

THE GRŪ OF PARNASSUS: AU CHHIENG AMONG THE TITANS

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You mean, Acis, that it is raining. Why don't you say: it is raining?¹

Nurtured on Sanskrit grammar and Sanskrit rhetoric, the Khmer past has not ceased then to explain the Khmer present, which continues it...²

Introduction

Khmer specialists know his name and a dozen articles by him:³ they made an impact then and they continue to do so now. His mastery of languages, that of French and Old and Middle Khmer, but also Sanskrit and Pāli, always impresses. Even more astonishing, however, is the way he reconstructed the way of thinking of the Khmers of Ancient Cambodia and how it was updated in the Middle Period right down to contemporary times, subtly connecting up words and ideas scattered in diverse corpora. Possessing a perfect logical structure and great philological rigor, his writings are a panoply of lyrical pleas for a renewal of Khmerology, the notion of which he was

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¹ Au, “Sanskrit ‘Jour de Yama’ et vieux khmer ‘Dixième jour lunaire’,” 203.

² *Ibid.*, 206.

³ Cf. *infra*, his bibliography.

the first to make use.

But Khmer specialists barely know the man who looms behind the scholar. Nor, moreover, is much known about the latter, aside from a few anecdotes passed on by those who attended his classes at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. We didn't know what he looked like, what precisely his educational background was, his role in the field of post-war Khmer studies nor, above all, why he published so little, when you have only to read a few page by this erudite man to suspect him the repository of an uncommon quantum of knowledge.

Until very recently, the hypothesis of a singular misanthropy prevailed. This allegedly had driven Au Chhieng (ឃុំ ខ្លឹះ⁴) to participate on the sidelines only of the world of Khmer studies and, moreover, to hoard his knowledge rather than cast pearls before swine.⁵ Out of the aura of mystery surrounding him there thus emerged the possibility for an initial understanding of his personality, providing what could appear be a key to this paradoxical relationship to knowledge. Behind this misanthropy was discernible the archetypal image of the Cambodian *grū*, an image worthy of one of those shadow-theatre puppets with features deliberately exaggerated all the better to make the silhouette stand out in the chiaroscuro: undue severity born of his capacious knowledge, sartorial elegance and great self-restraint, rejection of the daily round of society to the point of self-withdrawal, a simon-pure savant installed on the sidelines of the by-definition corruptible academic system... a virtually mythical personage of spectral physiognomy, he consequently vegetated in the shadow of the tutelary figure of Khmer studies embodied by the historian George Coedès (1886-1969), whose collaborator he was and whom Coedès consulted when he struggled with a challenging text.⁶

Then, during research into the colonial period, a personal drama was discovered that was perhaps the origin of this misanthropy: a doctorand in law in 1941, his thesis was pulped by the police chief of Paris owing to its subversive nature (*cf. infra*) before he was rescued by the milieu of Orientalists, which eventually found him a small place in the academic system teaching Khmer philology, but in conditions that were always precarious.⁷ Bitterness and self-withdrawal appear then as an altogether natural consequence of this decisive event.

They bear witness, however, less to a social pathology than to an affection: deliberate withdrawal in the face of dominant forces. This internal exile appeared, then, paradoxical. While

⁴ This article contains two forms of transcription for names, the commonly accepted one and the scientific one, as follows: 1) the most common names, such as Norodom or Sutharot, are given in the most common transliteration; 2) the known names which are more directly the object of this biographical enquiry, like Au Chhieng or Au Chhoeun, are given in the most common transcription as well as, on first occurrence, their transliterated form, between brackets (ឃុំ ខ្លឹះ, ឃុំ ខ្លូន); 3) all other names are given in scientific transliteration; 4) the exceptions to this are names whose spelling we do not know with certainty owing to their absence in Khmer in the sources read, and which will also be found in simple common transcription only.

⁵ Personal communication of Mrs Saveros Pou.

⁶ George Coedès, whose biography we are only beginning to know thanks to one of his descendants. See Cros, "George Coedès, la vie méconnue d'un découvreur de royaumes oubliés."

⁷ Cf. Singaravélu, *Professer l'Empire*, 105-108.

he could easily find cultural justifications in the figure of the Cambodian *grū*, this aloofness was also the arena for the waging of a metapolitical combat characteristic this time of the European scholarly world: the knowledge that Au Chhieng sparingly dispensed, despite or through this withdrawal, radically challenged the idea of a cultural break between the ancient Khmer civilization and contemporary Cambodia, the largely ideological break on which colonial domination was built.⁸

This new information raised, moreover, singular questions about the scholar's biography: while it enabled you to understand much better the rigor of his demonstrations in the field of Khmer studies, which were clearly informed by his legal training, it nonetheless raised a question about this unexpected period of law studies and the link between them and his Orientalist studies. Two courses of study with divergent potential outcomes —one adapted to action in the world while the second is more easily accompanied by a meditative attitude— which afforded an insight into a tension constitutive of Au Chhieng's very personality prior to the dramatic episode of 1941.

Having carried out further research in different archival holdings —the Archives de Paris, the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM), the Archives Nationales du Cambodge (ANC), the archives of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) and the Fonds François Martini—as well as a field survey in Au Chhieng's home neighbourhood in Battambang in July 2018, and, more recently, a survey of members of his family living in France, the United States and Canada, I shall present here previously unpublished material which makes it possible to offer both a better-documented and more nuanced reading of his social origins (I), his career (II & III) and his work (IV) which also serves, I hope, to explain his paradoxical position in the field of Khmer Studies, central in some ways, but marginal in others (conclusion).

I. IN THE CRUCIBLE OF THE SECOND-TIER ARISTOCRACY OF BATTAMBANG

A regional elite of underestimated sociopolitical weight

The provincial origins of Au Chhieng provide an initial lead to understanding his positioning in the landscape of the Cambodian elites of his time, although it is not always easy to give an account of them. While the singular weight of the Khmer Krom has been the object of particular attention in the historiography,⁹ there has been a lack of similar attention paid to the people of Battambang, even though it is quite clear that they represent the other major regional component of the land of the Khmers in the 20th Century.

Easily identifiable by their names, and, what's more, demanding,¹⁰ the Khmer Krom are sometimes considered the heirs of a “Funan tradition”, which does, whatever one might think, have

⁸ Mikaelian, “L'aristocratie khmère à l'épreuve des humanités françaises.”

⁹ Népote, “Combien sont les Khmers Krom?;” Engelbert, “The Enemy Needed;” Mikaelian, “Bref aperçu sur la question khmère krom.”

¹⁰ Engelbert, “The Enemy Needed.”

the advantage of placing this population of the Mekong Delta in the long history of Cambodia;¹¹ with a dash of Sino-Vietnamese modernity¹² and, on that account, favoured intermediaries between the local authorities and the French bureaucracy, they were placed early on in the service of the colonial administrators.¹³ Hence their relative visibility in the sources, especially colonial ones, and the fact that you can quite easily spot the Khmer Krom component in cultural or political movements ranging from the Buddhist Institute to the Khmer Rouge, including the Issarak, the Khmer Serei and the cadres of the Republic.

For the people of Battambang it is a quite different story. The collective personality that historical research has tentatively recognized in them is still too limited to be fully exploitable. Emerging suddenly with the establishment of the Principality of Battambang, founded by Regent Ben in 1795 and developed over a long century of history which fused with this viceroy's putting down roots through a local dynasty, that of the Aphaivong, this collective personality suddenly vanished after France secured the province's reunification with the Khmer Crown, in 1907. The departure to Siam that same year of *mcās' Jhum*, the last upholder of the dynasty, would sound the knell of that collective, which would persist only in a fossilised state, for example, through the action of political personalities like Bun Chan Mol, who were clearly identified as members of the Aphaivong family. As for the rest, it was only incidentally that the northwestern origins of an individual would be mentioned, without the path he followed or choices in life (especially political) being related to those of his regional compatriots. In other words, while you can here and there easily pick out Battambang personalities, it is difficult to gauge, and with good reason, the place of the networks of influence hailing from that province in the contemporary history of Cambodia. One of the reasons for this unbalanced historiographical situation is no doubt down to the natural discretion with which the people of Battambang surround themselves—which contrasts, here again, with the attitude of the people of the delta—which is perhaps explained, in its turn, by the fact that being suspected of playing along with Thailand against the Cambodian Crown, they operated, as much as possible, under cover.

The cloak of invisibility of Battambang's networks is then all the more deleterious in that these networks played, so far as we can tell, a not inconsiderable role in the modernisation of Cambodia.¹⁴ In certain respects, one can even suggest that the history of the Principality of Battambang merges more or less with that of the modernisation of the Siamese royalty, the latter reflecting the former: so, when Regent Ben founded the Principality of Battambang in 1795, he did so in the wake of the first 'crisis' of modernisation of the Siamese royalty,¹⁵ which—because

¹¹ Groslier, "Pour une géographie historique du Cambodge," 367-368. Népote, "Entre discontinuités chronologiques et diversités régionales."

¹² Mikaelian, "Note sur une chronique monastique du delta du Mékong."

¹³ Barrault, "Les Cambodgiens de Cochinchine." Malleret, "La minorité cambodgienne de Cochinchine."

¹⁴ We thank Nasir Abdoul-Carime for having drawn our attention to this point.

¹⁵ Which crisis is also the consequence of a world movement (Subrahmanyam & Armitage, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context*) which affects the Indochinese Peninsula overall (Nguyễn, "Dans quelle mesure le XVIII^e siècle a-t-il été une période de crise").

of its recent transfer of the capital from Ayutthaya to Thonburi-Bangkok, as close as possible then to the overseas mercantile networks and the economic firepower they represented—shifted its territorial base at the expense of the Khmer Crown. The dual allegiance shown by the viceroys of Battambang connected them, then, to two political “currents”: the one ‘modernist’ and turned towards Bangkok, the other ‘traditionalist’ and continuing to recognise the Khmer Crown in Udong: just as, after the signing of the Franco-Siamese treaty in 1867, whereby France handed Battambang to Siam, which turned it into a fully-fledged province, it was going to benefit from the current of Europeanisation which was spreading at the time, via the Anglo-Saxon filter, from Bangkok, in accordance with the model (admittedly, still quite theoretical) of a centralised nation-state;¹⁶ and lastly, a second, already more effective centralisation was observable when, thanks to the territorial reforms of the 1890s, modelled on the British administration of Burma and Malaya, Battambang was incorporated into a “North-East Circle” or *Monthon Burapha* (1896) with Siem Reap and Sisophon, coming directly under the Siamese interior minister.¹⁷ It was through this new administrative framework that a certain number of young Cambodians —monks and laymen— would go off to be trained in Bangkok and thereby became acquainted with the Western innovations then streaming into the “City of the Gods”.

While the 1907 treaty, whereby France recovered the three *monthon* provinces to attach them to the Khmer Crown, brought this dynamic to a rude end, it did not, for all that, put an end to the principality’s collective personality, which persisted through three types of network of influence: in Siam itself, in Prachin Buri or Bangkok, some Aphaivong members and courtiers who joined the Siamese higher administration and carried on in it until the end of the 20th Century; in Phnom Penh, within the Cambodian higher administration this time, certain networks transmitted this collective personality within the immediate vicinity of royalty;¹⁸ in Battambang, some “cadet” branches of the Aphaivong family and the second-tier aristocracy which had formerly been in the viceroyal service would, they too, bear this collective identity, very often performing the role of a transmission belt (cultural, economic, religious, political, diplomatic) between Bangkok and Phnom Penh.

A kinship network set within the orbit of three monasteries: vatt Kantāl, vatt Sainkae and vatt Gar

Born 24 February 1908,¹⁹ Au Chhieng came from a matrilineage established in the *bhumi* of *vatt* Kantāl, one of the small “villages” or small clusters of dwellings (*bhūmi*) which once made up the city of Battambang and which gradually became full-blown urban districts. It was there,

¹⁶ Gantès, “L’évolution du concept de frontière au contact de la colonisation,” 318.

¹⁷ Vickery, “Thai Regional Elites and the Reforms of King Chulalongkorn.”

¹⁸ A recent thesis shows this on the basis of the famous example of the Poc-Thiounn network; affiliated to the Aphaivong, it gave no fewer than two prime ministers to Cambodia, Poc (1903-1907) and then Thiounn (1929-1941). See Aberdam, *Élites cambodiennes*. Another thesis provides further biographical elements on certain Battambang personalities: Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*.

¹⁹ ANOM, EE/ii/5606, Au Chhieng Individual school report.

on the right bank of the *sdīn* Saïkæ,²⁰ occupied, in particular, by families of Sino-Khmer descent (*cf.* Figure 1) that his maternal grandmother, *yāy* Maen, lived. The daughters that she had with her husband *tā* Úk each inherited a plot of her land, and it was on the plot of the second of her daughters, *nāi* Pil,²¹ Chhieng's mother, that was built the house in which he was born. Abutting that of the rich merchant So Hī, it was, according to family history, destroyed during the war, to the extent that all that remains of it today is the stone fence, which has become that of a restaurant.²²

Yāy Maen and her husband *tā* Úk were among the worshippers at *vatt* Kantāl, erected by *anak srī* Ghlip, daughter of *mās'* Nuñ, the eighth governor of Battambang (1860-1895) and sister of *mās'* Jhum, the ninth governor (1895-1907), both of them from the lineage of viceroys of Battambang.²³ But they also went to *vatt* Saïkæ, located a little farther south of *vatt* Kantāl and founded by *mās'* Nuñ.²⁴ While certain testimonies affirm, without it being possible to find confirmation of such, that the matrilineage of *yāy* Maen is linked by cousinage to the descendants of the viceroyalty of Battambang,²⁵ it is in fact from the other way round, on Chhieng's father's side, that it has been possible to clearly establish such links.

Being worshippers at *vatt* Saïkæ, *yāy* Maen and *tā* Úk would regularly have run into *yāy*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Abdoul-Carime, “Au Chhoeun”.

²² Author's interview with Ker Osel, niece of Au Chhieng, 11 July 2020. On So Hī, see Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 239-241.

²³ Loch, “Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang,” 90, 92.

²⁴ The visit to the surrounding monasteries and the systematic reading of the cartouches of the reliquaries, and, in particular, those of *vatt* Saïkæ, yielded nothing. This is partially explained by the trials and tribulations of recent history: during the conquest of the city by the Vietnamese army in January 1979 the explosion of a munitions store in *vatt* Saïkæ caused the destruction of numerous stupas. According to Ker Osel, the one containing the ashes of *tā* Šū and *yāy* Khiev, their son Šū Ú and granddaughter Au Rieng (Ú Rieñ), who died prematurely from tuberculosis in 1964, were to be found on the right-hand side, near the main entrance (email to the author, 15 October 2020).

²⁵ Author's interviews with Loch Phlèng (1 February 2009) and Loch Chhanchhai (2 April 2019). Au Chhieng is said to be a maternal cousin of Loch Phlèng and Loch Chhanchhai, themselves descendants of the half-brother of the last viceroy of Battambang through their paternal grandmother (see Loch, “Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang”). It has not been possible to identify the precise link between Au Chhieng's mother, *yāy* Pil, and the brothers' mother, *anak nāy* Lī. Nevertheless, Au Chhieng is explicitly recognized by the Loch brothers in the very terms of Cambodian kinship as “*ma*” (younger maternal uncle, *cf.* Népote, *Parenté et organisation sociale*, 76-77), and this indeed was the term that Mr Loch Phlèng used to address Au Chhieng when he tried to meet him in Paris in 1974 (*cf. infra*). This “classificatory uncle” belonged then to the generation of the “classificatory brothers” of their mother (*anak nāy* Lī), i. e. cousins-german, which could mean that Au Chhieng's mother (Pil) and the maternal grandmother of the Loch brothers (*anak nāy* Sam) were second-degree cousins (both descendants therefore of *yāy* Taeñ, the great grandmother of Chhieng, the mother of Pil, *yāy* Maen, being then a sister of *yāy* Khāv, the grandmother of the Loch brothers), or even third-degree cousins (descending from the mother of *yāy* Taeñ, she then having been a sister of *yāy* Khāv's mother). A family survey carried out by Mrs Sam Samphān', daughter of a patrilateral second-degree cousin of Au Chhieng, did not, however, yield any tangible result whatsoever (letter from Sam Samphān' to the author, 2 August 2020), which can be explained in one of two ways: either the link is too old to have been preserved (on the side of the Loch brothers as well as that of the Au brothers), the genealogical depth on the maternal side does not go back beyond the great grandmothers (respectively, *yāy* Khāv and *yāy* Taeñ); or the link is metaphorical and is based on a kinship reinterpretation of diverse links attesting to propinquity (neighbourhood, friendship, etc), as is frequent within the Cambodian social space.

The Grū of Parnassus: Au Chhieng Among The Titans

Khīev, Au Chhieng's paternal grandmother. Born in the *bhūmi* of *vatt* Saïkæ, *yāy* Khīev had married a young Chinese from Fukien, Kiang Sou,²⁶ who was a small trader. Their son, Ŝū Ū, a Sino-Khmer, seeking to integrate into a Khmer family, promised, as was often the case with families of Hokkien origin, to preserve the Cambodian values inherited from his mother while at the same time ensuring an opening up to European modernity, which the Sino-Khmer milieus were noted for introducing throughout the 19th century.²⁷ A modernity, particularly technological, to which the viceroys of Battambang and some of their descendants who governed it afterwards made abundant recourse, equipping themselves with a ceremonial artillery unit at the end of the 18th century²⁸ and coins minted by a Chinese farmer in the second half of the 19th century.²⁹

Given these historical contexts during which the union of a Khmer matrilineage to a network of Sino-Khmer descent could usher in an alignment with titled lineages possessing local political power, it is not for nothing that a source outside the family should posit the existence of

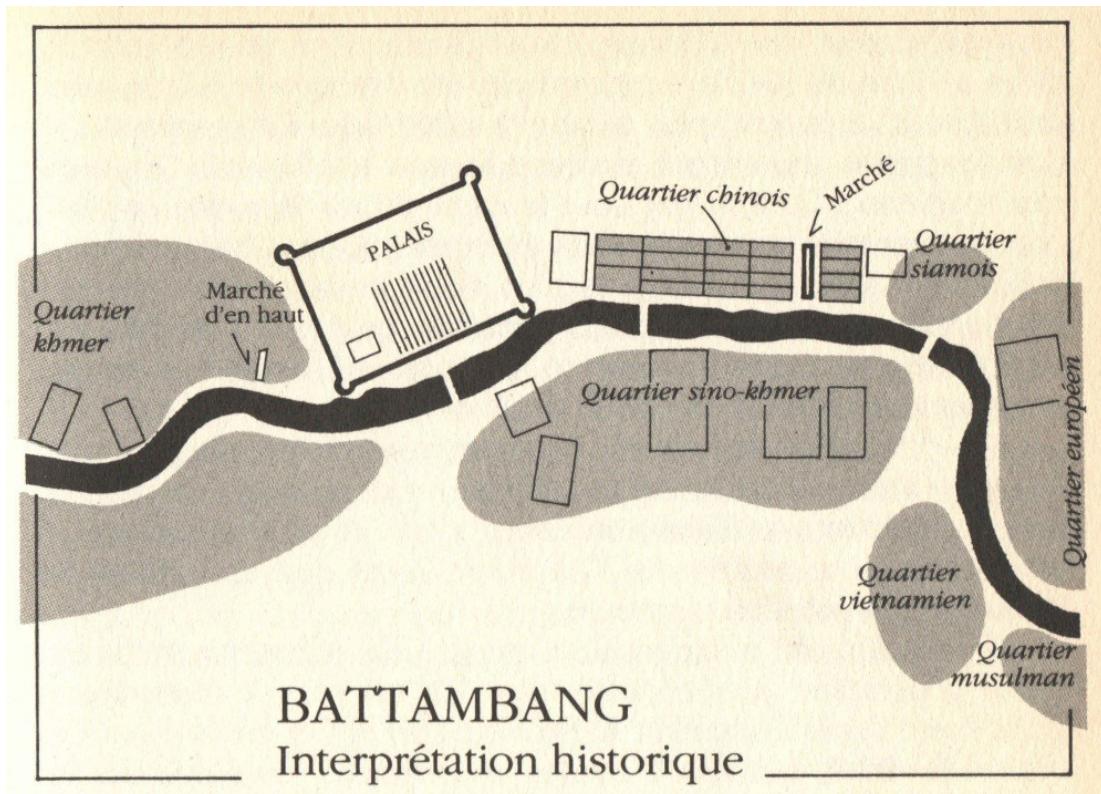


Figure 1. Layout of the city of Battambang
(Népote, Pour une géographie culturelle de l'Indochine, 125)

²⁶ Sam S. letter to the author, 2 August 2020. “Kiang Sou” clearly corresponds to “Tay Sou” of the genealogy of Sophie (cf. Népote, “Ascendance de S.A.S. Sophie,” 26).

