

ROYAL PORTRAITURE IN THE CAMBODIAN POLITIO-CULTURAL COMPLEX: NORODOM SIHANOUK AND THE PLACE OF PHOTOGRAPHY¹

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The death of Norodom Sihanouk, former king of Cambodia, in Beijing on October 15, 2012 prompted predictable scenes of mourning in Phnom Penh and elsewhere in Cambodia. Yet the size of the crowds outside the Royal Palace, and their responses, were unexpectedly large and spontaneous. Observers estimated that millions thronged the streets of Phnom Penh to watch the procession of his coffin to the Royal Palace, and on the 20th of October, approximately 2,000 monks from across Phnom Penh assembled to pray for Sihanouk, as part of the seven-day ceremony, a tradition observed one week after a person's death. The ceremony was attended by hundreds of Cambodians who clutched portraits of the king, lit candles, and offered prayers. In the days after his passing, the National Television of Cambodia network began to loop a thirty-minute documentary of archival footage from the 1950s-60s, which showed staged scenes of Sihanouk helping to build homes in the countryside and presiding over newly opened factories in the capital. The spectacular scenes of mourning culminated in a cremation ceremony spanning five days, beginning on February 1, 2013, and which took place in a purpose-built crematorium at Veal Preah Man, adjacent to the Royal Palace.

In diverse ways, the death of Sihanouk was primarily experienced through the visual: from the crowds gathering along the boulevards of Phnom Penh to take view of the coffin and body - many recording the spectacle on mobile phones or iPads - to the huge numbers of people watching the live television transmission. Furthermore, Sihanouk's portrait was inescapable. In addition to his official portrait, new technologies and increased internet access allowed people to bypass official channels of image production and distribution and something of a black market

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visual economy emerged.² This article focuses on the unofficial portrait montages which were modified, printed, and displayed in the immediate aftermath of his death and during the five-day cremation ceremonies. These images were not only concerned with the commemorative, a term which here encompasses memorialization, souvenir, and remembrance. Instead, the manner in which these portrait photographs were collected, collated, modified, distributed, consumed, and displayed became illustrative, didactic expressions of ideal leadership, intimately intertwined with the need to make the king visible. I suggest that this was motivated by a political urgency, linked to the loss of a figurehead who many felt offered support to rural and dispossessed communities, up against a government which stands accused of a number of human rights abuses.³

Sihanouk's protective, paternal role was one he cultivated himself, in the shadow of pre-existing beliefs in a quasi-divine king, ritually and politically embedded in Buddhism. He was adept at manipulating his own image, displaying a variety of characters in his films and making explicit associations between himself and the glory of Angkor, especially the paradigmatic Cambodian king, Jayavarman VII. Arguably, it was Sihanouk himself who set the tone for creating a culture of the collation of portraits, by portraying himself in a number of guises. The posthumous practice of distributing montages of modified images functioned as a means to display characteristics of a "good" leader in the form of narrated biographies of his life. When assembled together these portraits became tools to describe, document, and present key moments in Sihanouk's life, and in doing so they recounted a certain biography of Sihanouk, whereby the figure of king metonymically stood for a version of Cambodian history.

It is crucial to note that there are many in Cambodia and in the Khmer diaspora who are not pro-Sihanouk and who did not participate in the phenomenon described here; many anti-Sihanouk voices were conspicuously silent during this period. In my view the very vocal, visible mourning was not necessarily evidence of specifically pro-Sihanouk sentiments *per se*, or even grounded in historical realities. Instead, lamentations were directed towards an emblematic "ideal king" in a broad sense, outside of particular institutional or political associations. This is inherent in many of the images themselves which, when collated together, portray a royal ideal, a person of merit, a pious Buddhist and military leader, who ensures the prosperity and stability of the country. The process of digitally altering images was a means of enhancing the beauty and the aura of the king, as befitting a legitimate Buddhist king, but the (re)production and consumption of images simultaneously became an expression of patriotism concerned with nostalgia for the past as well as present day issues.⁴

² Mobile technology and social media meant that ordinary Cambodians could record and share the spectacle on an unprecedented scale. At the time of Sihanouk's death there were approximately 2.5 million internet users in Cambodia, which equates to 16% penetration. Of the 19.6 million mobile phone users (131% penetration), 3.2 million mobile users were 3G subscribers and mobile technology accounts for 23% of all internet activity in Cambodia. As of October 2012 there were 690,520 social media users and the number of Facebook users had increased by 41% over six months, with more than one thousand people joining Facebook every day.

It is important to note that the internet is not completely democratic space; as in the 'real' world there is uneven geographical development with regard to cyberspace and internet usage is limited by the prohibitive cost of smartphones. ("Social, Digital and Mobile in Cambodia," research carried out by We Are Social, October 2012; Stallabrass, *Internet Art*, 40-50; Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity*, 9-11).

³ See reports compiled by Human Rights Watch.

⁴ I suggest that the nostalgic turn in the post-war Cambodian context rests upon a sense of the irreparable loss of two



Figure 1. An A3 laminated montage poster, purchased by the author in the aftermath of Sihanouk's death.

PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE AFTERMATH OF SIHANOUK'S DEATH

The photographs which appeared in the aftermath of Sihanouk's death can be organized into three categories. The first are the official portraits which were distributed by official channels for display at public sites. These images were selected and distributed by the Ministry for the Royal Palace, under His Excellency Kong Sam-ol. According to Prince Sisowath Thomico, Sihanouk's nephew and former aide, Sihanouk himself took no part in selecting his official photographs, nor did King Sihamoni or the Queen-Mother.⁵ In the days immediately after his death, these official photo-portraits of Sihanouk appeared outside government offices, public buildings and private businesses. The image was the same photograph, although there were two versions which appeared to be used interchangeably and concomitantly, each comprising a head and shoulder shot. Sihanouk's face is angled to the right and his gaze is focused on a space to the right of the frame. He wears a black suit and red tie; lines are visible on his face. Another version of this portrait has

historical moments: the first being the pre-war years between Independence and Sihanouk's disposal in 1970, which came to an unimaginably abrupt and violent end under the Khmer Rouge regime. The second is the specter of the Angkorian period, which had been explicitly conjured in pre-1970 Cambodia as the pinnacle of Khmer history, via French colonial and, later, Khmer nationalist discourses.

