

DRAWING CAMBODIA'S BORDERS:  
NOTES ON KHMER TEMPLE MURALS IN KAMPUCHEA KROM (VIETNAM)<sup>1</sup>

Ashley Thompson  
*University of California, Berkeley*

Kampuchea Krom is the modern Khmer appellation of a region in the southern Mekong delta. It belongs politically to the state of Vietnam, and yet it has intimate historical, cultural and ethnic ties to Cambodia "proper." It is precisely this question of the proper that I hope to address here, on both sides of several borders: how can something like Kampuchea Krom, which is a cultural-historical phenomenon as much as a geographical area, help us to reconsider the concept of the proper? In particular, how can we think anew about what the "properly Cambodian" might be or mean from the perspective of Kampuchea Krom?

The name Kampuchea Krom, literally "Cambodia below" or "lower Cambodia," has generally topographical connotations: this region is lower in altitude than the central Cambodian plains or the mountain ranges that rise in western, northern and eastern Cambodia. Krom can also mean "downstream," and in reference to the Mekong, this is the most probable immediate source for the designation. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the Mekong, which cuts through Cambodia's northeastern plateaux down to Phnom Penh before heading southeast to its delta in southern Vietnam, defines or structures Cambodia in profound cultural as well as geographic ways. In any case, the term Kampuchea Krom appears to be a relatively recent fabrication. Though it is likely to have first arisen in nationalist circles evolving in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term gained wide currency only as Cambodia and Vietnam obtained independence from France in the mid-1950s.<sup>2</sup> This territory, traditionally, if sparsely inhabited by Khmer

<sup>1</sup> This paper has known various oral incarnations: at the University of Michigan November 2001 conference *Mural as Mirror: Reflections of History and Politics in Buddhist Art*, at the Society for Asian Art in February 2003, and in a seminar at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* led by Christopher Goscha in May 2003.

<sup>2</sup> If specifically created in a modern nation-building context, the term "Kampuchea Krom" is nonetheless derived from common usage. Geographic distinctions are often rendered in Khmer with the opposing terms *krom* ("below," "downstream" or "downhill") and *loe* ("above," "upstream," "uphill"). In Ratanakiri province we find, for example, two villages or two groupings of a single village, named Kachon Krom and Kachon Loe, the former situated downstream of the latter on the Se San river. The term *khmaer krom*, literally "Khmer below" in reference to Khmer populations of Kampuchea Krom, has strong ethnic overtones in contemporary usage. Apparently coined along with "Kampuchea Krom," the term is likewise derived from common usage, namely of the terms *anak krom* and *anak loe*. People or populations (*anak*) are frequently distinguished by their relative topographic location *krom* or *loe*. The shift from *anak krom* to the ethnic term *khmaer krom* would easily follow from politico-cultural distinctions made between the Khmer in what is now Cambodia, and those people identifying themselves as Khmer, but living in the southernmost regions of modern Vietnam that have come to be known in Khmer as Kampuchea Krom.

An obvious point of comparison here is the appellation of territory and Khmer populations on the Korat plateau situated in modern-day Thailand. Khmer populations living in the border regions, on both sides of the border, refer to the Khmer of the Korat plateau as *khmaer loe*. For these *khmaer loe*, the term *khmaer krom* designates Cambodians on the Cambodian side of the border. Interestingly, beyond these border regions, i.e. in central Cambodia, the term *khmaer loe* does not now designate Khmer of the Korat plateau. Appropriated by assimilationist movements during the Independence period, for central Khmer the term strictly designates ethnic minority populations in Cambodia's mountainous regions; the Khmer of the Korat plateau, on the other hand, are called *khmaer surind*, after Thailand's Surin province. Most pertinent to the present

populations, was already under varying degrees and forms of Vietnamese occupation and control by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A part of Cochinchina, it was effectively ceded to France by the Hue court through a series of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century military moves and treaties. However the colonizers found their new territorial possessions to be lacking clear cartographic definition. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, border surveys were thus repeatedly organized by French authorities to trace divisions between the Cambodian Protectorate and the Cochinchinese Colony. Cambodian nationalist sentiment formed and grew in response to the apparent loss of significant portions of territory. With Japanese occupation during World War II, and then while acquiring the first attributes of independence from France, the Cambodian government increasingly reasserted claim to the region. But in 1949 hopes were dashed as the French National Assembly transferred Cochinchina to postwar Vietnam presided over by Bao Dai. Khmer protests to this decision, primarily based on the assertion that previous Cambodian agreements to border divisions had concerned territory accorded the French, not the Vietnamese, were summarily rejected. And though Khmer protests continued sporadically throughout the following decades, the post-World War II convention was nonetheless perceived in many circles as representing a point of no return.<sup>5</sup> In this way the Southern Mekong Delta became fully integrated in political terms into what only a few years later would become

paper, however, is the fact that there has never existed a linguistic equivalent to "Kampuchea Krom" to designate the territory in modern-day Thailand inhabited by Khmer, i.e. "Kampuchea Loe" or "Kampuchea above." Revendications of territorial and cultural sovereignty around the Thai border have, likewise, never attained the same intensity and continuity as those surrounding Kampuchea Krom. For a discussion of the evolution of this terminology concurrently with that of Khmer nationalism, see Népote 1998: 150-5.

I am indebted to a number of colleagues for their assistance in researching the history of the region and related terminology, in particular Ang Choulán who first called to my attention the artificiality of the term "Kampuchea Krom" and its probable entry into common usage around Independence. Thach Deth offered me generous and skilful research assistance in Parisian archives. He brought to light a series of articles in Khmer language periodicals of the 1930s-1940s (*Kampuchea Suriya* and *Kampuchea*) which refer neither to Kampuchea Krom nor Khmer Krom to designate territory and populations in the Mekong delta. In the first issue of *Kampuchea Suriya*, in 1930, the Venerable Tat, a monk and professor of Sanskrit at the Buddhist Institute, provides an account of a "Message" delivered by the Governor General to "the Khmers of the Southwestern Cochinchina region" (*paññā vāstr khmaer knuī ðaen kūsāmsīn khāñ dis nīratī*) during a recent visit to the region in question. The terms *vāstr khmaer* and *ñāti khmaer* are used interchangeably throughout the account. The first is a traditional term etymologically designating Khmers belonging to a (Khmer) kingdom; the second, etymologically designating people of Khmer birth, arose with 20<sup>th</sup>-century nationalism as a sort of conflation of genetic heritage with nationality. The expression *knūī ðaen kūsāmsīn*, "in the region of Cochinchina," or slight variations thereof, recurs frequently throughout this same text and 1943 articles in the pro-Vichy *Kampuchea* (see for example *Kampuchea*: January 9, 1943). Interestingly, one example given for usage of *ðaen*, "region, territory" in the Khmer Dictionary published by the Buddhist Institute in 1967-68 is *ðaen kambujā krom* (t. 1, p. 337). Siyoni Sophearith located a series of pertinent articles in the nationalist newspaper *Nagara Vatta* (1937-1942). Though the collection consulted (archived at the University of California, Berkeley) is missing several issues (39-43, 68-71, 158-162), it would seem that the term "Kampuchea Krom" was not in current use at the time. This newspaper, which counts amongst its founders Kampuchea Krom-born Son Ngoc Thanh, carried pedagogically oriented and pointedly nationalist articles on the history, culture and geographic demarcations of the region, as well as "Letters from Cochinchina." The tone of these articles intensifies in fervor after the coronation of King Norodom Sihanouk in 1941. In two letters published in 1941, for example, first a group of monks, then a "Representative of Khmer people of Cochinchina" express their fidelity to King Sihanouk, along with their hopes that the new king would ensure the reunification of Khmer in Cochinchina with Khmer in the State of Cambodia. (*Nagara Vatta* August 20, 1941; November 26, 1941). Most pertinent to present concerns is what I suspect to be evidence of coinage of the term "Kampuchea Krom" specifically for nationalist purposes in another 1941 *Nagara Vatta* piece. Entitled "On the Khmer of Cochinchina" (*ambī ñāti khmaer nau ðaen kūsāmsīn*), this article strives to prove the ancient nature of Khmer occupation of Cochinchina through reference to what it claims to be traditional terminology: "The terms that Khmer in Kampuchea use up until today to designate our relatives in Cochinchina are *khmaer sruk krom* (Khmer of the lower regions or of regions downstream) or *khmaer pāsāk* (Khmer of the Bassak (river) region). This is clear proof that the Cochinchina region (*ðaen kūsāmsīn*), more than three hundred years ago, was part of our State of Kampuchea (*ruom panduk jā muoy nīñ kambujarath yoeñ*) as it exists today. Those who are called *khmaer sruk krom* are Khmers who have lived throughout the Cochinchina region since that time – up to the border with Champa (today's Annam), all the way down to the Camau (*ñlle khmau*) peninsula" (*Nagara Vatta* June 1941: 1). Gregory Mikaelian gave me meticulous bibliographical guidance on the history of the region. Michel Antelme offered me several linguistic leads. Lastly, David Chandler, Peter Zinoman and Christopher Goscha shared their reflections and bibliographical suggestions.

