
SONGS AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST: PERCEPTIONS OF ORDER IN THREE CAMBODIAN TEXTS

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“Mon ami, faisons toujours des contes. Tandis qu’on fait un conte, on est gai; on ne songe à rien de fâcheux. Le temps se passe; le conte de la vie s’achève, sans qu’on s’aperçoive.”

— Diderot, “Letter to Grimm”

When the French imposed their protectorate on Cambodia in 1863, they took control of a society that had been pulverized by half a century of invasions and civil war. In these years, Cambodia often lacked a monarch, or had its monarch imprisoned, or closely patronized, by one of its two neighbors. In many ways, the first fifty years of the nineteenth century were “dark ages” resembling those which the country re-entered in the 1970s. I have discussed the narrative history of this period elsewhere.¹ For our purposes it is important to note that many of the precolonial manuscripts which have come down to us date from the 1850s when, under King Duang (r. 1847–1860), Cambodian literature, benefiting from a few years of peace, enjoyed a renaissance.² One of the texts I will discuss is a chronicle that looks back over the century from the vantage point of 1856. The other two are folktales, chosen from a wide range of published work, which seem to me to heighten and exemplify some of the themes in the chronicle and the perceptions of ambiguity in the moral order which the chronicle transmits.

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¹ David Chandler, “Cambodia Before the French: Politics in a Tributary Kingdom, 1794–1848” (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 1974).

² See David Chandler, “Going through the Motions: Ritual and Restorative Aspects of the Reign of King Duang of Cambodia,” in *Centers, Symbols, and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Lorraine Gesick, Monograph Series no. 26 (New Haven, CT: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, 1983), p. 99.

Before turning to the texts we might look briefly at the semantics of Cambodian conceptions of order; these are as valid for most of the twentieth century as they are for the nineteenth.

The word for “order” (as in, “to put in order”), or more exactly, the phrase *robāb rap roy*, means “the way things are [properly] arranged,” to place them symmetrically like books and papers on a desk, and also to rank them correctly, i.e., hierarchically, the ways they have been ranked before.³ The phrase *lomdab lomdoy* implies order on a horizontal plane, while another phrase for “order,” *sandap thno’p*, means literally “customary fingers’ width measurements,” where the word translated as “customary” (*sandap*) means “what has been heard”—presumably as the Buddhist Institute Cambodian Dictionary suggests over and over again.⁴ This phrase is used to describe order in vertical terms, i.e., in terms of strata.

There is nothing ad hoc about these terms for “order.” The contrast between wildness (*prei*, which means “forest”) and what is grown, civilized, arranged, predictable, like rice or families, is common to many Southeast Asian cultures and is one which I shall emphasize in the paper.⁵

In a similar vein, the Cambodian word for “to be” (*chea*) also means “normal,” as in the phrase *chea vinh*, “to regain one’s [normal] health.” The relationship between things as they are when they are properly arranged and things as they ought to be (or perhaps, the only way they can “be”) is thus a close one, linguistically, as suggested by our own colloquial phrase, “That’s the way it [always, repeatedly] goes.”

In nineteenth-century Cambodia, when people were always in danger and almost always illiterate, examples of orderliness (such as an elegant ceremony, a design in silk, or a properly chanted poem) were few and far between; all the same, the semantic overlappings mentioned above suggest that, to many Cambodians, things, ideas, and people—societies, in fact⁶—were thought to be safer and more authentic when they were ranked and in balance, arranged into the same hierarchical pattern (however ineffectual or unhappy) which they had occupied before. Wildness was to be feared, and so was innovation. “Don’t avoid a winding path,” says a

³ Editors’ note: we have maintained the original transliteration of Khmer in this essay, except in the case of “*kaun lok*,” the name and cry of the “child-of-the-world” bird, to match the now commonly used oral transliteration system used by the other contributors in this volume.

⁴ Buddhist Institute, *Vanananukrama Khmera, Dictionnaire Cambodgien* (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1968), p. 1251.

⁵ See Penny Edwards’s essay in this volume, as well as S. Lewitz, “Les inscriptions modernes d’Ankor Wat,” *Journal Asiatique* (1972): 116; Denys Lombard, “La vision de la forêt à Java,” *Etudes Rurales* 53–56 (1974): 479–85; Gabrielle Martel, *Lovea, Village des Environs d’Angkor* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1975), p. 36, which points out the philosophical contrast between the Cambodian words *sruk* [*srok*] (cultivated and settled land) and *prei*. For a stimulating analysis of this contrast in Western thought, see Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness: Archaeology of an Idea,” in H. White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 150–82.

⁶ The Cambodian word for “society” (*sangkum*) appears to be a neologism for it does not appear in the J. Guesdon, *Dictionnaire Cambodgien-Française*, Paris, 1930. The work itself apparently derives from a rarely used Sanskrit one, *samgrāma* (Pali *samgāma*), meaning “assembly,” or “host.” Ian Mabbett, personal communication. For a similar development in Vietnam, see David Marr, “Concepts of Individual and Self in Twentieth-Century Vietnam,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37,2 (2000): 769–96.

