

‘1620’, A Cautionary Tale

Michael Arthur Aung-Thwin & Kenneth R. Hall, eds., *New Perspectives on the History and Historiography of Southeast Asia, Continuing Explorations* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 157-166.

I offer this modest contribution to John, thinking with pleasure of the intellectual atmosphere in Southeast Asian studies at Yale during the time I worked there in 1967-1970 preparing my Ph.D. The Southeast Asian studies faculty where John offered courses in Southeast Asian history was open to new ideas and interpretations, which permitted me to propose and conclude a thesis topic which had long been considered impossible to achieve, and which would have excluded me from at least one other of the better-known Southeast Asian programs.¹

My thesis project was to unravel the relationships among the Cambodian and Ayutthayan chronicles purportedly treating the post-Angkorean history of Cambodia through the 16th century.

It stopped short of the recovery of Cambodia from an Ayutthayan invasion in the 1590s, and did not touch at all on the events of ‘1620’, about which there have been as many confused tales as concerning anything in earlier times, and which require unraveling in the same manner as the stories of the 15th-16th centuries.² In fact, I had hoped that my work on the chronicles, at a time when such study had seemed to be popular among some students of Cambodia, would encourage further work, both more deeply detailed study of the period I had treated, and further work on later periods. Instead, whether or not there was any causality, analytical study of Cambodian chronicles shut down.³

1 "Cambodia After Angkor, the Chronicular Evidence for the Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries", Yale University, Ph.D., December 1977. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, University Microfilms.

2 For more detail about this period see my “Cambodia and its Neighbors in the 15th Century”, Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 27, Singapore, 2004; www.ari.nus.edu.sg/docs/wps/wps04_027.pdf; and www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps2004.htm

3 There is still no good study of Cambodia’s 18th century, of interest because that was the time when Cambodia broke up into factional blocs, which must be explained as other than bad people doing bad things. See the suggestions in my “History of Cambodia, Summary of Lectures Given at the Faculty of Archaeology, Royal University of Fine Arts, 2001-2002”, published in Vidya Series, Pre-Angkor Studies Society, Phnom Penh, 2003, pp. 156-158.

Cambodian historical mythology, followed by most modern historians, holds that a weak Cambodian king began to give away Cambodian land in what is now the region south of Saigon (French ‘Basse Cochinchine’, Khmer ‘Kampuchea Krom’), in exchange for a Vietnamese princess, if not just for lust, in order to get Vietnamese help against the threatening Thai of Ayutthaya. Different chronicles have slightly different dates for the marriage, but 1620 has come to be conventionally preferred.

Perhaps the first modern scholarly treatment was by Aymonier who summarized the mythology, based on Moura’s synthesizing of the Cambodian chronicles.⁴

The confusion is evident in the contradictory treatments in a single work, *Les frontières du Vietnam*, where, p. 125, in his chapter on the Vietnamese ‘march to the South’ (*nam tien*), Nguyễn Thé Anh wrote that the first step of Vietnamese intervention in Cambodian affairs was in 1620 when the Vietnamese king Nguyễn Phước Nguyên gave his daughter Ngọc Vạn to the Cambodian king Jay Jettha/Chey Chetta who wanted support against threats from Ayutthaya; but Mak Phoeun, in “La frontière entre le Cambodge et le Vietnam...”, pp. 136-6, ignores the date 1620, and the royal marriage, saying that there was then no common frontier between Cambodia and Vietnam, that Cambodia in 1622 and 1623, repulsed ‘Siamese’ attacks, apparently without Vietnamese help, and that in 1623 the Vietnamese king Nguyễn Sãi Vu'o'ng another name of Nguyễn Phước Nguyên, requested temporary cession of the customs posts of Saigon and Kampong Krabei.⁵

⁴ Aymonier, *Le Cambodge III*, pp. 768-769.

⁵ *Les frontières du Vietnam*, sous la direction de P.B. Lafont, Paris, Editions L’Harmattan, 1989 Note that a new generation of scholars of Vietnam reject entirely the concept of *nam tién*. As Li Tana put it, it was a “series of different episodes responding to particular events or opportunities”; and Keith Taylor, one of the leading historians of Vietnam, has written, “I do not believe that such an event [*nam tién*] ever took place”. Like Li Tana, he writes in more detail of a series of episodes. See Li Tana, *Nguyễn Cochinchina, Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998 (Li Tana), pp. 19, 21, 28; Keith W. Taylor “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4, 1998, pp. 949–978 (Taylor 1998), pp. 951, 960.