²⁷ Népote, “Les nouveaux Sino-Khmers acculturés,” 144-146.

²⁸ Mikaelian, “Une ‘révolution militaire’ au pays Khmer ?,” 106-109.

²⁹ Joyaux, “Les selung de Battambang au caractère chinois ji.”

a link between the viceroyalty of Battambang and Ŝū Ū on the side of his father's ancestors (*cf.* Figure 3): in this account, which takes on the trappings of foundation myth, his father, of Chinese origin, a certain Tay Sou,³⁰ born around 1820, was said to have a brother, Tay Nhok, a coin-minter in the service of the viceroy of Battambang, who ended up marrying one of his daughters or, more likely, a young woman of his House.³¹

Be that as it may, Ŝū Ū married, around 1900, one of the daughters of *yāy* Maen, *nān* Pil, born circa 1881.³² An official in the Siamese provincial administration before 1907, he was appointed *me ghum* of Kampong Preah after the retrocession of Battambang,³³ duties which had him living distanced from his family, who remained in *vatt* Kantāl, to which he regularly returned in order to visit them. It is then through his paternal uncle Ŝū Pun Jhin that Au Chhieng is definitely related to what one might call the second aristocracy of Battambang. While no physical memento of this link has withstood the passage of time or the recent mixing of populations in the city's central district of *vatt* Kantāl, the memory of the Au is, on the other hand, still present in the minds of old people living in a small group of houses adjoining *vatt* Gar in the Khmer quarter in the south of the city (*cf.* Figure 1). Several elderly residents identify the Au as indeed linked to the matrilineages that make up this aristocratic district where some "cadet" branches of the viceroys of Battambang have lived since *mcās'* Nuñ made it his favoured district,³⁴ and which was still famous for that very reason in the 1960s: it was actually in this district that Princess Kanitha Rasmei Sophoan (1898-1971),³⁵ daughter of Prince Sutharot (1872-1945) and sister of King Suramarit (1896, reign 1955-1960), used to stay when she visited Battambang during, in particular, the Buddhist *vassa* retreats³⁶. Their paternal grandmother was no other than Chom Iem Bossaba (1864-1944), one of the wives of King Norodom (reign 1860-1904), whose available family trees agree in making her a princess of Battambang (and even, for some, one of *mcās'* Nuñ's daughters), performing a particularly important role in that she links the Khmer royal family to the Siamese royal family.³⁷

³⁰ *Cf. supra*, note 26.

³¹ Népote, "Ascendance de S.A.S. Sophie," 26.

³² Sam S. letter to the author, 15 October 2020.

³³ Sam S. letter to the author, 31 October 2020.

³⁴ Author's interview with Loch Chhanchhai, *loc. cit.*

³⁵ "S.A.R. Sophon Norodom," In *Notabilités d'Indochine*, 75. According to this reference, Samdach Préa Pituccha Raksmey Sophon, born in 1898, was Samdach Préa Ayika Khateyac Kaiyana Réach Soda Phékvadey's daughter (*alias* Phangangam, *cf. ibid.*, 77) and ran the Sutharot School.

³⁶ Author's interview with Loch Chhanchhai, *loc. cit.*; author's interviews with Pun Rioen and Yi Sarit, Street 800, Vatt Gar Village, Battambang, July 2018; Sam S. letter to the author, 8 September 2020.

³⁷ Her filiation varies according to the family trees available: for Népote and Sisowath, *Khun Cham* Iem Bossaba is the daughter of a Battambang mandarin and a relative of the royal family of Thailand, without further specification (Népote and Sisowath, *État présent*, 68); for Corfield, Yem Bossaba is the sister of Thao Sri Sudorn-nath, herself the grandmother of Phra Nang Chao Suvadhana (1905-1985), who married Rama VI (also known as Vajiravudh) in 1924, (Corfield, *The Royal Family*, 47-48); for Nhiek Tioulong, *Khun Cham* Iem is the daughter of a titled dignitary, "Piphéak Bodin", former governor of Siem Reap under Siamese authority, another of whose daughters, Mâm Keo, is the grandmother of Pranang Tiv, wife of Rama VI (Nhiek, *Chroniques khmères*, 44). At this stage, the divergences are easily resolved: the "Battambang mandarin" father of the two sisters (one of whom is the grandmother of one

Through Ŝū Êpun Jhin, the Au siblings are thereby linked to the matrilineage of Êpun Ruot, otherwise known as Nuon Jā, born in the village of Vatt Gar in 1926 and whose mother, *yāy* Bāñ, cooked for the members of the royal family when they came to stay occasionally in Battambang in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁸ The Au siblings are, moreover, still recognised as belonging to the category of second-degree cousins (*ji duot*), and are well identified as such.³⁹ This fact is particularly significant and rich in implications in that the historiography of the Khmer Rouge movement, like that of the Province of Battambang, has tended, without perhaps realising its full importance, to emphasize the singular character of this village and the no less singular place occupied in it by the mother of Êpun Ruot⁴⁰ (*cf.* Figure 6). In fact, memory of the family tree has this matrilineage the ally of the Battambang viceroys several times over and through at least two marriages, that of Koet Ÿin with Nū Binity Bhijñ, himself said to be a descendant of the viceroys, and then, in the following generation, through the marriage of Nū Yāñ to a descendant of Rath Sady, grandson of *mcās'*Jhum through the maternal line (*cf.* Figure 2).

In addition to the colonial sources confirming the existence of a sibship made up of two brothers and two sisters,⁴¹ we also have then several distinct oral sources that relate them to the descendants of the viceroyalty of Battambang, this on both the maternal and paternal sides. Links which, even if not clearly identified on the maternal side converge nevertheless toward the same

of the wives of King Rama IV) is none other than “Piphéak Bodin,” governor of Siem Reap falling within the orbit of the regents of Battambang (Loch, “Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang”). On the other hand, things become complicated when you try to clarify the identity of this dignitary and that of the mother of Iem. If you follow the genealogies of the Siamese royal family (“Khmer-Siam Royal Family Tree”), she is none other than the daughter of the eighth governor of Battambang (see likewise Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 119 and So, *The Khmer Kings, Book II*, 372).

³⁸ Author’s cited interview with Yi Sārit; author’s interview with Phāt’ Sāřāv, abbot of Sañkæ monastery and a native of the village of Vatt Gar; Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 359-360.

³⁹ Cited interview with Yi Sārit, who declaimed this euphonic phrase inserting the forenames of the two brothers (Chhoeun, Chheang) and the two sisters (Rieng, Roeuy) of the sibship in order of age (and pronounced with the Battambang accent): “Jhīoen, Jhieñ, Rīen, Rīoey”. Significantly, only the fate of the elder brother and the two sisters was known to him, as Chhieng had disappeared from the villagers’ social horizon after leaving for France in 1931.

⁴⁰ “A man who had been relocated in 1976 to the village of Wat Kor in *damban* 3, a village sited roughly 5 kilometres from the city centre on the left bank of the *stung* Sangker (when you head south from the city in the direction of Phnom Banan), recounted that there was a lot of food there. When the Khmer Rouges seized power in the province, each family deposited rice and the agricultural implements they possessed in the Wat Kor monastery. The rice and other food was redistributed by the Khmer Rouge cadres to each family, which prepared its own meal. The new arrivals were accepted and able to settle in the village subject to the authorisation of the Khmer Rouge cadres, who showed themselves to be generous. Meals taken in common only began in August 1977. It seems, however, that the village of Wat Kor enjoyed a special regime because certain important people were living there, such as the mother of Nuon Chea. And, according to rumour, Penn Nouth, [enjoying the title of] prime minister from April 1975 to 1976 [but without any power] also lived there for a certain time. Some Battambang inhabitants recounted that Nuon Chea’s mother led a life comparable to the one she had led under the previous regimes, living in her own house in Wat Kor. They added that it seemed that she did not even know what was happening in the rest of Cambodia. According to a woman who was returned to Wat Kor, her native village, during the Khmer Rouge regime and who worked in the kitchen, Wat Kor was the “model district” that foreign friends like the Chinese, the Yugoslavs and the Bulgarians were brought to visit,” Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 359-360.

⁴¹ ANC, RS 4945, Scholarship for years 1923-1936 [scholarships file] AU CHHEUN. Scholarship application made by AU CHHEUN, 16 October 1924.

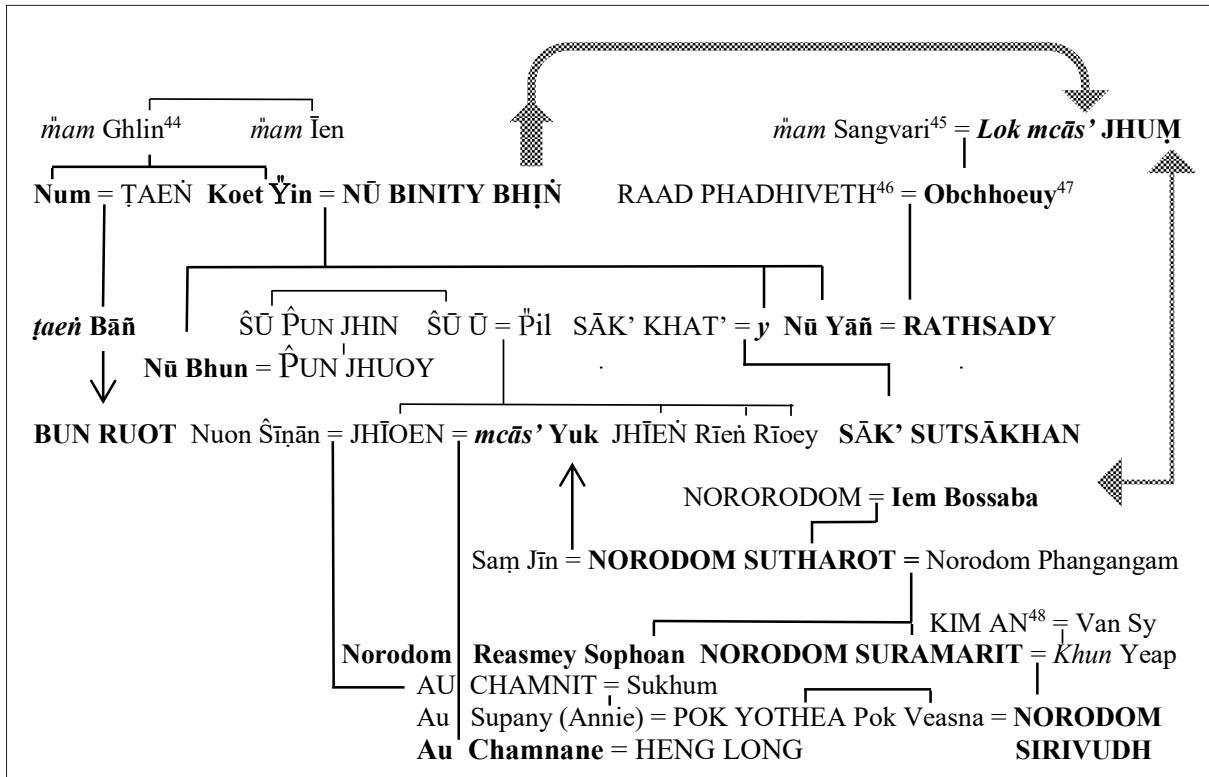
social space—the second aristocracy of Battambang in the service of the viceroyalty—as well as the same territorial space.

A policy of family marriages at the hub of the viceroyalty of Battambang and the House of Prince Sutharot

By way of confirmation of these links, we will note, moreover, the Au siblings' marriages or promises of marriage, as well as some of those of their cousins, it being understood that the tendency in these domains is to iterate marriages between the same branches of two families over several generations in order to consolidate the family ties: the eldest, Chhoeun (Jhīoen), thus began in this way by marrying the daughter of Kaep Nuon, governor of Battambang between 1927 and 1934, where one can reasonably suspect the existence of a genealogical link with the family of the viceroys, even if it has not to date been identified;⁴² he then married a daughter of Prince Sutharot, in other words, a granddaughter of Iem Bossaba (*cf. infra*); while the younger of the boys, Chhieng, was, if not officially promised, at least identified as having as possible intended a great-niece of the last viceroy of Battambang (*cf. infra*); finally, the elder of the sisters, Rieng, married Mey Phorin (Mi Bhūrin), who became one of the leaders of the Issarak rebel movement, whose links with the viceroyalty of Battambang need no further demonstration.⁴³

⁴² Putting it differently: it seems to us unlikely that during the interwar years a person who attained the position of governor of Battambang should not have benefitted from some link with the lineage of the viceroys, be it through his marriage or by virtue of his own parentage. As Kaep Nuon reputedly came from Kampong Chhnang (Sam S. letter to the author, 31 October 2020), it is on the side of his wife, Sen, that you would have to seek this link.

⁴³ Interview cited with Yi Sārit; Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 166. For the historians, Mey Phorin, born in 1912, was the son of Mey Kham, *cau bray sruk* of Puok (Siem Reap); owner of the “Au Khmer” shop in Battambang, he joined the Issaraks in 1946 and then became their treasurer before being executed in May 1947 in Thailand, west of Poipet, by two Issaraks, Nak Chhuon and Sgnuon, as he was getting ready to lay down his arms and surrender (Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 166, 180). For his family and in-laws, he was born, like his wife, Au Rieng, in the Year of the Rabbit, 1915, the son of Mi Naem (1885-1947), born in Phnom Penh but whose administrative career had led him to work in the Siem Reap court, and Nū Se (1896-1977), a native of the *sruk* of Siem Reap. The couple had two sons and three daughters. Mi Naem was a friend of Ŝū Ū, whom he probably met in the course of his postings, which had him serving in turn as governor of three *sruk* of Battambang (Pailin, Phnom Srok and Tek Chor) before ending his career as governor of the *sruk* of Puok in Siem Reap. And the two *cau bray sruk* decided to have their children marry one another, and in this way Mey Phorin married Au Rieng around 1940. She died from tuberculosis (Sam S. letter to the author, 10 October 2020, relaying information from a sister of Mey Phorin, Mey Sarun). A sister of Mey Phorin, Mey Sariem (Mi Sāriem), married Maen Jhum (1910-1975), born in Pursat, who was Secretary of State for Education in the Sixties (*cf. Corfield & Summers, Historical Dictionary*, 259; Ker Osel email to the author based on information transmitted by Men Bopha, daughter of Mey Sariem, 27 October 2009).

The Grū of Parnassus: *Au Chhieng* Among The TitansFigure 2. The *Au* in the second-tier aristocracy of Battambang

⁴⁴ Although at no time during their interviews did the inhabitants of the village of Vatt Gar point it out, the appellative *mām*, which generally precedes the names of the concubines of *Lok mcās' Jhum*, suggests that the two sisters were also concubines of Battambang's last viceroy.

⁴⁵ Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 121; corresponds to *anak Saīvān*, concubine no. 17 as recorded in Tūc, *Pāt' tampañ samāy lok mcās'*, 208, and to *mām Saīvān* in Loch, "Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang," 72.

⁴⁶ The Aphaivong (Rath Thon La) referred to by the inhabitants of the village of Vatt Gar probably corresponds to *Luang Raad Phadhiveth*, who invaded the province in 1940 before becoming its governor and who, according to Khuon Vichika, was a member of the Aphaivong family, being married to a daughter of *mcās' Jhum* (therefore brother-in-law of Poc Khun) (see Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 93, 121).

⁴⁷ Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 121; corresponds to *ghun Uk Jhoey* (Tūc, *Pāt' tampañ samāy lok mcās'*, 208) and to Up Jhoey (Loch, "Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang," 72).

⁴⁸ Corresponds to Gim Ān (1876-1928), a merchant born in Pursat but living in Battambang "whose house was located behind Vatt Bibidh" (Loch, "Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang," 94) who was reportedly one of the *cau bray sruk* of this province and a son of whose from a second marriage, Kim An Doré (1920-?) took part in the coup of 9 August 1945 with his maternal uncle by marriage, Norodom Thon, the elder brother of Kim An's first wife (Norodom Touch, daughter of Norodom Raya). His third wife, Van Sy (1905-1930), was a Sino-Khmer belonging to the house of *ghun Méak*, aunt of Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) and one of the wives of King Monivong (Corfield, *The Royal Family*, 49, 51-52; Népote & Sisowath, *État présent*, 132; Aberdam, "ID 31", in *Elites cambagiennes*, 802-803).