⁵ Author's interview with Prince Sisowath Thomico, Royal Palace, Phnom Penh, January 25, 2013.

been digitally altered, his face now shadow-less and wrinkle-free, his hair a solid grey mass. In each version his suit and shirt are different colors. At Preah Ang Chek and Preah Ang Chom, popularly known as Neang Chek Neang Chum, a shrine situated in front of the royal residence in Siem Reap,⁶ these same portraits were situated side-by-side, each surrounded by a digitally-rendered ornate gold frame. The second portrait is also set within an actual gilt frame. This act of framing creates a critical space between the king and his subjects, creating and maintaining a sense of aura in the image.⁷ Businesses often set up small altars in front of this photo-portrait, whilst ones displayed outside official buildings were draped in black and white cloth. These portraits were also sold in print shops across Cambodia.



Figure 2. Two official portraits of Sihanouk installed at Preah Ang Chek and Preah Ang Chom in Siem Reap, December 2012. Photograph by author. (Left) Figure 3. Shop front in Battambang, October 25, 2013. Photograph by author. (Right)

The second category of image comprises photographs taken by the public, some of which were distributed on social media, such as Facebook, but which were largely kept in individual archives. The primary examples are the photographs of the apparition of Sihanouk's face in the moon on October 21, 2013, and images from his cremation. While an interesting phenomenon in itself, these images are not the subject of this paper. The third category, the subject of this paper, comprises unofficial collections of official and media photographs, collated and displayed as laminated montages, photo-posters, laminated photo-cards, plastic pin badges or on Facebook pages. Many of these were sourced from the internet and shared between print shops and individuals

⁶ Both the Royal Residence and the shrine are at the gateway to the temples of Angkor, as designed by colonial urban planning. The two Buddha statues housed in the shrine are royal palladia, rescued from an anti-Sihanouk rebel, Dap Chhuon, who had taken them from a monastery in his flight to the maquis. The statues, in *abhayamudrā*, were enshrined in their current location in 1990 (Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, 68; Hang Chan, "Stec Gamlañ and Yāy Deb," 116-18).

⁷ Morris, "Photography and the Power of Images in the History of Power," 133.

via social media. The nature of the circulation of these images makes tracing their original point of entry into the public, digital realm practically impossible.

In Siem Reap these A3 posters, along with smaller laminated pins of Sihanouk, were sold at Neang Chek Neang Chum and in local markets. In Phnom Penh it was largely street vendors, poorer families and children, who otherwise hawk street snacks or panhandle, who sold stacks of these posters to mourners during the funeral for around 3000 *riel* (75 cents) each. The vendors replenished their stock at local print shops each night, when montages containing the latest scenes from the funeral went on sale. In informal interviews with print shop owners I was told that the circulation of images on Facebook allowed them to be downloaded instantly, printed, before or after digital manipulation, and sent out to be sold. Street vendors I spoke to in Phnom Penh were selling around forty to fifty laminates per day during the five-day funeral. Buyers consisted of families who had travelled from as far away as Banteay Meanchey, monks and renunciant women, students and young factory workers who migrated to Phnom Penh from bordering provinces.



Figure 4. *A photo-poster vendor outside Veal Mean, Phnom Penh, February 2, 2013. Photograph by author. (Left)*
 Figure 5. *A group of yiey chi from different provinces. Phnom Penh, February 2, 2013. Photograph by author. (Right)*

There are a range of images included in these montages: Sihanouk's official monk portrait from 1947, when he was ordained at Wat Preah Keo Morokat (the "Silver Pagoda" of the Royal Palace); Sihanouk in decorated military uniform; Sihanouk as an old man, bowing to the people; an image of him riding horses in the French army Calvary training school in Saumur, and many family portraits. The majority of the photos included in these posters and on social media sites were subjected to digital alteration, sometimes expertly but often rather crudely, with no attempt made to disguise the process. Often very bright color was added to photographs, which were originally black and white, and the backgrounds were often radically altered. This in itself is not new in

Cambodia, or indeed elsewhere, as hand-coloring existed from the very birth of photography, until color film became readily available in the 1950s and 1960s. The National Archives of Cambodia in Phnom Penh hold examples of monochrome photographs of Sihanouk's official portraits where color has been added by hand. However, as technology has advanced, so have the modes of manipulation and circulation; anyone with access to a photo-editing program, such as Adobe Photoshop, can remake an image and share it on social media. The photo-posters and the images shared online converge with the wider explosion of photography in Cambodia, due to the rise of digital technology, smart phones, and internet access.



Figure 6. *A retouched family portrait of Sihanouk, his wife, and son, King Sihamoni.*

A family portrait of Sihanouk with his wife and son, now King Sihamoni, appeared several times in the montaged photo-posters and in digital albums on Facebook, which serves as an example of digital manipulation. Prince Sisowath Thomico recalled that the photograph was taken in 1981 in Sihanouk's house in the south of France.⁸ The original photograph has a plain grey background and the only prop is a potted plant in the lower left hand corner, yet many different versions of this image exist. One version of the photograph has been adeptly colored, while another places the family in a living room, complete with European-style furniture in the background. In a third version the family are set against a psychedelic background of pinks, purples and yellows, with a bunch of pink roses adorning the top-right hand corner of the frame. In yet another version, shared online and included in printed posters, the family is situated in a fantastical garden filled with vivid painterly flowers and this image is credited to Saly (Fig. 7). Saly is a young Cambodian man who participates in a Facebook group called *We're always*

remember You our King [sic], the same text which appears at the lower right corner of the image. This Facebook group is one of many which were set up in the aftermath of Sihanouk's death in which contributors post photographs of the king, and from where poster manufacturers acquired some of their images. These groups run parallel with the emergence of the social media platform as a place of political and historical discourse among predominately younger, urban generations of Cambodians.

⁸ Author's interview with Prince Sisowath Thomico, Royal Palace, Phnom Penh, January 25, 2013.

Print shop workers (re)producing these images were also consumers and the line blurs between the motivating factors in the modification and consumption of portraits. The primary reason given by print shop owners for photoshopping was that this process creates “more images,” driven by a market imperative for more photographs. However, the implications of this process are far greater than a demand for more images, and relate to the narration of a nexus of ideas about kingship and leadership and the exemplification of histories. For instance, mourners at the funeral on several occasions gestured to the photoshopped background furniture in the family portrait described above to demonstrate that it was taken in France. On other occasions the same image was used to demonstrate his presence in China, based upon the fictional background. This was done, they explained to me, because of their admiration of Sihanouk as a protector of Cambodia who negotiated independence and was fluent in French, or English, or Chinese. These images became illustrative of these qualities and the alteration of the background allowed the king to be expressly situated in the geographic locations that symbolized his mastery of foreign languages and mannerisms.