It is uncertain why Nguyễn Thé Anh decided on Ngọc Vạn as the daughter given to Cambodia. As source he refers to Phan Khoang , *Việt sử, Xứ Đàng Trong*.⁶ Phan Khoang, however, noted the story that in 1620 the Viet king gave a daughter to the Cambodian king, but in a footnote says that act is not recorded in the Viet histories, perhaps because the Viet chroniclers did not consider that it was worthy, and Phan Khoang has inserted it based on French studies of the Cambodian chronicles, in which, of course, the various Cambodian mythologies about the period are mixed. He notes that Christopher Borri, who was in Viet Nam at the time, knew of such a marriage, and that according to the *Dai Nam Liet Tryen Tien Bien* (*LTTB*), biographies Nguyễn royalty, the king had four daughters, but that for two of them, Ngọc Vạn and Ngọc Khoa, there was no biographical detail and they probably did not get husbands. So it was probably one of them who was given to the Cambodians.

Earlier, Thái văn Kiêm, in "La plaine aux cerfs et la princesse de jade", .., pp. 385-89, also identified the two otherwise unknown daughters of Nguyễn Sãi Vu'o'ng, named Ngọc Vạn and Ngọc Khoa, as the princesses given in Cambodian and Cham traditions to Jāj Jetṭhā and Po Romé respectively. In his study of the Cambodian chronicles for that period, however, Mak Phoeun did give attention to the royal marriage, but not at the date 1620. There, p. 120-121, based on some of the chronicle texts, he wrote that in 1617 the Khmer king Suroyopear, concerned about aggression from Ayutthaya, decided to establish alliance with Viet Nam, and to request marriage between his son Prince Jāj Jetṭhā /Chey Chetta and the daughter of the king of Viet Nam, Aṅg Cūv [pron. /chov/]. She arrived in 1618, and became chief queen of Chey Chetta. In this version the date 1620 has no special significance.⁷

⁶ He referred to the 1969 printing, p. 401, but in the 1967 printing to which I have access, the story is on pp. 309-310.

⁷ See Mak Phoeun, *Histoire du Cambodge de la fin du XVIe siècle au début du XVIIIe*, Paris, Presses de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Monographies, no 176, 1995; and my review, Mak Phoeun, *Histoire du Cambodge de la fin du XVIe siècle au début du XVIIIe*, in Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient Tome 83 (1996), pp. 405-15. The pronunciation of the name as found in the Cambodian chronicles is indicated in Mak Phoeun, *Chroniques royales du Cambodge (de 1594 à 1677)*, École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Collection de textes et documents sur

In David Chandler's *History of Cambodia*, the sections concerning the 17th century, the worst of all in this generally slap-dash piece of work, the marriage is not mentioned at all, but Chandler follows the myth of a Vietnamese 'march to the South' taking Saigon and establishing 'customs agents' there in the 1620s. (p. 94)⁸

Mabbett and Chandler together also avoided the problem by skipping from the end of Angkor to modern times with the inaccurate characterization of a Cambodian court which fell under Thai domination at the end of the 16th century, and "a period of Thai suzerainty...that lasted...until the arrival of the French".⁹

There was no excuse for Chandler's and Mabbett's sloppiness; it cannot be blamed, as Chandler likes to do, on lack of sources.¹⁰ As Mak Phoeun's *Histoire* demonstrates, the 17th century is the best documented period between the high point of Angkor in the 12th century and the arrival of colonizing Europeans in the 19th.

One has the impression that elements of the story of the marriage have been passed around among various writings, as with Phan Hoang's use of French interpretations of Cambodian chronicles to fill out a page of Vietnamese history for which he found too little Vietnamese documentation. The Cambodian chroniclers themselves, writing at different times, and under differing current political preconceptions, reflect changing Cambodian ideas about past relations with Viet Nam. Thus one chronicle says the Vietnamese began to encroach on land at that time, another says they asked for temporary use of customs posts, a third, and least credible, writes that the Vietnamese asked for use of Cambodian land to train Vietnamese soldiers to

l'Indochine XIII, Paris, 1981. see p. 459, where she is listed in the index as 'Ang Cuv', followed by the name in Khmer script, which indicates the pronunciation clearly.

⁸ It is not directly relevant to the present subject; therefore I shall not attempt to explicate Chandler's excursus on '17th-century values

⁹ Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers*, Oxford UK & Cambridge USA, Blackwell, 1995, pp. 218, 223; Michael Vickery, "What to do About *The Khmers*", review article in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, part 2 (September 1996), pp. 389-404.