<sup>5</sup> There exists a wide variety of publications on various aspects of the history of this region. These range from historical chronicles, legal and geographical texts, to more or less overtly nationalist Vietnamese declarations of "conquest" and Cambodian accusations of "annexation," to less impassioned but at times no less ideological accounts by Western scholars or journalists. Vietnamese sources (along with French sources on Vietnamese populations in the region) are much more extensive than Khmer ones, and research has been most concentrated on the colonial period, such that the political and socio-cultural evolution of the region prior to the establishment of French administrative control, particularly for Khmer populations, remains relatively obscure and subject to polemical debate. For the modern period and/or the Cambodian perspectives with which this paper is most concerned, see in particular Osborne 1997, Sarin Chhak 1966, Groslier 1985-6, Lamant 1989, Mak Phocun 1989, "La notion

independent Vietnam. And so "Kampuchea Krom" was born as an appellation in Khmer, and thus as a distinct "Cambodian," or "Kampuchean" region to Khmer speakers, only as political borders were drawn making the provinces in question an inalienable part of Vietnamese territory. Which is to say that Kampuchea Krom was born only as it was lost. The desire for territorial reintegration, and even more, a certain nostalgia for a "lost whole" that only ever existed as always already lost, is part and parcel of this nominal phrase and the "entity" it names—an entity that is at once political, geographic and linguistic, "natural" and "cultural."

But of course, in such a context, "territory" and "integration," to say nothing of "reintegration," are quite problematic concepts, and this is one of the questions that form the backdrop of my investigation here: What is a land? What is a homeland? To what extent and in what manner is it constituted by cosmography, which is to say by myth, and the stories that are told, or not told, about it? At issue is what is generally called "cultural identity," though this too is anything but a self-evident concept. So I have chosen to approach the question not from a strictly historical or political science point of view as is often the case in academic work on territoriality in Southeast Asia as a whole, and on Kampuchea Krom in particular, but instead from a somewhat unusual standpoint, giving particular heed to place and story, to the relations between localization, or locality, and myth.

### *Visiting Kampuchea Krom*

In May of 2001 I spent ten days traveling in Kampuchea Krom.<sup>4</sup> This first trip to the region constituted a sort of enlightenment for me. I had been living in Cambodia for several years, and yet during this brief visit to Kampuchea Krom, I had the sensation of reaching a different level and kind of understanding of Cambodia. I use the word sensation intentionally, for this experience was both interior and sensorial; it was simultaneously profound and ephemeral. Kampuchea Krom is intensely Cambodian, but in a way that was at once extremely familiar and strikingly new to me. This fragmented piece of Cambodianness, if not strictly of Cambodia, seemed to constitute a whole that I was unprepared for, and this wholeness made the Cambodia I thought I knew so well suddenly itself seem terribly fragmented. In other words it was Kampuchea Krom that started to stitch together in my mind various snippets of Cambodian life or cultural practices that I had never understood, during my time in Cambodia, to be deeply linked. It was as if a figure suddenly leapt out of the assembled pieces of a puzzle. At the same time, the familiar became radically different as it began to take on unforeseen meaning.

I am recounting here my personal experience also as a sort of deontological warning with regard to elementary ethnographic codes of practice. This article is in some ways about nostalgia, about the lost homeland and the impossible return. But, as the attentive reader will already have noticed, I, too,

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de frontière dans la partie orientale de la frontière indochinoise" collectively authored in Lafont 1989, and Engelbert 1998. The recent publication of two 19<sup>th</sup>-century poems recounting violent Vietnamese oppression of Khmer populations testifies to traditional Khmer renditions of early modern history in the region, but perhaps most importantly to the continuation of this tradition, that is to the passion the subject still evokes in Cambodian socio-political and scholarly circles. The book includes the poems in the original Khmer and in French translation, with modern illustrations of torture scenes described in the text. This raises the question of the historiographical/poetic status of such a text: do these drawings simply serve to accompany a poem, or are they "scientific" illustrations of an historical account? What ideological decisions are hidden, or revealed, therein? A formidable example of interpretive translation, the book bears two different titles: in French, *L'Annexion du Cambodge par les Vietnamiens au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle d'après des deux poèmes du Vénérable Bâum Baraméy Pich*, and in Khmer *Rieuvî Kambap' Tae Uî* (Story of the Vietnamese General's Overturned Tea Kettle) (Khin Sok 2002). This Khmer title, which does not correspond to those of either of the manuscripts, refers to a particularly gruesome torture episode said to have taken place during the construction of the Vinh Tê canal by Khmer forced laborers.