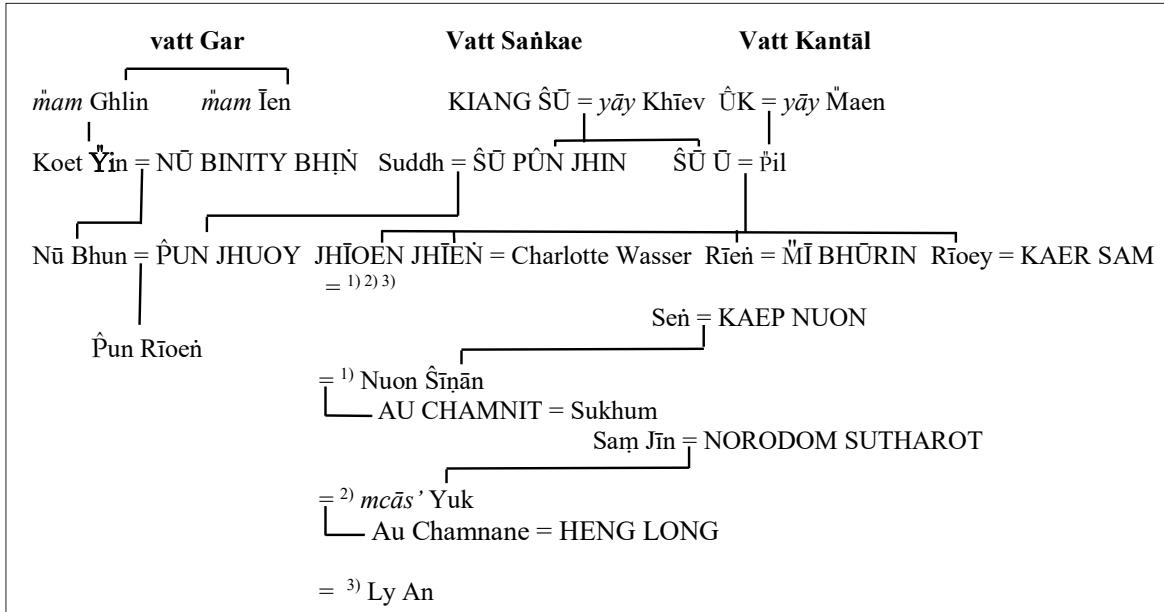


Figure 3. The *Au* family tree

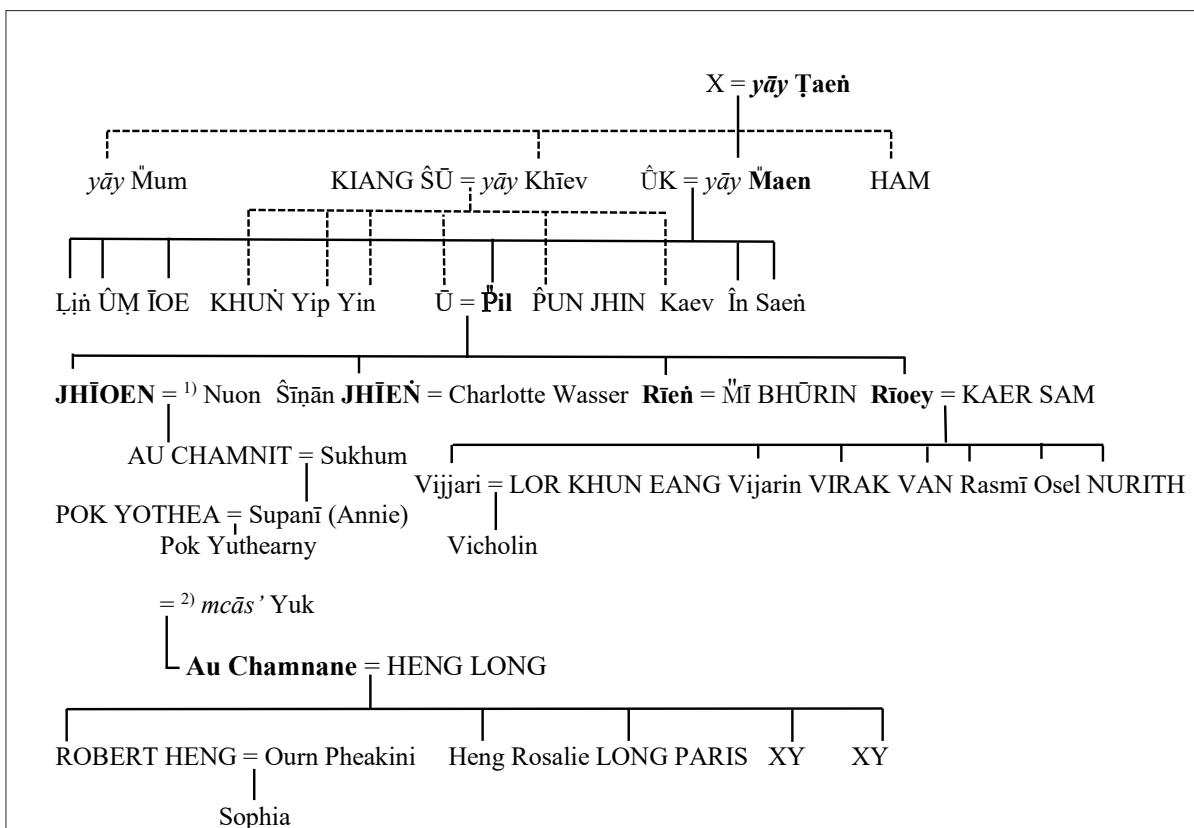


Figure 4. Au line of descent

The Gr̄u of Parnassus: An Chhieng Among The Titans

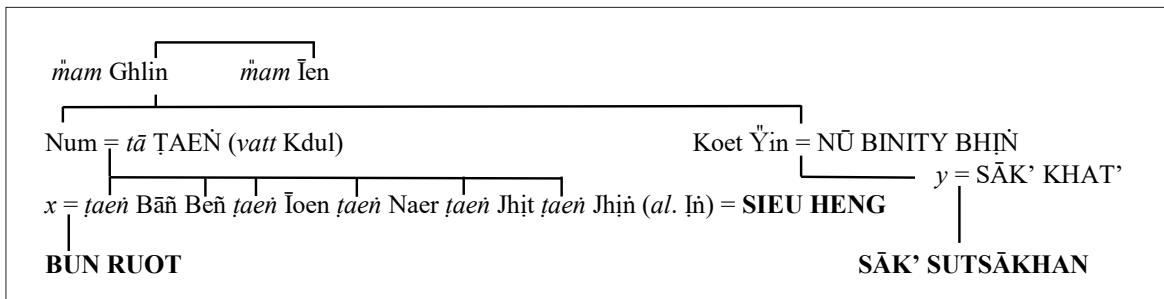
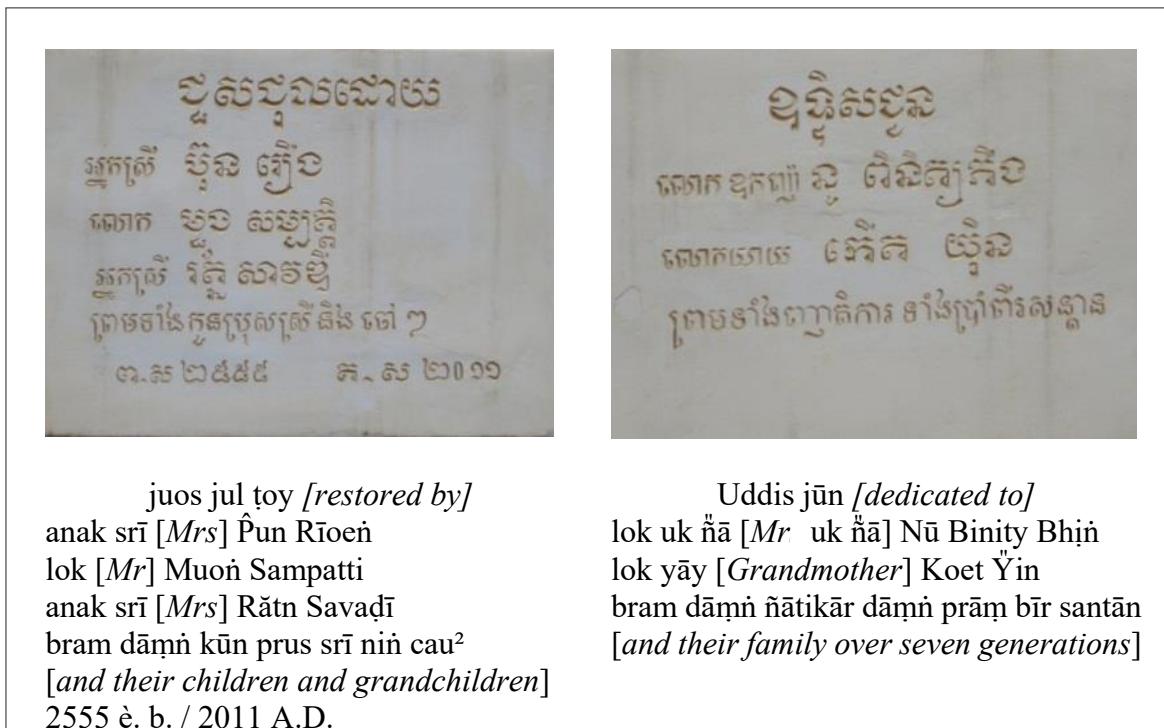


Figure 5. Family tree of Pun Ruot, otherwise known as Nuon Ja



juos jul toy [restored by]
anak srī [Mrs] Pun Rīoeñ
lok [Mr] Muoñ Sampatti
anak srī [Mrs] Rātn Savađi
bram dāmñ kūn prus srī niñ cau²
[and their children and grandchildren]
2555 è. b. / 2011 A.D.

Uddis jūn [dedicated to]
lok uk ñā [Mr uk ñā] Nū Binity Bhin
lok yāy [Grandmother] Koet Yīn
bram dāmñ nātikār dāmñ prām bīr santān
[and their family over seven generations]

Figure 6. Funerary plaque on the reliquary of yāy Yīn (vatt Gar).

On the cousins' side this time and, in particular, the descendants of a sister of Ŝū Ū, Ŝū Yip, we find another two ties of cousinhood through significant marriages, which, although not yet precisely confirmed, nevertheless constitute such in the minds of people within the family circle. The first relates to Phlek Chhat (1922-2006), who was a minister several times under the Sangkum and the Republic, himself identified by several sources as a descendant of the Aphaivong,⁴⁹ whose

⁴⁹ Corfield & Summers, *Historical Dictionary*, 325. Phlek Chhat's mother, "Neang Phlek Chhom," is said to be a cousin of Savong Aphaivong (son of *mcas'* Jhum and *anak* Yīoeun, cf. Loch, "Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang," 69; Tūc, *Pāt' tamprāi samāy lok mcas'*, 208, no. 13), while his father, a certain "Tek," is also said to be related to Aphaivong via Chhavalit Aphaivong (who is the son of Snuon Siñhasenī(y) and Luon Aphaivong, therefore the grandson of Em Siñhasenī(y) along the maternal line, and of *mcas'* Jhum along the paternal, see Loch, "Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang," 66-67; Khuon, *Battambang et sa région*, 97), see Abdoul-Carime, "Phlek Chhat (1922-?)"; note that

sister, Phlek Saravin, married in the 1960s Sam Sunnaro, a cousin of Sam Samphān', granddaughter of Ŝū Yip.⁵⁰ Sticking with Ŝū Yip's descendants, the second tie of cousinhood, perhaps through, here again, a marriage, relates to Ieu Koes (Iev Koes) (1905-1950),⁵¹ treasurer of the Democratic Party and Speaker of the National Assembly before briefly becoming Prime Minister in 1949 and assassinated in 1950.⁵² Educated, just like Au Chhieng, at *vatt* Kantāl and then Collège Sisowath (*cf. infra*), he married Gim Ŝirī, otherwise known as Bāñ, who taught at the Prince Norodom Sutharot School, and when Ieu Koes wanted to have his famous book on the Khmer language published in 1947, he did not fail to thank the “Suthāras Association” for having allowed him to have it printed at the royal printing house.⁵³

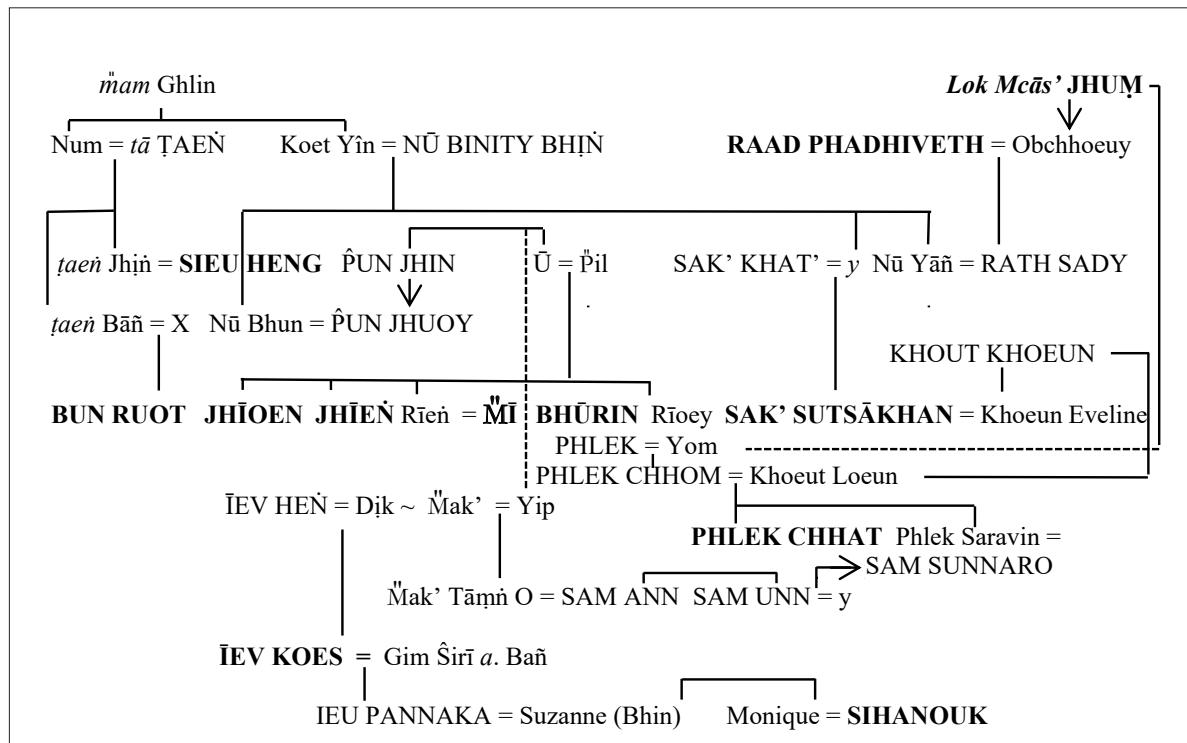


Figure 7. Tree diagram of personalities connected to *Au Chhieng*

an alternative source mentions Phlek Chhat's father, named “Phlek Chhom,” as the son of a sister of *mcās'* Jhum, “Yom,” and Phlek Chhat's mother, named “Khout Loeun,” or “*yay Līoen*” (Sam S. letter to author, 31 October 2020), as the sister of Khout Khoeun, father-in-law of General Sak Sutsakhan (Sāk’ Suthākhan) (*cf. So, The Khmer Kings*, 372; Idem, *A Genealogy Report*).

⁵⁰ Sam S. letters to the author, 10 and 31 October, 2020; 3 November 2020. Sam Sunnaro is the son of Sam Unn, brother of Sam Ann, the father of Sam Samphān' (Sam S. email to the author, 3 November 2020; So, *A Genealogy Report*, 35).

⁵¹ Sam S. letters to the author, 10, 17, 31 October 2020 and 3 November 2020.

⁵² Iev, *Bhasā khmaer, ga-cha*; Corfield, *The Royal Family*, 104; Corfield, & Summers, *Historical Dictionary*, 169.

⁵³ Iev, *Bhasā khmaer*; *Bulletin Administratif du Cambodge (BAC)*, order of 2 September 1930.

By way of a final notable element of ex-post confirmation of these ties, we will note that the family network in question provided, throughout the second half of the 20th Century, a series of “cadres”, sometimes front-ranking, to the resistance movements against the central power of Phnom Penh (the Coup d’État of 9 March 1945, the Issarak, the Khmers Rouges, the KPNLF) or, conversely, they chose to look after the well-understood interests of the Province of Battambang from the heart of central power within different organs of the press (*Nagara Vatta* and then *Khmer Krauk*), political parties (the Democratic Party), or within the governments themselves (of post-independence Cambodia, the Sangkum and then the Republic), this in close relationship with a branch of the royal family to which the people of Battambang have always been concerned to attach themselves (Sutharot and Suramarit): Kim An Doré, Mey Phorin, Ieu Koes, Au Chhoeun, Phlek Chhat, Sieu Heng, Nuon Chea, Sak Sutsakhan⁵⁴ (cf. Figure 7).

The information available on the siblings assigns them strongly marked social coordinates, which are obviously not ungermane to their respective careers. Chhoeun, the eldest, a lawyer by training, was a senior civil servant and several times a minister during Sihanouk’s first reign (1941-1955),⁵⁵ which was always concerned with respecting regional balances within the central

⁵⁴ (1928-1994), cf. Corfield & Summers, *Historical Dictionary*, 355-357; So, *The Khmer Kings*, 372.

⁵⁵ Born 11 May 1903, (cf. Archives of Paris, Death Certificate of Au Chhoeun, 17th arrondissement, 10 July 1982), a student at Collège Sisowath, probably in the years 1917-1921, and then a teacher there 1921-1923, Chhoeun then obtained a year’s leave of absence to study at the School of Law and Administration of Hanoi (1923-1924) and seems to have begun his administrative career at the end of 1924 as trainee secretary assigned to a delegation at the Ministry of Justice (cf. ANC, RS, 4945) before being placed simultaneously at the disposal of the Director Administrator of the Offices of the Senior Residency and of Norodom Suramarit (ANC, RS 18994). Confirmed as secretary 6th class in 1926, it was, it seems, during this period (in 1925 or 1926) that he married Nuon Šīnān, daughter of Okhna Kaep Nuon, who, the following year, became governor of Battambang (1927-1934), and Choumteav Señ. Šīnān died a week after giving birth to a son, Au Chamnit, born in 1927 (Sam S. letter to the author, 10 October 2020). We do not know the circumstances of how he met his second wife; around 1929 or 1930 he married a half-sister of Prince Norodom Suramarit (born 1896, reign 1955-1960), Sūryyin Lakkh(n), also known as *meās’ Yug* (called “Norodom Yop” in Népote, “Ascendance de S.A.S. Sophie,” 38), daughter of Prince Sutharot (1872-1945) and Sam Jīn (Sam S. letters to author, 2 August and 3 September 2020). Their daughter Au Chamnane was born in Phnom Penh in 1931 (cf. Death Certificate of Au Chamnane, Archives of Neuilly-sur-Seine, 5 August 1997). It was during this period that he was appointed to the Cambodian School of Administration, of which he quickly became General Secretary while teaching French and Administrative Skills there (cf., BAC, order of 8 May 1930) until 1945. Becoming Director of the School of the *Kromokars* (new name of the former Cambodian School of Administration), he began a political career alongside Prince Norodom Montana (1902-1975), with whom he founded the Progressive Democratic Party in April 1946. He then joined the government of Prince Youthevong as Secretary of State for Religions from December 1946 to July 1947. According to Corfield, it was during 1947 that he married Út Pupphāvann, otherwise known as Ly An, a principal dancer of the Royal Ballet, whereas the Au family places the marriage rather in 1950 (author’s cited interview with Loch; Sam S. letter to the author, 10 October 2020; Corfield & Summers, *Historical Dictionary*, 23). His mother, Pil, is said in any case to have continued seeing her ex-daughter-in-law, *meās’ Yug*, who died under the Khmer Rouges in Samlaut (author’s interview with Ker Osel, 11 July 2020). Having become minister of the interior in the government of Prince Sisowath Watchhayavong (July 1947-February 1948), he then held the post of counsellor of the Kingdom (February-October 1948), after which one ministerial post followed another: minister of finances (September 1949-December 1950), minister of the interior (January-May 1951), again minister of finances (May-October 1951), minister of foreign affairs (January-July 1953), deputy head of government and at the same time minister for religions, the fine arts, and social action and labour (29 July-22 November 1953), minister of state responsible for foreign affairs (7-17 April 1954) and then minister of the national economy (18 April-31 July 1954). A first appointment as ambassador to London (1954-1955) removed him from the government, although following the

administration.⁵⁶ As for Chhieng, who undertook advanced law studies in Paris, as his brother had done in Hanoi, it is likely that his risking, in all good faith, a head-on clash with the colonial Republic by virtue of the content of his doctoral thesis is down to his awareness of his origins, which determined in part his career as an Orientalist.