Cambodian proverb. “And don’t [automatically] take a straight one, either. Choose the path your ancestors have trod.”⁷

Cambodians in the nineteenth century—at least insofar as their social ideas are reflected in their literature—were backward-looking people, but I don’t mean to suggest that they were nostalgic for a verifiable golden age—at Angkor, for example. Instead, by “backward-looking” I mean only that their social conduct was based on ideas, techniques, and phrases which had been passed along through time and space like heirlooms, with the result that people were continually reliving, repeating, or “restoring” what was past—in ceremonial terms, in adages, and in the agricultural cycle. Things which could not be predictably transmitted, like violence, droughts, and disease, were linked in people’s minds with what was wild, and less distinctly perhaps with immoral, unremembered behavior in the past. Similarly, high rank, people thought, could be traced to meritorious, unverifiable behavior in *another life*. This dependence on the past for explanations, and the partial disassociation of people from responsibility for their actions, produced tensions in people trying to construct a usable moral order in terms of the everyday world. What comfort was it, for example, to “explain” that meritorious people (i.e., those with wealth and power) monopolized exploitation and commanded violence? How could supposedly “universal monarchs”—like the Cambodian queen in the 1840s—be held prisoner by the Vietnamese? Why did meritorious people die?

The chronicle I will discuss deals with some of these questions in the context of events, while the folktales face them metaphorically. The chronicle, after all, is firmly rooted in the nineteenth century, while the stories, probably much older than that, passed through the nineteenth century on their way to being written down. Both of them deal with crises in loyalty and culture resembling those which Cambodians as a whole endured in the 1830s and 40s; for this reason, I think, the three texts can be discussed together.

The first of the stories sets out to explain why a certain magpie-like bird in Cambodia is known by its cry, *kaun lok*, a phrase meaning “child of man,” or “child of the world.”⁸

Three small girls are abandoned by their widowed mother who has no interest in them and plans to remarry a “good-for-nothing man.” She leaves them to grow rice beside a pond in the forest, where

⁷ A. Pannetier, “Proverbes cambodgiens,” *Bulletin de l’ École Française d’Extrême-Orient*, XV,3 (1915): 71. There are several collections of proverbs in Khmer, which would be rewarding to study; see Solange Thierry, “Essai sur les proverbes cambodgiens,” *Revue de Psychologie des Peuples* 13 (1958); and Karen Fisher-Nguyen, “Khmer Proverbs: Images and Rules,” in *Cambodian Culture since 1975*, ed. May Ebi-hara, Judy Ledgerwood, and Carol Mortland (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 91–104.

⁸ For the Khmer texts of this story, see Buddhist Institute (comp.), *Brajum rioen pren bhak 4* (Collected Stories vol. 4) (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1966), pp. 1–10. See also Solange Thierry, *Etude d’un corpus de contes cambodgiens traditionnels* (Lille: Atelier Reproduction des thèses, Université de Lille III; Paris: Diffusion H. Champion, 1978), pp. 217–22. I have translated this story in *The Friends Who Tried to Empty the Sea: Selected Cambodian Folk Tales* (Clayton: Monash University Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1976). Thanks to Colin Poole, Cambodia Coordinator of the Wildlife Conservation Society, and my friend Sok Pirun, who remembers trying to trap *kaun lok* birds as a child in the 1950s, I have tentatively identified the *kaun lok* as the giant ibis (*ibis giganteus*), which is not especially large.

She gave them each a handful of cooked rice, some uncooked rice, and a little corn. She also gave them salt, some fish-sauce, and a piece of smoldering wood with which to start a fire. She thought, "A tiger will devour them tonight, for certain. If they manage to survive, they'll be dead from hunger soon enough."

That night as the girls lie awake terrified by the noises of the forest, they are protected by a local spirit (*arak thevoda*) who bellows to keep wild animals away and then goes off to plead on the children's behalf with Indra's guardian, Varuna.

"There's no need to bother Indra with this problem," Varuna said. "Those girls will be changed into birds soon enough. But in the meantime, you should protect them against wild animals, and be sure they get enough to eat—small fishes and snails, for example."

Little by little, the girls take to eating their food raw. Upset by this, they try to go back to their mother, but she thinks they are lying to her (the conversation turns around a play on words): exasperated, she chases them back into the forest.

At the pond when they return the smoldering wood has gone out but some of the corn has begun to grow. The girls eat it raw, along with *krim* fish, snails, and clams. For three months the spirit keeps wild animals away from the children and the pond, and

After six months had passed, the girls grew downy feathers all over their bodies, and their arms turned into wings. They could fly on branches now, and their new claws could grip the branches or pluck fruit ... Their lips narrowed at this time into beaks, and they lost their ability to talk. In their hearts, all the same, they knew they were people, not animals, even if when they tried to talk they had animals' voices.

Meanwhile, their mother's second husband has been sent to prison. The mother repents and comes to redeem her daughters. Even though they are birds, she can still recognize them, and follows them deeper and deeper into the forest, while they call out to her:

We are released from our humanity; we have turned into animals, and we are far more beautiful. Don't come near us!

The mother hears only the phrase *kaun lok* ("child of the world," translated as "humanity"). She runs on after them, runs out of breath, and dies.

The second story claims to be historical, taking place during the time when Udong was the capital of Cambodia (c. 1600–1866).⁹ It concerns a crocodile named

⁹ For the Khmer version of the story, see Buddhist Institute (comp.), *Brajum rioen pren bhak 5* (Collected Stories vol. 5) (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1969), pp. 179–88. See also Donald Lancaster, "The Decline of Prince Sihanouk's Regime" in *Indochina in Conflict*, ed. J. J. Zasloff and A. E. Goodman (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1972), p. 54. For other versions of this legend, see Evéline Porée-Maspéro, *Etude sur les rites agraires des cambodgiens*, 3 vols. (Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1962–1969), pp. 92–94, 97–100, and 196–97.