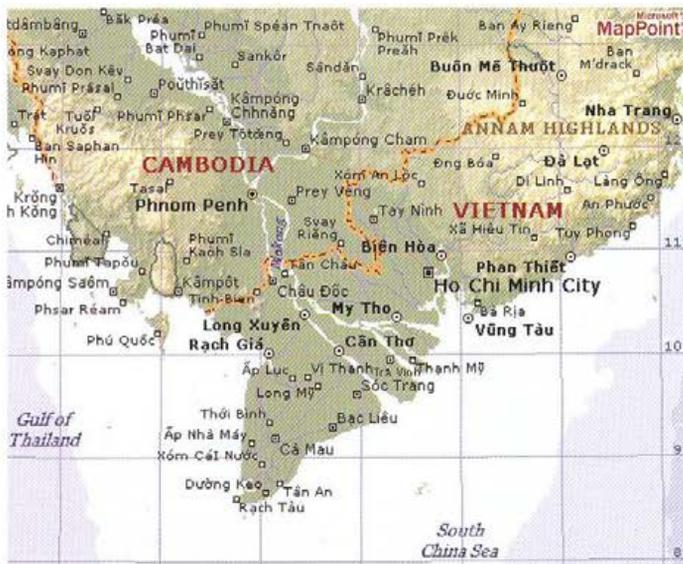
<sup>4</sup> This trip was financed by the Toyota Foundation in the framework of a collaborative research project with Ang Chouléan. Siyonn Sophearith and Svay Pisith also participated in field research.

had a tendency to see only Cambodia –albeit a new, or in some ways precisely an old Cambodia– as I looked at Kampuchea Krom. This could be seen as rather dubious ethnography, at least by some standards. Not only did I spend an extremely short period of time in the region, but in retrospect I have the strange feeling that I was studying as much what was not there as what was –or what was standing in, there, for something missing elsewhere. This feeling is undoubtedly not unrelated to the kind of research I did in Kampuchea Krom, to the type of testimony I brought back, and to the form of this article. I took an inordinate number of photographs, as if I wanted to definitively capture some elusive objective reality. But such excessive behavior belies an unspoken anxiety: that the object of my study would escape my grasp. In fact the great majority of my pictures are themselves of pictorial representations. In what follows, therefore, I will look at a select series of pagoda mural paintings in Kampuchea Krom. My overriding and modest aim in what can at best be called the preliminary results of a research project that is still largely to come, will be to articulate ways in which relations between the macrocosm and the microcosm can be realized in Buddhist worlds through a process of localizing myth –and simultaneously mythologizing the local. What is ultimately at issue is a certain experience or understanding of time and space: what does it mean to be present, here and now –or absent– within Kampuchea Krom, within Southeast Asia, within the syncretic-Buddhist tradition to which these pagodas belong? For it seems that within this world, conceptions of identity (cultural, national, ethnic...), of the proper or the self-same, of territory and territoriality, are paradoxically formed, with the attendant tracing of physical and political borders, but also historiological, sociological, ethnic and indeed psychological borders, only as these very borders are radically, inaugurally transgressed.

Khmer Buddhist pagodas in Kampuchea Krom are in general extremely well preserved in comparison with their counterparts on the other side of the border. I am referring to Theravadin temple complexes, generally comprising a *vihāra* (primary worship hall), a *sālā* (secondary worship or assembly hall) and various other buildings such as monks' quarters, as well as stupas (Buddhist funerary monuments), and perhaps a reservoir. Virtually none of the buildings are more than one hundred years old, although some pagodas are built on the sites of much older "ancient" temples. As a rule, the pagodas of Kampuchea Krom are culturally conservative. They seem to be invested with a largely unspoken mission to protect and maintain vestiges of the past. To some extent of course, this mission is really no mission at all, but simply a way of life, the way that life goes along its way in a region where the past, in the form of a strong cultural heritage, is always present. Yet as I have just suggested, there is an urgency and a strangely nostalgic quality to this perpetually renewed affirmation of a living heritage in Kampuchea Krom that can be traced to a history of borders drawn under the pressure of nation-building forces. Furthermore, this affirmation is put into stark relief by a more recent loss: the unprecedented cultural destruction that has taken place in Cambodia over the past thirty years, most spectacularly with the Khmer Rouge, and their explicit attempt to eliminate traditional social structures, but continuing to the present day, and even including some of the attempts at rebuilding Cambodia anew. If only for this reason, the temples of Kampuchea Krom bear invaluable testimony to pre-war Khmer localizations of Buddhist mythology. However, these sites offer more than simply vestiges of artistic traditions virtually extinct in Cambodia today. Because while they propose a Khmer rendition of Buddhist myth, the very specificity of these pagodas lies in the fact that they also enact a mythologizing localization of a "lost" Cambodian kingdom.

### *Itinerary*

The pagodas we will be looking at are situated in Tra Vinh, or in Khmer, Preah Trapeang province, and Soc Trang, or Khleang province (figure 1). The interior walls and ceilings of *vihāra* are typically painted with scenes from Buddhist legend. I will discuss such *vihāra* murals from three sites dating to three distinct moments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the 1930s before Cambodian and Vietnamese Independence, the 1950s after Independence, and the 1970s during the American/Vietnam War and after Lon Nol's ouster of Sihanouk.



*Figure 1: Kampuchea Krom, with reference to the modern Cambodian and Vietnamese urban centers, Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City. Discussion below will focus on the eastern provinces of Soc Trang (called Khleang in Khmer) and Tra Vinh (Preah Trapeang). (Expedia 2002)*

### *Vat Angkor Reac Borei (Vatt Aṅgar Rāj Purī)*

Vat Angkor Reac Borei, which translates literally as the "Pagoda of the Royal Capital," is situated a few dozen kilometers outside the town of Preah Trapeang (Tra Vinh) (figure 2). As its name suggests, this is an ancient temple site. The pagoda itself is part of a larger ensemble, including, to the northeast of the temple grounds proper, an ancient rectangular reservoir (figure 3); and facing the pagoda directly to the east, a modern State-run Museum of "Khmer People's Culture" (figure 4). The *vihāra* stands on a raised terrace with fragments of what appears to be an ancient laterite supporting wall, surrounded by a moat (figures 5 and 6). Vestiges of an ancient temple—pedestals, statues and sculpted fragments in sandstone are housed primarily in the Museum, along with displays of ethnic Khmer minority members, including monks, demonstrating solidarity with the Viet Minh or with Ho Chi Minh directly, Khmer minority war hero mothers, Khmer pagodas destroyed by American bombs, and traditional Khmer clothing, utensils, musical instruments, etc.

Angkor Reac Borei's *vihāra* murals are dated 1939. These murals represent the life of the Buddha taking place as it were then and there, in the modern world with its ubiquitous French presence. Such



Figure 2: Entrance gate to Vat Angkor Reac Borei, Preah Trapeang (Tra Vinh) Province

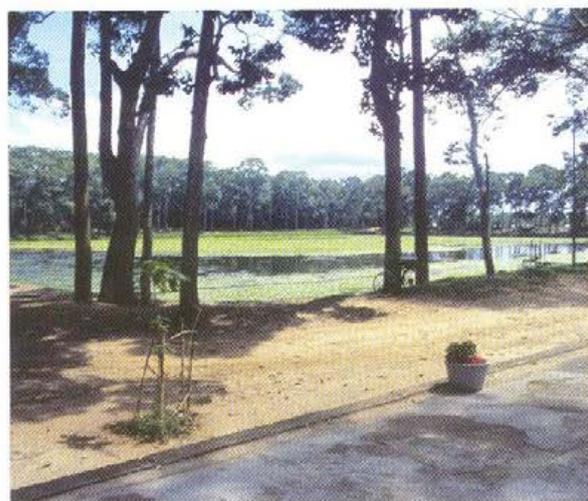


Figure 3: Water reservoir, called "Srah Sri" or "Srah Kū," near Vat Angkor Reac Borei



