and what was paid, meant that in many cases people paid less taxes than they were supposed to pay, or none at all. As Sok Bith remarked, people were poor, and uncomfortable about paying so many taxes, but they had enough to eat.

Why was the affair unique? One answer is that Bardez, stepping out of character and behaving like a Cambodian official, was treated like one by the villagers of Kraang Laev. Very few *residents* in the 1920s, or later, made the same mistake. The lesson of the incident, in fact, was that villagers were better off left, if not to their own devices, then to the types of indigenous "control" to which they were accustomed. Bardez insisted, recklessly, on removing some of the flexibility from the tax-collection system by collecting taxes himself. His presence in the village offended the large and restless crowd. Perhaps he was banking on their proverbial peaceability. He made no allowance, it seems, for the likelihood that many of the men in the crowd would have been drinking sugar palm-wine, in the sun, as the day wore on. He made things worse for himself by taking hostages at random, without sufficient force to back up his decision.

Bardez' error, in other words, was his decision, which may have been wrung from him by officials in Phnom Penh, to go into the village himself. Something about the village, or the crowd, made him sufficiently nervous to summon reinforcements from Kompong Chhnang; at the same time, his conduct in Kraang Laev appears to have been edgier and more exasperated than it had been in the villages he had visited earlier.

34. AOM 3 E 15 (8): Annual report from Kampot, 1935.

To make an assesment of the affair, we can dismiss it, as the *Echo du Cambodge* did in an early report, as a “crapulous crime”,³⁵ or, in the prosecution’s words, not “a Cambodian crime, but only a crime, of a few individuals who in no way resemble the Cambodian”. This assessment begs the question of what “proper” Cambodian behavior is, and archival records reveal quite a different picture about rural violence in the 1920s and 1930s than is purveyed by French mythology. Another view, taken by the defense, was that the village was collectively at fault, that the “crowd had been its own leader”, provoked by an unjust syetem (which affected the entire country, after all) and Bardez’ extreme behavior. *Maitre* Gallet pointed out that several hundred people had been arrested for the crime at first, and noted that the palace itself had already collectivized the guilt, by stigmatizing the village as a whole before anyone had come to trial.

This is Sok Bith’s view. He links the village’s behavior to the heaviness of taxes as well as to Bardez’ behavior on the 18th.

The notion that Cambodians could organize themselves in a just cause, however fitted poorly with French conceptions—still prevalent in the 1920s—about the “Cambodian race”, and France’s obligation towards it. Perhaps part of this misperception had to do with France’s colonial mission. If the Cambodians could look after themselves, in other words, were French days in Cambodia numbered? And if Cambodians could make up their minds, acting together, how could they be governed?

They could be governed in part by dissolving their solidarity, by *passages à tabac*, and by forcing them to testify against themselves. They could be governed, also, by being detached from the Cambodian state, and renamed “Bestial”. And they could be governed in the old way, by their own officials, because no other way had yet occurred to anyone. It’s clear that the royal family saw the incident in part in terms of *lèse majesté*. This is because government in the kingdom had always been “royal business” (*rajakar*); in the provinces, the word for “govern” also meant “consume”. These arrangements had been in effect in Combodia for centuries; the the French had found them easy enough to use, once they had bought off the Cambodian elite. In traditional Cambodia, when a village of a group of people refused to be governed in this way, they were defying the structure of the state (since participation meant being consumed) and had to be removed from it. This is the rationale behind the *Direchan* decree.

35. *Echo du Cambodge*, 9 December 1925.

36. A French official writing in 1916 observed that “French residents lack sufficient influence in their provinces. The population appears to ignore them completely”: quoted in L. Vignon, *Un programme de politique coloniale. Les questions indigènes*. Paris, 1919, 289n.

To Cambodian thinkers of the 1940's, or to historians of Indo-China in search of trends, watersheds and turning-points, the Bardez incident offers a rare example of rural Cambodians uniting in an anti-colonial cause. For this reason, Bardez' assassins have been made heroic, because heroes are needed for self-respecting "national" history. In examining this particular case, however, it is legitimate to ask how much further beyond Kraang Laev its significance can really be extended. Certainly the incident reveals a reservoir of indigenous violence which normally worked itself out on other villagers, or on Cambodian officials; similarly, it shows that the French had no clear reason to count on much good will when they stepped down from the heights of the *residence* and began to push rural Cambodians around. But whether it can be treated as a prologue to nationalism is less clear. The villagers killed Bardez and his assistants because, in their view, the three had no business being there, and because Bardez was unfair not to release the hostage who had paid his taxes. The villagers' gesture, then, was neither an heroic premonition of nationalist struggle nor the squalid plot alleged by the prosecution. Instead, it was a gesture of some exasperated men, whom the crowd, palm wine, and Bardez' outrageous conduct had encouraged to behave as if they were in charge of Kraang Laev, and not the French. Evidence at the trial suggests that when their fervour waned (after the crowd moving on Kompong Chhnang had been dispersed) they returned, ashamed, to the village, and before long were turning one another in to the police. Whatever they were, the villagers were not habitual killers. At the same time, if Sok Bith's recollections are any indication, as time went on they took a kind of collective responsibility for their momentary liberating gesture, and harbored few regrets.³⁷

37. According to Dik Keam, *op. cit.* p. 119, Bardez' body was exhumed in 1970 and removed to France.