II. A QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE UNDER COLONIAL DOMINATION (1908-1941)

In the Family Home, at the Foot of vatt Kantal

“Whatever the origin of the dream, the Cambodians keep a meticulous record of it [...].”⁵⁷ Written shortly after Cambodia’s independence, this remark by a French Orientalist introducing the translation of a manuscript of oneirology, to which Au Chhieng’s work had just allowed access through the publication of his famous catalogue of the manuscripts of the Khmer holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale, is well illustrated in the family’s account of the scholar’s birth. At the time itself and afterwards dreams play an important role, particularly in the interpretation of children’s future. Sign of a singular destiny, and regarded as such by the family, it is no accident that the memory of the dream Pil had when expecting her second son should have been preserved to this day. In this dream she saw herself walking close to the garden fence before becoming aware of a lunar eclipse; as soon as it was spotted, the moon fell down beside her, but as she advanced her hand to grab hold of it, the moon began to float in the sky again. Pil went to consult a soothsayer, who explained to her that her son would only borrow her womb in order to be born, but that in the future he would not live with her. At the time, this comment worried no one, but the day it was realised that Au Chhieng would not be returning to the country, everyone remembered the dream and understood that the movement of the moon heralded the journey of no return of Pil’s last son.⁵⁸

abdication of Sihanouk and the enthronement of Suramarit in 1956, who appears to have been his long-term protector, he was appointed a member of the High Council of the King from 1958-1959. However, Suramarit’s death in 1960 deprived him of a significant supporter. Appointed in the meantime ambassador to London in the wake of the Sam Sary scandal of the summer of 1958, he remained there from 1959 to 1964, the year when, recalled to Phnom Penh, he requested early retirement in order to show his disapproval of Sihanoukian international policy (Ker Osel email, 29 November 2020); he then seems to have lived in Paris in a private capacity but figures nevertheless as a pillar of the small community of Cambodians of France, welcoming, for example, the Queen Mother alongside the ambassador when she came for medical treatment in February 1965 (*cf. Réalités cambodgiennes*, Friday 19 February 1965, 7). It was necessary to wait until Sihanouk’s deposal and the advent of the Khmer Republic before he regained high office, when he became president of the Constitutional Court (1972) (see Abdoul-Carime, “Au Chhoeun”). Seeking refuge in France after the fall of Phnom Penh in April 1975, he reportedly lived with his daughter, Au Chamnane, in Neuilly-sur-Seine, before residing at 17 rue de la Brousse, in Paris’s 17th arrondissement, where, aged 80, he died on 10 July 1982. His funerary urn repose in the Père Lachaise crematorium (Secretariat of Père Lachaise; Robert Heng emails to Ker Osel, 27 October 2020; Archives of Paris, Death Certificate of Au Chhoeun, 17th arrondissement, 10 July 1982 (no. 730).

⁵⁶ Abdoul-Carime, “Note sur l’identité communautaire khmère,” 48, note 22.

⁵⁷ Bitard, “Le manuscrit 145 du fonds khmer,” 310. The translation of the treaty occupies pages 311-318.

⁵⁸ Sam Samphān’ letter to the author, 3 September 2020.

It seems that it was Chhieng's father who introduced his two boys to Cambodian writing. Their mother, illiterate like most women of her generation, took advantage of it to discreetly learn to read at the same time as her sons.⁵⁹ The practice of writing was still the prerogative of men, whether they belonged to the administrative service of the province, now placed under French protectorate, or the religious service, with the knowledge of the sacred texts that it necessitated. In Phnom Penh, as in Battambang, things were nevertheless gradually changing. During the second decade of the 20th Century, when this initial period of learning occurred, there were, admittedly, still no schools for girls on the model of those that the Princesses Malika and Sutharot had just opened in Phnom Penh in 1911 inside their princely residence. Figures of authority, these princesses dispensed to young girls from good families and certain boys from the aristocracy an education in the tools of French modernity, beginning with the language, as well as the traditional palace values such as these could be updated.⁶⁰ There was nothing of the kind in Battambang, even if some institutions of modern schooling were also present there, particularly through the pagoda schools, where girls were admitted, and where Siamese was the language of instruction,⁶¹ thus enabling the most gifted pupils continue their studies in Bangkok. Although a native of another province, a man of learning illustrating this toing and froing between Bangkok and Battambang dominated the *vatt* Kantāl district. Ind (1859-1924), who had switched from the religious service to that of the viceroy's administration, came from the Province of Kandal. He had spent time in various of the country's monasteries before staying for two years in Battambang's *vatt* Kaev, from where he left for seven years of study in Bangkok before returning in 1886 to spend a decade as a monk in *vatt* Kantāl. Leaving the monkhood in 1896 and married to a young woman of Battambang, he was spotted by *mcās'* Jhum and recruited into his service to translate Pāli texts before being called to Phnom Penh in 1914 for different duties within the commission compiling the dictionary instituted by King Sisowath in 1915 —duties which he would leave behind only in 1924 in order to return to Battambang, where he died that same year.⁶² Alternating, as was the traditional custom, periods “in the world” in the service of the administration and periods of monastic retreat, the scholarly practice of *acāry* Ind did nevertheless take on some modern trappings:⁶³ not so much because he navigated between languages and literatures, translating a Siamese chronicle or transposing La Fontaine's fables into Khmer, nor because these translation exercises illustrated *mezza voce* an anti-French critique, as the political atmosphere of his chosen land encouraged him to do —the retrocession of Battambang having not been well received by the local elites— as by the use of a new discursive and textual rationality. Transmitted by the reformed Buddhism of Bangkok and its literalism, it embodied a tension of paradoxically reactionary purity, since it was designed to restore the palatial order that had been deposed by the European cultural machinations, even though it

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Nut, “Phnom Penh des origines à 1975;” Mikaelian, “Aréno Iukanthor à Paris;” Aberdam, *Élites cambodgiennes*, 328-333.

⁶¹ Tūc, *Pāt' tampan samāy lok mcās'*, 165. Girls represented around one-third of the complement, according to the author.

⁶² Khing, *Suttanta Prjā Ind niñ snā tāi*.

⁶³ Hansen, *How to behave*, 68, 70-76, 94-95.

was expressed by means of religious ideas whose genesis was specifically European.⁶⁴ A way of being an “anti-modern modern”, a transitional figure between the world of traditional scholars and European knowledge who was going, like Mahā Bidū Krasem in Phnom Penh, to be imbued, up to a certain point, by French modernity in order better to safeguard the palace culture that the latter was precisely in the process of destroying, Ind was nevertheless still considerably removed from the scholarly world that Au Chhieng was going to discover in France.

Like his elder brother, Au Chhieng probably underwent some monastic training in *vatt* Kantāl when he was around 11 or 12.⁶⁵ It is not impossible either that he was educated in one of the three pagoda schools set up by the Siamese government to teach Thai when the province was still under its authority. Nor indeed is there anything to indicate that these establishments stopped their activity after the 1907 retrocession. Among these, “Indrādhipati,”⁶⁶ the school of *vatt* Sañkāe, may have been the first to see young Chhieng’s earliest schoolboy steps. In all likelihood, he then followed the path of his elder brother, Chhoeun, who we know for certain went to one of the two French schools of Battambang⁶⁷ before entering Collège Sisowath.⁶⁸

From Collège Sisowath to Parisian Orientalism

It is actually as one of the pupils recorded as coming from the Battambang school that we first pick up Chhieng’s trail in the colonial archives, in September 1922, when he, in turn, aged 14, entered Collège Sisowath as a boarder, at the same time as Ray Mouth.⁶⁹ His elder brother was still to be found at the school, having started as a trainee teacher there in the autumn term of 1921,⁷⁰ eventually leaving it after another two years of teaching in September 1924 to enter the School of Law and Administration in Hanoi.⁷¹

⁶⁴ We know that the renewal of Buddhism during the reigns of Ang Duong and then Norodom was directly inspired by the Buddhist reforms of Bangkok (particularly those of the future King Mongkhut (reign 1851-1868), which themselves had as driver European rational science, and as inspirers the reformed Christians (particularly the missionaries), who were at the same time the tutors and interlocutors of the Siamese princes of the period (see Forest, *Histoire religieuse du Cambodge*, 166; Tambiah, *World Conqueror & World Renouncer*, 211-214).

⁶⁵ Sam Samphān’ letter to the author, 31 October 2020.

⁶⁶ Three pagoda schools where instruction was in Siamese were established: one in *vatt* Bibhiddh, another in *vatt* Kamphaen and one more in *vatt* Sañkāe (see Tauch, *Battambang during the time of the Lord Governor*, 101-102).

⁶⁷ Cf. ANC, RS 7949 - Battambang school: reports and statistics - 1911-1917. In 1911-1912, the colonial archives record two boys’ schools, run by two European and four native masters, for 130 pupils.

⁶⁸ Cf. ANC, RS, Résidence 465 Native Scholarships 1917-1918, order of the Senior Resident no. 900, 24 August 1917, Article 1, scholarship-holder no. 57, Chheun, from the Battambang school.

⁶⁹ BAC, 8 September 1922; ANC, RS 4945, Educational Scholarships for the years 1923-1936, Order of the Senior Resident no.1648, 20 August 1923. Article 1, renewal of boarding scholarships, no. 47, Au Chhieng. Ray Mouth, or Lamouth (circa 1905-1975), born in Sisophon, would become a member of the Democratic Party and, in particular, Minister for Religions in 1950 (Corfield, & Summers, *op. cit.*, 348-349).

⁷⁰ BAC, 5 August 1921 (Au Chheun, trainee teacher, appointed to the Battambang school).

⁷¹ ANC, RS 4945, Educational Scholarship for the years 1923-1936 [scholarship file] AU CHHEUN. Application for scholarship by AU CHHEUN, 16 October 1924.

For four years, Chhieng's school-mates were, for the most part, future personalities of the Cambodian political world, such as Ieu Keus, his "cousin," also from Battambang, Monteiro, Nhiek Tioulong and Sonn Voeun Sai.⁷² If one is to believe the impressions of a former pupil, Huy Kanthul, who followed Au Chhieng into the establishment two years later, they were happy years. "The absence of responsibility, the studious atmosphere in which you basked, the indulgence you met with from the grown-ups, parents and friends, combined with the blitheness of youth made you see the world through rose-tinted spectacles. It was with a sense of melancholy that you later looked back on those, alas, too brief happy moments! Moments gone forever."⁷³ Chhieng also came across at the time his first representatives of French speculative reason, like, for example, the philosophy teacher, Eugène Pujarsnicle, who was going to become a "writer of best-selling novels" while also holding down the position of principal of Collège Sisowath.⁷⁴

In 1926, after four years at the Collège, Chhieng followed his elder brother's path to Hanoi, while the latter, on graduating from the School of Law, was first appointed to the secretariat of the Ministry of Justice and then placed simultaneously at the disposal of the Senior Resident and Prince Norodom Suramarit.⁷⁵ Chhieng, for his part, entered the Teacher Training School of Hanoi, "[...] a large, fine-looking building [...]" where both colonial glory and its detractors were on display to the young scholarship boys: "In the amphitheatre inside the building you could see an immense painting depicting the figures who had played a role in the colonisation of Tonkin."⁷⁶ Some of the teachers, however, behaved "[...] in a very curious way [...]," particularly some university teachers from France who, passing through, "spoke unabashedly of topics taboo at the time such as the right of peoples to govern themselves or the legitimacy of European colonization in Africa and Asia. These were hot topics that the colonial authorities had no desire to see treated unorthodoxly."⁷⁷

Two years later, in 1928, Au Chhieng emerged with the status of probationary teacher. And it was only natural that he should carry out his training period at Collège Sisowath itself, from September 1929, before becoming a permanent-contract teacher of French-Native Higher Primary Education in January 1931.⁷⁸ It was probably during these months of teaching that his colleagues, some of whom were his former masters, persuaded him to continue his studies in France. His eminent qualities marked him out as an ideal candidate to leave for France. While nothing allows us to know the precise reasons which led him to choose Orientalism, the intellectual agitation

⁷² ANC, RS 4945, Educational Scholarships for the years 1923-1936, Order of the Senior Resident no. 1774, 20 August 1924. Article 1, Boarding Scholarship (renewal) no. 9, AU CHHIENG.

⁷³ Huy, *Mémoire*, 50.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 63. Eugène-Félix Pujarnicle (1881-1951) notably published *Le bonze et le pirate*, G. Crès, 1929, 241 pages. Having become Director of Collège Sisowath in 1931, he married for the second time, taking as his wife "a woman of the Khmer nobility" (*ibid.*), to whom the archives give the name Koy Yi-Houp (married in 1932, died in 1934, cf. BAC).

⁷⁵ ANC, RS 18994, Personal File of Mr Norodom Suramarit.

⁷⁶ Huy, *Mémoire*, 54.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ ANC, RS 16456 - Collège Sisowath. Monthly reports, 1929-1932; RS 25357 - Recruitment examination of pupils of Collège Sisowath - 1930.

of those years probably played an important role in his choice: the revue *Kambuja Sūriyā* had just been founded (1926), the École Supérieure de Pāli was teaching monks courses in Pāli, Sanskrit and Latin, and the Haut Conseil pour les Traités Religieux (the commission for the publishing of the *Tripitaka*) had just been established (1929).⁷⁹ As the colonial authorities particularly favoured the study of the classical languages in the wake of the creation in 1930 of the Buddhist Institute, presided over by Prince Sutharot, he obtained administrative secondment as well as an École des Langues Orientales scholarship to study “Sanskrit and Pali” in Paris. His leave of absence was swiftly forthcoming, starting in November 1931.⁸⁰

Chhieng represented a promise of things to come for his family, then. Among the people from Battambang performing administrative duties, his brother, Chhoeun, who had just been appointed General Secretary of the Cambodian School of Administration, was himself one of the high-profile personalities in the capital, one whose recent, second marriage had been to a daughter of Prince Sutharot who was also half-sister of Prince Suramarit. The departure of his younger brother for France, a still-rare event for young Cambodians, represented a promise of prestigious diplomas and thus administrative advancement and at the same time a hypergamous marriage, a practice that the Cambodian elites readily associated with this path.⁸¹

Lodging from the beginning of the 1931 academic year in the Maison de l’Indochine, on the Cité Universitaire campus, he threw himself body and soul into the study of the classical Orient. He was an ardent devotee of the seminars of the erudite Indianists who presided at the Institut de Civilisation Indienne, which had been founded a few years earlier by Sylvain Lévi. Criss-crossing between the Sorbonne, the École Pratique des Hautes Études and the Collège de France, he became part, without difficulty, of the circles of students around the major scholars of the time: Sylvain Lévi and Alfred Fouche, Jean Przyluski, Jules Bloch, Jacques Bacot and Louis Renou. His success was such that, in 1935, he became the first Cambodian to hold a Bachelor of Arts degree. He regularly sent money home to his mother and offered a radiant demeanour to his family (*cf.* Figure 8) in the exchanges of letters, letters which have disappeared today but in which you can imagine the expressions of happiness. The doctoral thesis on Khmer epigraphy that he began under the supervision of Sylvain Lévi came to naught, however, for the master died in October that same year.

His scholarship was coming to an end, and the colonial authorities were calling him back to Phnom Penh. However, the deputy chief of staff to the minister of the colonies, Robert Delavignette, took up this young talented native’s case. He understood the scientific but also the political interest —the famous “winning of hearts”— that there would be in letting him continue “disinterested studies (archaeology and linguistics)” in order to see him subsequently become part of the higher educational system in Cambodia.⁸² The minister overturned Phnom Penh’s decision,

⁷⁹ Buddhist Institut, *A Short History*, 19, 23.

⁸⁰ ANC, RS 427 - Collège Sisowath - Reports 1923-1932; ANOM, EE/ii/5606, Au Chhieng, Individual School Report.

⁸¹ Népote, *Parenté et organisation sociale; Abergement, Élites cambagiennes*.

⁸² Cf. ANOM, lecol/125/9, Au Chhieng, Note by R. Delavignette to the minister of the colonies, 13 November 1936.

The Grū of Parnassus: Au Chhieng Among The Titans

Figure 8. Au Chhieng at his work-desk, most likely in Paris, perhaps in his room at the Cité Universitaire (family archives of Ker Virak, undated.)

and Au Chhieng, who had been appointed teacher first class in November 1937, was officially seconded to the École Nationale de la France d'Outre-Mer (ENFOM), where the rudiments of the native languages useful to future officials of the colonial service were taught. By teaching his mother tongue he was thus sure to be able to continue his studies.

Au Chhieng then enrolled for a BA in Law rather than completing his Oriental Studies. The influence of his elder brother and the political agitation in Phnom Penh in the second half of the Thirties were perhaps not unrelated to this choice of a discipline attentive, as it is, to the development of the contemporary world, especially that of a colonial world administered by a complex web of French and native law. It was indeed in 1936 that a protégé of Prince Suramarit, Pach Chhoeun (1896-1971), founded the pro-independence newspaper *Nagara Vatta*.⁸³ However, he did not, for all that, abandon the nourishing relationship with the texts of Ancient Cambodia, and he set about classifying the Bibliothèque Nationale's Khmer manuscripts with a view to preparing the catalogue.⁸⁴ Obtaining his LLB in 1938, he took his Advanced Law Diploma in 1939 and was able as a result to start writing a doctoral thesis.

⁸³ Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, 31; Népote & Sisowath, *État présent*, 130.

⁸⁴ Cf. ANOM, EE/ii/5606, Au Chhieng, Au Chhieng letter to the Director of the ENFOM, 9 November 1941.

During this interval he met a young Parisian primary-school teacher, Charlotte Wasser, whom he married in April 1939.⁸⁵ That was perhaps when he started looking to leave his university lodgings in order to live, shortly afterwards, with his wife in a small suburban detached house in Châtenay-Malabry.⁸⁶ What we have here is perhaps more than just a romantic encounter but a choice to set down roots, something which continued to mark him out from the majority of Cambodian scholarship-holders. “Intellectually formed by French masters and married to a Frenchwoman [...],”⁸⁷ Au Chhieng was aware that in so doing he had rejected the marriage with a daughter of the administrative elite or the aristocracy which his family had had in store for him on his return from France. His mother had in this way planned for him to marry *Ghun Úc*, daughter of Em Arun Siñhasenī(y), governor of Battambang from 1908 to 1922, himself a nephew of *mās’ Jhum*, the last viceroy of Battambang.⁸⁸ By steering clear of the traditional marriage that organises Cambodian society, it was, then, not only the career of a Phnom Penh senior civil servant, the career embraced by his brother, Au Chhoeun, that he was renouncing. In a community based on maternal law where the marriage of a daughter to a foreigner is easily conceivable⁸⁹ but where the converse, when not forbidden, is looked down upon, this was to take one further step towards France.