Figure 4: "Museum of Khmer People's Culture," facing Vat Angkor Reac Borei

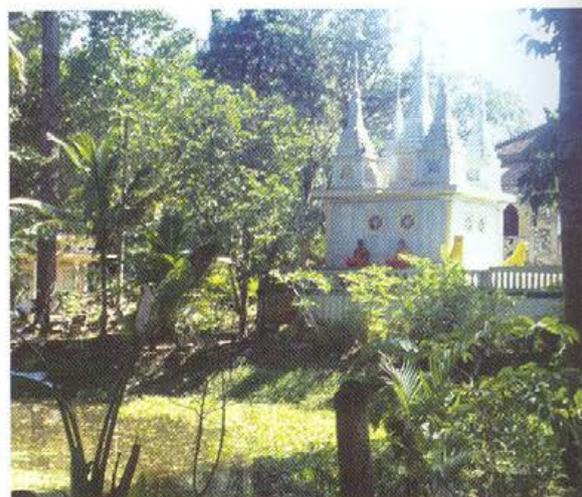


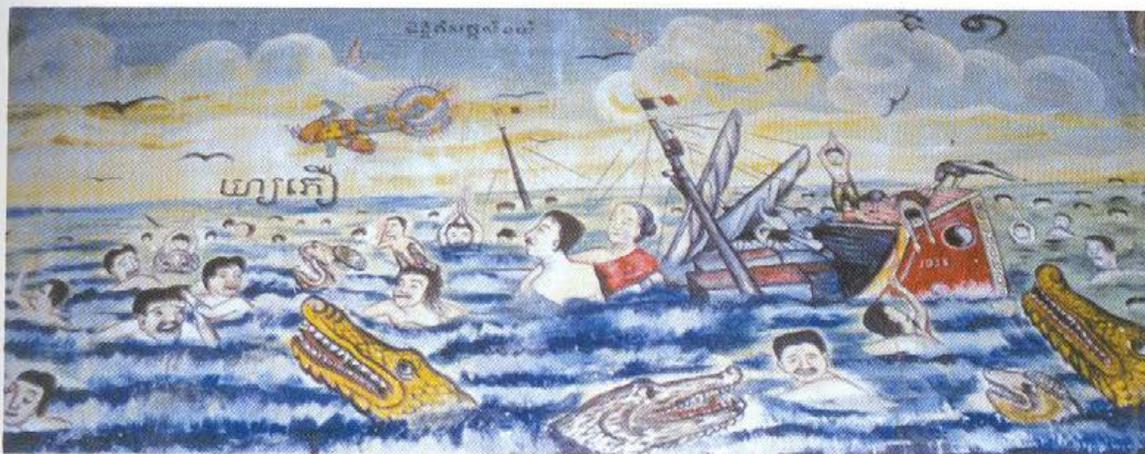
Figure 5: Laterite-supported platform and moat of the vihāra, Vat Angkor Reac Borei, seen from the northeast



Figure 6: Vihāra of Vat Angkor Reac Borei, seen from the northeast

localization of "cosmopolitan" myths is of course itself a universal, not to say a cosmopolitan phenomenon. By all accounts, it presided over the cultural and political formation of what is known as Cambodia, and has accompanied all of its subsequent history. It is the very principle on which traditional Cambodian art and architecture are based. Many of the localizing motifs and techniques employed in Kampuchea Krom murals can in fact be found throughout Cambodia, where they (re)construct at once a relation with India and a lost golden age. I will attempt to demonstrate, however, that the cultural, geographical and temporal situation of the Kampuchea Krom murals in question illuminates this phenomenon while displacing and in a certain sense radicalizing it.

Vat Angkor Reac Borei's murals begin with the Buddha in a past life as a bodhisattva transporting his mother across the ocean (figure 7). This is the story of *Mātudār Manub*,<sup>5</sup> as it is labeled here in Khmer, otherwise known as the *Mahājanaka Jātaka*. In this story, the Queen and mother of the future bodhisattva flees her kingdom in the wake of a palace revolution. In exile, she gives birth to a son which she names after his grandfather *Mahājanaka*. At an early age the young prince has a revelation about his origins.



*Figure 7: Scene from the Mahājanaka Jātaka, Vat Angkor Reac Borei*

Resolved to reconquer his kingdom he sets off with his mother and entourage on a boat, which is caught in a storm and sinks. Moved by the young boy's energy, the goddess of the seas, *Mañimekhalā*, decides to help him reach his goal. *Mahājanaka* eventually marries the daughter of the deceased usurper king, and rises to the throne. The long reign which follows leads him to understand that to possess is a source of affliction. He abdicates in favor of his son, and to the great dismay of his wife, to take up the religious life.<sup>6</sup> The French flag is visible on the mast of the sinking ship. Evil sea creatures pursue the drowning passengers while birds, a plane and a divinity, the goddess of the seas, fly overhead. This opening theme of suffering endured before reaching and re-acquiring a lost kingdom is one that will accompany us throughout our investigation.

A few episodes further along, *Māyā* gives birth to the future Buddha under a tree along a path

<sup>5</sup> I am at a loss to explain the bodhisattva's name clearly here. *Mātudār* could signify "mother's child." G. Mikaelian has suggested to me that *Manub* could be a Khmer reformulation of the Pali *mahānubasamudr*, "ocean with big waves." A similar term, *nab mahāsamudr*, is found in the Khmer Brahmanic cosmogonical text *Traibed Traitāyug* (EFEO ms. O 107) (Personal communication, July 28, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> CE Nafilyan 1997: 26-27. The mural of Cambodia's Kompong Tralach Krom pagoda (Kompong Chhnang province) pictured in the Nafilyan publication is artistically more refined than this Angkor Reac Borei painting, but the two are relatively similar in composition.

leading to the temple of Angkor Vat (figure 8). The future Buddha stands in the temple's central axis. The birds and airplane motif provide continuity with the Mahājanaka scene cited above.

Angkor Vat rises again in the background of the Royal Plowing ceremony (figure 9), which, in modern Cambodia, traditionally takes place not at Angkor but next to the Royal Palace grounds in Phnom Penh. The ceremony is attended by Khmer royals, French colonials and the future Buddha who goes into

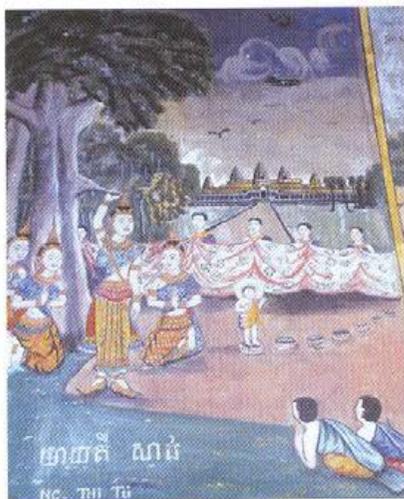


Figure 8: Maya gives birth to the future Buddha, Vat Angkor Reac Borei



Figure 9: The Plowing Ceremony, Vat Angkor Reac Borei

his first meditative trance. Seated in a pavilion to the right of a winding path leading to the distant temple, the future Buddha is figured here in the axis, and then as a double, at the summit of a mountain rising before the temple.