¹⁰ See Chandler, p. 227, introducing his chapter 13 on Cambodia after 1979, where, in his narrative, he simply ignores the sources available, but which are named in his footnotes.

fight against the Chinese, showing misconception of the nature of Trịnh (North)-Nguyễn (Center/South) enmity and warfare in the 17th century.

Careless modern writers tend to amalgamate everything (as did traditional Cambodian and Thai chroniclers faced with seemingly contradictory sources). Chandler, for example, writes that the Vietnamese ‘march to the south’ had carried colonists to the Mekong delta by the 1620s”, the first effect being “the takeover of Saigon … first by customs agents in the 1620s”. He does not, however, seemingly, repeat the canard about using Cambodian territory to train troops for warfare in the North. He does, however, combine two of the later nationalist myths, one Vietnamese, one Cambodian. After noting the Vietnamese colonists in the Mekong Delta in the 1620s, he says “the area was lightly populated”, which is the Vietnamese chauvinist view of their occupation of empty land not under Cambodian control; but the Nguyễn control … “eventually removed … tens of thousands of ethnic Khmer from Cambodian jurisdiction”, which is the Cambodian nationalist interpretation.

Of course, Chandler may not have here intended what he seems to have said. In these paragraphs the meaning of ‘south’ is not always clear. When he writes that in 1626, after Vietnamese colonists had occupied the Mekong Delta, the Nguyễn broke with the northern Le/Trịnh dynasty and “began governing the southern region on their own”, where ‘southern region’ should be taken as meaning, not the Cambodian Mekong Delta, but what is now central Viet Nam, and which was separated from the Mekong Delta and Cambodia by a still existing Champa. Perhaps that area is what Chandler considered “lightly populated”, but if so, the remark is irrelevant for the rest of Chandler’s text. And how could that have “the effect of sealing off Cambodia’s southeastern frontier”? Frontier with what—Champa, Nguyễn Viet Nam, the sea?

Another point, although Chandler when writing may have been innocent of the latest work, is that Cambodia was not “cut off from maritime access to the outside world”. As Yoneo Ishii has demonstrated, for much of the 17th century Cambodia was considered by the Japanese as a more important maritime commercial power than Ayutthaya.¹¹ In particular, during the reign of Cambodia’s Muslim king, 1642-59, “Cambodia surpassed Siam again in the dispatch of junks to Nagasaki … It did so again

¹¹ Ishii 1998. Yoneo Ishii, ed., *The Junk Trade from Southeast Asia, Translations from the Tōsen Fusetsu-gaki, 1674-1723*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998.

in the 1690s” when, according to Chandler and the Cambodian anti-Viet Nam school, “Cambodia was now cut off from maritime access to the outside world”, an isolation “unique in precolonial southeast Asia”.

As Ishii writes, Cambodia offered an alternative to Siam for the procurement of sappanwood and deer hide, both in great demand on the Japanese market”; and “thanks to its convenient and regular traffic with Guangnam [Nguyễn Viet Nam] it could provide Vietnamese silk which was highly valued in Japan”. Thus, far from isolating Cambodia, the Nguyễn contact in mid- and late 17th century was of commercial benefit for Cambodia—“may have been instrumental for maintaining Cambodia’s relatively high position among Southeast Asian ports”.

Thus we see some of the confusion in modern scholarship about the events of the 1620s. But what were the basic facts?

Cambodia had quickly recovered from an Ayutthayan invasion of Lovek in 1593-94, which itself was perhaps conflict over domination of maritime relations with China and Japan. Prince Suriyopear/soriyopoa/ (<*suryavarma*) returned to Cambodia with Thai support in 1601/1602. He was king until he abdicated in 1618 for his son Jay Jettha. The capital was in Udong. Suriyopear was successful in reuniting Cambodia and making it a prosperous and strong kingdom. All of the sources, both chronicles and foreign reports, agree that the reign of Suriyopear and his son was a good period. Cambodia was important in international sea trade, and competed with Ayutthaya. Evidence for Cambodian strength is that in 1622 Ayutthaya sent an army and navy to attack Cambodia but they were defeated. Cambodia had become the equal of Ayutthaya in military force.