Au Chhieng was to do this however without renouncing anything of his country. Reading his doctorate enables one to grasp precisely the consistency of his approach or, to put it better, the affinities that emerge from the diverse contingencies that made him the person he was: his social coordinates, his inquisitive nature and his manifold academic virtuosity, but also his romantic encounter. In *The Foundations of the Second Treaty of the French Protectorate over Cambodia*,⁹⁰ the famous treaty imposed, through violence, on King Norodom (reign 1860-1904) in 1884, he demonstrates uncommon clear-sightedness concerning the recent history of the relations between France and Cambodia. He performs the tour de force of first demonstrating by means of the rules of international law the illegality of the power grab of 1884, to then show the legitimacy of the French presence transcending this illegality. For this young, unwitting Carl Schmitt,⁹¹ this legitimacy was particularly to be seen in the awareness the Cambodians had of the need to gain access to the

⁸⁵ Archives of Paris, “Marriage Certificate Au & Wasser,” 22 April 1939.

⁸⁶ At 59 Rue Camille Pelletant. A few years later, between 1946 and 1957, the young Douc Rasy (1925-2020), brother-in-law of Pach Chhoeun (Corfield & Summers, *Historical Dictionary*, 105), who had come to Paris to study law, was once received in the house “[...] where there were hens and cocks”, email from Mr Khing Hoc Dy reporting the recollections of Mr. Duoc, 17 September 2019.

⁸⁷ Au Chhieng letter to the Director of the ENFOM, 20 September 1941 (AOM, lecol/125/9, quoted by Singaravélu, *Professer l’Empire*, 107).

⁸⁸ The *Ghun Úc* referred to by Au Chhieng’s nieces as the niece or great-niece of *mās’ Jhum* (daughter of one of his nieces) and whose house was located next to the Lycée Monivong on Route No. 3 (author’s interview with Ker Osel, 11 July 2020; Sam S. letters to the author, 2 August and 8 September 2020) clearly corresponds to *Úñ*, daughter of Em Arun Siñhasenī(y), the first governor of Battambang after the retrocession of 1907 and nephew of *mās’ Jhum* (being the son of one of his sisters, *mās’ Ghlip*), whose house was situated “to the west of Lycée Monivong, on Route No. 3”, (see Loch, “Chronique des vice-rois de Battambang,” 90, 92, 96).

⁸⁹ Népote, *Parenté et organisation sociale*.

⁹⁰ Au, *Fondement du deuxième traité de protectorat*.

⁹¹ Schmitt, *Légalité et légitimité*.

tools of modernity. However, the time would come when this legitimacy would have run its course, i.e. when the Cambodians had been able to acquire those tools themselves. That, moreover, was how the old generation saw the French, via a metaphor which Au Chhieng was very careful to point out had changed its meaning since 1884: in the aftermath of the coup d'état “Asura dai dèk phnèk prak” or “Titans with iron hands and silver eyes” was the nickname commonly given to the French, a nickname which rightly inspired terror; however, “given the positive French achievements, ‘dai dèk’ tends no longer to designate ‘harsh, implacable hands ready to commit violence and injustice’, but industrious hands (dai) skilled in forging iron (dèk), while ‘phnèk prak’ is an ‘outlook’ (phnèk) that is wealth creating (prak). Gentle violence done to the grammar and the language in order to give a more favorable meaning to the originally anti-French nickname!”⁹²

Ranking high among the tools of modernity that form the basis for the legitimacy of the French presence are “France’s concern to favour and develop in secondary education in Cambodia the study of Sanskrit and Pāli, which are to young Cambodians what Greek and Latin are to young French people;”⁹³ the author is, of course, fully aware of the role “that the Sanskrit-Pāli humanities have played in Cambodia” and summons up “the prestigious role that they will play in it anew with the aid of the knowledge and methodologies of modern science;”⁹⁴ “At the strictly local level, the Sanskrit-Pāli humanities will by re-establishing the chain of traditions broken by the sudden modernisation or ‘Francisation’ of Cambodia reinforce the individuality of the Cambodian people, develop their personality, and ensure their cohesion within, first, the Indochinese Union and, then, the French State.”⁹⁵ The “Sanskrit- Pāli humanities” are both a bond between France and Cambodia and the modern tool for the regeneration of the kingdom. In this equation Au Chhieng finds an appropriate place: from the legal standpoint, he re-establishes the legitimacy of a dialogue that transcends the memory of the violence and illegality committed against the Crown —where you again find the ethos of the princely house of Battambang, always quick to jump to the defense of the Khmer royalty against France (at the risk of being accused of singing from the Siamese hymn sheet); from the Orientalist standpoint, he becomes a scholar and acquires the tools of the science in order to revivify the Sanskrit-Pāli humanities and thereby help return the Cambodia of yesteryear to the scene of the future. While writing his thesis, he continued preparing the catalogue of manuscripts of the Khmer holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale, a first version of which was finished in 1941,⁹⁶ but was unable to appear because of the war.

⁹² Au, *Fondement du deuxième traité de protectorat*, § 2, 3; § 298, 257.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, § 315, 270.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, § 316, 270.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, § 317, 271.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* He cites in his thesis, dated June 1941, his *Catalogue détaillé et raisonné des manuscrits cambodgiens de la Bibliothèque nationale*, *ibid.*, § 13, 16, note 1.

Between the French police and the Issarak networks

It was moreover to a large extent the Indochinese theatre of operations of the Second World War that brought about the rejection of his thesis. Admittedly, the thesis did in any case contain enough to alarm the authorities. By exploiting all the available documents to reveal what 40-odd years of colonial historiography had constantly camouflaged or played down he made a formidable legal weapon available to the young generations of Cambodian students and diverse protestors. In the first half of the Thirties, Prince Aréno Iukanthor, who had three anti-colonial satires published, was moreover kept under close watch by the Paris Sûreté before he returned to Phnom Penh in 1938,⁹⁷ when the Palace was rife with rumor over the upcoming succession to King Monivong (reign 1927-1941), who was weakened by illness. This is a Iukanthor on whose writings Au Chhieng relied at one point in his doctoral demonstration.⁹⁸ Be that as it may, history was marching apace thanks to the defeat of June 1940, which led to the invasion of the provinces of western Cambodia by Thailand (February 1941), which was ratified by a peace treaty signed in May and which again saw the loss of Battambang. Meanwhile Admiral Decoux sped up the process of selecting a successor to Monivong, who died on 23 April. Two days later, Norodom Sihanouk was proclaimed king.

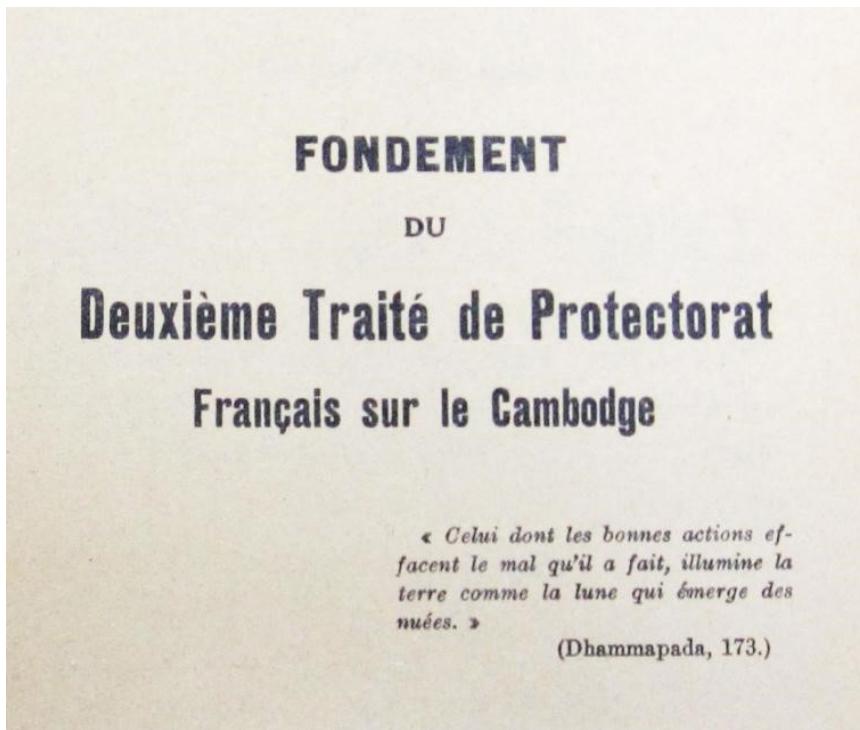


Figure 9: epigraph to Au Chhieng's thesis

⁹⁷ Mikaelian, “L’aristocratie khmère à l’épreuve des humanités françaises.”

⁹⁸ Au, *Fondement du deuxième traité de protectorat*, § 260-263, 224-225 citing *Destin d’empire*, 117 and 123. See also *infra*, note 107, where you see that Au Chhieng had read it, and read it well.

The weight of current events did undeniably influence the work that the young Battambang jurist presented to the jury at the end of June. While he still exhibited a certain restraint when mentioning the royal succession in the course of a commentary on Article I of the Treaty of 1884, specifying the procedures for the appointment of the king by the representative of France,⁹⁹ he abandoned this when talking about the recent “dismemberment of Cambodia,” which he implicitly put down to the French authorities.¹⁰⁰

The result was final and without appeal, the thesis being rejected at the viva held on 21 June.¹⁰¹ The former minister of public education and doyen of the Paris Law Faculty Georges Ripert demanded that the Paris police chief seize every copy of the volume published by the Domat-Monchrestien printing house.¹⁰² The jurists of the Sorbonne had, Au Chhieng thought with good reason, betrayed him. It was in vain that he tried to prove his good faith by appealing to his supporters at the ENFOM, of which Robert Delavignette had become director.

[...] My thesis was driven rather by the wish to establish good, frank relations between France and my country. Now, I was persuaded that these good, frank relations could be secured only after sincere explanations concerning the past. I have, as I see it, provided those explanations in my work, never having thought, in all good conscience, that I might have failed in my duty of loyalty to France [...].¹⁰³

In short, as he put it via a quotation from the *Dhammapada* which he placed as epigraph to his work and which encapsulates the spirit: “Whoever performs good actions cleans the slate of his misdeeds and illuminates the earth like the moon emerging from behind the clouds”.¹⁰⁴ The intervention of François Martini, whose colloquial language assistant he was at the ENFOM, no doubt spared him the disciplinary board.¹⁰⁵ He could therefore continue teaching Khmer there.

Shaken and shorn of his future in the law, Au Chhieng nevertheless continued his study of

⁹⁹ Not, however, without underlining their irregularity by a rhetorical flourish whose presence could not fail to resonate with current events: “We are only talking here about what everyone can see. We are refusing to tackle the question of the choice made by France among the candidates for the throne. This issue is a sensitive one. Besides its secretive nature, it gets too close to politics which have nothing to do with the law”, (Au, *Fondement du deuxième traité de protectorat*, § 245, 214, note 1).

¹⁰⁰ After the recent Franco-Thai events which have resulted in the dismembering of Cambodia, can one and should one say that it has failed in its duty as Protector? (*ibid.*, § 294, 254, note 2). To ask the question was to answer it.

¹⁰¹ It seems that the viva may have been put back, cf. the date of 14 June struck out on the cover of the copy kept at the University of Pau and the addition of that of the 21st; his thesis supervisor, Le Fur did, moreover, urge him to defer the viva by a letter of 16 June (AOM, lecol/125/9, cited by Singaravélu, *Professer l'Empire*, 106).

¹⁰² ANOM, lecol/125/9, Au Chhieng File, G. Ripert letter to the Paris Chief of Police, 23 June 1941. Two copies clearly escaped the vigilance of the police officers: one is held at the Amiens Law Faculty (AMIENS-BU Droit, call number SIB 463), the other at Pau (Pau-BU Droit, call number UDT 1110).

¹⁰³ Cf. ANOM, lecol/125/9, Au Chhieng file, Au Chhieng letter to the Director of the ENFOM, 20 September 1941.

¹⁰⁴ Au, *Fondement du deuxième traité de protectorat*, cf. figure no. 9.

¹⁰⁵ Singaravélu, *Professer l'Empire*, 107-108.

the humanities alongside his colleagues and Orientalist masters. We can imagine him absorbed in his reading and taking refuge in the company of the men of learning of Ancient Cambodia in the Bibliothèque Nationale,¹⁰⁶ which holds not only a rich collection of Khmer manuscripts but also a collection of rubbings of the “Angkorian” epigraphs.¹⁰⁷ He even presented an initial method for interpreting the stone inscriptions in Old Khmer to his peers in the Société Asiatique of Paris. It consisted in comparing the Sanskrit and Khmer parts of the bilingual inscriptions in order to draw out the nuances of meaning considered as decisive for the comprehension of these bilingual texts, in particular, as well as for the epigraphy of Old Khmer, in general.¹⁰⁸

The end of the war came and, with the defeat of Japan, France recovered control of Cambodia within the framework of the renewed statutes of the Indochinese Union. The rare Cambodian students who were living in France—Chean Vam, Thonn Ouk and Prince Youtevong—then returned, one after the other, to Phnom Penh in order to take part in the first Cambodian elections. Within this group, Chhean Vam (1916-2000), a student of philosophy, who, like Au Chhieng, was also a native of Battambang, was married to Thiounn Thioeum, granddaughter of former Prime Minister Thiounn through her father, and granddaughter of Poc, his predecessor in the post, through her mother. The French therefore saw the Democratic Party, which he co-founded with Sim Var and Ieu Koes in March 1946, as a political offshoot of the armed movement of the Issarakas, which had been founded in Bangkok in 1939 by Poc Khun, son of Prime Minister Poc and son-in-law of the last governor of Battambang, *mcāś* Jhum, his brother-in-law being no other than Khuang Aphaiwong, then serving as prime minister of Thailand for the second time.

Therefore, when, in September 1946, Thiounn Mumm, the brother of Thiounn Thioeum and brother-in-law of Chhean Vam, met Au Chhieng in the foyer of the Maison de l’Indochine, on the Cité Universitaire campus, to ask him to become chairman of the Khmer Students’ Association that he wanted to set up, Au Chhieng refused. Alongside Thiounn Mumm, whose mother, Boun Chan Moly, was the sister of Boun Chan Mol, himself the nephew of Poc Khun and thereby directly affiliated to the viceroys of Battambang, Chhieng was certainly on home ground, but he rejected the offer all the more easily because it came precisely from circles that had been the object of French police surveillance since the “Umbrella War” of 1942, in which Bun Chan Mol had distinguished himself to the point of being incarcerated on Poulo Condor. Fearing, not without reason, that he was under French surveillance, Chhieng avoided the issue by demanding political

¹⁰⁶ Cf. ANOM, EE/ii/5606, Au Chhieng: letter to the Director of the ENFOM, 9 November 1941 “I have the honour to inform you that the Department of Manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Nationale has secured the aid of Mr Au Chhieng for the compiling of the catalogue of Pali manuscripts”, letter of the Curator of Manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Nationale to the Director of the École Nationale de la France d’Outre-Mer, Paris, 18 October 1943.

¹⁰⁷ He mentions one after the other “the pre-Angkorian period”, “a pre-Angkorian process”, an “Angkorian process” and “Angkorian epigraphy”, cf. Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmer (II)”. The term, which is far from innocuous, was invented by Prince Aréno Iukantor in his poetic writings, cf. his “Angkorian” cantata (*Iukanthor, La Cantate Angkoréenne*).

¹⁰⁸ Au, “Interprétation des inscriptions en vieux khmer,” unpublished paper for the Société Asiatique, cf. “session of 14 January 1944,” *Journal Asiatique*, vol. CCXXXIV, years 1943-1945, 1945, 431-433.

guarantees that Mumm could in no way give him.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, François Martini left the ENFOM to work in Indochina as a liaison officer: Au Chhieng replaced him and thus became a lecturer in Cambodian, which enabled him to remain in France and improve his daily lot.¹¹⁰ While showing himself receptive to various approaches by the colonial administration in order to allay suspicion, he observed with circumspection the installation of the government of Cambodian Democrats, whose principal leaders he had known in Paris and in which his brother was participating as Minister of Religions. Particularly so as at the same time the settling of accounts inside the Issarak was in full swing and his brother-in-law, Mey Phorin, was assassinated in 1947.¹¹¹ The strain was such that he turned down the offer to become head of the Buddhist Institute, perhaps for want of a sufficient guarantee of autonomy from the French supervisory authorities.¹¹²

It is perhaps in connection with this event that a vivid family memory kept by the scholar's nieces is to be located: addressing Sihanouk during a royal audience, Chhieng's mother, full of hope, asked the young sovereign to intervene in favour of his returning to the country. Clearly apprised of her son's refusal, Sihanouk is said to have replied that he quite simply had no wish to return.¹¹³

III. The Inner Realm of a Distinguished Khmerologist (1946-1992)

Had Au Chhieng decided quite simply to distance himself once and for all from political contingencies in order to cultivate the garden of knowledge? Abruptly turned away from the criticism

¹⁰⁹ “[...] I met Au Chhieng in the foyer of the Maison de l'Indochine around September of 1946. I asked him to be the chairman of the association that we were going to set up. He replied yes if appointed by Sihanouk! That was out of our reach. [...]. Afterwards, Thon Ouk told us that it was difficult to communicate with him. This was probably because of his anti-colonialist stance! [...]. The fact that he was under French police surveillance explains quite a lot. [...]” Thiounn Mumm email dated 15 September 2014. Based on other oral sources, Marie-Alexandrine Martin suggests, without, however, spelling it out, that during this period he used strong language towards France (doubtless more towards France than the French as such) to the point of being “known for his xenophobia,” (Martin, *Le mal cambodgien*, 62).

¹¹⁰ Archives of the EPHE, Martini File, letter of the secretary of the IV Section to the Minister of the Associated States, Paris, 23 November 1950.

¹¹¹ Cf. *supra*, note 43.

¹¹² “S.E. Chéan Vam [defence minister at the time] tells me that it is because the Cambodians are counting on Mr. Au Chhieng's return that they are showing themselves so intransigent. The post of Director of the Buddhist Institute is said to be his for the taking. He never responded in the affirmative to my letters when I wrote to him saying that he should take advantage of his brother's time at the Ministry of Religions [December 1946 to July 1947] to raise his profile and get offered a position in keeping with his merits and his knowledge” (François Martini letter to George Cœdès, Phnom Penh, 6 January 1949). Cf. also F. Martini's letter to M. Dannaud on the cession of the Buddhist Institute, Phnom Penh, 19 February 1949. We thank Angelina Martini-Jacquin for having given us access to these documents.

¹¹³ Author's interviews with Ker Osel, 17 and 19 July 2020.

of imperialism to which his knowledge of colonial law had led him, he detached himself from worldly passions the better to ascend to the inner realm, the realm that unites people transcending that which divides them, the blood of the ancestors, the land of the father or the mother tongue, because they share a same fundamental idea and defend its values: Orientalism as humanism.¹¹⁴

Working provisionally as a researcher in the Department of Manuscripts of the Bibliothèque Nationale, he revised the catalogue of Khmer manuscripts of the Indochinese holdings in order to expand it while continuing to make progress in understanding the ancient inscriptions. He consequently shared his thinking on the tutelary divinity of Cambodian royalty, the *Devaraja* or *kamrateñ jagat ta raja*, which took up no fewer than two sessions of the Société Asiatique, so important were the discussions generated, first with George Cœdès and then with Jean Filliozat, who took inspiration from it for one of his papers (*cf.* Annexe).¹¹⁵ Even if this fact was subsequently passed over in silence, it was indeed he who, to use Filliozat's words, launched the debate over the *Devaraja*, set, as we know, to take an important place in both the historiography of Khmer royalty and, more broadly, the historiography of the royalty of Southeast Asia.¹¹⁶ As a corresponding member of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO), he also published his first Orientalist writings¹¹⁷ and dispensed his first specialised teaching.