On the left of the next image (figure 10), the Buddha confides his alms' bowl in his stepbrother Nanda the day of the latter's marriage, so obliging Nanda to accompany him to his monastery at Jetavana. Once at Jetavana, the Buddha invites Nanda to enter the monkhood. Once again, Nanda obeys the Buddha, and, not without regret, abandons his new wife. More French flags proudly fly over this tragic scene. On the right (figure 11), the Buddha's son Rāhula requests his inheritance from his father; this meeting happens at an imaginary location "between" the Royal Palace –what appears to be Phnom Penh's Royal Palace constructed over the course of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries– and Angkor Vat, actually located in northern Siem



Figure 10: (left) The End of Nanda's marriage, Vat Angkor Reac Borei  
Figure 11: (right) Rāhula requests his inheritance, Vat Angkor Reac Borei

Reap province. The composition sets the corner of the Palace enclosure in the foreground. A Frenchman stands guard in the sentry niche, while monks line up alongside the enclosure wall, their heads forming a continuation of the wall's finial motif, itself a citation of temple wall finials characteristic of the architectural style prevalent under the reign of Jayavarman VII in the 12<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries: lotus-petal shaped niches framing a Buddha image. At the head of the line, the Buddha stands out from his followers on the path winding from the Palace to a distant Angkor Vat.<sup>7</sup>

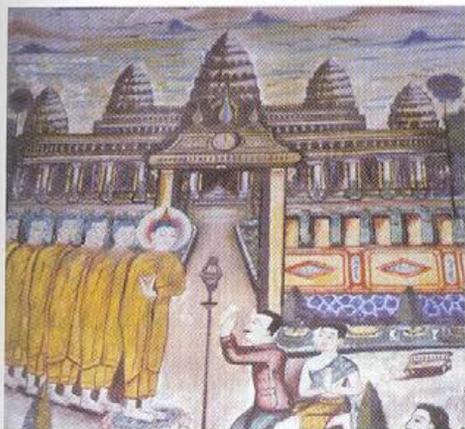
We finally approach the ancient temple as the famous merchant patron Anātha Piṇḍaka makes offerings to the Buddha, at Angkor Vat's entrance gate, at 12:15 sharp (figure 12).

French flags fly almost as high as the ritual "soul" flag at the Buddha's funeral (figure 13).

And it is under the French flag that the Kings of Jambudvīpa raise armies to dispute the Buddha's relics (figure 14).

This mural sequence, which recounts the life of the Buddha through a series of canonical mythological scenes arranged in roughly "chronological" order, also tells another, very Cambodian story. It recounts a pilgrimage, a long voyage back to Angkor as symbolized by Cambodia's most famous ancient temple, Angkor Vat. Ever since the fall of Angkor as the royal capital in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, this return to Angkor, and by extension to a lost golden age of Khmer civilization, has been a recurring Cambodian leitmotif. Here it is the Buddha himself who leads the way to Angkor Vat, and the entire canonical narrative of the life of the Buddha is instrumentalized as it is localized and overlaid by this nostalgic and subtly messianistic trope of return and salvation so typical of political-religious discourse and iconography in Cambodia after Angkor.

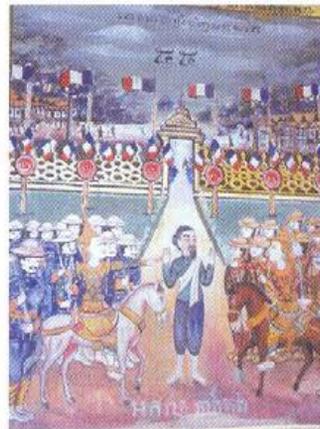
The French element here might be seen as providing a bit of comic relief in this rather serious iconographic enterprise. And yet the French too are pressed into service on this road back to Angkor. The



*Figure 12: Anātha Piṇḍaka makes offerings to the Buddha, Vat Angkor Reac Borei*



*Figure 13: The Buddha's funeral, Vat Angkor Reac Borei*



*Figure 14: Disputing the Buddha's relics, Vat Angkor Reac Borei*

French ship is sinking, but the flag still flies, and high above, the airplane, like the goddess of the seas, promises to carry the unfortunate voyagers beyond the reach of the evil sea monsters. Likewise, the French sentinel at the Royal Palace plays a vital role in this multi-civilizational quintessentially Khmer effort.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Thompson 2000, 2002 and in particular 2003 for a telling comparison with a mural depicting King Sihanouk in the axis of Angkor Vat—in a position similar to that the Buddha occupies here. Another example of this interchangeability between King and Buddha will be discussed below. The theoretical constructs at play in such images are explored more thoroughly in the 2003 article.

At the end of the 1930s, of course, Kampuchea Krom was not yet full-fledged Kampuchea Krom. Independence was still to be gained; the French governed Indochina as a whole; the border between two Southeast Asian nations as such had not been definitively drawn. Yet already we see in the *vihāra* paintings of Vat Angkor Reac Borei a sort of exacerbated longing not simply for the lost golden age, but for the "lost" homeland—a longing that was only to grow with time.

*Vat Bo Sal Reac* (Vatt Bo(dhi) Sāl Rāj)

Vat Bo Sal Reac is situated in the provincial seat of Preah Trapeang (Tra Vinh). According to the temple Superior, Vat Bo Sal Reac was patronized by the family of Son San, the renowned Cambodian statesman who had died a few months before our visit. Son San had served as Prime Minister under Sihanouk and had led a major faction of the resistance against post-Khmer Rouge Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. The temple Superior discreetly pointed out the stupa of Son San's grandfather, Oknya Son Kuy. Oknya Son Kuy served as provincial chief in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is remembered for having led a resistance movement against Vietnamization of Khmer populations, and particularly for having exchanged his own head, literally, against an assurance that Khmer Theravada Buddhist traditions would be respected. I first learned this story from Son Kuy's great grandson, Son Soubert, a prominent political opposition figure in Cambodia today, who learned it as a child from a Khmer Krom monk in Phnom Penh's Vat Botum Vodei.<sup>8</sup> Kampuchea Krom is known as the cradle of many of modern Cambodia's most learned and respected politicians. The figure of Oknya Son Kuy personifies for many the origin of this political lineage, extending beyond his own biological descendants.

The disproportionate prominence of Khmer Krom in modern Cambodian politics is often attributed by scholars to differences in educational opportunity during the colonial period. Residents of Cochinchina, a French colony, had enhanced access to French educational structures, whereas Cambodia, a Protectorate, was left more or less to its own devices in the field of education.<sup>9</sup> This is undoubtedly an important contributing factor. However, in the context of the present article, and based on my observations in Kampuchea Krom, I would argue that an even more pressing determinant of this phenomenon can be seen in the history of the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, leaving the Khmer Krom, or rather creating them as such, cut off yet that much more attached to a "Cambodia" which has perhaps nowhere been more clearly, insistently, passionately conceived as an entity, a (lost) whole, I would even say a living being, than in the marshy lowlands that form this southernmost extremity of the "Indochinese" peninsula.

The murals of Vat Bo Sal Reac are dated to 1955, shortly after Cambodian and Vietnamese independence. The French are conspicuous in their absence here in all but lingering art historical references: the artist, who calls himself a *dessinateur* (and signs in Vietnamese, while the mural legends are in Khmer), unabashedly borrows from classical French artistic traditions. Yet, in the stead of the Frenchman and the French flag of Angkor Reac Borei, we see here the icons of independent Cambodia.