In conversations with the buyers of the laminated photo-posters, it was clear that, in the first instance, these photographs were purchased as souvenirs and intended for display in their homes. For people aged fifty and over, the primary reasons cited for buying particular images was as a didactic tool, to take home to show children and grandchildren in order to teach them about Sihanouk, and by extension, a particular version of twentieth-century Cambodian history, utilizing these “narrated-portraits.”⁹ In his archeology of new media technologies, Lev Manovich notes the centrality of montage in the construction of fake realities in the twentieth century, sometimes exploited for ideological purposes.¹⁰ In this context the assemblages of photographs were instrumentalized as narratives of a version of Cambodian history, as embodied by the figure of Sihanouk, and which distil the person of Sihanouk into two over-arching narratives: a meritorious Buddhist king and the father of the modern nation-state. As far as it is possible to discern,



Figure 7. Family portrait, digitally enhanced, which circulated widely on Facebook in early 2013.

⁹ The term “narrated-portraits” is borrowed from Irene Stengs, whose study of the present-day, predominately middle-class Thai cult of King Chulalongkorn, or King Rama V (r. 1868 – 1910), argues that portraits of the king are used to illustrate overarching narratives of his life (Stengs, *Worshipping the Great Moderniser*, 38).

¹⁰ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 144; 148-49.

these images, and the narratives of Sihanouk's life that they illustrated, were taken up, embraced and reworked by people themselves rather than by official channels, although involvement by people at the Royal Palace in putting "new" images of Sihanouk into circulation is suspected.

SIHANOUK AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY CAMBODIA

One popular oval-shaped plastic badge worn during the cremation period featured a photograph of an elderly Sihanouk smiling and *sampeah*-ing to an assembled audience, one imagined to be located to our left where his gaze falls. The Cambodian flag is in the background, with two towers of Angkor Wat visible, and the text on the right of the flag reads "Our Khmer symbol." This example underscores the metonymic relationship between the figure of Sihanouk and the nation, and the biography of Sihanouk cannot be divorced from the historical trajectory of Cambodia over the last century.¹¹ In the first instance this is due to his commitment in guiding the development of the nascent nation-state and his machinations in the tumultuous political landscape of the country, as it was forced to confront its position in the wider geo-political currents of the Cold War. But more deeply than that, Sihanouk's fate and the fate of Cambodia were inextricably linked because of the longstanding belief in the body of the king as the establishment of order and the belief that a good and righteous ruler would ensure the prosperity of the nation. In summary, this understanding has its roots in Angkorian concepts of kingship and order, remodeled in the post-Angkorian Theravāda landscape so that the king's own body can substitute for the cosmological structuring force of Mount Meru.¹²

Norodom Sihanouk was born in 1922, during the French Protectorate over Cambodia, and he received a French education at the Lycée Chasseloup Laubat in Saigon, Vietnam. In early childhood his care was entrusted to his grandmother, Madame Chau Khun Pat, whom Sihanouk remembered as a pious Buddhist who made generous daily offerings to the monks.¹³ It was after her death that he was first ordained as a monk for 24 hours. Time spent as a monk is important for all Theravāda Buddhist leaders, and it is usual for Cambodian kings – and politicians – to have been ordained for at least a nominal period in order to bolster their *parami* (ten perfections).¹⁴ In 1941 Sihanouk was selected for the Cambodian throne by the French Vichy government, as the French believed him to be the most acquiescent of the candidates and because he was connected

¹¹ Arguably these expressions of national pride are interlinked with the uglier manifestations of nationalistic fervour which have been a feature of recent opposition rhetoric and protest in Phnom Penh, largely against the Vietnamese.

¹² For example, at the coronation of King Sisowath in Phnom Penh in 1904 the king himself was identified with Mount Meru, with parts of his body corresponding to the universe, explicitly making the king himself the axis of the entire universe. See Heine-Geldern, *Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia*, 6.

¹³ Norodom Sihanouk, *Shadow Over Angkor. Volume One*, 41-2.

¹⁴ The current King Sihamoni was ordained in Paris twice; Sam Rainsy was ordained for a week in Cambodia. Hun Sen was never a monk but often alludes to his time as a temple boy. It is generally thought that time spent as a monk endows the ruler with *dāna* (generosity), *sīla* (the five precepts of abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech and intoxicants), and *bhāvanā* (the development of physical, moral and emotional wisdom). See Heng, "In Search of the Dhammika Ruler," 312.

to both royal households; the Norodoms on his father's side and the Sisowaths from his maternal side. However, within years of his accession to the throne he began to negotiate for Cambodian independence, in line with domestic independence movements set against a changing global political landscape after the Second World War. On November 9, 1953 Cambodian independence was declared, crucially without recourse to the sort of violence and guerrilla warfare witnessed in neighboring Vietnam's battle for independence. In 1955 Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father, Suramarit, enabling Sihanouk to establish the Sangkum Reastr Niyum party, which advocated a policy of Buddhist Socialism. Sihanouk's party swept the national elections, and he took the role of Prime Minister later that same year. In 1960 King Suramarit died and Sihanouk became permanent Head of State.

By the late 1960s Sihanouk was failing in his attempts to keep Cambodia neutral in the face of the war between the United States and North Vietnam.¹⁵ This attempted path of neutrality, balancing the influences of the Cold War – the communism of the neighboring Democratic Republic of Vietnam (in northern Vietnam) and China and growing American hegemony – was projected as adhering to the Buddhist doctrine of the Middle Way.¹⁶ Yet, as the war in Vietnam spilled over the borders, the U.S. government began illegally bombing Cambodia in a bid to prevent Communist forces from using areas of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that passed through Cambodia.¹⁷ The bombing forced them further into Cambodia where they met with members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, better known as the Khmer Rouge, an appellation coined by Sihanouk. The devastation wrought by the U.S. aerial campaign along Cambodia's eastern border also meant the population was increasingly amenable to the Khmer Rouge's policy of opposing American imperialism.

While travelling in France in 1970 Sihanouk was ousted from power in a *coup d'état* led by Lon Nol and widely believed to have been supported by the Americans. Nevertheless, the riots which broke out across the country, along with the influence Sihanouk held over peasants in the early 1970s, suggests that support for him in rural areas remained high as civil war spread across the country. Exiled in Beijing, Sihanouk formed a government in exile in conjunction with the Khmer Rouge, and began regular radio broadcasts into Cambodia where he informed listeners that support for the Khmer Rouge would enable his return to Cambodia. Later Sihanouk blamed Lon Nol for forcing him to abandon his position of neutrality and choose between the Americans or communists.

