

The Raison d'être of French Protectorate of Cambodia

By Sovannarith Keo / December 14, 2014

For almost a century, Cambodia was placed under the French Protectorate. This was covered by the Oudong Treaty of Amity, Commerce and French Protection, entered into on August 11, 1863 by and between Cambodia and France. The protectorate per se was to last for exactly ninety years, over four different reigns of Cambodian monarchs, namely: King Norodom (1860-1904); King Sisowath (1904-1927); King Sisowath Monivong (1927-1941); and finally King Norodom Sihanouk (1941-1955; 1993-2004), during whose time Cambodia gained independence on November 9, 1953.

Cambodia was the second country of the Indochinese peninsula to have fallen under the French control after the latter colonized Cochinchina in 1862 (the only region to be formally under the French colony although the rests were practically under the French *de facto* colony). This was to be followed by the French subsequent placement of her similar protectorate over Annam (1884), Tonkin (1884), and Laos (1893).

Various Western writers, particularly the French, struggled to give different versions of justification over the French expansion of her colonial power in Southeast Asia at that time. Yet, aside from their hidden economic (greed), religious and political (imperial nationalist/national egoism) interests, they basically seemed to end up at agreeing upon their self-appointed duty—the so-called principle of “*Mission civilisatrice*” (civilizing mission)—in what Kipling (1899) called “*the white man’s burden*” rationale. In other words, their interventions in foreign countries in terms of either protectorateship or colonization was carried out for the sake of spreading Western civilization to indigenous people of different regions in the world, whom they considered backward; in that regard, the latter could adopt a modern or more civilized lifestyle and society.

In fact, the French was not the first Westerner to land on Cambodian soil. It was the Portuguese and the Spaniard who sent their missionaries to Cambodia during the Longvek era. Cambodia was first mentioned in European accounts in the early 16th century in “*letters from the Portuguese navigator Alfonso de Albuquerque to the king of Portugal and the Portuguese king to the pope*” (Robert, 2012, p. 111). King Satha, who reigned over Cambodia at that time, according to Manich (1970), even requested Spanish military intervention to defense his country against the repeated Siamese invasions; Siam at that time was reigned over by King Naresuen.

As for the French interests in Cambodia, after colonizing Cochinchina, a lower Mekong delta rich in agricultural resources, according to Milton (1969) and John (2002), the country’s geographically strategic and commercial importance is perhaps one of the primary motives for the French to further its ambitious conquest of colonial expansionism much deeper into the Indochinese peninsula.

First, the country’s central ownership of the great Mekong River system would serve as an important trade route, the French misperceived, from Cochinchina to China and vice versa, as well as to the rest of the world. French writer and administrator Jean Moura,

according to John, tells us that “*when the French Governor of CochinChina, Admiral Louis Adolphe Bonard, traveled to Cambodia in September 1862, he was interested not just in the politics of the kingdom, and its relations with Siam, but also in ‘its agricultural and commercial importance’*” (2002, p. 4).

Second, with its border shared by Thailand to the north, Cambodia would perfectly serve as a sandwich to protect French interests in colonized CochinChina from the British sphere of influence through Siam’s expansion into Cambodia. Milton put it, “*The wish to restrict Siam’s expansion, and what were believed to be British interests working through Siam, dominated much of French thinking on Asia throughout the nineteenth century. Control of Cambodia’s foreign relations, and protection of France’s position in CochinChina through this control, became the first aim of French policy in the kingdom and the raison d’être of the Protectorate Treaty that the French concluded with Norodom in 1863,*” (1969, p. 176).

As for Monseigneur Miche, a French bishop who played a key role in designing French protectorate over Cambodia, the treaty would “*allow French presence at a strategic place so as to frighten off both the Thais and the Vietnamese*” (Manich, 1970, p. 101).

It should be noted that, at the time of the French arrival, Cambodia was under a dual protectorate from both Siam and Vietnam as Cambodian king had to send tributes to both nations (Siam annually, and Vietnam triennially, according to Manich). In fact, King Ang Duong himself was brought to the throne by Siam when the latter helped fight the Vietnamese in a Siamese-Vietnamese war (1841-1845) in Cambodia. As part of compensation to the Siam, Ang Duong was asked to “*ratify the treaty ceding the provinces of Mlou-Prey and Tonlé-repou taken away in 1814. Ang Duong was quoted by Leclère to have said that ‘as the Thai were stronger and I was weak, I was therefore forced to cede it,*” (Manich, 1970, p. 82). Manich (1970) added, “*The Thai wanted only the king to send tributes and pay homage, to send golden and silver flowers as an act of vassalage and to contribute men in case of war*” (p. 83). When the war was over, the two governments of Siam and Vietnam agreed to have Ang Duong crowned king at the end of 1847. “*The Vietnamese sent back the sacred sword and the regalia of royalty. The coronation was presided by Ong Kham-Mang as representative of Vietnam and by two Thai special envoys: Chao Phya Petpichai and a priest from Bangkok*” (Manich, 1970, p. 80).