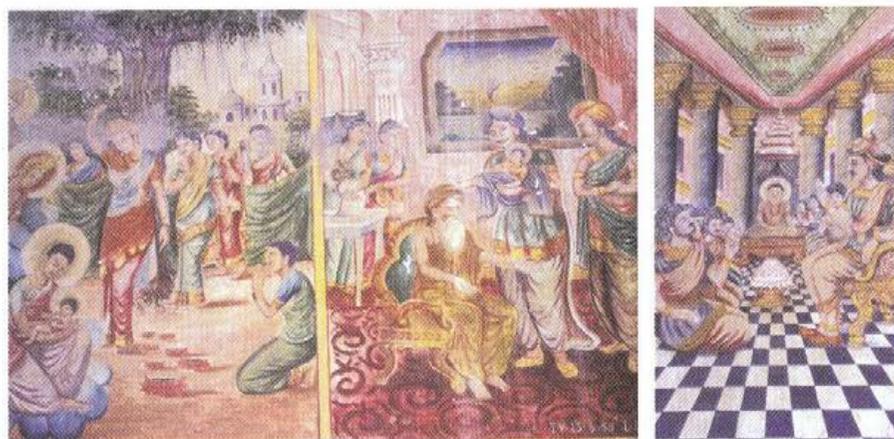
In 1918 the French administration, and in particular Georges Groslier, officially took over Phnom Penh Palace art workshops to found the School of Cambodian Arts in Phnom Penh. Groslier's principal goal was to rehabilitate and preserve those aspects of Cambodia's intangible cultural heritage consisting in artistic and craft traditions. The disciplines included traditional drawing and painting, architectural drafting, sculpture, furniture-making and wood- and metal-working, weaving and mask-making.. Along with traditional Khmer models and techniques, students were trained in Western artistic traditions, and in time, art history and

<sup>8</sup> Personal correspondence, October 11, 2001. The story is kept alive today through a plethora of Khmer language publications and internet forums.

<sup>9</sup> See for example Corfield 1994: 5.

theory. A certain number of students received French government grants to study at schools in Paris such as the *École des Beaux-Arts* or the *École du Louvre*. In initiatives across Indochina, the French government strove to train students in ancient indigenous traditions (including and in fact concentrating on Indian and Chinese influenced arts), while nonetheless introducing modern Western practice. Important aspects of the new training – most relevant to the present article were the introduction of perspective in painting – a technique employed in all of the temple art discussed here – and more or less realistic renderings of "natural" scenes rather than the generic iconographic models that dominated traditional forms of representation. It was this Cambodian School of Arts which was to become in 1965 the Royal University of Fine Arts, and where the curriculum continues to be based on a philosophy of researching and preserving Khmer traditions in conjunction with the study of Western culture, artistic technique and research methodologies. French government initiatives in Vietnam were more extensive with regard to the arts, as in so many domains, in particular as they promoted and strictly managed the introduction of European artistic traditions through the establishment of numerous teaching institutions. One notable difference between arts initiatives in Cambodia and Vietnam was that teachers in Cambodia were initially largely Cambodian, while teaching staff in Vietnam was primarily composed of French nationals. Three Schools of Art were opened in Cochinchina alone: in Thu Dau Mot (1901), Bien Hoa (1903) and Gia Dinh (1913), each specializing in particular art forms, for example drawing, engraving and lithography at Gia Dinh. In 1924 an *École des Beaux-Arts* modeled on that in Paris was founded in Hanoi. Each of these schools also continues to operate in more or less modified form today.<sup>10</sup>

(Figure 15) Whether directly or indirectly influenced by such initiatives, these murals from Vat Bo Sal Reac seem to relocate the Buddha's life into the iconographic universe of French so-called historical painting of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or even the famous orientalist productions of painters like Delacroix. In fact this particular version of the Plowing episode in the life of the Buddha might be seen as a sort of artistic medley mixing the works of various different painters represented at the great museums of Europe



*Figure 15: Scenes from the legend of the Buddha's life, Vat Bo Sal Reac, Preah Trapeang (Tra Vinh) Province*

<sup>10</sup> The majority of information here is drawn from André-Pallois 1997: 200-60. Many thanks to Nora Taylor for her comments on the introduction of fine arts training into Vietnam, and for her bibliographical guidance. Below discussions of the adoption of French orientalist traditions in the service of post-Independence nationalist expression in Kampuchea Krom echo ideas set forth in N. Taylor's 1997 essay "Orientalism/Occidentalism: The Founding of the *École des Beaux-Arts d'Indochine* and the Politics of Painting in Colonial Việt Nam, 1925-1945."



Figure 16: *The Plowing Ceremony, Vat Bo Sal Reac*

(figure 16). For example in the foreground scene, the three thickly-painted, heavy-set, well-clad figures, the Persian rug and the turbaned man, which situate us as much in the West looking east to the Orient as in Cambodia looking west to India, one might see influences of a painting such as Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger*. And perhaps, in the landscape visible behind the main action here, with its ceremonial plowmen turned peasants going about their daily lives, calmly plowing their fields even as the Buddha levitates in trance before his parents, one might see the distant influence of Breugel's "Fall of Icarus."<sup>11</sup> This stylistic delocalization of the *dessinateur* at Vat Bo Sal Reac is however readjusted through a series of tell-tale details.

In the very distant lightly painted background, beyond a tiny figure climbing one of two very Cambodian-looking palm trees, emerge the towers of Angkor Vat. This barely discernible reference to Cambodia – Angkor Vat on the horizon – radically relocates the artistic perspective. For Angkor Vat locates both the subject painted – the Buddha's life – and the painting subject – the *dessinateur* – in Cambodia. In locating the Buddha's story in the newly independent Kingdom of Cambodia, these temple murals seem to relocate

Kampuchea Krom *itself* in Cambodia, or Cambodia in Kampuchea Krom. Since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as I have already mentioned, Angkor Vat has been a symbol of Cambodia's long-lost political integrity and cultural hegemony, and implicitly an open promise of the future restoration of such a "golden age." This figure of Angkor Vat found new potency in the southern Mekong delta which in a sense lost independence as Cambodia regained it. Though legally a part of Vietnam, Kampuchea Krom in 1955 could imagine itself as Cambodian by drawing from the resources of Buddhist art in which geographical transposition in pictorial iconography has long operated metaphysical associations between the microcosm and the macrocosm. In the artistic turn studied here, Cambodia is to Kampuchea Krom what India is to Cambodia. The temple of Angkor Vat served as the ideal vehicle for this politically charged artistic transposition. An architectural realization of the association between the microcosm and the macrocosm, the temple of Angkor Vat collapses the singular and the universal, the here and now with the there and past: it is in and of itself an expression of territoriality which surpasses the material substance or presence of land.<sup>12</sup>

This relocation is operated through other sorts of equally discreet detail. The first of these is a thinly disguised portrait of the father of Khmer Independence, Norodom Sihanouk, and of other members of the royal family. (Figures 17 and 18; compare with figure 19) Here we have Sihanouk playing King



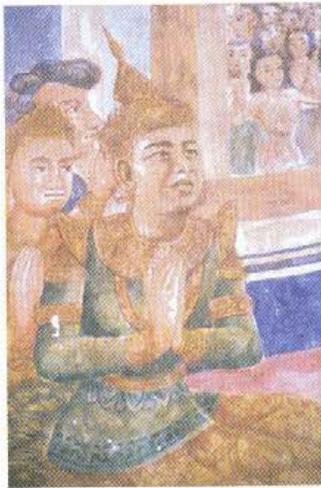
Figure 17: *The Conversion of King Bimbisāra, Vat Bo Sal Reac*

<sup>11</sup> To understand how particular this style is, we can contrast it with the well known and studied traditional "Khmer" murals of Kompong Tralach Krom pagoda in Cambodia's Kompong Chhnang Province, illustrated in Nafilyan 1997; or with those of Siem Reap's Vat Bo reproduced in H. and E. Leisen's "The Murals of Wat Bo pagoda in Siem Reap" in the present volume. These are of course deeply influenced by Thai mural painting – as is typical of what are seen to be Cambodia's most refined murals, exemplified by those of the Royal Palace.