In April 1975 the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh, immediately ordering the evacuation of the city. Sihanouk returned to Cambodia as the symbolic head of state, a position he held for approximately one year, before he resigned. He spent the rest of the Khmer Rouge years under house arrest in the palace in Phnom Penh and five of his fourteen children perished under the regime. The increasingly paranoid Khmer Rouge closed schools, abolished money, dismantled all civic infrastructure, destroyed books and musical instruments, murdered artists and intellectuals,

¹⁵ For a more thorough historical account of this period of Cambodian history see Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*; Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*; Shawcross, *Sideshow*.

¹⁶ Thompson, "Buddhism in Cambodia, Rupture and Continuity," 136.

¹⁷ Shawcross, *Sideshow*.

and broke down family units. In a bid to erase history, eradicate culture, and create a pure agrarian society, the population was put to work in the countryside, dying in the thousands from malnutrition, disease, exhaustion, torture or execution. It is estimated that between one and three million – or up to one third of the population – perished under the Khmer Rouge.

Provoked by Khmer Rouge expansionist attacks on their border, Vietnamese forces entered Phnom Penh at the end of 1978, in a move that has been regarded as both a liberation and occupation. The People's Republic of Kampuchea was established in 1979. The presence of Vietnamese troops and foreign observers revealed the extent of the genocide as mass graves were uncovered across the country. The discovery of S-21, located in a former high school in Phnom Penh, revealed chilling evidence of the atrocities the regime carried out. S-21 was a prison for "enemies" of the regime and effectively served as a place of torture before certain execution. At least 16,000 men, women and children passed through the facility before execution. The unimaginable task of dealing with the traumatic aftermath of the genocide and its legacy has been a primary preoccupation in Cambodia since 1979, via a number of local and international initiatives of justice and commemoration that are often at odds with each other.

In 1979 the Vietnamese installed a government in Phnom Penh comprised largely of Khmer Rouge defectors, but the Khmer Rouge still controlled vast swathes of the country and war raged on for most of the 1980s. Sihanouk once again found himself in exile and he spent the 1980s in political negotiations between warring Cambodian factions. In 1991 the Paris Peace Accords were signed, officially, if not in practice, signaling an end to the civil war. United Nations forces came to support the ceasefire, to administer disarmament, and to back the first democratic elections since 1970. This period between 1992 and 1993 is often simply called UNTAC (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia).

After the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in October 1991 Sihanouk returned to Cambodia as the Head of State, a position he held until the UN-backed elections in 1993, after which he was once again crowned King of Cambodia. Despite Sihanouk's alliance of convenience with the Khmer Rouge, huge swathes of the population welcomed him back, his arrival prompting hope after the deleterious effects of the genocide and the instability of the 1980s. Prince Ranariddh's Royalist FUNCINPEC Party was believed to have won the elections, but the incumbent Hun Sen's refusal to give up power resulted in the agreement to share office between FUNCINPEC and the Cambodian People's Party. This coalition of two Prime Ministers came to a violent end in 1997 after a bloody coup in which the CPP took full control of parliament. Hun Sen became the sole Prime Minister, a position he still holds today.

Sihanouk's continued vocal presence in Cambodian politics posed challenges to the post-1979 government of Hun Sen, and tensions existed between the government and the royal palace.¹⁸ In 2004 Sihanouk abdicated for a final time citing ill health and was succeeded by his son, King Sihamoni, who is less politically involved than his father, likely due to a combination of circumscription by the government and a disinterest in taking the political stage. Nevertheless, abdication did not mark the end of Sihanouk's interference in politics and he explored new media

¹⁸ Osborne, "Death of a survivor: Norodom Sihanouk."

to make his views public, including becoming a prolific blogger.¹⁹ His website contains historical documents, correspondence, photographs, press clippings annotated by Sihanouk, and his own commentaries on current affairs. Ruom Ritt, whom Sihanouk claimed was a childhood pen pal who now lived as a virtual hermit in France, wrote letters that were highly critical of Hun Sen.²⁰

Sihanouk's personal involvement in the trajectory of Cambodia's recent past means that his profile rests upon his association with securing Cambodian independence from the French and with a period of modernity in urban Cambodia before the country descended into unimaginable horror. For many mourners it was modernity and independence that Sihanouk emblemized, and this was bound up with his perceived concern for the Cambodian population. His return to Cambodia in 1991 coincided with the promise of democracy and development, the realization of these objectives being patchy at best. Nevertheless, for many in Cambodia, Sihanouk's vocal critiques of the government, and often simply his presence, were seen to temper the post-war regime, regardless of whether this is a view embedded in political reality or not. His death left a critical void in oppositional voices, and the perceived absence of a Buddhist leader.

At the time of writing, one pertinent concern is the increasingly vocal expressions of dissatisfaction with the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP). After the 2013 national elections, the main opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), boycotted the National Assembly, citing electoral irregularities which allowed the Cambodian People's Party to claim victory. The oppositional fervor, which had seen high levels of participation in pre-election CNRP rallies, sparked large demonstrations in Phnom Penh, which occupied public spaces and became marred by violence.²¹ In mid-2013 it was related to me by acquaintances in Cambodia, as well as mentioned in online discussions by Facebook users, that Sihanouk had arbitrated in the violent aftermath of the 1997 elections, and many lamented the loss of his mediating presence in the current context. In addition, Ashley Thompson has proposed a connection between the large gatherings of mourners after the death of Sihanouk and the sizeable numbers of people attending opposition demonstrations.²² She argues that his death marked Sihanouk's final, great return to Cambodia, as he was affectionately embraced once again by the people in public outpourings of emotion that were just as concerned with the generic institution of kingship as with the person of Sihanouk. I suggest that this embrace of Sihanouk and the nostalgia-tinged photographs that accompanied his funeral formed a part of the catalyst for, and a sense of urgency in, these present-day calls for change.

Although Sihanouk formally abdicated from the throne in 1960, and went on to assume a number of leadership roles, for many people, especially in the countryside, his status as a monarch associated with the divine remained unchanged. During the 1950s and 60s Sihanouk made regular visits to the countryside, accompanied by photographers and film crews. In his memoirs he speaks of his affection towards the peasant population, with whom he says he felt more politically and

¹⁹ <http://www.norodomsihanouk.info/>; Associated Press, "Royal Blogger Takes on the World;" Wallace, "The Royal Blog."