Thon who is a playmate-disciple of the abbot of a Buddhist monastery at Sambaur on the upper Mekong. The abbot

was fond of Thon and he'd often go to sit on a rock at the water's edge and call for Thon to come and play with him. Whenever the crocodile heard his voice, he hurried over to pay his respects to the abbot, taking care to honor the other monks of the monastery as well.

One day, the abbot is called away to Udong to cure a princess who has fallen ill. After a time, the crocodile misses his master and swims off after him. On the way he encounters a wicked crocodile but manages to avoid a fight. When he reaches Udong and finds the abbot resting in a pavilion beside the river, he catches him in his jaws, puts him on his back, and begins his voyage back to Sambaur.

In the first part of the journey, Thon tried to keep the abbot out of the water. He swam along carefully, skimming the surface. When he reached the territory of the wicked crocodile, however, Thon thought to himself: "If I fight this enemy, I'll have to go up and down in the water, flailing around, and my master will fall off. What can I do? Change myself into something different? Avoid a fight?"

The crocodile swallows the abbot, defeats the wicked crocodile, and when he reaches Sambaur to disgorge his master, the abbot is dead. Filled with chagrin, Thon decides that the princess is responsible for his master's death (for without her illness, the abbot would never have left home), so he swims back to Udong and swallows the princess, whom he surprises bathing. This leads to a hunt for the crocodile, sponsored by the king, and the story closes with Thon's dismemberment and the construction of a stupa holding the princess's ashes at Sambaur.

These stories say interesting things, I think, about tensions in the moral order between servitude and autonomy, for example, wildness and humanity, destiny and chance. Both stories ask: What is an animal? Who is to blame? And who is rewarded? And they give contradictory, oddly satisfying answers.

In the girls-into-birds story, we notice that not even Indra, the king of the gods, can halt the process of devolution. The gods, like students of Levi-Strauss, recognize an abyss between the raw and the cooked. The story is not, however, a mechanical working out of this idea. Because the girls are innocent, and because a local spirit happens to be there, they are protected by the spirit's beastlike roaring from predatory beasts. Their mother, on the other hand, is a wicked human being. She dies in the forest alone, which is to say, like a beast. Just before this, the girls rejoice to be free from the human condition, even though we are told that they "knew they were still people"; their mother recognizes them in spite of their appearance; she can't understand what they say.

The story, then, is in a sense "about" the frontier between the wild and the tamed, with "human" birds on one side of the border, and an "animal" woman on the other. Once the girls turn into birds, the gods are not needed to help them, for now they are "at home" in the forest. And yet the story is richer still, for it suggests that *kaun lok* birds, even today, might be aware, as we are, of their past. The story closes by mentioning that the birds cry out "*kaun lok*" when surprised by men in their natural habitat, which lies just at the edge of the woods, along the border of the

cultivated world; and at night—perhaps at the time just after sunset, which the French refer to as *entre chien et loup*—the story says that the cry “*kaun lok* disturbs the stillness.”

The story about Thon and the abbot also has a dreamlike quality which springs in part, I think, from the failure of the two characters to communicate with each other or to influence events. Thon, an animal, is capable of more subtlety of feeling than his master realizes. The monk plays with the crocodile and accepts his homage, but doesn't seem to tell him much about the world. The two don't understand each other's language or each other's mission in life. By his loyalty to the king, incomprehensible to Thon, for example, the abbot sets off a chain of deaths. By his humanly incomprehensible quarrel with another crocodile, Thon imperils his master. Seeking to save his master, the crocodile swallows him up; seeking to avenge the monk, he swallows the princess; he is a prisoner of his natural style, swept up inside a ruinous charade.

In both stories, an emphasis falls on the links between things as they are and things as they ought to be. Looking at the stories from this angle, several platitudes emerge, such as: girls who behave like birds will turn into birds; mothers who leave their children should be punished; crocodiles have no understanding of human affairs; kings are more powerful than beasts. But the stories themselves are not assertions of the status quo; they are momentarily successful assaults on it. The girls are preserved in the forest (as no one is), the crocodile is consumed with loyalty (as reptiles never are). On the whole, of course, while the stories say something about the perils of dependency, neither of them calls dependency into question. The girls, after all, try to go back to their mother; the crocodile's loyalty to his master is what eventually destroys him.

The verse chronicle from Wat Srolauv, in north central Cambodia, was composed in 1856 to commemorate the completion of the *wat* itself. The poem consists of twenty strophes, or *bot*, averaging (in typescript) about thirty lines apiece. Four distinct metric forms—all common to nineteenth-century Cambodian verse—are used. Unlike the two folk stories, the chronicle has not been published, although parts of it appear in other nineteenth-century texts.¹⁰

The poem traces the fortunes of an elite Cambodian family—a father, mother, and son—from about 1811 to 1856. In the course of the poem, which also tells of dislocations suffered by the kingdom, father and son die, and long stretches of the text, which was sponsored by the widowed mother, consist of dirges for these men. Wat Srolauv itself was built in memory of the son, whom many people in the audience probably knew. The author, a monk named Pech, was a relative of the sponsor, and perhaps was serving as abbot of the *wat*. Like the audience, he knew what life had been like in Srolauv under the Vietnamese protectorate and during the