<sup>12</sup> I am thinking in particular here of conceptions of territoriality which do not presuppose fixed borders, but rather see radiations out from a center, as figured by the mandala. See in particular Tambiah 1976, Winichakul 1994, and Wolters 1999.

Bimbisāra, a well-known character in Buddhist mythology. A friend of Siddhartha's grieving father, King Bimbisāra had originally attempted to convince the young prince-turned ascetic to return to the royal fold. However he, himself, subsequently becomes the Buddha's disciple, and we see him here in veneration. Through the use of portraiture in an artistic tradition founded on fidelity to the generic model, the artist communicates a quasi-secret message of loyalty to the Khmer crown.<sup>13</sup> In 1955, Prince Sihanouk embodied for many, not unlike Angkor Vat, the re-establishment of national integrity. As a player in the Buddha's story, his figure—his face—simultaneously disrupts the generic Buddhist artistic tradition and draws on that same tradition as another form of localization. While the Buddha's life is made to take place in contemporary Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk is placed on a mythical footing in a role of universal meaning. The composition brings the Buddha's story home and projects Sihanouk—as the incarnation of newly independent Cambodia—into the historical-legendary dimension of Buddhist time and place. The reversal of roles—between father and son, King and Prince, leader and follower in this Buddhist scene is not without relevance to newly Independent Cambodia.

The second appearance of Prince Sihanouk is in fact in the person of another, older man bearing similar royal family traits (figure 20). The features of this man following in the footsteps of the Buddha are in any case those of the Khmer king—although which Khmer King remains undecideable. He might be said to recall Sihanouk's predecessor on the throne, King Monivong (figure 21). What is more, the royal figure in this mural bears striking resemblance to the Buddha at his side. Indeed, if chronological temporal causality were not a constraint, one could even say the latter looks like Prince Sihmoni, a son born to



*Figure 18: Close-up of King Bimbisāra, figure 17, Vat Bo Sal Reac*



*Figure 19: King Sihanouk, Coronation Procession, 1941 (Jeldres and Chaijivanit 1999: 118)*

<sup>13</sup> Though I believe the influence of Western naturalistic painting to be of some importance here, I also want to avoid caricaturizing distinctions between "East" and "West." Portraiture of the sort seen in Vat Bo Sal Reac draws most directly from a long Cambodian tradition of associating royalty with legendary religious figures identified by iconographic codes. This tradition was brought to its logical extreme under the reign of the last well known Angkorian king, Jayavarman VII, who has served as a model for Sihanouk both in his own and others' minds. Cf. comments below on Vat Champa. In a forthcoming article ("Portraits..."), I have attempted to trace the theoretical evolution of portraiture in Khmer art, up through the reign of Jayavarman VII.

Sihanouk and Queen Monique in 1953, shortly before these murals were painted (figure 22). Intentional or not, this undecideability between father and son, royal and robed, King and Prince, leader and follower, is crucial to the subject matter at hand. These two murals serve to narrate in a remarkably concise manner the political interchangeability of father and son on which the new Khmer state was founded. In 1955 and in a characteristic twist of tradition, King Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father, Suramarit. Like a father, Sihanouk stepped down from the throne in order to organize and win elections as Cambodia's first elected head of state; like a son, Sihanouk's father rose to the throne in his son's place and in order to secure that



Figure 20: Royal figure following the Buddha, Vat Bo Sal Reac



Figure 21: King Monivong, grandfather of Sihanouk



Figure 22: Prince Sihanouk, carrying the ashes of his grandmother, Queen Kossamak Nearireath, September 1975 (Jeldres and Chaijitvanit 1999: 36)

place. The King-Prince-Buddha in this painting –that is, both central figures together– looks at the artist or the viewer straight on. Such a straightforward gaze is rare in Khmer Buddhist art. The appearance of the father of Independence in these murals certainly contains an element of tongue-in-cheek play by the artist. Couching representations of the Khmer royalty in the story of the Buddha, he makes a savvy political statement, with gravity but not without humor, protecting himself from reproach –these are after all characters in the life of the Buddha– while nonetheless allying himself, his temple or Kampuchea Krom with the newly independent nation. The gaze of the two figures is not itself a challenging one; it is rather contemplative, even inviting. Yet there is challenge here: the challenge portrayed by the artist in the gaze of the King-Prince-Buddha which engages us. Red, white and blue flags are waving in the background. But here, in contrast to those of Vat Angkor Reac Borei, the flags are Cambodia's, bearing at their center the image of Angkor Vat.

#### *Vat Champa* (Vatt Campā)

Vat Champa is located a few dozen kilometers from the provincial seat of Khleang (Soc Trang) province. The *vihāra* apparently burned in the late 1960s or early '70s. The murals inside the renovated *vihāra* are dated 1973. These murals are unusual in that they are not wall paintings. Vat Champa's interior

*vihāra* walls are tiled in light blue with a pink trim. The murals consist in miniature landscape scenes painted on white tiles set into a pink tile frame and arranged at regular intervals along the otherwise blue walls. These tiles depict four repeating motifs.

The first is Phnom Penh's Independence Monument, put into perspective in two slightly different renditions at the end of a long promenade complete with reflecting pools and park benches shaded by lush trees (figures 23-24). The Independence Monument was inaugurated in 1962 by Vann Molyvann, Cambodia's first professional architect, trained in France.<sup>14</sup> Taking inspiration from the pink sandstone and finely sculpted motifs of Angkor's famous Banteay Srei temple, the designers, at the behest of Prince Sihanouk, aimed to create an icon of Khmer modernity through citation of the Angkorian past. As a modern



*Figure 23: Phnom Penh's Independence Monument, Vat Champa, Khleang (Soc Trang) province*



*Figure 24: Close-up of a second version of Phnom Penh's Independence Monument, Vat Champa*

rendition of the temple or stupa, the monument alluded moreover to the cycle of death and rebirth. A flame to the unknown soldier burns in fact inside the monument. The use of Banteay Srei motifs served in addition as a personal homage by Vann Molyvann to his grandfather-in-law, Henri Marchal, the first architect of the Conservation of Angkor to employ anastylosis restoration technique and whose first major project using the technique was at Banteay Srei. The Independence Monument was of immediate renown, and has come to be seen as Vann Molyvann's first chef-d'oeuvre. It quickly became the capital's most important landmark, and launched a major campaign to transform Phnom Penh into a modern urban center. The Prince spearheaded the campaign with Vann Molyvann as his personal/public architect. In recent years, King Sihanouk has even described Vann Molyvann—who returned to Cambodia in the early 1990s to head the post-war campaign for the protection and restoration of Angkor—as the reincarnation of Jayavarman VII's architect.<sup>15</sup> In the lineage of Angkor Vat and the Bayon temple, the Independence Monument became a national icon of independent Cambodia. These facts about the Independence Monument are familiar to most Cambodians who had reached adulthood by the 1960s in or with some

<sup>14</sup> Many thanks to Darryl Collins for sharing the unpublished findings of the Architecture Research Khmer team (Darryl Collins, Helen Grant Ross and Hok Sokol) on the history of the Independence Monument (Personal communications, November 17, 2001; July 18, 2003; August 12, 2003). According to ARK findings, one set of structural blueprints for the monument was signed in 1957 by engineers Du Ngoc Anh and Ing Kieth. Designer Seng Suntheng was apparently also involved in this initial conception. Vann Molyvann, then Chief Architect for State Buildings and Head of Public Monuments, drafted a different set of blueprints, which served as the basis for construction. Responsible for overseeing construction, Vann Molyvann remains closely associated with the monument in the collective memory of Independence.