Nevertheless, various French historians, from time to time, maintain their justification that it was King Ang Duong who first sought the French protectorate to help his shrinking nation out from being taken away and wiped out from the world map by the aggression of Siam and Vietnam. This is based on King Ang Duong’s top-secret letter sent to French Emperor Napoleon III through the French consul in Singapore in 1854; the letter was edited by Bishop Miche. In the letter, King Ang Duong not only sought alliance with France but also requested the latter not to accept any southern territory of CochinChina taken away by Vietnam from Cambodia. Instead, he requested France to return them to Cambodia. The King wrote, “*I beg Your Majesty to know the name of the provinces deprived, these are: Dongnai, taken away more than 200 years, Saigon, Long-*

ho, Psar dec, Mitho, Pra-trepang, Ongmor, Crémuon Sâ, Tiec Khmau, Péém ou Hatien, Isles of Cô-Trol and Trelach. If, by any chance, should the Annamites come to offer Your Majesty with any of these provinces I pray you not to accept them, because they belong to Cambodia. I beg Your Majesty to have compassion on me and my people, so that we shall see the end of our losses, and we shall have the highest idea of your reputation, which shall have been proved here.”

The pretext of the said Ang Duong’s invitation for the French protecting power was used by Pierre Pasquier, Governor General of Indochina, as a “*conquest of hearts*”. In his article “*Indochina Today*” published in 1929 in *The Asiatic Review* XXV (84), as quoted by John (2002), he boastfully wrote, “*The ruler of Cambodia himself placed his kingdom under the French Protectorate without any pressure being put on him... and the Upper Mekong became French without the firing of a single shot, according to an expression that today is famous, this was a ‘conquest of hearts’ ...*” (p. 1)

French designs on Cambodia, according to Manich, began with Monseigneur Miche, a French bishop who worked as Vicariat Apostolique of Cambodia from 1848 to 1857. It was him who impressed King Ang Duong as written by Manich (1970) that “*France as a great empire and urged him to make contacts with the French emperor. It was in 1853 that he edited a letter in French for Ang Duong’s signature addressed to the French Emperor through the French consul in Singapore*” (p. 98).

The first French attempt to persuade King Ang Duong to sign the protectorate treaty was on October 5, 1856. However, the King refused to sign the treaty on grounds that it was made without prior discussions, and under pressures and threats from the French, and that he was offended with a lack of courtesy. Yet, at that time, Louis Charles de Montigny, French envoy to King Mongkut of Thailand, blamed the Thai emissaries for sabotaging the French work.

In reacting to this incident, King Ang Duong wrote two separate letters to Montigny and Emperor Napoleon on November 25, 1856. In his letter to Montigny as quoted by Manich from Meyniard of “*Second Empire en Indochine*”, the King wrote that he “*could not sign the treaty nor put a seal to it because a treaty is an important affair which regulates reciprocal interests and of which the consequences should last for a long time to come. There has as yet not been held, between French and Cambodian nobles, any meeting which would show what would be the advantage or disadvantage on each side, and then to determine the agreement as a result...*” (Manich, 1970, p. 105).

It took the French another seven years since this incident and three years following the death of King Ang Duong in 1860 to have her protectorate treaty eventually concluded with Cambodia under the new reign of King Norodom. Definitely, it was through forces, pressures and threats, according to Manich (1970) and Milton (1969). The contents of the treaty itself were not from Cambodian king’s own freewill and immediately became the subject of a long diplomatic feud between France and Siam. It was made known that King Mongkut of Siam at that time even considered British protectorate to counter the French position over Cambodia. Terwiel (2011) wrote: “*It was during these protracted*

and difficult negotiations that Mongkut wrote confidently to the British consul, suggesting that he would welcome a British take-over. In his letter of 18 December 1866, Mongkut says his opinion is a personal one made without the Siamese government's knowledge and continues: 'if the British protectorate is necessary, he [Mongkut] and his family would accept it' (p. 165).