¹⁰ *Sastra lboek rabalksat (Ang Chan)* (Document concerned with the annals of Ang Chan). Manuscript from Wat Srolauv, Kompong Thom, 1856, recopied 1951, in the archives of the Buddhist Institute, Phnom Penh. I am grateful to the late Dik Keam (murdered as a “class enemy” under Pol Pot in 1976) for providing me with a typescript in 1971. A related, published verse chronicle, from the same region, is *Rioen robalksat sruk khmaer* (The Story of the Royal Lineage in Cambodia) (RRSK), Phnom Penh, 1958, which was composed in 1874, but contains many passages identical to the ones in the Wat Srolauv manuscript, and clearly draws on earlier material. For a detailed history of this period, see Khin Sok, *Le Cambodge entre le Siam et le Vietnam (de 1775 à 1860)* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1991). Both of these texts have been edited and translated into French in Khin Sok, *L'annexion du Cambodge par les Vietnamiens au XIXe siècle* (Paris: You Feng, 2002).

Thai Invasions of 1833 and 1841. There was not a fanciful world where girls turned into birds or monks rode crocodiles. It was a world of suffering, instability, and war. The poem is about what has happened to a kingdom, a family, and an audience, all sharing a decline in merit for reasons that are difficult but necessary for the poet to explain. The poem describes two attempts by King Duang and the widowed mother to push back the wilderness and to restore and reenact the seamliness of the past by reconstituting kingship and sponsoring a *wat*. The poem itself, in this way, is an expiatory act. As far as we know, it was recited only on the one occasion.

In the preamble, the poet discusses the notions of merit and rebirth, which are central to the poem:

Sometimes people have merit, high status, possessions, more than anyone else, for sure, and on other occasions people are small and low, their lineage and descendants insignificant, like poor orphans altogether. This is destiny [*karma*]; suffering comes as a result of what we have done; merit and demerit are all mixed up together.

The reversals of fortune suffered by the family are then made more specific:

This poem has been composed for Lady Prak, deprived of her husband, so that all of you, men and women alike, can listen and understand ... Once she had merit, riches, possessions. Now all that has been reversed, has changed, and she is poor and bereft.

“Misfortune,” continues the poet, “is the essence of this poem”:

... and as for fate, it's like being in the middle of the sea, with no islands and no shore in sight, with no one to help, with none of the images of life.

The narrative then begins, with the marriage of Lady Prak around 1800 to a high official named Narin. Her own background is not recorded. The poet gives a lavish description of their horses, elephants, carts, food, servants, and slaves, commenting that “in those days, officials were better equipped than they are now.” Soon both receive titles and emblems of rank from the king (Chan, r. 1796–1835), for it is the king who bestows identities, and when he dies—as we shall see—these identities (and the merit they imply) become less efficacious.

In the second strophe, the couple's only child, a son named Meas, is born. Nourished by loving parents, he becomes “more beautiful than his father,” “neither short nor tall,” with a “round, lovable face.” His childhood passes peacefully, for King Chan, still meritorious, “watched over the border markers [*seima*] of the kingdom of Cambodia,” presumably from his “sacred center” in Phnom Penh.¹¹

¹¹ For discussions of this notion, see Clifford Geertz, “Centres, Kings, and Charimsa,” in *Culture and Its Creators: Essays in Honor of Edward Shils*, ed. J. Ben-David and T. C. Clark (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 172–46; Paul Mus, “Angkor in the Time of Javavarman VII,” *Indian Art and Letters* XI,2 (1937): 65–75; and H. L. Shorto, “The Planets, the Days of the Week, and Points of the Compass: Orientation Symbols in ‘Burma,’” in *Natural Symbols in Southeast Asia*, ed. G. B. Milner (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1978), pp. 152–64.

Then, in the year of the snake (i.e., AD 1833, the correct date), Siam launches an unexplained attack. Some officials flee into the fortress of Phnom Penh; others hurry off by boat to warn the “celestial king,” i.e., the emperor of Vietnam, allegedly in Saigon. Chan himself, however, offers no resistance to the invasion and flees instead to seek refuge at the Vietnamese court, at Hue, where he tells the emperor, Minh Mang, of the attack. Minh Mang orders a military expedition into Cambodia. This part of the poem plays tricks with the historical record. The first is that the Vietnamese had in fact exercised informal control over the Cambodian capital since a Thai invasion of 1811–12; therefore, Meas and his parents would have had to acquiesce, at least once before, to Vietnamese protection.¹² Moreover, the Thai attack of 1833 is made to seem unprovoked, perhaps to throw people’s sufferings (and their innocence) into relief, or to allow the poet to disapprove of an attack that did not include (as the 1841 invasion was to do) the restoration of a rightful king. In other chronicles, Chan orders resistance to the Thai before fleeing, but his ministers are unable to recruit any troops. Chan’s flight into the Mekong Delta is confirmed in these sources, but his visit to Minh Mang is fictional and meant as a way of pointing to a culpable collaboration with the Vietnamese, who succeeded, in 1834, in driving a Thai army out of eastern Cambodia, as well as suggesting that Chan could speak as an equal with the emperor of Vietnam. The poet describes the sacking of Phnom Penh by this retreating Siamese army:

They took everything away, and burned what had been people’s houses, until not one of them remained; they took off everyone’s possessions, masters’ and slaves’ alike, and they carried off all the people until not a man was left.¹³

When Chan returned to the devastated city in 1834, he asked the Vietnamese to rebuild it. The poem relates that the Vietnamese then dispatched middle-echelon officials, like Narin, to the countryside to build fortifications at the “doors of the country,” using locally recruited labor.