In the labyrinth of Indochinese linguistics

From 1947 to 1951 he was responsible for temporary lectures on “Indochinese linguistics”¹¹⁸ as replacement for Solange Bernard, who was herself standing in for François Martini. His academic status, however, remained no less precarious, for it had to be renewed each year, and he never managed to break out of this cycle. Au Chhieng began his series of courses with a history of Khmer script, beginning with exhaustive study of the characters serving to record “Middle Cambodian and contemporary Cambodian”.¹¹⁹ Ever the pedagogue, he combined his teaching with a visit to the Department of Oriental Manuscripts to present the rubbings of the inscriptions cited. His master, Jules Bloch, attended his seminar, as did Jean Filliozat, with whom a fruitful collaboration began. The latter gave him comments that were beneficial to his teaching while the Cambodian philologist would generously instruct the Indianist on the etymology of a toponym or

¹¹⁴ Lévi, “Occident et orient. Essai sur l’humanisme,” 528-540.

¹¹⁵ “Séance du 10 décembre 1948,” “Séance du 14 janvier 1949,” *Journal Asiatique*, vol. CCXXXVIII, MCMXXXIX, 65-67.

¹¹⁶ The question of the form and the nature of this tutelary cult of the Angkorian royalty has caused much ink to flow. A reading list would include, among others: Cœdès and Dupont, “Les stèles de Sdok Kak Thom, Phnom Sandak et Prâh Vihâr,” Kulke, *The Devaraja Cult*; Bourdonneau, “La fondation du culte du Devarâja;” “La stèle de Sdok Kak Thom et le *Devarâja*,” and Bourdonneau & Mikaelian, “L’histoire longue du *Devarâja*”.

¹¹⁷ Au, “Écriture khmère ou cambodgienne,” Bloch, Filliozat, Renou, *Canon bouddhique pâli*. transcription de MM. Au Chhieng and Thach X’uong.

¹¹⁸ *Annuaires de l’EPHE* (*cf.* Bibliography).

¹¹⁹ *Annuaire* 1949-1950, EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, 1949, 56.

the meaning of a tricky epigraphic passage.¹²⁰ He followed this up with a study of the “grammatical words that had been forged in Indochina since the arrival of the Europeans,” concentrating his remarks on “the mechanical Sanskrit or Pali calques of Western terms (pre-position),” which were quickly abandoned in favour of “creations” reconciling “on Indochinese soil both the Indian and European traditions.”¹²¹ It was also during this period that active collaboration with George Cœdès became a reality, Chhieng helping him prepare the edition of Volume III of the *Inscriptions du Cambodge*¹²² and then Volume V.¹²³ When his non-tenured lectures at the EPHE were not renewed, he managed to secure his livelihood by giving up his teaching responsibilities at the ENFOM and entering the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) as a researcher.¹²⁴ He published straightoff his *Catalogue du fonds khmer*,¹²⁵ the detailed notes of which are of such rigor and precision that they still remain an irreplaceable working tool.

In the autumn term of 1953,¹²⁶ a new round of musical chairs enabled him to resume his lectures at the EPHE, replacing the teaching of “Sanskrit” usually done by Louis Renou, who was on assignment at the time in Japan. As if to clarify the meaning of this term he laid down the foundations of an “Indo-Khmer philology:” “A discipline which has and will doubtless always have Sanskrit at its centre, but a Sanskrit adapted and bent even to Khmer or Cambodian needs and realities,” which he illustrated by the study of two Sanskrit words whose usage differs between India and Cambodia: *paramecvara* and *nakṣatra*.¹²⁷

Markers for an Indo-Khmer philology

The collaboration with Cœdès carried on for the edition of Volume VI of the *Inscriptions du Cambodge*¹²⁸ as his knowledge of the ancient texts and his hermeneutic acuity continued to grow. This was always accompanied by an instructive dimension through demonstrations of the pioneers’

¹²⁰ Au, “Note additionnelle,” sent to J. Filliozat and published at the end of his article “Le symbolisme du monument du Phnom Bâkhèn,” 553-554.

¹²¹ EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire* 1951-1952, 58-59.

¹²² “The finalisation of this volume has benefitted from the valuable assistance that Mr Au Chhieng, lecturer at the École Nationale de la France d’Outre-Mer, has kindly afforded me. I owe him many felicitous suggestions for the interpretation of ancient words that have disappeared from the modern language. I thank him most warmly for his friendly collaboration,” cf. Cœdès, “Introduction” to *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. III, 1-2.

¹²³ “As with volume III, this one has benefitted from the collaboration of Mr Au Chhieng, to whom I express my keenest thanks for the useful suggestions that he was kind enough to communicate to me regarding the interpretation of several passages of the inscriptions in Khmer,” cf. Cœdès, “Introduction” to *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. V, 2.

¹²⁴ Archives of the EPHE, Au Chhieng file, “Detailed service record,” appointment 1 October 1952.

¹²⁵ Au, *Catalogue du fonds khmer*.

¹²⁶ *Annuaire de l’EPHE* (cf. Bibliography).

¹²⁷ *Annuaire 1954-1955*, EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, 70.

¹²⁸ “On finishing, I once again have the agreeable duty to thank Mr Au Chhieng for having been kind enough to read the first proof and provide me with the very useful comments that this reading suggested to him,” cf. Cœdès, “Introduction” to *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. VI.

misreadings. He thus corrected the readings of Hendrik Kern, “who, in 1879, inaugurated scientific commentary on the Sanskrit inscriptions of Cambodia,” by comparing his transcriptions with the “safer or more faithful” rubbings “which we now have the good fortune to possess in Paris;” nor did he shy away from contradicting Cœdès on matters of substance apropos a set of Sanskrit inscriptions dealing with the erection of divinised statues of persons living or dead: relying on pre-modern epigraphy, he did not see them as solely animated by the name and the form (*nāma-rūpa*) but also by parts of the human body of the deceased.¹²⁹ His method is thus plotted, one which breaks down the textual chronological barriers in order to enable the semantic material contained within the documents to vibrate until it resonates over several periods. The year when he initiated his students into the decipherment of pre-6th-century Sanskrit epigraphic texts in order to make them aware of the problem of the relative chronology of the undated documents, he also drew their attention to a late document containing a compendium of royal vocabulary studded with misspelt borrowings from Sanskrit and Pāli, mistakes the cause and logic of which he reconstructed.¹³⁰ When, at the start of the 1957 academic year, he was at last able to put on a programme of independent lectures, we lose track of the content of his teaching, which an administrative slip-up travestied under the label “Philologie khémère [sic],” while the appointment order attributed him “25 lectures on Vietnamese Linguistics” for the following year!¹³¹ We have to wait until the start of the 1961 academic year before what was doubtless experienced as yet-another vexation was cleared up,¹³² and he decided, probably as a result of a management edict, to start sending his activity reports in again.¹³³ The teaching of “Philologie indo-khmère” then reappeared in due and proper form in the School’s yearbooks up until 1969.

Breaking down the chronological barriers was again the teaching framework: the palaeological study of the characters split into three periods (round, square and irregular) accompanied by practical reading exercises was followed up by the examination of the gap between the Classical Sanskrit vocabulary and the Sanskrit words drawn, once again, from the royal vocabulary, and the study of the modern lexicon, which he extended through the systematic highlighting of the Indian words (Pāli and Sanskrit) in a late inscription K.301. A critical “balance sheet” of the “work which had enabled the foundation of Indo-Khmer philology” from Kern to Cœdès and taking in Bergaigne, Barth, Senart, Aymonier and Finot showed in actual fact how scholars had hitherto concentrated on “the history of events,” and equally the “urgent” need henceforth “to exploit the texts with a view to studying the two languages present—Sanskrit and Khmer—their connections and their oppositions.”¹³⁴ A series of three articles illustrated this position: the first appeared in

¹²⁹ EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1955-1956*, 63-64.

¹³⁰ EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1956-1957*, 69-70.

¹³¹ “Chronique de l’année 1956-1957,” EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1957-1958*, 96; Archives of the EPHE, Au Chhieng file, Order of 12 December 1957.

¹³² “Chronique de l’année 1959-1960,” EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1960-1961*, 108.

¹³³ Archives of the EPHE: kindly transmitted by Pascal Bourdeaux, whom I thank. Jean Filliozat letter dated 29 June 1962.

¹³⁴ EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1962-1963*, 161-162.

The Grū of Parnassus: Au Chhieng Among The Titans



Figure 10: Au Chhieng in a French library (the École Pratique des Hautes Études?) at the end of the 1950s, undated. Courtesy of Ker Osel

Artibus Asiae, as part of a tribute volume to George Cœdès, where again he did not desist from contradicting “the master of Cambodian studies,” while the other two were published in the *Journal Asiatique*, in which Au Chhieng launched his famous “Études de philologie khmère.”¹³⁵

Thereafter, he returned regularly to the practical reading of the sources starting with the first glossists of the Sanskrit or Khmer texts, be it a misdecipherment or a limited interpretation: Kern and his misreadings; Barth, Bergaigne and Senart mired in the history of events and disdainful of “hollow Sanskrit rhetoric;” or the questionable rules of aspiration established by Aymonier. He dwelt, in particular, on Louis Finot’s work “on recovering the meaning of Old Khmer, highlighting the illustrious scholar’s methodological decision to separate the Cambodian of our time from the Khmer of the past” and emphasising, on the contrary, that “Khmer has been but one language from the Angkorian period through to today.” Two topics captured his attention in the second half of the Sixties: on the one hand, the numeration of ordinary objects and, on the other, the semantic equations and translation equivalences between Old Khmer and Classical Sanskrit, particularly the terms for the titles of divinities, kings and top officials.¹³⁶ Five new articles published in the *Journal*

¹³⁵ Au, “Sanskrit ‘Jour de Yama’ et vieux khmer ‘Dixième jour lunaire’;” “Études de philologie indo-khmère (I);” “Études de philologie indo-khmère (II).”

¹³⁶ EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1964-1965*, 356; *Annuaire 1963-1964*, 249; *Annuaire 1966-1967*, 463-464; *Annuaire 1967-1968*, 539-540; “Programme des conférences pour l’année 1967-1968,” In EPHE, 4^e section, Sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1967-1968*, 706; “Programme des conférences

Asiatique reflected these scientific concerns.¹³⁷

Meanwhile, the early Sixties saw a further stage in the scholar's self-withdrawal following the death of his sister, Au Rieng, who died of tuberculosis in 1964, and with whom he was the closest. She had, however, been able to see her brother again on one occasion. This occurred shortly before her death, at the very end of the Fifties, when she had come to Paris during Au Chhoeun's appointment as ambassador to London, he making repeated stays in Paris. After 1964 the epistolary link, which had kept him connected with his homeland, broke off.¹³⁸

With the turn of the Seventies and his retirement, it becomes difficult to follow the course of his life. It seems that his house in the suburbs was compulsorily purchased by Châtenay Town Hall when it gave permission for a large development on his plot of land.¹³⁹ From 1973 on we find him living with his wife on the Boulevard Saint-Michel,¹⁴⁰ in the heart of the Latin Quarter. The following year, during which two new articles appeared,¹⁴¹ he refused to receive two young Cambodians, including a descendant of the princely house of Battambang,¹⁴² who had come to study in France. We do not know whether he saw again his brother, who took refuge in France in 1975, living, firstly, at his daughter's in Neuilly-sur-Seine before moving to the 17th arrondissement, where he died in 1982. The last publication of Chhieng's we know of appeared in 1984, a decade after his previous one, and is regarded as his academic testament.¹⁴³ Completed in 1983, it was written to mark the centenary of an article by Abel Bergaigne, to whom he paid an elegant tribute at the same time as he himself was preparing to quit the scene. The subject chosen was far from innocuous: in studying the posthumous name of King Suramarit, grandson of Chom Iem Bossaba as well as the protector of his elder brother when he served the higher administration, the Cambodian scholar made him into an echo chamber for the ethics of the second aristocracy of Battambang: glorifying sovereignty, the Crown, while discreetly serving the interests of those elements of it who bore the collective identity of the principality (*cf. supra*). A two-fold tribute, then: to Orientalism, his adopted country, but also to the second aristocracy of Battambang, his native country. Then, the natural discretion he surrounded himself with combined with the bitterness felt at his true worth

pour l'année 1968-1969," In EPHE, 4e section, Sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1967-1968*, 706; "Programme des conférences pour l'année 1968-1969," In EPHE, 4e section, Sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1968-1969*, 648.

¹³⁷ Au, "Études de philologie indo-khmère (III);" "Études de philologie indo-khmère (IV);" "Ban' et 'Rnoc';" "Études de philologie indo-khmère (V);" "Études de philologie indo-khmère (VI)."

¹³⁸ Author's interviews with Ker Osel, 17 et 19 July 2020; Sam S. letter to the author, 3 September 2020; Ker Sam email to the author, 22 October 2020.

¹³⁹ A large development now stands where the house once stood at 59 Rue Camille Pelletan, which, according to neighbours, was indeed put up in the Seventies.

¹⁴⁰ At no. 35.

¹⁴¹ Au, "Études de philologie indo-khmère (VII);" "Études de philologie indo-khmère (VIII)."

¹⁴² [...] When I accompanied Mr Loch Phlèng to Mr Au Chhieng's [in 1974], we were very briefly welcomed on the doorstep by a lady who told us that, as Mr Au Chhieng was retired, he no longer received students" (email of Mr Mak Phoeun to the author; author's cited interview with Loch Phlèng).

¹⁴³ Au, "Le nom posthume du roi cambodgien Suramarit."

not having been properly recognised had him literally disappear from the academic environment. That same year a change of marital status made to his marriage certificate¹⁴⁴ indicates perhaps that he added an antenuptial settlement to it, doubtless in order to enable his wife to inherit her separate estate in case of his death. He died on 27 March 1992, aged 84,¹⁴⁵ and it was probably his wife who scattered his ashes on the cemetery lawn of Père Lachaise on April 3rd.¹⁴⁶ She continued living at no. 35 Boulevard Saint-Michel until her own death, which came a decade later, on 18 December 2002.¹⁴⁷

IV. The Meta-Political work of a cambodian savant

When writing little is to do a lot

During his last public lecture delivered at the Sorbonne in 1984, Bernard Philippe Groslier tackled the image of Angkor in the mind of the Khmers, regretting that its history had been almost exclusively the work of foreigners. Considering Au Chhieng to be a happy exception, the result of a recent development, he expressed himself as follows:

For my part, I regret that Mr Au Chhieng has not provided us with more, because the last time we saw his approach to the Khmer inscriptions, his vision was truly exciting.¹⁴⁸

Hic jacet lepus: Groslier's remark nicely sums up both the expectations and the astonishment of the Khmer studies milieu at his meagre scholarly output. Because, his Orientalist work is, as we have said, small in size. The edition of a text, a book —his famous catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale's Khmer manuscripts—and a dozen articles. It is, admittedly, only appropriate to add here what he never published. At least three manuscripts of his are known: an “index, still unpublished, of Khmer epigraphy,”¹⁴⁹ probably his major work, which was rather to assume the form of a solid dictionary of Old Khmer, the first of its kind, whose underground fame ran through the decades;¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ “Change of marital status. Ruling delivered 18 May 1984. By the Court of First Instance of Paris. Entry made 21 June 1984,” In Archives of Paris, Marriage Certificate Au & Wasser, 22 April 1939.

¹⁴⁵ Archives of Paris, “Death Certificate of Au Chhieng.” He died in the Forcilles nursing home, Férolles-Atilly, Seine-et-Marne.

¹⁴⁶ Lor Vicholin email to the author, 17 November 2020, reporting the information of the Paris cemeteries service.

¹⁴⁷ Archives of Paris, “Register 391, no. 674. Death Certificate of Charlotte Wasser.”

¹⁴⁸ Groslier, “L'image d'Angkor dans la conscience khmère.”

¹⁴⁹ Filliozat, “Une inscription cambodgienne en pâli et en khmer de 1566,” 105.

¹⁵⁰ In the 2000s, Mrs Saveros Pou mentioned from time to time during her own teaching its existence as a document that it would have been fundamental to publish had it been possible to locate the manuscript.

the edition of a royal vocabulary¹⁵¹ and an article in preparation on “The reconstitution of the names of numbers in Old Khmer from 1 to 39,999.”¹⁵² But everything suggests that this would be to miss the point: our savant was much more in dialogue with the subtle-minded men of learning of Ancient Cambodia, *vrah guru*, and other Shaivaite ascetics than he was with his contemporaries, and there is nothing incongruous therefore in our thinking that he practised writing for the drawer, a drawer that we can imagine was deep.

Another feature of his personality may further explain this anomaly. From his youthful years spent at Collège Sisowath he had been and would remain an outstanding teacher. All the accounts agree on this. Being a deeply-committed and knowledgeable Buddhist, he lived perhaps more for the quality and the rightness of the present moment than for addressing himself to posterity. What more noble purpose for the *grū* than transmitting his knowledge *hic et nunc*? His listeners were few in number: around 30 if the attendance lists of the School’s annual directory are to be believed, but they were high grade. To his masters —Jules Bloch and Jean Filliozat— must be added younger colleagues —André Haudricourt and André Bareau— and students who subsequently became the leading figures in Oriental studies: Colette Caillat, Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat, Ginette Terral, Martine Piat, Pierre Bitard, Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, Sahai Sachchidanand and, of course, Saveros Pou, the doyenne of Khmer studies until 25 June 2020, the date of her death.

The work of the latter is to a certain extent testimony to the quality of the teaching she received, for while she followed his seminar for only one year, she was lastingly marked by it, as is demonstrated by, among other writings, her “Recherches sur le vocabulaire cambodgien” (I-XI), published in the *Journal Asiatique* between 1967 and 1983¹⁵³ and clearly inspired by the “Études de philologie indo-khmère”. That anyway was how Bernard Philippe Groslier saw it when he paid joint tribute to Au Chhieng and Saveros Pou in the 1984 lecture after lamenting the fact that Khmer studies had, for 75 years, been shaped by the French:

Of course, the situation has changed considerably since the Fifties, when there were the first Khmer students, moreover, who themselves became scholars: Mr Au Chhieng and Mrs Saveros Pou have given, and god knows with what talent, an extremely new and thoroughly exciting view.¹⁵⁴

In her last work, which appeared in 2017, Mrs Pou expressed in these terms her debt to her senior, in an introduction which retraces the history of Khmer studies:

A Cambodian scholar, Au Chhieng (A.C.), tasked as a young man with collating the Bibliothèque Nationale’s Khmer-language manuscripts, published the results of it in his monumental *Catalogue du fonds khmer* (1953). Subsequently, this scholar was responsible for a seminar devoted to Khmer philology at the EPHE

¹⁵¹ Cf. EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1956-1957*, 69-70.

¹⁵² Au, “Etude de philologie indo-khmère (II),” 587.

