

# A History of Cambodia

David P. Chandler

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## About the Book and Author

### *A History of Cambodia*

David P. Chandler

Prominent though Cambodia has been in world affairs in the last two decades, remarkably little is available in the way of historical studies of that ancient country. Recent events have been documented and there are histories of the medieval kingdom known as Angkor, but this book is the first to chronicle Cambodian history from its beginnings to the twentieth century. It also is the first scholarly history of Cambodia to appear in English, the first in any Western language since Adhémard Leclère's *Histoire du Cambodge* appeared in 1914, and the first to draw on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Khmer archives and documents.

Within the framework of a narrative of historical events, Dr. Chandler examines the roots of today's Cambodia (Kampuchea), exploring how patterns of Cambodian thinking and the style of Cambodian politics have been derived from the past. His work is based on research conducted in Cambodia, Thailand, France, and the United States, supplemented by more than twenty years' study of documents relating to Cambodia.

Dr. Chandler is associate professor of history and research director for the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies at Monash University in Australia. He is author of *Cambodia Before the French: Politics in a Tributary Kingdom, 1794–1847* and *The Land and People of Cambodia*, coauthor of *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*, and coeditor of *Revolution and Its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays*.



*For Elizabeth, Margaret, and Tom*



Every nation in the world has its own history and its own strengths and weaknesses. Since earliest times excellent things and rotten things have mingled together and accumulated over long periods. To sort them out and distinguish the essence from the dregs is a very difficult task, but we must not reject history because of this difficulty. It is no good cutting ourselves off from history and abandoning our heritage. The common people would not approve.

—Mao Zedong  
Talk to music workers  
24 August 1956

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## Preface

I have studied Cambodia since 1959, when I enrolled as a student of Khmer at the Foreign Service Institute in Washington, D.C. Since then, in the Foreign Service, graduate school, and my years of teaching, I have contracted a multitude of intellectual debts, which it's a pleasure to acknowledge here. Since I began my research for this book in 1977–1978, many people have helped me to maneuver the manuscript into print. I am grateful to them all.

The last four chapters of this book are based for the most part on research with primary sources. Chapters 6 and 7 are drawn in large part from my doctoral dissertation, *Cambodia Before the French: Politics in a Tributary Kingdom, 1794–1847* (Ann Arbor, 1974). Chapters 8 and 9, which deal with the colonial era, reflect archival work I carried out in Paris and in Aix-en-Provence in 1977. The chapters also benefit from valuable work on this period by Milton Osborne, V. Reddi, and Alain Forest. Much of the material in Chapter 10 can be traced to work in the archives of Aix-en-Provence and Phnom Penh by Benedict Kiernan, and other parts are drawn from private papers entrusted to me by Maj. Gen. Chana Samudavanija in Bangkok in 1981.

The earlier chapters, on the other hand, rely largely on secondary sources. My debt to the writings of George Coedes and L. P. Briggs should be evident from the footnotes to Chapters 2, 3, and 4. I'm also grateful to my colleague Ian Mabbett for his comments on these chapters, which contain several references to his work. The material presented in Chapter 5, which traverses a *terra incognita* of Cambodian history between the abandonment of Angkor and the end of the eighteenth century, owes much to the work of Michael Vickery, a fellow sojourner in Cambodia in the early 1960s and since then a colleague in graduate school and most recently in Australia. For all of these chapters, I've benefited from discussions and correspondence with friends like these and with such faraway colleagues as Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., Saveros

Pou, Evéline Porée-Maspero, O. W. Wolters, Khin Sok, and Sumedh Chhim.

A major intellectual influence that might, I hope, be perceptible at many points in the book is that of the late Paul Mus, whose insights into Southeast Asian society and culture illuminated my first two years of graduate study. Other teachers, students, and friends have also made important contributions along the way. These include the late Harry Benda, J. D. Legge, David J. Steinberg, David Wyatt, David Marr, Alexander Woodside, and Robert E. Elson. Ben Kiernan, when still a student, taught me a great deal about the history of Cambodian radicalism, as readers of Chapter 10 will notice. While the book was in its final stages, I was encouraged by discussions of Cambodian history with Serge Thion, William Shawcross, Laura Summers, Anthony Barnett, and Chanthou Boua.

I'm grateful for access to the facilities of Harvard University, where I began my research for the book in 1977, and to those of Cornell University, which I visited in 1977, 1978, and 1979. Staff members of the French colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence were extremely helpful when I worked there in 1977, and so was the staff of the National Library in the People's Republic of Kampuchea, which I visited briefly in 1981. Closer to home, I have been assisted ably and often by the interlibrary loan personnel of the Monash University Library.

In other publications, I have recorded my gratitude to Cambodian friends in 1960–1962, 1970, and 1971. I doubt if many of them have survived the holocaust of the 1970s. None of them has written to me to say so. All the same, it seems appropriate to record my gratitude to them all once again, singling out especially Long Anar, Chhea Ton, the villagers of Krol Ko hamlet, Kompong Speu, and the late Dik Keam, formerly librarian of the Institut Bouddhique, who was murdered near Kratie as a “class enemy” in 1977.