²⁰ Mydans, "The Royal Alter Ego Wields a Poison Pen in Cambodia."

²¹ Ponnudurai, "Disenchanted Young Cambodians Flex Their Muscle in Elections;" Fuller, "Protest Turns Into Clash With Police in Cambodia."

²² Thompson, *Introduction, Journée d'Etude 'Histoire et Théâtre.'*

emotionally closer than the elites in Phnom Penh. He often referred to his subjects as his “children,” and he later wrote, “it is true that I felt, and still feel with regard to the loyal Khmer population a paternal affection, similar to that which I feel for members of my family.”²³ In the mid-1950s, he dispensed with the lengthy high-status royal terms originating in Pali and Sanskrit, in favor of the term “*samdech euv*,” often translated as “monseigneur papa.”²⁴ This term infers an affectionate, familial, and even accessible, connection with the king, while designating him as hierarchically superior to the population due to his status as the “father.”

Bernard Krisher, a Newsweek reporter who spent a month shadowing Sihanouk in 1965, recalls that he was struck by the Prince’s popularity and by how much Sihanouk loved to be adored by the masses.²⁵ However, Krisher’s sense that there was no institutionalized cult of personality, orchestrated by Sihanouk himself, is contestable.²⁶ These visits to the countryside provided ample occasion for photo opportunities which stressed Sihanouk’s affection and affiliation with rural, traditional Cambodians. Visits to new factories and schools – additional publicity opportunities – demonstrated his involvement with the development of the modern nation-state. Yet rather than simply claiming recognition for development and stability in Cambodia, Sihanouk configured himself as the structuring force and the very embodiment of the nation itself. A sense of equivalence between the person of Sihanouk and the country is in accord with traditional Theravāda Buddhist conceptions of kingship and was encouraged by Sihanouk himself, who played up to the role of a paternalistic protector of Cambodia.²⁷

In addition to the archives of newsreels and photographs of Sihanouk’s tours of the countryside, he also produced a large body of films, both documentary and fictive, which he wrote, directed, scored, and in which he himself starred. Between 1960 and 1970 he produced a total of twenty-one films, of which nine were documentaries that effectively constitute a form of self-representation. A brief examination of Sihanouk’s cinematic oeuvre is relevant to thinking through the visual economy of his image during his lifetime, firstly because film was one of the key mechanisms through which Sihanouk portrayed himself in relation to the political climate of the day and communicated his understanding of his relationship to Cambodia. Eliza Romey has proposed a nuanced reading of Sihanouk’s cinematic work, concluding that rather than simply poorly executed distractions from political realities, his film-making was a means of communicating with illiterate peasant audiences, allowing Sihanouk to couch his politics within familiar vernacular narratives.²⁸ Secondly, Sihanouk took the starring role in his films, depicting as many fictional characters as he had official roles throughout his political life. This enabled Sihanouk to inhabit

²³ Norodom Sihanouk, *Shadow Over Angkor. Volume One*, 39.

²⁴ Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, 146.

²⁵ Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Bernard Krisher, *Sihanouk Reminisces*, 25.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For an account of the relationship between the figure of the king, the bodies of the king, and the nation, see Thompson, “The Suffering of Kings,” 91-112.

²⁸ Romey, “King, Politician, Artist. The Films of Norodom Sihanouk.”

When Sihanouk resumed filmmaking in the late 1980s, he continued to weave political messages into the narrative and plots demonstrating his connection with the Khmer even as he was exiled.

multiple roles and personas while still maintaining the integrity of the monarch. In effect, he remade his own image multiple times, a process that was replicated in the portraits collated after his death, in which he was posed in many different scenarios and personas. In all likelihood the different dimensions of his filmic characters were devised to appeal to different audiences, much like his multifaceted personas in political life.

In 1967, as the Americans agitated to disrupt Sihanouk's position of neutrality and draw Cambodia into the war in Vietnam, Sihanouk released the film *Shadow of Angkor*.²⁹ In the film Sihanouk plays Admiral Prince Dhanari, a counter-revolutionary, who uncovers an international plot to overthrow the Cambodian government. At a dinner at Angkor, attended by the Admiral, a senior CIA agent, the captain of the South Vietnamese army, and a host of ambassadors, the Admiral takes Ambassador Esmeralda Alvarez – played by Sihanouk's wife Monique – to the Bayon temple. Standing beneath an illuminated face tower, the Admiral tells the ambassador that the faces are of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and a symbol of royal omnipresence: “He is the king, Jayavarman VII, always ready to defend the nation, the motherland and the people against the enemies of the kingdom.”³⁰ He then informs the ambassador that Cambodia has faced many aggressors over the centuries and now they face new imperial threats, from Saigon and the neo-colonialism of the United States of America, which threatens his neutrality. The film concludes with the Ambassador being forced to leave Cambodia due to American foreign policy, thus ending their burgeoning romance.

A year later, in the film *Crepuscule* (Twilight), Sihanouk and Monique revisit Angkor, this time with Sihanouk as Prince Adit, who hosts a widowed Indian Princess in Siem Reap.³¹ During this melodramatic love story the couple visit several Angkorian temples and Vihear Pampil Lveng, a Theravādin pagoda in Angkor Thom, which houses the Buddha statue recovered from the central well of the Bayon temple. Here the prince tells the princess how Jayavarman VII suffered the illness of his subjects more than his own, and that their pain was the pain of the king, a formulation found in the epigraphy of Jayavarman VII's reign. In voice-over narration during footage of the Bayon's bas-reliefs, which show Khmer soldiers defeating the Cham, the prince says “the king was concerned with his subjects' needs. Full of care for their wellbeing he expressed this wish: ‘may I help people plunged in the ocean of life by virtue of this good work’.”

Although *Shadow Over Angkor* is an explicit reference to the political and military machinations in Cambodia in the late 1960s and *Crepuscule* is a tale of unrequited love and an ode to the beauty of the temples of Angkor, both share common themes. Explicit reference is made to Jayavarman VII protecting his subjects during times of unrest, while Sihanouk casts himself as a righteous leader, maintaining stability and upholding tradition while fighting the corruption of modern politicians. Moreover, Sihanouk's liaisons with women in each of the films end when the relationships begin

²⁹ Sihanouk stated that the film's title was symbolic and referred to threats over Cambodia. The plot was based upon the 1959 attempted coup by Dap Chhuon, the military commander for Siem Reap and the film itself was set in 1963 after Sihanouk's rejection of US aid (Gordon, “Cambodia: Shadow over Angkor,” 58).