Indeed, Cambodia began a new period of development which lasted until after mid-century, and in which the country was well integrated into the international maritime circuit. This period included the reign of a king Chan-Rāmādhipatī (1642-1658) who converted to Islam, no doubt to better integrate Cambodia into the international network led by the Muslim states of Nusantara.¹²

Mabbett and Chandler were mistaken in their notion that the Cambodian court fell under Thai domination at the end of the 16th century,

12. According to the Cambodian chronicles and popular belief, this King Chan converted to Islam because he fell in love with a Cham girl. The chronicles show no awareness of the economy or international relations of the time, except for statements, mostly inaccurate, about relations with Vietnam (see Chandler 2000, p. 94, who uncritically accepted these tales).

and it was certainly not “a period of Thai suzerainty...that lasted...until the arrival of the French” (218, 223). There was a quick recovery from the brief Thai conquest at the end of the 16th century, followed by genuine independence until the eighteenth century, including Cambodian invasions of Ayutthaya, and repulsion of a major Thai attack in 1622, reported by Europeans on the scene, but expunged from official Thai history and from its foreign imitators.¹³

What about marriage with a Vietnamese princess? That basic fact is secure. Christopher Borri, who was in Cochinchina from 1618-1622, wrote about the king there, which would be Nguyễn Phước Nguyễn, "He is also in continual motion, and making warlike preparations to assist the king of Cambogia, who has married his bastard daughter, sending him succors of gallies, and men, against the king of Siam; and therefore the arms of Cochinchina and their valour, is famous and renowned, as well by sea as by land."¹⁴ And as Mak Phoeun has recorded, the Vietnamese queen was well known to Europeans at the time. What is less certain is the significance of the marriage—its political purpose.

Vietnam was divided into two kingdoms after 1570, the Trịnh in the North and the Nguyễn in the South, and they were at war from about 1620 to 1670. Contact between Cambodia and Vietnam (South Vietnam of the Nguyễn) began between 1613 and 1620, just when the two Vietnamese kingdoms began their war. The first official contact was a request from Vietnam for war elephants from Cambodia to fight against the Trịnh in the North. In exchange the Nguyễn king sent a Vietnamese princess to marry the Cambodian King. She married King Jay Jettha, son of King Suriyopear who abdicated in 1618.

Cambodian historical mythology, followed by most modern historians, has different stories about this marriage, but the basic fact—a marriage between a Cambodian prince, soon to be king Jay Jettha, and a Vietnamese woman, allegedly a princess, is true. Her existence was known

13. Examples are David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984; and David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, third edition, Boulder, Westview Press, 1992.

14 Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam: Christorforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Baron on Tonkin, Introduced and Annotated by Olga Dror and K.W. Taylor, Cornell Southeast Asia Program 2006. The quote is on p.130 (details supplied by Brian Zottoli).

to foreigners in Cambodia, who wrote about it. Some of the chronicles, however, are wrong in writing that Cambodia began to give away land in Kampuchea Krom at this time. The best history of Cambodia in the 17th century, Mak Phoeun, *Histoire du Cambodge de la fin du XVI^e siècle au début du XVII^e siècle*, shows that Vietnam did not begin to take land in Kampuchea Krom until after 1690. Not only did the Vietnamese not get land in Kampuchea Krom at that time, but because of the war in Vietnam they could not interfere in Cambodian affairs.

King Jay Jettha was king until 1628. After he died Cambodian royalty and officials began to divide into different groups fighting with each other, and this led to the destruction of Cambodia at the end of the 17th century and in the 18th century.

According to most chronicles, and also according to Mak Phoeun, the change from Suriyopear to Jay Jettha was a time of change in foreign relations, from close relations with Ayutthaya to more involvement with Vietnam. Most of the chronicles say that the Cambodian kings, Suriyopear and Jay Jettha wished for help from Vietnam against Ayutthaya, and that they were also threatened by the Vietnamese who were moving southward through Champa toward Cambodia. Therefore Suriyopear asked the king of the southern kingdom of Vietnam, the Nguyễn, for a princess to marry to Jay Jetthā. These chronicles mean that Cambodia was weaker, and wanted to establish good relations with Vietnam which was stronger.

However, at that time the southern Vietnam kingdom of the Nguyễn was at war with northern Vietnam under the Trịnh family, and was not powerful enough to threaten Cambodia or to give help against Ayutthaya.

One Cambodian chronicle, which I have called the *1170 chronicle*, has a different story, and because of the apparent accuracy of this chronicle in general, I think we should pay attention to its description of the marriage of Suriyopear's son, Prince Jay Jettha, with a Vietnamese princess.¹⁵

In A.D. 1616, the *1170 chronicle* says,

15 It is a Thai translation of a text presented to the Thai court in *cula* 1170/1808 AD. It is the only extant copy of this version and has never been translated into a western language or discussed in the literature, although it has appeared in part 71 of *Pra:jum bañśāvatār*. See Vickery, "Cambodia After Angkor", chapter 5. It begins in about 1575 and ends in 1628. It will be cited as the *1170 Fragment*, or *1170*. It seems to be part of the P57 manuscript of the École Française cited in Mk Phoeun, *Histoire*.