The following is a full excerpt of King Ang Duong's letter sent to French Emperor Napoleon III in 1854, as translated by Manich Jumsai and published in his book "History of Thailand & Cambodia [From the days of Angkor to the present]" (p. 92-93). Part of this letter was also quoted in Marie Alexandrine Martin's book, *Cambodia: a Shattered Society*, published in 1994 by the Regents of the University of California (p. 41).

King Ang Duong's letter to Napoleon III

I, Phra Hariracks réam maha Issara Tibodi, King of Cambodia, have full esteem and attachment for His Majesty Napoleon III, Emperor of the French and to the loyal French nation.

For several years the missionaries have agreed to praise France: "The sovereign of France and the French, who profess the Catholic religion, have a heart to relieve all miseries and are far from harming the interests of anybody and from attacking but they help in the misfortunes and procure advantage and prosperity; the sovereign of France has really good intentions, quite contrary to other European governments which only seek to corrupt and destroy."

Having thus heard such stories, here is the subject of my gratitude. I would like to enter into alliance with Your Majesty, who has such good dispositions, in order to enjoy long and lasting friendship and in order to extend my country with advantage for the people. I have thus asked Mgr Miche, Bishop of Dansara, to write a letter for me, in order to express my friendship to Your Majesty, and offer to Your Majesty four elephant tusks, two rhinoceros horns, five quintals of sticklac, five of sugar, five of pepper, as presents which I did not have any news for so many years. This time I present to Your Majesty four specimens of Cambodian textiles and four elephant tusks. All that is very little ... I beg Your Majesty to accept as my pledge of cordiality.

Moreover, may it please Your Majesty to know that formerly the Kingdom of Cambodia was great and extensive; but the perfidious Annamites after having concluded friendship with Cambodia had invaded various provinces of the kingdom in successive partitions.

When king Gia-Long was quarrelling with his opponent, he went to ask help from Siam; there he met my father, made alliance with him, returned from Siam and Cambodia taking away with him a Cambodian army with which he conquered the enemy and became the sole king of Cochin-China. He then asked my father not to exact tribute and

corvée from the province of Trapang, to whom he was indebted for their help. My father, understanding this language of peace, consented to it that this Cambodian province be exempted from the burden.

After a few years, the King Gia-Long annexed it. Later, when my father went to ask help from Gia-Long, and when I was in Siam, Ming Mang, son and successor of this king, had ordered a canal which divided up Cambodia from Hatien to Mot-chruc to be dug, and put the seized provinces under Annamite administration. My brother died without leaving a male heir. Ming Mang transported the daughters and mother of this prince to Saigon and had one of the daughters put to death. As to the Cambodians of these provinces they dispersed them, people and nobles, to various islands, and even to the provinces to the South of China.

The Cambodians, unable to bear the perfidy of the Annamite king any longer, had asked me from the King of Siam to come and rule over them. King Phra Nangklao, at the time on the throne of Siam, sent Bodin with an army of more than 5000 men, and made such considerable expenses in order to assist the Cambodians against the Annamites who had not yet definitively occupied all the provinces. After eight years of war, the King of Cochin-China asked for peace and promised to return my mother and the daughters of my brother, and also to return the nobles and my Cambodian subjects, scattered about everywhere, to recognize me as king of Cambodia and to deliver to me the Annamite seals as symbol of my sovereignty. In the end they made this promise: all the Cambodian provinces taken away by the Annamites shall all be returned.

Thereupon, Bodin told me: that is enough for peace. It was thus concluded. But in the year 1208 (Cambodian era), i.e. since 1846, the king of Cochin-China declared that the provinces taken from Cambodia shall no longer obey my orders nor pay me any tributes. Moreover, he forbade Cambodia to have any trade in his kingdom nor in his ports; such is the state of the Kingdom of Cambodia.

I beg Your Majesty to know the name of the provinces deprived, these are: Dongnai, taken away more than 200 years, Saigon, Long-ho, Psar dec, Mitho, Pra-trepang Ongmor, Crémuon Sâ, Tiec Khmau, Péém ou Hatien, Isles of Cô-Trol and Trelach. If, by any chance, should the Annamites come to offer Your Majesty with any of these provinces I pray you not to accept them, because they belong to Cambodia. I beg Your Majesty to have compassion on me and my people, so that we shall see the end of our losses, and we shall have the highest idea of your reputation, which shall have been proved here.

The French and the Cambodians will mutually love each other and will have continuous trade relationships in the future.

Note: The Khmer version, dated November 25, 1856, of this letter can be accessed here: [King Ang Duong's Letter to French Emperor Napoleon III](#)

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