³⁰ *Ombre sur Angkor* [*Shadow over Angkor*], directed by Norodom Sihanouk (Cambodia: La Société Nationale de Cinématographie: Khemara Pictures, 1967).

³¹ *Crepuscule* [*Twilight*], directed by Norodom Sihanouk (Cambodia: La Société Nationale de Cinématographie: Khemara Pictures, 1969).

to pose a threat to his loyalty to Cambodia, thus highlighting his dedication to the well-being of the nation and contradicting accusations of his playboy image in the popular press.³² Middle class and expatriate audiences in Phnom Penh were apparently less than enthralled by Sihanouk's films – William Shawcross cites one wealthy young Khmer man speaking in the aftermath of Lon Nol's 1970 coup as saying "we were bored with [Sihanouk] and humiliated by him. His damn film shows and endless radio speeches"³³ – and felt that despite Sihanouk's claims to the contrary, the films represented little of the realities of contemporary Cambodia.³⁴ However, in the countryside, uneducated peasant audiences were exposed to Sihanouk's glorified version of Cambodian history, which invoked the rulers of Angkor at the same time as demonstrating his own commitment to defending Cambodian sovereignty and traditions.

MEDIATING ABSENCE AND PRESENCE: PORTRAITS OF SIHANOUK

While Sihanouk posed for a great number of official photographs, it is his two official portraits which came to dominate the public and private spaces of Cambodia. As Sihanouk's physical presence in public life in Cambodia waxed and waned, so too apparently did the visibility of his portrait. The arrival of Sihanouk was often marked by the appearance of his portrait; artist Vann Nath, for example, remembered painting huge portraits of Sihanouk to mark his visit to Battambang in the late 1960s.³⁵ Archive photographs from the visit by Charles de Gaulle in 1968 show the Olympic Stadium in Phnom Penh filled with large portraits of the two leaders, looming over the assembled crowds.³⁶ Similarly, Sihanouk's departure is underscored by the absence of the image. For instance, some outbreaks of peasant revolt in the immediate aftermath of the 1970 coup centered on peasant anger at the Lon Nol regime's removal of Sihanouk's portrait from offices and shops.³⁷ In Kompong Cham for example some ninety people were killed or wounded after riots broke out when officials tried to take down Sihanouk's portrait.³⁸ While it would be naive to suggest such protests were simply attributable to the removal of the portrait, it nonetheless demonstrates that the ousting of Sihanouk from power in Phnom Penh translated as a loss of his image in the provinces and that rural anger was focused on the symbolic and literal disappearance of his image. In later years, after his re-coronation, photographic portraits of Sihanouk, sometimes hand painted with color, were erected in Phnom Penh to mark occasions such as his birthday celebrations.

³² Romey, "King, Politician, Artist," 56-8.

³³ Shawcross, *Sideshow*, 126.

³⁴ Milton Osborne held that Sihanouk's obsession with filmmaking helped precipitate his 1970 fall from power as he was compelled to spend less time attending to the issues at hand. (Osborne, *Sihanouk. Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness*, 177-83).

³⁵ Vann Nath, *A Cambodian Prison Portrait*, 1.

³⁶ National Archives of Cambodia, Sangkum Reastr Niyum Photographs, Box 48, Album 1.

³⁷ Shawcross, *Sideshow*, 125.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 126-27.

When Sihanouk returned to Cambodia in 1991, his arrival in Phnom Penh on November 14th was marked by sizeable crowds who lined the streets from the airport, and by representations of his own face.³⁹ Children were filmed holding the same portraits of him as they waited for his cavalcade, although some contemporary reports suggest that many in the crowd were there at the behest of the government.⁴⁰ However, contemporary artist Leang Seckon, who produced a body of work entitled *Goodbye Cambodia*⁴¹ in the immediate aftermath of Sihanouk's passing, recalls the emotional response to these portraits:

Cambodia [was] smoke and death, but Phnom Penh was new in 1991 and when the portrait [came], we felt protected by the king, everywhere, we [were] not thinking about the king, but everywhere: "oh the king is here!" [we felt] hopeful. He is very symbolic and very protective [... one would] turn their moto on the road and see him smiling [and] that is enough, you feel protected.⁴²

In Seckon's recollection, the visibility of the portrait is synonymous with the protective presence of the king himself. In echoes of the Admiral's impassioned invocation of the omnipresence of royal Buddhist power in *Shadow Over Angkor*, the landscape of portraits, both before and after death, suggest that the visibility of Sihanouk's face was interpreted as a protective gaze across Cambodia; seeing the face of the king was of great importance to many in the population.⁴³

I have suggested that seeing the portrait of Sihanouk took on an additional dimension and urgency after his death, and it seems to me that the period between Sihanouk's death and his five-day funeral marked a time of transformation in the role of the portrait, culminating in the protective paternal gaze of the king being wholly transferred from the king himself to the photographic image. The portrait no longer replicated and reproduced his presence but instead mediated his final physical presence in Cambodia. The desire to see the face of the king, as a marker of his presence, one final time is made concrete in the numerous sightings of the king's apparition in the aftermath of his death. Most famously, on the night of October 21st, crowds in Phnom Penh, the provinces, and beyond – as the news was shared by mobile phones – saw the king's face on the surface of the moon. Another such example that I witnessed occurred in Phnom

³⁹ See *Preparation for the Return of King Norodom Sihanouk in Cambodia*, Paul Cummings, November 14, 1991, Bophana Audiovisual Center Archive, PLC_VI_003368.

⁴⁰ Murdoch, "Papa Prince' Returns to Heal Nation."

⁴¹ *Goodbye Cambodia*, named after a well-known song composed and performed by Sihanouk, was exhibited at Art Stage Singapore, January 24-27, 2013.

⁴² Interview with Leang Seckon, Siem Reap, August 27, 2013.

Seckon produced his own portrait of Sihanouk in the mixed media collage *Seven Day Mourning* (see Figure 10). Based upon the official portrait, the face of the king is sketched in grey acrylic paint. His body is excluded, leaving the face emerging from a rich, vivid background composed of hundreds of incense wrappers discarded by mourners, which Seckon collected from outside the Royal Palace every night after the King-Father's death. The painting is large, 1.5m by 1.3m, and the red and gold background is a startling departure from the usual blue background used in official portraits.

⁴³ The centrality of taking vision of a deity or royal person associated with the divine is illustrated in the practice of *darśan*, which has been widely documented in the Hindu tradition, but little acknowledged in Theravadin Buddhist contexts.