¹⁵³ I à III, 1967; IV, 1968; V, 1969; VI, 1970; VII, 1971; VIII, 1974; IX, 1976; X, 1978; XI, 1983.

¹⁵⁴ Groslier, “L’image d’Angkor dans la conscience khmère,” 27.

(Paris). A different kind of teacher from F.M. [François Martini], hence a different programme, one which involved reading the inscriptions of Angkor Vatt, in this instance the “Long Inscription,” IMA 41 [*Inscriptions modernes d’Angkor*], composed in verse and dated and “signed” by its author. We read the text aloud, chanting it, which shed valuable light on the phonetics and consequently the versification and brought out the role of grammatical words in connected speech —a crucial feature of Khmer and other related or neighbouring languages. It was thanks to these beneficial lessons that I was able to establish the date of the *Poem of Angkor Wat*, either 1542 śaka or 1620 AD. During this time A.C. was preparing a series of studies for the *Journal Asiatique* under the heading “Études de philologie indo-khmère,” which came out in five parts (1962-68). Steeped in the lessons of these pioneers, I came to realise that the denomination “modern” covering this long period from the 14th- to the 19th-century was somewhat improper.¹⁵⁵

As a teacher, however, the impression the man made on his audience was contradictory. The reserved demeanour and dress style are certainly constant features that come out of the rare accounts that we have been able to gather. The distinction and elegance that he gave off¹⁵⁶ can moreover be imagined by looking at the rare photographs of him kept by the family (*cf.* Figures 7 and 8): a handsome, perfectly-turned-out man, just like his elder brother, Chhieng, for his part, was a man of great discretion, which is, here again, confirmed by all the witnesses. The other character traits or attitudes attributed to him, though, vary enormously, running from one extreme to the other: towards some he showed kindness (S. Soubert¹⁵⁷), while towards others he demonstrated a certain off-handedness (S. Pou¹⁵⁸); for some he was the embodiment of the perfect teacher (Chea Th. S.¹⁵⁹ S. Pou,¹⁶⁰ P.-S. Filliozat¹⁶¹), while for others he was hermetic to the point that some students

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Pou, *Un dictionnaire du khmer moyen*, iii. For a previous, less glowing acknowledgement, see, in particular, the “Introduction,” In Pou, *Lexique Sanskrit-khmer français*, 93.

¹⁵⁶ “Au Chhieng was handsome and well-built. Well dressed, in a classic manner. [...]” personal communication of Mrs Saveros Pou; “[...] Mr Loch Phlēng told me that he later received a letter from Mr Au Chhieng which, unfortunately, he had mislaid. He remembers, nevertheless, its author’s beautiful handwriting” (email from Mr Mak Phoeun to the author, 27 July 2018). For an example of his handwriting, *cf. Figure 11*.

¹⁵⁷ “[He was] affable and used to put himself at our level of understanding,” email from Mr Son Soubert to the author, 27 August, 2018.

¹⁵⁸ Mrs Pou reported this anecdote: having asked him a question, he replied “go ask the people at the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh” (personal communication to the author).

¹⁵⁹ “The following two examples are taken from the works of Mr AU CHHIENG, Professor of Indo-Khmer Philology at the École Pratique des Hautes Études of Paris. We should like to pay tribute to him here for the constant efforts he has been making for years to advance scientific knowledge of the Khmer language” (p. 34, note 11 of Chea, “A propos de la langue cambodgienne”).

¹⁶⁰ Cf. the quotation highlighted above taken from Pou, *Un dictionnaire du khmer moyen*, iii.

¹⁶¹ “[...] I can tell you that I have a wonderful recollection of his kindness and his knowledge. Because I followed his course of Khmer epigraphy in 1956 or 1957. I was his sole pupil for a whole year. I did not pursue the study of Cambodia, but I have held on to his lessons of precision and rigor in the observation of the inscriptions,” email of

literally did not understand what he was saying (P. Bitard,¹⁶² C. Jacques¹⁶³). He showed himself, by turns, open to others (H. de Mestier¹⁶⁴) or decidedly unapproachable (H. de Mestier,¹⁶⁵ S. Pou¹⁶⁶). To some he gave the impression of being an embittered person (J. Filliozat¹⁶⁷), to others simply distant.

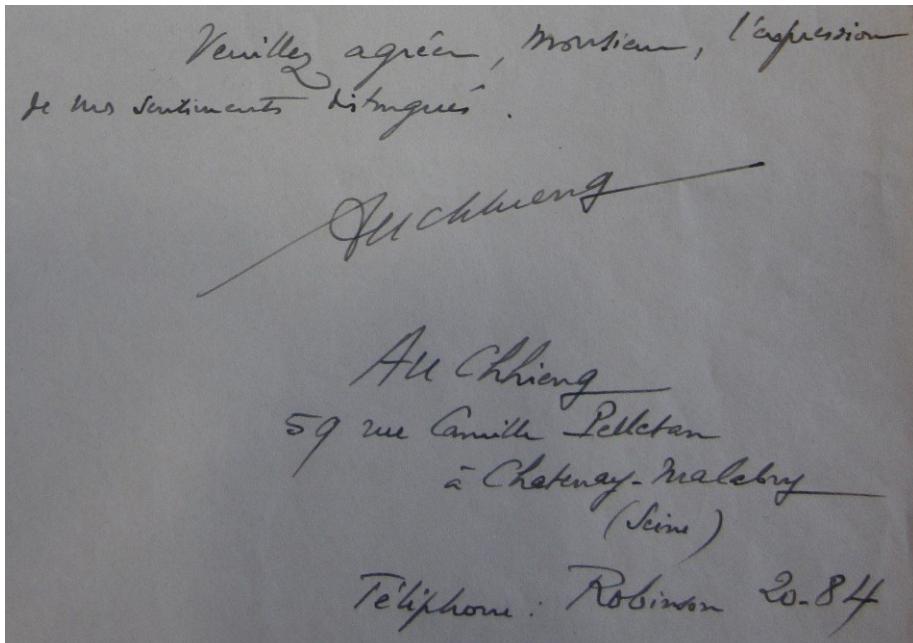


Figure 11: letter of Au Chhieng to the Accounts Secretary of the EPHE, 29 October 1953, EPHE Archives, Au Chhieng File

Pierre Sylvain Filloziat to the author, 16 April 2018.

¹⁶² [...] After having followed your teaching in rue de Lille, when you were in Indochina, I found Au Chhieng in your place at the ‘colo’ [ENFOM]. Of course, there was no question anymore of Romanisation or transliteration. Au Chhieng revealed himself to be a terrible teacher, [p. 2] who turned off all his pupils, and after two years none of them was capable of reading or writing. Especially as he had based his method on the study of a few poems in kākgati pad [metre]: it was like teaching French to Cambodians on the basis of the poems of the ‘grands rhétoriqueurs’! The ‘success’ was phenomenal! No one attended his classes any more. [...],” letter of Pierre Bitard to François Martini, Luang Prabang, 21 October 1955. For good measure, it should be made clear that Pierre Bitard coveted a post at the École française d’Extrême-Orient at the time, and he shows in his letter a certain obsequiousness toward François Martini, from whom he was counting on active support as well as protection against Jean Filliozat, who did not hold Pierre Bitard’s work in high regard.

¹⁶³ Author’s interview with Claude Jacques, Thursday 16 January 2012, who declared he remembered a “tedious” course: he taught Khmer grammar, he said, by comparing it with Sanskrit “simply saying it is not the same.”

¹⁶⁴ [...] Au Chhieng was a charming, very discreet person, I met him only a few times at the Sorbonne (Institut des Hautes Études Indiennes I believe) [...] ; “[...] he left me with a good impression of a likeable person. I did not speak with him much, but he was courteous” (email from Hubert de Mestier du Bourg to the author, 10 and 11 September 2013).

¹⁶⁵ “[...] he was not very socia[b]le and produced little (for which he was often reproached by G. Cœdès and J. Filliozat)” (e-mail from Hubert de Mestier du Bourg to the author, 11 September, 2013).

¹⁶⁶ Mrs Pou conjured up the image of a cat poised to scratch at the slightest misstep (personal communication to the author).

¹⁶⁷ Personal communication of Jacqueline Filliozat to the author, 19 January 2012.

Cutting through this tangled web is a steep order, and it is probably unwise to venture an interpretation on the basis of so few accounts, accounts which are in part prisoner to a reputation built up essentially through his own reactions to an objective situation which had never, until now, come to light, the personal drama that he experienced in 1941 having remained unknown to his students. While some people apprised of this drama might resort to a psychologising reading of the way he carried out his *officium*¹⁶⁸ —a tension between the passion for teaching the Good, the Beautiful and the True and the frustration at not being able to discharge it properly— we favour here a more fundamental understanding, one which stems from the very modes of transmission of knowledge in Cambodia.

For, in addition to not being disposed towards publishing a large body of work, as was encouraged by the modernity triumphant of the scholarly republic in which Au Chhieng was trained, the Buddhist world vision as manifested in early 20th Century Cambodia was not predisposed toward pedagogical isonomy either. Heir to an Angkorian Buddhism itself permeated by Shaivaite tradition, Khmer Buddhism actually has as its base an esoteric dimension which means that the active knowledge of the world as taught by the ascetic masters withdrawn from the world is transmitted through a path of initiation that tests the disciple at each stage of his progress.¹⁶⁹ What, then, is a “*grū* (Skt. *guru*), in the sense that we Asians generally give to the word” once transposed into a European educational system?

The *grū* is essentially a savant who is aware of his knowledge and the duty he has to transmit it to his pupils, towards whom he is required to show the greatest benevolence. The pupil or *sīsā* (Skt. *śīṣya*, pl. *sīṣas*), for his part, in addition to the respect and obedience that he shows towards his *grū*, ends up becoming attached to him by a boundless, steadfast affection. [...] demanding and firm [the *grū* pays] careful attention to the education of his *sīsā* and prevents them from straying into the reckless speculation that can arise in the course of research.¹⁷⁰

While the *guru* may show “benevolence,” he allows himself “no indulgence” and admits “no infringement of the rules of knowledge,” “occasionally castigating.”¹⁷¹ Alternating reproof and praise, the *grū* discourages as much as he encourages, giving everyone his due according to what he conceives his capabilities or merit to be on the basis of both the commitment and the attachment that he shows. By this yardstick, one imagines that a large number of different situations can be encountered.

¹⁶⁸ On the responsibility of the lecturer-researcher in terms of officium and related professional duties, see Thuillier & Tulard, *La morale de l'historien*, vi, 1-2.

¹⁶⁹ On this subject the research of François Bizot is to be consulted.

¹⁷⁰ Lewitez [Pou], “Hommage d'un élève,” 2, 3, 4.

¹⁷¹ Pou, “Jean Filliozat: le *guru* que j'ai connu,” 6-7.

A humanist programme

On the other hand, the point of his teaching and the writings which underpinned it never varied, namely, that of establishing Khmer studies as a science, a “khmerology”—the word was first used in 1969¹⁷²—thanks to an accurate history of the language that flushes out the misreadings, approximations and lack of rigor in the interpretation of the facts. His approach is always critical: he builds on the writings of the glossists who preceded him and points out the weaknesses or errors in the analysis of the sources: Barth, Cœdès,¹⁷³ Dupont (his “late, lamented comrade”¹⁷⁴), Finot (who does “gentle violence to the grammar” of Sanskrit¹⁷⁵), Colette Caillat,¹⁷⁶ François Martini,¹⁷⁷ etc. While he may operate with the analytical precision of the lawyer, he is, even so, not averse to derision. The wrongs done to the words carved in stone must be righted: it is necessary therefore to vigorously re-establish the rationality of the Ancient Khmer there where some denounce “no logic whatsoever in the ideas, no order in the expression of thought, no principle in the syntax, no rule in the composition!”¹⁷⁸ now, this rationality can be restored only by comparing the ancient documents with premodern and contemporary ones: Khmer, “a language possessing authentic ancient texts does not permit researchers to give free rein to their common sense or their logic while absolving them of the need to compare the texts of the past with those—written or oral—of today.”¹⁷⁹

Au Chhieng intended in this way “[...] to help demonstrate, from the general methodological standpoint of research on Cambodia, the possibility —textuary or linguistic— of reconnecting the Khmer of today to the Khmer of the past and thereby re-establish Khmer unity and the Khmer continuum.”¹⁸⁰ “Nurtured on Sanskrit grammar and rhetoric, the Khmer past has not ceased then to explain the Khmer present, which continues it.”¹⁸¹ In a way, he is revisiting the languages of the Ancient Khmers as a Renaissance humanist, keeping at bay the readers behind Ronsard’s *Odes*, and, like the old Europe, calling on them when it comes to Cambodia to draw nourishment from the fertile ancient soil: “I pillaged Thebes and ransacked Apulia/Enriching you with their rich spoils...”¹⁸²

¹⁷² Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (V),” 187-188.

¹⁷³ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (I),” 576-577; “Études de philologie indo-khmère (IV),” 158.

¹⁷⁴ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (IV),” 160.

¹⁷⁵ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (I),” 580.

¹⁷⁶ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (III),” 143-144.

¹⁷⁷ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (V),” 187.

¹⁷⁸ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (I),” 579.

¹⁷⁹ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (V),” 186.

¹⁸⁰ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (V),” 187.

¹⁸¹ Au, “Sanskrit ‘Jour de Yama’,” 206.

¹⁸² Cf. Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (VI),” 308, adapting this passage of Ode 20: “[...] Rotted away by time, your wood [lyre] no longer sounded/But I took pity on seeing you in such a parlous state/You who once [during banquets] made the great kings’ victuals taste sweeter and more appetising;/To refit you with strings and wood/And provide you with a natural sound,/I pillaged Thebes [birthplace of Pindar] and ransacked Apulia [native home of

In order to do this, he presents a perfect construction that indeed partakes of a *continuum* all of whose elements appear to hold together and be linked. To the analytical power of the lawyer and the exactitude of the consummate scholar is added the verbal aesthete who will pick up on a word and round off the philological argument with a flash of wit. He drew his compendious rhetoric from several sources. On the one side, there is the Atticism of the Classics: Cicero,¹⁸³ La Bruyère,¹⁸⁴ Boileau;¹⁸⁵ on the other, Asian profusion, in a kind of Sanskrit *kārya* transposed into French. We could moreover almost apply his Sylvain Lévi quotation on Indian texts to his own writings:

Hindu verse is always a strophe, a rigorously closed rhythmic unit, an organised system of elements in equilibrium which imposes a fixed stopping point on both expression and thinking. Continuity is internally resolved —as in Indian metaphysics— in a succession of autonomous snapshots...¹⁸⁶

The distinctive music produced by this keen instrument makes it a formidable critical weapon —Cœdès suffered it over the meaning of the expression *kamraten jagat ta rāja* (cf. Annex)— but at times it requires delicate handling. The erudition that he rolled off sometimes disorientated even the most seasoned Orientalists. One suspects even that he took a mischievous delight in putting them through it: distilling, as if toying with them, classical references that were obvious to his contemporary professorial world —the researcher in quest of an etymology is thus transformed into “[...] Buridan’s ass: he can’t make up his mind.”¹⁸⁷— Au Chhieng sometimes pushed the irony to the point of exhumeing a gem unknown to the French scholars.¹⁸⁸ Barely contained derision is therefore never far away:

[...] Coming from the master of ‘Cambodian Studies’ [George Cœdès], this translation surprises because it cannot fail to remind one of the Abbé Edgeworth’s words to Louis XVI on the scaffold: ‘Son of SAINT LOUIS, ascend to Heaven’.

Horace]/Enriching you with their handsome spoils.” (“[...] Moisi du tens ton fust ne sonnoit point / Mais j’eu pitié de te voir mal empoint, / Toi qui jadis des grans Rois les viandes / Faisoiso trouver plus douce & friandes : / Pour te monter de cordes, & et d’un fust, / Voire d’un son qui naturel te fust, / Je pillai Thébe’, & saccagai la Pouille, / T’enrichissant de leur belle dépouille.” In “A sa lire. Ode 20,” in Ronsard, Pierre de, *Les Quatre premiers livres des odes de Pierre de Ronsard, Vandemois*, A Paris, avec privilège du roi, M.D.L.

¹⁸³ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (I),” 578.

¹⁸⁴ Au, “Sanskrit ‘Jour de Yama’,” 203: “you want to say, Acis, that it is raining. Why did you not say: it is raining!” (Cf. La Bruyère, *Les caractères*, 1668, chap. 7 “De la société et de la conversation”: “[...] I finally figure it out: you want, Acis, to tell me that it is cold: why didn’t you say: it is cold”? You want to let me know that it is raining or snowing; say: it is raining, it is snowing. [...]”.

¹⁸⁵ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (V),” 198; Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (VI),” 300.

¹⁸⁶ Au, “Études de philologie indo-khmère (I),” 576.

¹⁸⁷ Au, “‘Ban’ et ‘Rnoc’,” 43.

¹⁸⁸ “He had an excellent knowledge of French and French literature. I can tell you a little story. He had handed in to my father [Jean Filliozat] his manuscript of an article for the *Journal Asiatique*. My father, who was the editor of the journal at the time, thought he had to make a correction to a French expression (I forget which). Mr Au Chhieng protested and demonstrated that his expression was correct by quoting Madame de Sévigné. My father published the article without making any correction,” email from Mr Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat to the author, 16 April 2018.

Now, while for His Majesty the very Christian Louis XVI there was but one heaven, which, incapable therefore of leading to confusion, is and must be grammatically—and theologically—speaking, singular only, for a dying king of Cambodia it needs to be specified which heaven he is bound for [...].¹⁸⁹

A corner carved out in the Khmer Studies system

The decades of the Fifties and Sixties, during which Au Chhieng delivered the bulk of his specialised teaching at the same time as he was publishing his Orientalist work, are those of a reversal of historiographical perspective which will, a few years on, see the proponents of a “literal” Indianisation gradually giving way to the “nativists.” For the former, embodied by Cœdès, the reading of the ancient inscriptions made it possible to show that the Khmers of Ancient Cambodia literally applied the Indian model, to the extent that when the outer forms of Indianisation disappeared at the turn of the 15th century, it was the very history of this cultural process that came to an abrupt end. For the others, among whom one numbers, from the 1970s on, Michael Vickery, the borrowings from India had to be kept in perspective, having been but a façade covering over native practices that never stopped being maintained over the centuries until, with the end of Ancient Cambodia,¹⁹⁰ they re-emerged. In the one case, Khmer society presented itself as a pretty successful carbon copy of Indian society; in the other, it remained impervious to it.

Au Chhieng, for his part, favoured a third way which enabled the borrowing from India to be considered in its complexity¹⁹¹ but also its duration. His “Indo-Khmer” philology is then underpinned by two key ideas: studying the precise differences of meaning that can be read in the inscriptions of Ancient Cambodia between Sanskrit texts and Old Khmer texts, going against in this way the literalism of colonial Orientalism; and showing that Indianisation was a development-rich historical process over a long period of time, which was soon going to stymie nativism. The “Khmerology” which he earnestly called for thus aimed to show the existence of a continuity beyond change; you could not go more against the Indianist doxa which saw nothing but a rupture between Ancient Cambodia and contemporary Cambodia, but also against the nativist doxa then in gestation which would soon see only an amorphous continuity, an immobile history without real change, Indianisation never having fundamentally modified anything as regard the functioning of Khmer society.