Narin is sent to north-central Cambodia, to the region of Barai, astride a potential invasion route, and rather near Srolauv. Under the Vietnamese, the population there is mobilized to dig wells, ponds, “moats and canals,” to raise fortifications, and to build granaries and gun emplacements:

And all the officials, high and low, stayed close together. None of them resisted the Vietnamese—for they were afraid of them, and tried not to displease them. They ordered workers to build fortifications the way the Vietnamese wanted them, with pointed stockades around them.

The poet adds that the Vietnamese also “taught the people how to fight, how to make rifles, and how to use their knives in combat.” All this, he says, was like a “meaningless game,” and when workers were slow, the Vietnamese beat them “like cats, dogs, cows, or buffaloes.”

¹² Interestingly, Narin appears in a manuscript chronicle (P-30, Fonds École Française d’Extrême-Orient, Phnom Penh) as leading an anti-Thai expeditionary force in 1815.

¹³ See also K. S. R. Kulap (pseud), *Anam Sayam yut* (Annam’s War with Siam) (Bangkok: Rongphim Sayam, 1970), pp. 658–60.

After mentioning Chan's death in 1835 and the succession to the throne of his three daughters under Vietnamese control, the poet relates that the governor of Kompong Svay, who was probably Narin's patron, flees to Siam to be replaced by an official friendlier to the Vietnamese, who soon decides to

capture all the Cambodian officials, high and low, and charge them with crimes. When the ordinary people heard this, they gathered together and said, "If they capture our leaders, we will have no one to honor and respect," but they were terrified of the Vietnamese, and far too scared to say anything in public.

In these lines, the necessity of hierarchy, as seen by underlings, is nicely put; it is echoed in other contemporary texts.¹⁴ Another point to stress about the poet's description of events in Barai in the 1830s is that his statements and chronology could be verified by older members of his audience, who had lived through this period of Vietnamese control.

Although ordinary people are too frightened to act, the Vietnamese threat to capture the officials pushes some Cambodian officials into revolt.

They did not wait to be told to do so, but raised a military force, rapidly, crying out to their troops: "Kill all the Vietnamese. From Kandal to Stoung, kill them in their fortresses, until not one of them is left alive!"

To be effectively *recited*, a poem in Narin's memory, sponsored by his widow, and confined largely to a Buddhist frame of reference, must strike a balance between Narin's "correct" anti-Vietnamese feelings (the Vietnamese, after all, were thought of as unbelievers) and playing down his violent, unmeritorious acts. There is the problem of transmission, also, for the text was passed along, in the first instance, by being chanted at participants in some of the events which it relates. For this reason, the poet—himself a Buddhist monk—had to walk a fine line between accuracy and prettiness. Although we know from other sources, for example, that massacres of Vietnamese took place all over Cambodia in the late 1830s, the poet makes sure that the Vietnamese attack before the Cambodians are provoked. When Narin hears of this attack, he

was unable to stay until the army came. He lost his head with fright; and so he ordered his (extended) family [*jat krou*], many of whom were elderly, to fill their ox carts with possessions and to leave at once.

In the scramble to leave, several carts are broken, and the family's possessions, including such manifestations of high status as gold and silver trays, spill out on the ground:

That was the year of the cock (1837); in the year of the cock, everyone was frightened, and many possessions were lost forever, scattered along the roads and in the forest.

¹⁴ See, for example, those cited in Chandler, "Cambodia Before the French," p. 144.

The possessions are like the smoldering stick in the story about the birds. They are symbols of civilization, ways of expressing a frontier between the wild, undifferentiated world, and the world of hierarchies anchored in ritual and in the past. As the exiles move northwestward through unfamiliar, uncultivated land, they encounter many hardships. After several days on the edge of death, they push on, convinced that the Vietnamese are in pursuit:

Their misery was great. There was no food at all, no fish, no rice, nothing normal to stave off their hunger; instead they dug for lizards, without pausing to think, or be guilty about it; they simply did it together. They hunted *saom* roots in the depths of the forest, and other roots as well to make into a kind of soup; there was no fish—no fish-paste, nothing to make food palatable. They ate like this until their hunger went away, but it was hard to swallow the food; they sat silently beside the road, intensely poor, and miserable.

This passage reiterates the themes of brutalization and reversal which permeate the poem, but softens and ennobles them somewhat by casting them into metered verse that links these hardships and wanderings in the forest to those of characters *in other poems*, like Prince Rama, for example.¹⁵

On the frontier of Siam, the caravan encounters some Thai officials (*kha luong*) who “take pity” on them, and give them some provisions. Narin goes alone to Bangkok to pay homage to King Rama III (r. 1824–1851), the patron of Chan’s self-exiled brother, Prince Duang, who has lived in Bangkok under Thai protection since 1812. Rama III questions Narin about his voyage and restores his rank (while perhaps deflecting his loyalties somewhat) by presenting him with gold and silver trays, bowls, goblets, and lengths of patterned silk.

Interestingly, many of these emblems of rank are connected with ceremonial consumption of food or betel. Emblems of rank in Vietnam, on the other hand, were often such things as seals of office and paper on which to write decrees.¹⁶ By paying homage to the only Buddhist monarch accessible to him, Narin regains his “rightful” position in the world; however, in another reversal still, he dies as soon as he gets back to his family, in the forest, far from home, as if lacking merit in some way.