Penh on the morning of Sihanouk's cremation, when his face was seen by a group of around thirty *yiey chi* (renunciant women) in the haze of the sun immediately to the north of the cremation area. At the same time a female medium walked amongst the assembled women telling each of them that Sihanouk was watching them. During the actual cremation his face was again seen in the smoke rising from the purpose-built atrium by Cambodian onlookers, both young and old, and some documented it in photographs and video. Immediately after the ceremony these images were shared on Facebook and mourners expressed the desire to buy the image as a photo-poster the following day. It was widely held by those who believed they had seen his face that this apparition signaled that he was watching over the people, protecting them and Cambodia, but that after his cremation his face would no longer appear to them. That Sihanouk was no longer able to cast a protective gaze over Cambodia added a sense of urgency of the circulation and "black market" consumption of his portrait.



Figure 8. An A3 laminated montage bought in Phnom Penh during Sihanouk's funeral. February 2013.

Royal Portraiture in the Cambodian Politio-Cultural Complex

Figure 9. An A3 laminated montage poster, purchased in the aftermath of Sihanouk's death.



Figure 10. An A3 laminated montage poster, purchased during the funeral of Sihanouk.

HAPTIC INTERVENTIONS AND RE-IMAGININGS

Contrary to the destruction of the aura through mechanical reproduction as described by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, I argue that the presence of multiple portraits ranging from the monumental to the miniature in scale, distributed and displayed via official and unofficial channels, adorned with the addition of new color, and collected together in montages, work to increase, rather than diminish, the auratic presence of Sihanouk after his death.⁴⁴ The images retain their ritual and cultic position, attempting to reconcile the royal and political status of otherness of Sihanouk with his empathetic connection with the poorest people who lived outside of the capital, or who were symbolically represented by the rural population.⁴⁵

The auratic presence of Sihanouk was not only maintained via the sheer mass of images, but also by the digital alterations, the framing and enshrining of portraits, and the practice of collecting these images together. These processes can be read as a means of showing respect and devotion, and allowing the image to bear presence in the here and now. In her discussion of Siamese royal portrait photography, Rosalind Morris argues that the adornment of a nineteenth-century photograph of King Mongkut with gold leaf was both a devotional gesture and an expression of selflessness.⁴⁶ This attention to the image was not reserved solely for royalty, as images of Buddhas and senior monks were subject to similar adornment, leading Morris to argue that the intervention in the image within this Theravāda context does not necessarily equate to the adoration for the person represented; rather it is a tribute to the generic representation of the exemplary deeds embodied in the image, or a complex conflation between the two.⁴⁷

The purchase and display of these photographs and the sharing of images of Sihanouk on Facebook was a means of publicly displaying affection, support, and dedication to the former king, which was conflated with notions of devotion to the nation and expressions of patriotism. For example, users were urged to “share” or “like” an image as a devotional practice to honor the king and as a means to bring merit to Cambodia. In such cases, the virtual practice mirrors the way in which people interacted with the presence of his image in a devotional manner offline.⁴⁸ Both make personal admiration visible to the public, in the real world and the digital realm. In the virtual world one clicks on a thumbs up icon on Facebook to “like” an image, while during the funeral mourners

⁴⁴ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 217-52.

⁴⁵ In essays on photograph images of kings within a Thai Buddhist context, John Clark and Clare Veal have each argued for the power inherent in the multiple reproductions; the omnipresence of the face does not diminish its power. See Clark, “Icon and Image in Modern Thai Art,” 1–31, and Veal, “The Charismatic Index: Photographic Representations of Power and Status in the Thai Social Order.”

⁴⁶ Morris, “Photography and the Power of Images in the History of Power,” 132.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The public and private display of the official photographs of Sihanouk, the Queen-Mother, and King Sihanouk is not without precedent, for it is relatively common to find this triad on display in businesses and homes. Interestingly Prince Sisowath Thomico confirmed that there is no plan to alter this triad now that Sihanouk has passed away. Interview with Prince Sisowath Thomico, Royal Palace, Phnom Penh, January 25, 2013.

clutched photo-posters to their chests, with the portrait facing outwards, or wore pin badges on their shirts. Perhaps the most explicit haptic intervention with the image is made manifest in the process of photoshopping, where the virtual hand touches up and reworks the image as an act of devotion and of imagination, echoing the way in which mourners gently ran their fingers across the photographs in the montages as they shared their affection for the king-father and histories of Cambodia which he represented. The process of erasing shadows and wrinkles, deciding upon appropriate shades to use in clothing, the imagination involved in conceiving of a new background matches the meticulous work put into hand-coloring portraits from earlier decades.

I borrow Roland Barthes' theory of the spatio-temporal dimensions of the photograph to argue that digital manipulation dislocates the image from its moment of origin, allowing the images to take on a more urgent political dimension. The images of Sihanouk, particularly those circulating in the unofficial visual economy, frustrate temporal delineations, by commemorating the now-lost past, while at the same time bringing that past into the here-and-now. The popularity of the phenomenon of digital alteration complicates Barthes' description of photography as the "stupefying evidence" of "this is how it was."⁴⁹ Although Barthes was more interested in the reception of the photograph than the making, his analysis is useful here for it draws attention to spatio-temporal dimensions at work at the level of manufacture and consumption of the image. According to Barthes, photography gave rise to a new spatio-temporal category of the "having-been-there;" "what we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then."⁵⁰ For him, this paradox frustrates the photograph's ability to function as a presence or illusion but it offers explanation for the nostalgic turn in the reception of the photograph.⁵¹

As demonstrated in the multiple versions of the family portrait detailed above, digital manipulation dislocates the image and its subjects from the original moment or context of production, enabling endless re-productions and re-imaginings. It is worth noting in this context that it was always "more" images being made, rather than "new" images. Indeed, it was only photographs from the funeral itself which were termed "new"; alterations to already existing photographs did not create anything "new," just the endless possibilities of "more." This digital manipulation allowed the image to exist in imagined geographic and historic locations, and represent Sihanouk in a variable, contingent space of both here and now *and* there and then. The altered photograph is caught in the disjunction of representing something that exists somewhere and something which exists nowhere. Barthes argues that the impossibility of a photograph to be an authentic presence is