<sup>15</sup> For example, at the inauguration ceremony of the restored statue of Jayavarman VII housed in the National Museum of Phnom Penh, held on the first National Culture Day, April 3, 1999.

contact with urban centers; many who were born later also know the general story outline. They also knew and know that Vann Molyvann left Cambodia shortly after Prince Sihanouk was deposed in 1970. The decision to depict the Independence Monument on the walls of a *vihāra* in Kampuchea Krom in 1973 could not have been without political intention or effect. Without further on-site research it is impossible to know with certainty what the intention was. This gesture could represent a bold appropriation of the royally-infused icon of Khmer modernity by anti-monarchists. The rejection of traditional painting formats –if not simply a socio-economic necessity in wartime– could represent a rejection of Buddhist tradition's intimate association with monarchy. Not surprisingly, many Khmer Krom did rally the vehemently anti-Vietnamese Lon Nol government. Yet, to the contrary, the atmosphere of bourgeois leisure which permeates this scene devoid of people could well dissimulate an appeal to the lost order, particularly to the monarchy as the cornerstone of modern independent Cambodia. The distant nostalgia which seems to emanate from the art leads me to favor this last hypothesis.

The second motif represented in the *vihāra* of Vat Champa is the Royal Palace, in its modern city setting replete with park and path (figure 25). The composition is similar to those discussed above: the potently symbolic architectural body is the central component of a modern manicured and unpopulated urban setting.



Figure 25: Royal Palace of Phnom Penh, Vat Champa

Two landscapes, one Eastern and the other Western complete the repertoire of Vat Champa (figures 26 and 27). Similar in composition, with a body of glassy blue water in the right foreground, a triangular landmass in the left foreground and mountains rising behind, these two landscapes reflect each other as much as they do their proper geographic references. Difference is to be found in the architecture of the house and the boat, vegetation, rock and mountain formations. These are clichés of the Far East –embodied by Mount Fuji in the background and a junk sailing the calm

waters– and the European West –embodied by Switzerland perhaps... –the immediately recognizable representation of the one and the other as peaceful and timeless settings in space. The Independence Monument and Royal Palace are themselves cliché embodiments of Cambodia. Conceived as a series of like images, these miniatures would seem to place Cambodia in a central (non-aligned?) position on a

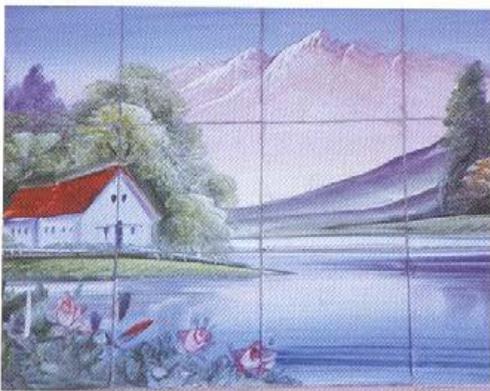


Figure 26: Western landscape, Vat Champa



Figure 27: East Asian landscape, Vat Champa

worldly stage between East and West. Yet, the silence of the foreign landscapes resounds differently from that of the urban Cambodian ones. The emptiness of an urban capital is eerie. As is that of a *vihāra* whose coldly tiled walls do not narrate familiar stories in familiar ways. The Buddha's life set here and now, that is in a Kampuchea Krom integrated through art into a mythologized independent Cambodia, is reduced at Vat Champa to a series of iconized landscapes emptied of their historical-legendary heroes.

To conclude rapidly and provisionally with regard to what are indeed only a few snapshots of more than one place, more than one history, more than one myth and memory, I would like to stress in the first place that while the phenomena I am concerned with here have everything to do with the tracing of national borders between the Cambodian and Vietnamese nations, there is no nationalist or nationalistic "solution" to the "problem" of Kampuchea Krom. What is interesting about Kampuchea Krom from the point of view of this paper is precisely how it forces one to take a deconstructive view of nations and (national) borders. The Cambodian-Vietnamese border as it is traced today is not wrong in a way that could be *simply* corrected by some other tracing. The forms of nostalgia and exacerbated Khmerness I have isolated in and through certain cultural manifestations in Kampuchea Krom are the complex, creative *products* of the history of the border—they depend on it, one could even say they thrive on it. What would be to blame, if blame were to be laid—and in a certain inseparable perspective, what one would have to thank—for the singularity, for the singular predicament of Kampuchea Krom today would indeed be nothing less than the institution of the modern nation-state itself, of which discrete, geometrical, political-geographical borders and a rational, Cartesian conception of national territory are but a function. In other words, the mistake would be to think that there is, or ought to be, only one border. There are more than one—there should always be more than one—and this is an incalculable source of wealth. At the same time, this elementary and I believe necessary insight is in no way an alibi to take the teeth, so to speak, out of all the struggles for justice, or against injustice, that spring up wherever borders are effectively traced or erased.

Kampuchea Krom is in effect neither here nor there. And at each of the telltale moments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that these murals illustrate after a fashion (the '30s, the '50s and the '70s), Kampuchea Krom has been neither here nor there in different ways. The continuity of this trait, the ambiguity of Kampuchea Krom's status with regard to place or time, its constitutive nostalgia for what it never had, itself forms a kind of identity. Yet such an identity represents a challenge for standard models of localization. These tend to be predicated on a binary opposition between the local and the universal or cosmopolitan, where the localized culture is constituted by an affirmation of full-blooded here-ness.<sup>16</sup> Of course, my conclusions can only be tentative for essential reasons. And it is no doubt true that in any local-universal dialectic, the locality of the local, the locale, so to speak, is constituted precisely through this process. Which is to say that the opposition cannot resist its own deconstruction, and the local is never *simply* local, never *simply* present, here and now. Yet it seems to me that in Kampuchea Krom, where there can of necessity be no simple narrative of a *proper* identity, this schema becomes complicated in a novel way. Because this process of localization, the (re)contextualization of Buddhist myth to tell, and in the telling to realize, an idiomatically local story, seems itself to be localized in, or rather with Kampuchea Krom. The relationship between Kampuchea Krom and "Cambodia" is apprehended and negotiated in these temples thanks to the mediation of a more "universal" relationship between a here and a there, between the walls of these *vihāra* in the lower Mekong delta and a certain India of Buddhist myth.

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<sup>16</sup> See for example Reynolds 1978; Pollock 1996.

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