In a strophe given over to Lady Prak’s mourning for him, she regrets that she is so far from home “where possessions, riches, and rank would make it easy to celebrate [a funeral] while it is so difficult here.” And she continues:

Now all families, as they live out their lives, grow sick, die, and disappear, losing to misfortune, as if on the slope of a hill. Some die as children, some as brothers

¹⁵ See Saveros Pou, trans., *Ramakerti* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1977), and Pou, *Etude sur Ramakerti* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1977). Wandering in the forest is a feature of many Cambodian folktales and of Javanese *wayang* theater. The family’s peregrinations, then, might be seen as an example of life imitating art.

¹⁶ Chandler, “Cambodia Before the French,” p. 81. For Thai parallels, see Lorraine Gesick, *Kingship and Political Integration in Traditional Siam, 1767–1824* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1976), especially pp. 48 and 112ff. Some of the emblems of office were in use as early as the tenth century AD: cf. G. Cœdès, ed., *Les Inscriptions du Cambodge*, vol. 4 (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1957), p. 181.

and sisters, and indeed all of us must die, husbands and wives as well, weakened with suffering and fever.

The linking of propriety/property recurs often in the poem; part of the widow's sadness on the frontier is that her husband's merit has become so ineffectual so soon. Nonetheless, a suitable funeral ceremony takes place, with Brahmins (*youki*) on hand to officiate, as well as Buddhist monks. Hearing of the family's plight from officials in the region, Rama III allows them to "settle and grow rice" (or, presumably, have rice grown for them) along the frontier.

The poet then shifts his focus to the Vietnamese zone of occupation which, "after the family had left, [became] unhappy." Vietnamese and Vietnamese-sponsored Cambodian armies, he tells us, scour the countryside, hunting down the people who had been killing Vietnamese. Reaching north-central Cambodia, the troops find only "people cowering in the forest"—a chilling premonition of events in 1979 and 1980. Many of these are brought back and imprisoned, presumably in villages, to the number of "one hundred thousand men." The poet goes on to describe Vietnamese punishments and tortures in detail.¹⁷ At precisely this point, the Vietnamese (1841, according to other sources) arrest the princesses and the highest-ranking Cambodian officials in Phnom Penh:

The officials (who remained at liberty) and the people pondered together, and decided to raise troops and kill the Vietnamese, so that the Vietnamese wouldn't be able to capture and kill them at first; for if they did, Cambodia would no longer exist.

The phrase "pondered together" (*kut knea*) in the passage should not suggest democratic procedures so much as a community of interest and a sense of oppression shared between "high" and "low" members of society, especially at this time.

Once again, what pulls Cambodians into concerted action is the fear that upper ranks in the society, which defined the others, had been eliminated by unbelievers and that, therefore, Cambodia—as a set of hierarchical arrangements—"would no longer exist." Being "wild" meant having no one to respect, or to look down on; orderliness had been destroyed by foreigners and violence, perhaps, was at last permissible, to restore it.

In forming a notion of what Cambodia "was," regalia, and especially the king's sword (*preah khan*), always played an important part, right up to 1975. Similarly, possessions indicative of status—such as umbrellas, betel-boxes, or gold and silver trays—play an important part in the poem. In some ways, they seem to have been more important than any duties an official was expected to perform. Duties, in fact, aren't mentioned in the poem, which focuses instead on shifts in status, fortune, and patronage, which is to say, in *merit* as observed by others. The poet suggests, indeed, that there is a close connection between power and possessions, which aren't merely symbols of merit, but proofs or manifestations of it. A linkage like this is not unusual

¹⁷ These include salting open wounds, burying alive, eye-gouging, and so on. The ensemble of these tortures passed into Cambodian folklore and history; see Eng Sut, *Akkasar mahaboros khmaer* (Documents about Cambodian Heroes) (Phnom Penh: n.p., 1969), pp. 1214–16. Interestingly, the passage describing torture is one which this version shares with the published verse chronicle about this period (see note 10, above), whether accurate or not.

in a society which places such emphasis on rank differentials and the difference between haves and have-nots; the Cambodian word for “rich,” indeed, means primarily “have.” The haves, in other words, had to be seen (by the have-nots) amidst their numerous possessions.¹⁸

The poet skims over the war that raged in Cambodia in the early 1840s, choosing instead to stress the restorative aspects of the reign of King Duang, who returned to the former capital of Udong with a Thai army in 1841 and was crowned king after protracted Thai-Vietnamese fighting and negotiations in 1847.

What Rama III had done for Narin, by presenting him with regalia, Duang now performs for Cambodia as a whole. Reimposing propriety, he brings the kingdom back to life—blotting out the troubles that had occurred. Like the Thai monarch Rama I’s refashioning of Ayudhya in the new city of Bangkok in the 1780s, Duang fastidiously restores his father’s capital in Udong. The passage in the poem describing the restoration resembles one in the chronicles that describes similar work, by Duang’s father, coming back from exile in Siam in 1794.¹⁹ Duang’s own return, of course, was vivid to listeners to the poem.²⁰ A point to stress is the contrast between the harmony, propriety, and elegance of his actions and the homelessness, barbarism, and the loss of status described in earlier strophes.