Vietnamese [*ñuon*] high official(s) [*khunnāñ*], head(s) of first class province(s), had been in the habit of offering tribute to the Vietnamese king [*cau*] in Tongking every year without fail. In the 11th month a (the) great *khunnāñ* rebelled against Tongking, set himself up as king [*cau*]. He had two daughters. He gave one of them to the king of Lan Chang, but her name is not known. The other one he gave to His Majesty [Suriyobārn]. Her name was Nāñ Cū. His Majesty was already old, and was not suitable for Nāñ Cū. So His Majesty gave Nāñ Cū to Prince Jay Jetṭhā, his son¹⁶.

They were duly married with Nāñ Cū being accorded formal installation as consort of an *upayurāj*. Her father sent tribute to Cambodia and asked to buy elephants and lacquer which he needed, and this was agreed to by Suriyobārn.

This story is obviously a reflection, as far as Vietnam is concerned, of the definite break between the Trịnh and the Nguyễn, and it also shows accurately the role of Cambodia as a supplier of elephants for the Nguyễn armies¹⁷. In contrast, though, to later traditions, the Nguyễn ruler is portrayed as considering Cambodia a more powerful kingdom. The later tradition, which has become deeply rooted in Cambodian folklore, is that the king Jay Jetṭhā, enamoured of a beautiful Vietnamese princess, agreed to

16. *PP*, Vol. XLV, p. 55.

17. Lê Thánh Khôi, *Le Viet-Nam, histoire et civilisation*, pp. 245-47, for the Trịnh -Nguyễn conflict. As for elephants, Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model*, although referring to the early nineteenth century, says, p. 252, "Cambodia was a major supplier of elephants", and p. 24, "the search for a reliable 'elephant market' obsessed Vietnamese military planners. It probably constituted one of the motives behind Minh-Mang's incursions into Laos and Cambodia". A reflection of this is also found in the Cambodian chronicle of *Wat Kok Kāk, khsae III*, pp. 22-23, which records that in A.D. 1813 Aṅg Cand sent 88 male and 88 female elephants to Gialong and received 1313 *naen* of silver in return. This role of Cambodia would have been equally, if not more, important for the Nguyễn at the beginning of their struggle with the Trịnh. Mak Phoeun, *Histoire*, mistakenly said that the Vietnamese asked for horses, but there is no doubt that the original text has 'elephants'. See Vickery, Review of Mak Phoeun, p. 414.

grant the Vietnamese special rights in the Saigon area in exchange for her, and that this led to the eventual loss of much Cambodian territory to the Vietnamese.¹⁸

Factually, of course, the tradition is inaccurate, for the first Vietnamese moves into the Saigon area did not come until between A.D. 1658 and 1674, at least forty years after the marriage in question¹⁹. Although Vietnamese records apparently contain no reference to such a princess²⁰, the *1170 Fragment* makes it appear that the Cambodian tradition may be based on a real event at a time when the Nguyễn court was much in need of Cambodian products. Whatever the facts may have been, it seems certain that the story embodied in *1170* was written down at a time when Vietnamese encroachments had not yet become a matter of serious concern to Cambodians, that is, probably before the end of the seventeenth century. It shows Vietnam asking favors from Cambodia, not Cambodia asking favors from Vietnam in exchange for territory.

Just as Cambodia at the time was not in danger from Nguyễn Viet Nam, neither did Cambodia need help from Viet Nam against Ayutthaya, abstracting from the circumstance that just when the Nguyễn were initiating warfare against the northern Trịnh they were hardly in a position to provide much aid to Cambodia.

As noted above, during the 17th century Ayutthaya was not a great danger to Cambodia. There was an invasion in 1622, but it was defeated by Cambodia, and for most of the 17th century Cambodia was as active in international trade as Ayutthaya—in fact, as described by Ishii (above) considered in Japan to be more important in international trade than Ayutthaya.

18. This tradition is treated in detail by Thái văn Kiểm in "La plaine aux cergs et la princesse de jade". I wish to thank John Whitmore for directing me to this source.

19. Lê Thánh Khôi, *Le Viet-Nam*, pp. 265-67.

20. At least not explicitly, for Lê Thánh Khôi, *op cit.*, does not mention the incident.