In closing, three people have urged me, over the years, to write this book: J. D. Legge, a long-time colleague; my wife, Susan; and editor Mervyn Adams Seldon, who finished her punctilious work on the manuscript in a period of great personal distress. Susan McRory, my copy editor at Westview Press, was vigorous with an editorial brush and comb and provided many helpful substantive suggestions.

My colleagues at Monash, Ben Kiernan and Ian Mabbett, read the book in draft and suggested several improvements. Nguyen van Hung provided the translations from the Vietnamese that appear in Chapters 6 and 7. Translations from French, Thai, and Khmer, unless otherwise noted, are my own. Two of the photographs were kindly supplied by my colleague

\*

Walter Veit, three by Jacques Nepote, and one by Roger M. Smith. The remaining photographs are my own.

Pam Sayers has typed my work for many years, impeccably and without much harm, it seems, to her sense of humor. In the final stages of writing, the manuscript benefited from Bess Brudenell's expert help. The index was prepared by Edythe Porpa, and the maps were drawn by Susan Tomlins and Vicki Tipping.

Any mistakes that have slipped past so many skilled and helpful people are obviously mine.

## A NOTE ON THE NAMES

### "CAMBODIA" AND "KAMPUCHEA"

Throughout the book, except where I refer to the regimes that have governed Cambodia since 1975, I have refrained from using the name "Kampuchea." I have preferred to use "Cambodia" because it is still more widely used in English than "Kampuchea" and also because I do not accept the right of a regime to say how its name is to be pronounced *in a foreign language*. I feel this especially in the Cambodian case, because Democratic Kampuchea's documents, written in Khmer, show so little respect for local pronunciation of other countries' names and in fact often preserve the *French* pronunciation, transliterated into Khmer! In other words, I respect the fact that "Danmark," "Italia," and "Republica Dominicana" are, inside those countries, preferred pronunciations to the anglicized "Denmark," "Italy," and "Dominican Republic." But should the man on the street in one of these countries, talking about America, be required to say "United States"?

Moreover, it is not as if we had been asked, after 1975, to give the Cambodian people back the name of an ancient empire or of an ethnic grouping battered by colonialism. *That* task was attempted by the ill-fated Khmer Republic. "Kampuchea" derives from the Sanscrit "Kambuja," the name of a tribe in northern India associated (as we see in Chapter 2) with a myth of Cambodian origin. The name is as "Cambodian" in origin as New York is "American."

In recent times, among foreigners especially, the use of the word "Kampuchea" has been a way of expressing, usually from afar, one's sympathy with the Cambodian revolution. For this reason, one scholar of the region has recently argued that "Cambodia" is "the imperfect imperial rendering of Kambuja or Kampuchea."<sup>1</sup> Why is a hard "C" less perfect, or more imperial, than a "K"? How, in any case, is "Kambuja"

to be pronounced? Or is one transliteration system to be seen as more patriotic than another?<sup>2</sup>

David P. Chandler  
Monash University

## NOTES

1. Laura Summers, "In Matters of War and Socialism Anthony Barnett Would Shame and Honor Kampuchea Too Much," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (October-December 1979):18, note 2.

2. See Serge Thion, "The Ingratitude of Crocodiles: The 1978 Cambodian Black Paper," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (October-December 1980):40, for an eloquent defense by an apologist for much of the revolution of the use of "Cambodia" in preference to "Kampuchea."

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# Introduction

This book will examine roughly two thousand years of Cambodian history. Chapters 2 through 5 carry the story up to the end of the eighteenth century; the remaining chapters deal with the period between 1800 and 1953, when Cambodia regained its independence. In Chapter 10, I have made an attempt to analyze the country's history in terms of the traumatic shocks that it suffered in the 1970s. The narrative begins with the onset of Indianization, at the beginning of the Christian era. It pauses when Cambodia became independent; the 1950s and 1960s, which have been ably treated by many authors, are not discussed in detail. At the same time, events in the 1970s have had such a profound effect on Cambodia's people and institutions that it was felt they should be sketched in at the end of the book so as to cast their pall over the preceding chapters.

One reason for writing the book has been to close a gap in the historiography of Southeast Asia. No lengthy history of Cambodia has appeared since the publication of Adhémard Leclère's *Histoire du Cambodge* in 1914.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent surveys, in French and English, have limited themselves to the study of particular eras or have relied primarily on secondary sources.<sup>2</sup> Over the last fifty years or so, moreover, many of Leclère's hypotheses and much of his periodization—to say nothing of his style of approach—have been revised by other scholars, weakened by new documents, or altered by archaeological findings. The colonial era has ended and needs examination in terms of preceding history; moreover, the so-called dark ages, discussed in Chapters 5 through 7, have often been ignored even though they form a bridge between Angkor and the present. The time has come, in other words, to reexamine the primary sources, to synthesize other people's scholarly work, and to place my own research, concerned mainly with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, into the framework of a general history, with a nonspecialist audience, as well as undergraduates, in mind.