Another of Au Chhieng’s distinctive features is that he never posed as a discoverer. The notion of discovery is antithetical even to his approach: for him, there is nothing to discover, for all that anyone prepared to cast an eye or lend an ear has to do is read and listen to what the Ancient Khmers say and how the Khmers of today echo them. You could not be going more directly

¹⁸⁹ Au, “Le nom posthume du roi cambodgien Suramarit,” 396.

¹⁹⁰ Bourdonneau, “Culturalisme et historiographie du Cambodge ancien.”

¹⁹¹ On the notion of borrowing and its usage in the social sciences, see *ibid.*, 62-64.

up against the pioneer posture, still current, of many specialists of Ancient Cambodia who see themselves as eternal discoverers (of stone, artefacts, epigraphs, etc.).¹⁹² Au Chhieng was an heir, not a pathfinder.

As such, he was a decisive vector of the ancestral idea of renewal: his life demonstrates both a keen awareness of an ancestral past and the updating of this past in the terms of modern science, to the point that he has to be identified as the leading Cambodian scholar. While he labours as a historian of words and concepts, attentive to permanence as well as to change, he also seeks to correct, using their own weapons, the misinterpretations made by those Titans of scholarly modernity who were the protagonists of Khmer studies, schooled in Indianism and swift to decree the decline of the Cambodia of their own time.

CONCLUSION

Given the current state of our knowledge and subject to what any additional information might provide, it would appear that this figure of Khmer studies, the premier Cambodian academic, remained in the shadows through the combined effect of a propensity for discretion, an *ethos* of knowledge associated with the figure of the *grū*, and a colonial system allotting but a subaltern place to Cambodians of learning. It was paradoxically because he did not confine himself to that place, abandoning his position of lofty observer to draw right up close to the Franco-Khmer political arena, that he provoked. Outraged, he treated this injustice with a disdain that does credit to his aristocratic upbringing as much as it does to the lessons of stoicism learnt on the school benches of the Republic. Knocked off balance, he took refuge in the practice of an asceticism that relegated him to the sidelines of the post-war system of Oriental studies. Emphasizing the esoteric relationship to knowledge inherent to the ethics of the Cambodian *grū*, most of whose knowledge goes up in smoke during his cremation, he abandoned the exoteric ideal of the master of Oriental humanities, thus further trammeling the transmission of his knowledge. His work does, however, show a marked metapolitical dimension that helps correct the impression that he bowed, as it were, to the inevitability of his fate. Not only does he appear in his rare writings and even rarer oral contributions as combative and determined, but he makes pertinent interventions on the major questions affecting Khmer studies, starting with their very definition. His positioning not so much on the margins of post-war Khmer studies, dominated by the figure of George Cœdès, as in their foundations, is then to be considered for what it allowed, as Au Chhieng himself saw it: helping improve the Khmer world from the scientific, moral and aesthetic standpoints.

¹⁹² Bourdonneau, “Pour en finir avec la ‘cité hydraulique’ ?,” 409; Mémoires du Cambodge, 56.

Once his work is lined up with his life story, there wells up from it what certainly seems to be identifiable as a dialectical tension nagging away, deep down, at the relationship to knowledge in contemporary Cambodian society: compared to the still-important figure of the traditional *grū*—whose archetype, deeply anchored in the imaginary, will remain throughout the 20th century the forest-dwelling Shaivaite ascetic recluse in possession of power-knowledge over the world—did not access to the modern knowledge embodied by European science not imply maintaining a more or less radical exteriority to society, a phenomenon of which in fact one finds several variants?

For example, the updated figure of the foreign ally appointed to the priesthood of Šiva—the Indian Brahmin married to a woman of the Khmer aristocracy in the inscriptions of Ancient Cambodia—,¹⁹³ that you will be able to find in a French scholar like George Cœdès, an historian who is specifically a specialist of Indianisation and a grandmaster, if ever there was one, of the reading of the Sanskrit and Old Khmer inscriptions of Ancient Cambodia, whose wife was a former dancer of the Royal Ballet and niece of a Cambodian government education minister.¹⁹⁴

Or, again, Prince Aréno Iukanthor, an updated figure this time of the foreign prince who is a catalyst of the strange foreignesses of the world and who, as part of an initiatory path towards the royal throne, imitates the foreign world that he discovers in interwar Paris during his postgraduate studies: assimilating like no other Cambodian of the time the Francophone cultural tools of Latin civilization, he will turn himself simultaneously into a student of Orientalism, painter, chorister, Symbolist poet, esoteric editorialist and anti-colonial polemicist, absorbing all the intellectual currents then in fashion in the City of Light, even marrying a French artist known by anyone who was anyone in Paris in order to apply the finishing touches to his man-of-letters' trappings and become in singular fashion a member of the Saint-Germain-des-Prés intellectual set. The failure of his return to Cambodia in 1938, however, seems to indicate that his transculturation was so radical that it hampered him in the race for the throne and his reinsertion into Cambodian political society.¹⁹⁵

Between these two virtually mirror-opposite figures—an erudite foreign academic married to a woman of the Khmer aristocracy and producing a scientific discourse on Cambodia, and a Cambodian prince assimilating Latin civilization in order to fuel his quest for the throne, to the point of marrying a French artist and breaking with his original milieu—there existed a whole array of intermediary situations wherein the aforementioned tension of exteriority was played out differently. Thus, for the majority of young Cambodians sent to France for higher education during the Protectorate the assimilation of the French university model via various disciplines (medecine, law, political science, the arts, etc.) was restricted by the social project underlying it, which was to acquire a diploma and technical knowledge sufficient to join the higher administration, and at the same time a matrilineage which, very often, gave access to the most prestigious posts by means

¹⁹³ Bourdonneau, “La stèle de Sdok Kak Thom et le *Devarâja*,” 115-166.

¹⁹⁴ Cros, “George Cœdès, la vie méconnue d’un découvreur de royaumes oubliés;” Khing, “Samdach Cakrei PICH PONN (1867-1932).” Thanks to Éric Bourdonneau for having drawn my attention to this parallel.

¹⁹⁵ Mikaelian, “L’aristocratie khmère à l’école des humanités françaises;” “Aréno Iukanthor à Paris”.

of marriage to the daughter of a high-ranking dignitary.¹⁹⁶ The strongly utilitarian dimension of this approach distanced it from the spirit, if not the letter, of the French university and its intellectual values inherited from the founding times of the European Middle Ages,¹⁹⁷ limiting, by the same token, the assimilation of modern science. Hence, perhaps, the enduring weakness of the Cambodian academic world, which was accentuated by the often-decried imbalance¹⁹⁸ between the number and the quality of the educational facilities made available to, respectively, the Vietnamese and the Cambodian elites by the French authorities.¹⁹⁹

In this landscape, Au Chhieng's career stands out through its singular nature, but it is no less a product of comparable dialectical tension. Surpassing the scientific curiosity of the majority of his comrades, his scholarly quest had him break with his social and matrimonial destiny (1939); the choice he made at the time to perfect his scholarly persona by adopting the French “intellectual passion” of the interwar years, decried by Benda in *The Treason of the Intellectual*,²⁰⁰ in the treatment of the subject of his law thesis cost him his academic status; this high price paid saw him thenceforward take refuge in the ethos of the *grū* withdrawn from the world, which fostered his refusal of administrative posts (1947-49) as well as the break with his family (1964) while deforming the exoteric dimension of European academic knowledge of which he was the bearer.²⁰¹ Truly scholarly but detached from the world, the producer of an authentic science applied to the understanding of Cambodia, but a cloistered science isolated from his Cambodian contemporaries, this *grū* of Parnassus dwelling in the Land of the Titans ended up, in short, contracting a Cronus complex towards his own intellectual progeny which prevented his work from growing, spreading and acquiring a following.

¹⁹⁶ Aberdam, *Élites cambodgiennes*, 282-335.

¹⁹⁷ “Justice, truth and reason are intellectual values only insofar as they have no practical goal in mind,” (Lwoff, “Introduction,” In Benda, *La Trahison des clercs*, 12).

¹⁹⁸ Iukanthor, “A propos de l'enseignement au Cambodge”.

¹⁹⁹ But this imbalance, it could be suggested, in addition to being the result of different demographies, also reflects a relationship to knowledge —Sinicised in one case, Indianised in the other—which is quite different. Putting it (over) telegraphically, the learned, state-examined mandarin is not the forest-dwelling Shaivite recluse. Let us add that the sociological makeup of the Cambodian scholarship-holders seems fairly reducible, given our current state of knowledge of this period, into two ideal-types: on the one hand, the prince (with, for example, Prince Youthevong (1913-1947), his conversion to French socialism and his equally French wife) following more or less the traditional path of a quest for the throne through imitation of a foreign model; on the other, the Sino-Khmer, painlessly polyglot, heir to a long-standing “Chinese mandarinate”, at ease in the administration of men and singularly so within the colonial bureaucracy, following a quite different path, demonstrating this time an updating of the figure of the foreigner placed in the technical service of the royalty in resorting, if need be, here too, to matrimonial alliance (Népote, “Les nouveaux sino-khmers acculturés”).

²⁰⁰ “The modern world has made the intellectual into a citizen subject to all the burdens and all the responsibilities that attach to that title. Many intellectuals have adopted political passions, ‘those that set men against other men in the name of interest or pride of which the two major types are, for that reason, the passion of class and the passion of nation’,” Lwoff, “Introduction,” 14.

²⁰¹ On the French university, a former corporation of clerics transmitting esoteric knowledge which became over the course of its history a secular institution supported by the Enlightenment and dispensing exoteric and uniform knowledge open to and on society, see Dupront, “Réflexions sur l'histoire de l'université française.”

ANNEX – Paper by Au Chhieng on the *Devarāja*

Au Chhieng made his reactions to George Cœdès's remarks on the “God-King” published in the new edition of his book *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor* in 1947²⁰² the subject of a lecture he gave on 10 December 1948 at the Société Asiatique, Paris. In it he demonstrated that the equation *Devarāja* = God-King was invalid, as *Devarāja* was, for him, the counterpart of the expression *kamraten jagat ta rāja*, which, because of the particle *ta*, “sign of the genitive of possession,” could not signify “god king” but had to signify “the god of the king.”

During the following session, 14 January 1949, George Cœdès responded by contesting, in error, Au Chhieng's reliance for his demonstration on the meaning of the *ta* particle in contemporary Khmer: to this end, he argued that Au Chhieng's reading was valid for the late period but not for the oldest usage of *ta*. You could not be further removed from Au Chhieng's position, which was, on the contrary, to draw parallels between the ancient texts and the contemporary usage of Khmer vocabulary. During this same session, Jean Filliozat gave a presentation on Au Chhieng's paper and went back over the interpretation of *Devarāja*.

The debate over this central topic of the historiography of Ancient Cambodia was launched. Cœdès would subsequently back-pedal over the meaning of *ta*, but, astonishingly, because he did not make a habit of this, without mentioning his debt to Au Chhieng in his own writings, to the extent that the Cambodian scholar's lecture was never cited. There remains, then, only a watered-down trace of this founding debate in the form of the summary reports of the Society's meetings published in the *Journal Asiatique*, the useful passages of which we reproduce below.²⁰³

Extraordinary General Assembly of 10 December 1948.

[p.64] The meeting was opened at 2pm under the chairmanship of Mr Bacot, *chairman*.

Present were: Mrs Lebeuf, E.-Lévy, Pascali, A. Simond; Misses Deneck, Lalou, Le Page, Le Scour, Séguy and Wetlé; Messrs Abdeljalil, Au Chhieng, Bareau, Basset, Bazin, Benveniste, Bernard-Maitre, Bezacier, J. Bloch, Cœdès, J. David-Weill, Demiéville, Deydier, André Dubosq, Depuy-Albarède, Feydit, Filliozat, Foucher, R. Gerard, Granet, Izeddin, Labat, Roger Lévy, Madrolle, Malzac, Martin-Morice, Massé, Mazahéri, de Menasce, Mohammed Moussa, Nguyen Pho, Nikitine, des Routours, Sauvaget, Sinor, Stern and Vélat.

²⁰² Cœdès, “III. Cultes personnels: l'apothéose des princes et le Dieu-Roi” In *Pour mieux comprendre Angkor*, 1947, 44-67. Au Chhieng would probably not have had access to the first edition, which was published in Hanoi during the war, in 1943 (*Idem, Pour mieux comprendre Angkor*, 1943) In that edition the chapter in question is to be found on pages 43-65), and it was probably after the war was over that he discovered the work in its second edition.

²⁰³ “Session of 10 December 1948,” unpublished paper given at the Société Asiatique, cf. “Session of 14 January 1949,” *Journal Asiatique*, vol. CCXXXVIII, MCMXXXIX, 64-67.

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The Minutes of the session of 12 November 1948 were read and adopted.

The chairman set out to the Society the reasons that obliged the Council to ask the Assembly to vote for an increase in subscriptions [...].

The following were elected members of the Society: [...].

Books offered to the Society: [...]

The Reverend Father Bernard-Maître gave a paper on the original dossiers of the *Mémoires concernant les Chinois*. [...]

[p.65] Mr Au Chhieng delivered a paper on the God-King.

He explained that the compound word “God-King” was calqued on the Sanskrit *devaraja*, a calque made despite Sanskrit and French syntax not being superposable. To know what it means requires that one seek to determine the grammatical relationship between its components “God” and “King.” As determining this from within the known Sanskrit texts proves impossible, you have to resort to the writings in the Cambodian language, which give as equivalent expression to *devarāja*, *kamrateñ jagat ta rāja*. After running through the different interpretations that have been given to *kamrateñ jagat ta rāja*, Mr Au Chhieng proposed, on the basis of the bilingual inscription of Phimânakas (K.484), where the *ta* particle is unquestionably a sign of the genitive of possession, that *kamrateñ jagat ta rāja* = god of the king. However, given the plurality of the “gods of the king” in Ancient Cambodia, it is essential that the nature of the *devarāja* be specified. The latter is a product not of faith in religion but of faith in magic. The two beliefs, one religious, the other magic, are confounded because the latter, in order to develop, utilises the gods and the ready-made frameworks of the former. You can follow the trace of this confusion from the Cambodia of the period known as that of the modern inscriptions of Angkor Wat. The word *pañcuh* which you find in current Cambodian vocabulary and which indicates a specific magical technique, is clearly to be read in the ancient inscription commenting judiciously on the bas-reliefs of the west wing of the temple of Angkor Wat. On the basis of this word, Mr Au Chhieng proposes, in conclusion, that the *devarāja* be seen as a living magical entity of the living person of the King.

[p.66] Owing to the late hour, discussion of Mr Au Chhieng’s paper was adjourned to the next session.

The session was closed at 7.15pm.

Session of 14 January 1949

The meeting was opened at 5pm under the chairmanship of Mr Bacot, chairman.

Present were: Mrs Lemaitre, de Manziarly, A. Simond and Viennot; Misses Cuisinier, Deneck, Hallade, Lalou, Le Page, Le Scour, de Mallmann, V. Sokolof and Vaudeville; Messrs Au Chhieng, A. Bassett, Benveniste, Bernard-Maître, J. Bloch, Coëdès, Faublée, Filliozat, Gaspardone,

Labat, Lacombe, Ch. Lefèvre, Madrolle, Malzac, Mazahéri, Meile, Mus, Nikitine, Pozzi, Sauvaget, Stern, Virolleaud.

The Minutes of the Extraordinary General Assembly of 10 December 1948 were read and adopted.

Mr Cœdès delivered a critique of Mr Au Chhieng's paper at the previous session. He first discussed the translation “god of the king” proposed by Mr Au Chhieng for the Sanskrit compound *devarāja* and for the Khmer expression *kamrateñ jagat ta rāja*. He showed that the grammatical argument advanced by Mr Au Chhieng to counter the translation by “god-king” was valid only for the modern language and the epigraphy of the 12th Century. On the other hand, numerous examples drawn from inscriptions of the 10th and 11th Centuries proved that the expression *kamrateñ jagat ta rāja* can have the meaning “god who is king” like the Sanskrit compound *devarāja*.

Mr Cœdès then espoused Mr Au Chhieng's thesis whereby the *devarāja* had to be considered as the personal god of the king, animated by one of his “properties.” But he formulated the hypothesis that imposing the name of the reigning sovereign on the idol might have been enough to make it into an image in which god and king found themselves closely associated, the upshot of which is that the *liṅga* erected by successive kings on the summit of the temple-mountains of Bakong, Bakhèng, Koh Ker, Mébon, Prè Rup and Baphûon are only the particular forms assumed by the *devarāja*, highlighted [p. 67] by Mr Au Chhieng, and underlining its relationships with a set of beliefs common to the countries of Southeast Asia.

Observations by Mr Au Chhieng

Mr Filliozat delivered a paper on *Jayavarman II et un rite indien de libération du territoire royal*, a paper following up on the debate begun on the interpretation of the expressions *devarāja* and *kamrateñ jagat ta rāja*.

He observed that the Khmer expression, as it appears open to the two interpretations —“god of the king” and “god who is king”— is ambiguous and cannot consequently lead to a definite opinion being formed as to the thing designated. He also observed that *devarāja* can in principle allow multiple meanings in Sanskrit, but that the only attested one is “king of the gods” to designate Indra, and possibly other sovereign gods. The most natural hypothesis, namely, that *devarāja*, designating the sacred object whose cult was established on a mountain by Jayavarman II, has its ordinary meaning and is a representation or symbol of Indra is supported by the fact that the mountain in question is called the Mount of Great Indra (Mahendraparvata) and that, on two other occasions, Jayavarman II dedicated capitals to Indra (Indrapura and Amarendrapura). He observed furthermore that it was possible to seek in India the rituals prescribed for kings when they found themselves in the situation of Jayavarman II in order to form an idea of the ritual instituted by him. Now, the *Ahīrbudhnyasamhitā*, chapter XXXVII, indicates in detail how a king whose territory is invaded by the enemy (Jayavarman II wanted to free his country from Java's hold over it), has to

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have made a representation called *Sudarṣana*, with which he associates himself through meditation and the rite of “depositing” (*nyāsa*).

In these conditions, the *devarāja* established by Jayavarman II —whether or not represented, as we ordinarily assume it was by a Shaivaite linga or merely linked with such a linga— effectively represented, under the name of Indra, the god of the king and at the same time the god confounded with the king. This does not allow us to decide on the real meaning of the Khmer expression *kamraten jagat ta rāja*, but justifies it in the two cases as equivalent to, if not the literal translation of, *devarāja*.

Observations of Messrs Cœdès, Lacomb and Stern.

The session closed at 7.10 pm.

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1948-49: “Linguistique indochinoise.” In *Annuaire 1949-1950*, EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, 1949: 56.

1949-50: no teaching scheduled.

1950-51: “Linguistique indochinoise.” In *Annuaire 1951-1952*, EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, 1952: 58-59.

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b) - “Sanskrit” (1953-1956)

1953-54: “Chronique de l’année 1952-1953.” Session of June 21, 1953. In EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, *Annuaire 1953-1954*, 1954: 78; “Sanskrit.” In *Annuaire 1954-1955*, EPHE, Section des sciences historiques et philologiques, 1954: 70.

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c) - “Khmer philology” (1957-1961)

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