After Duang’s coronation, the refugees along the frontier gradually drift home. Meas, his mother, and their followers hurry to Srolauv with their possessions, their ox-carts making the noise *kokik kokok*. They are welcomed back by local people. Meas orders them to build him a new house. When this is finished, he frets about his lack of rank:

“I am destitute,” he thought. “I am too poor; and as this is true, I should consider offering myself [to the king] as a slave. My father used to be important; he had honor and high rank, but that has vanished. I must go and become a slave to the king.”

The audience would not take Meas’s allegation of poverty very seriously, sitting outside a gilded *wat* constructed by his mother. But to Meas himself, the fact that he lacked an identity bestowed by the king meant that he was impoverished, in terms of merit, and perhaps in terms of an entourage, or at least entitlement to it, as well.²¹

¹⁸ This notion of visible merit (*bun*) leads us back to the idea of regalia (including chronicles) which are hidden away, polished, added to, and passed along through time. Chronicles, like merit, are additive; the notion of personal transformation is lacking from them. See Shelly Errington, “Some Comments on Style in the Meanings of the Past,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 38,2 (1979): 231–44.

¹⁹ Eng Sut, *Akkasar*, pp. 1012–13.

²⁰ Inscription K. 142 (Cœdès’s classification). See E. Aymonier, *Le Cambodge*, vol. 1 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1900), pp. 349–51. See also Lunet de Lajonquiere, *Inventaire descriptif des monuments du Cambodge*, vol. 1 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1910), p. 208.

²¹ Cf. the words of the Sunan of Surakarta (1788–1820), quoted in Soemarsaid Moertono, *State and Statecraft in Old Java* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1968; repr. 1974), p. 94: “There is nothing to be compared with serving the king; he will see the king’s courtyard and will be respected and have a name (in society) ... ; serving can be likened to debris drifting in the ocean, going wherever it is commanded to.”

His departure gives the poet, *via* Lady Prak, the opportunity for an aria about the perils of living in the city (which few in the audience would have visited); but Meas persists, and sets off by boat for Udong.

He soon attracts the attention of the king, because he acts like a “true servant, who never does anything improper,” probably—although the text is unclear about it—as some sort of page at court.

Returning to Srolauv, he courts the daughter of a governor, impressing her parents with his “ancient pedigree,” his merit, and his ability to arrange ceremonies “according to old traditions.” His brief separation from his bride-to-be (who was probably in view during the recitation of the poem) allows the poet to spin and embroider stanzas of advice to her, stressing the importance of obedience to her husband. When she joins Meas in Srolauv, she finds him “worried sick” that he might be recalled to Udong, away from his village, his mother, and his wife. Satisfied with his new rank, he has become fearful of Duang; for the main purpose of his visit, it seems, had been to have a rank bestowed on him with which he can lead his easy life.

Soon after he returns home with his wife, *i.e.*, just as his merit is established, Lady Prak complains to him that she lacks proper offerings (*borikkha*) to present to local monks. Meas, “intelligent and understanding of his mother’s heart,” offers to go back to Udong to procure them for her. His mother tries to dissuade him but she fails, and he leaves for the capital by canoe. After buying the offerings, he sets off for Srolauv. However,

when they reached Thkoub Island, he was stricken ill, and then got worse. He tried to stay conscious, and the servants in the canoe tried to row faster; but his fate was very near, his illness was too heavy. He tried to think of life; then he couldn’t think of life; his life was over.

Meas dies as his father had done, on his way home from performing what seems to have been a meritorious act. Why, asks the poet, was it his fate to “die in the middle of the forest, like a poor man in a far-off land?”

Here again we encounter the contrast between wilderness, animality, poverty, anonymity, and loneliness, on the one hand, and villages, cultivation, sociability, and bestowed identities, on the other. Just as girls are not supposed to turn into birds, meritorious people are not supposed to die like ordinary men—*i.e.*, unexpectedly, like the people listening to the poem—although they often do. In nineteenth-century Cambodia, the frontier between the two was not especially sharp; people in the audience had crossed it, and come back, more than once, just as the *kaun lok* do.

The strophes that follow are given over to laments of Lady Prak and her daughter-in-law, who feels as if “life has been beaten from her body.” Lady Prak declares:

O favorite son, when you were born I nourished you, gently, gently, and lay beside you, and embraced you, so that no powdery dust could touch you; no one allowed you to be sad or to cry from hunger. Oh why did you die in the forest, while you were still so young?

The remainder of the poem, perhaps a hundred and fifty lines, deals with Meas's cremation, his mother's mourning, and the construction of Wat Srolauv. The poet recounts that work began on the construction in 1851, and continued, on a part-time basis, alternating with work in the fields, until 1855. One problem mentioned by the poet is the shortage of able-bodied men; another is the scarcity of decorations, like gilded mirrors and gold leaf. At each stage of the construction, festivals take place; at the most recent of these, Lady Prak recites a long prayer, addressed to the Buddha image of the *wat*, offering up the *wat* itself in exchange for assurances of salvation. The poet describes the levels of hell to which people are consigned when they lack merit and "act like crazy pigs," comparing this to the behavior of the patrons of the poem who, by constructing a *wat* (and, perhaps, by allowing history to be recited) have a meritorious future for themselves.

The recitation of the poem, in fact, like the construction of the *wat*, is at once a celebration of hierarchy and sociability: hierarchy by means of the values expressed, and the elegance which expresses them, and sociability because the people listening to the poem are also the ones who built the *wat*, and thus partake of these two kinds of elegance. Similarly, the recitation of tales that are "about" the boundary between the forest and the field is, in a sense, to *mark off* the boundary, as we listen together to the stories.