⁴⁹ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 278.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ I suggest that in the Khmer context presence operates in two ways: the first, drawing upon recent work in media archaeology, argues that presence is the "literal transhistorical transference or relay of metonymic and material fragments or traces of the past through time to the 'here and now,'" where these fragments are then re-realized in the corporeal and operative spheres. This definition of presence intersects with a broadly-speaking Buddhist view-point whereby the image not only acts as a proxy, but the distinction between physical person and the representation is radically conflated, allowing the image to act as a presence while at the same time, by being a re-presentation, reaffirming the absence of one who is lost. In the Theravāda context the effect of presence in the photograph or statue is doubled: the image functions as a representation but it also *is* the thing that it shows (Sobchack, "Afterword: Media Archaeology and Re-Presencing the Past," 324).

due to its inescapable insistence that “this is how it was,” but this formulation does not hold in the present context. Firstly, because of the modes by which presence is instantiated, but also because of the elements of nostalgia and political urgency that accompanied these photographic portraits of Sihanouk. I contend that the “how it was” is precisely what was being instantiated, illustrative of a particular version of history or a kind of longing for something irretrievably lost. The portraits claim that “this is how it was,” but this “was” is variable, fictional, and contingent on the decisions of print shop employees, anyone with access to Photoshop, and the consumers of these portraits.

The intertwined processes of a haptic production and consumption of the portraits marked an attempt at a recuperation of the protective paternal-royal-divine figure of the king. Digital manipulation of photographs, assembled into montages, resulted in recontextualizations of the figure of Sihanouk, mediated via nostalgia, memory, and socio-political imperatives. The images, especially when assembled into multiple image montages, formed a nostalgic medium, where ideals about society and leadership, or rather kingship, were viewed through a lens of 1950s and 60s aesthetics and artifice achieved via new photographic technologies. When assembled together in a montage, the effect of these images is one of animation, retelling a version of the biography of the king, and by extension, a story about the nation. In this context, Barthes’ “there-then” is an imagined cultural-politico “golden age” of Cambodia and Cambodian kingship, mediated by nostalgia and refigured in the here and now as a possibility for what might be and as a radical alternative for what currently is.

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ABSTRACT

Royal Portraiture in the Cambodian Politico-Cultural Complex: Norodom Sihanouk and the Place of Photography
Joanna Wolfarth

In the immediate aftermath of the death of Norodom Sihanouk on October 15, 2012, photographic portraits of the King-Father flooded the visual landscape of Cambodia. Photographs were displayed in public places and photo-montages were purchased and shared in markets, pagodas, and streets, and in the atterritorial spaces of the internet, particularly Facebook. The display of portraits of Sihanouk was not just a posthumous phenomenon; however, access to new photographic technologies radically altered the manufacture, sharing, and consumption of images. This article pays particular attention to the photo-posters of collected portraits that circumvented official channels, arguing that beyond just beautifying the king, these portraits became illustrative, didactic expressions of ideal leadership. Digital manipulation of photographs, assembled into montages, resulted in recontextualizations of the figure of Sihanouk, mediated via nostalgia, memory, and socio-political imperatives.

RESUME

Le portrait royal dans le complexe politico-culturel cambodgien: Norodom Sihanouk et la place de la photographie
Joanna Wolfarth

Immédiatement après le décès de Norodom Sihanouk survenu le 15 octobre 2012, les photos-portraits du Roi-Père inondaient le paysage visuel du Cambodge. Des photos sont montrées dans les places publiques, et les photos-montages sont vendues et se sont échangées dans les marchés, les pagodes, les rues, ainsi que dans les espaces non territoriaux, en particulier dans le Facebook. Le grand étalage des portraits de Sihanouk ne tient pas seulement d'un phénomène posthume, car l'accès aux nouvelles technologies de la photo a radicalement changé la fabrication, l'échange et la consommation de l'image. Le présent article scrute en particulier les posters provenant des sélections par canaux officiels, pour souligner qu'au-delà du souci de montrer un monarque tout beau, ces portraits sont devenus l'illustration didactique de ce qu'est un dirigeant idéal. Les manipulations numériques des photos en vue des montages ont abouti à recontextualiser la figure de Norodom Sihanouk, médiatisée à travers une atmosphère de nostalgie, à travers les souvenirs et les impératifs socio-politiques.

សង្ខេប

ព្រះឆាយាលក្ខណ៍ជាក្នុងបរិបទវប្បធម៌និងនយោបាយខ្មែរ ៖ ព្រះបាទ
នរោត្តម សីហនុ និងជាតិនៃរូបថត

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ភាសាក្រោយពេលព្រះអង្គចូលទីវង្គតនៅថ្ងៃ១៥ តុលា ឆ្នាំ២០១២នោះ ព្រះឆាយាលក្ខណ៍គ្រប់បែបយ៉ាងនៃព្រះវរបិតាផុសផុលចេញឡើងទូទាំងប្រទេសកម្ពុជា។ គេតម្លើងរូបថតនានានៃព្រះអង្គនៅតាមទីសាធារណៈហើយមានគេលក់ឬដូរព្រះរូបទៅវិញទៅមកនៅតាមផ្សារ, វត្ត, ដងផ្លូវនិងតាមបណ្តាញអាកាសជាពិសេសតាមFacebook។ បាតុភូតបិតតាំងរូបភាពនេះពុំគ្រាន់តែជាប់នឹងការសោយទីវង្គតប៉ុណ្ណោះទេ តែជម្រុញឲ្យមានការបង្កើតបច្ចេកទេសថ្មីៗទាក់ទងទៅរូបថត, ការប្រែប្រួលនៃរោងជាងថត, ការដូររូបគ្នានិងតម្រូវការនៃព្រះរូបព្រះអង្គ ដែលពុំធ្លាប់មានដល់កម្រិតនោះពីមុនមក។ អត្ថបទនេះផ្តោតគំនិតទៅផ្ទាំងព្រះឆាយាលក្ខណ៍ធំៗ ដែលគេសម្រាំងយកមករៀបចំបិតតាំងជាផ្លូវការ។ ព្រះរូបដ៏ស្រស់ថ្លាទាំងនោះសុទ្ធសឹងតែបង្ហាញពីភាពឧត្តុង្គឧត្តមនៃអ្នកដឹកនាំ។ គេកែ, រៀបចំ, តម្លើងរូបថតដោយប្រព័ន្ធ Digital ដើម្បីបង្ហាញរូបភាពនៃព្រះសីហនុក្នុងបរិបទឬបរិយាកាសផ្សេងៗដែលគេចង់បានហើយមនុស្សមើលទៅអាចស្រណោះស្រណោក, នឹកឃើញអតីតកាលថ្មីៗ, ឬគិតទៅសង្គមនិងនយោបាយជំនាន់រាជ្យព្រះអង្គ។