The three texts that I have discussed suggest that there were two contrasting perceptions of moral order in early nineteenth-century Cambodia. They were not, as one might expect, perceptions on the part of those in power *versus* perceptions of the powerless, or perceptions of people who could read *versus* those of people who could not.²² Rather, there was a moral order for everyone—or at least those reachable by texts of this kind—based on prescription, memorization, and teaching, largely Buddhist in orientation, on the one hand, and perceptions rooted in the real world, on the other. The first was a celebration of hierarchical arrangements, operating, ideally, in the common good. The second was an attempt to survive inside the framework of what was going on.

Some Cambodian literature, like epic poetry or the Tmenh Chey cycle (a picaresque novel about a rogue), can be seen as primarily idealistic, or primarily profane, either sanctifying or overturning the meritoriousness of power. People called on these forms of discourse not only when they were told to, by the elite, but also on their own, to relieve the pain that came from living in the world. They could escape the world for an evening by following Rama into an enchanted forest, or they could overturn it, momentarily, by hearing how Tmenh Chey outwitted kings, ministers, and even the Chinese. But there was no real escape from the world outside the stories, a world which, in many ways, these two extreme forms of literature failed to address.

²² For a discussion of the issue, see Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), especially chapters 1–3. See also Kathleen Gough, "Implication of Literacy in Traditional China and India," and Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1968). For Asian references to this general theme, see Madeleine Biardeau, "Théories du Langage en Inde," in Julia Kristeva, et al., *La Traversée des Signes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975); and also S. J. Tambiah, "Literacy in a Buddhist Village in Northeast Thailand" in Goody, *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, pp. 85–131.

The texts I have chosen, on the other hand, exemplify tensions and overlappings between these two extremes, and between two ways of looking at the question of moral order. They describe the gaps that open between what ought to happen in the world, what often happens, and the “normal.” Thus the girls, though good, change into animals; the crocodile, although loyal, is destroyed. Narin honors a monarch, and Meas his mother. In the course of doing so, both of them are stricken dead. Similarly, people listening to the poem, who had hidden in the forest like animals in the 1830s, are now celebrating around a new *wat*, glittering with mirrors and shimmering gold leaf. There is poetic justice here, as there is for the girls, who as birds remember their humanity, and for Lady Prak, who asks for merit on a bereaved occasion, and is granted it, if not perceptibly by “heaven,” by the people who have worked on her behalf and have now gathered to celebrate their work with her.

In spite of momentary triumphs, poetic justice, or moments of shared intensity (as when listening, together, to poems and music), the world of nineteenth-century Cambodia was a desperate, cacophonous place. People had no explanations for suffering that would allow any but the magically endowed to overcome it; they had no explanation for justice that led them to question the propriety of exploitation. They had practical explanations for injustice, and Buddhist ones as well: a tiger is bigger than a king; King Chan’s lack of merit brought misery to his people. These explanations fitted some of the facts, but not as many as the texts I have discussed. In a sense, the texts “answer” questions that no one dared to ask, but in the end, what do they *explain*? No more, and of course no less, than songs at the edge of the forest, as night comes on,²³ the time *entre chien et loup*. Certainly neither the poet nor the characters in the poem saw themselves as acting out roles in an historical process; for at this time, as George Steiner suggests in another context, “All human beings were subject to general disorder or exploitation as they were to disease. But these swept over them with tidal mystery.”²⁴

Hierarchies and those who inhabit them—like the characters in the poem—are oriented to the past, when things were not so bad, and so are perceptions of the moral order that hesitate, as these perceptions do, in the presence of revolutionary change. The idea that bestowed identities as an official, for example, or a Buddhist monk kept the wilderness at bay for the “haves” at least, was widely held in

²³ I have borrowed this image from a lovely passage in Fredrik Barth, *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman of New Guinea* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1975), p. 267: “My own image for the achievements of Baktaman understanding and codification is provided by the concrete symbol of their own dance evenings. Occasionally, a score or two of adults and youths will come together at night, aided by torches and a partly overcast moon. They dress in their finery, including cassowary-feathers for the seniors, dance to their sacred drums, and sing their songs of love and violence, thereby shaping the whole scene in complex cultural imagery, positively intoxicating themselves with the force and vitality of their own expression. But if you move a hundred metres along one of their paths, you find yourself outside this circle of cultural imagery; and through the trees you glimpse a panorama of immense, untouched forest-covered landscape, dwarfing man’s tiny village clearing and muting his tiny noise. The command which the Baktaman achieve over their situation is, as for all of us, at best a subjective command only, asserted in those limited sectors where their awareness asserts itself. And in creating this awareness, the symbols fashioned in their rites are both their main beacons and their tools.”

²⁴ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle* (London: Faber, 1971), p. 19. It is illuminating to note, in closing, that the Javanese word for “chronicle” (*babad*) derives from the verb that means “to clear a wilderness.” See Peter Carey, *The Cultural Ecology of Early Nineteenth-Century Java* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1974), p. 4.

nineteenth-century Cambodia. But when hierarchies break down, spilling onto the roads of the forest like gold and silver trays, and when a society, like Cambodia's in the 1830s, 1840s, and the 1970s, appeared to have come to an end, where does one look for explanations?