Behind Khmer Smiles: Prospero's Adventures in Cambodia

The Cambodian *coup d'état* deposing Prince Norodom Sihanouk caught most of the world by surprise. Sihanouk, with his dynamic personality, assertive foreign policy and royal legitimacy, had convinced friends and foes alike that his regime was progressive and smooth-running, a veritable oasis of peace and tranquillity in a turbulent Southeast Asia. This was not the case. In *Derrière le Sourire Khmer*, one of Sihanouk's closest associates assesses the inner workings and problems of the regime during its final years.* A certain, marvellous Cambodia had disappeared, Charles Meyer asserts. Sihanouk, failing to find original solutions to problems of decolonization was forced to fall back on the spirit of monarchy and neo-traditional "Buddhist Socialism" as the ideal road to development. This approach had little chance for success, according to Meyer, and the idea seemed to obscure from Sihanouk's view the threat posed by new political forces including an emerging class of "greedy and impatient" profiteers, peasant revolts, revolutionary organization in the countryside and conspiracies aided by American intelligence agencies. Sihanouk's "brutal awakening" was the *coup d'état* followed by massive American and Vietnamese invasions which provoked Khmer civil war. Unfortunately, Meyer believes this realization was, in some sense, too late. More than a decade of benign neglect, incompetent economic administration and increasingly authoritarian politics had taken its heavy toll on the morale and energy of Khmer society. Meyer forecasts a "very somber future" for Cambodia, particularly for its young people and its peasants whose interests he claims to defend. In fact, the very survival of Khmer civilization rests in the balance, he concludes, a situation reminiscent of the state of affairs in the mid-19th century when the French "rescued" the Khmer kingdom from absorption into the Thai and Vietnamese empires.

Derrière le Sourire Khmer is a subtle and complex book, subtle because it confounds the personal experience of Charles Meyer with Cambodian history under the pretense of objectivity. It is revealing that Meyer fails to discuss his personal relationship with Sihanouk and his own contribution to the events, policies and extravagances for which he

* Charles Meyer, Derrière le Sourire Khmer (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1971), 414 pp. Photographs, Map.

now criticizes the deposed Chief of State. Sihanouk's regime was noted for its large contingent of French administrators, advisors and businessmen, a neo-colonial presence which irritated important segments of the Khmer intelligentsia and became an issue of some importance in the coup. Meyer was without doubt the most prominent of these Frenchmen because of his enormous influence in all areas of foreign and domestic policy making and notably in domestic economic planning. Called to his vocation from love of adventure rather than professional training, he arrived on foot in Phnom Penh in 1955 and requested employment in Sihanouk's personal secretariat. His energy, intelligence and personal commitment to Sihanouk were recognized by the Prince, and Meyer was rewarded in the form of increasing power and responsibility. By 1961, it was widely acknowledged that he was almost as powerful as Sihanouk: His word or decision was tantamount to the Prince's own.

Sihanouk's decline signals Meyer's own. Meyer points with considerable disapproval to the increasing influence of Sihanouk's third wife, Monique, and the rise of her clique after 1966; to Sihanouk's increasing neglect of internal economic crises; and to his contrived efforts to attain a rapprochement and economic aid from the United States as a means of alleviating domestic political and economic pressures on his regime. Sihanouk, refusing to reduce court expenditures or to curb the appetites of corrupt bureaucrats, ignored the advice of "Cambodian specialists and foreign experts" (i.e. Meyer) who advocated austerity measures, elimination of prestige expenditures and extensive development of the agricultural sector. Other references to being ignored are less opaque. Meyer's remarks about unnamed ladies of the court influencing important decisions, his dismissal of "specialists and experts" of other ideological persuasions as swindlers and opportunists and his backbiting compliments to Sihanouk "in his moments of lucidity" betray a certain arrogance and smugness. His competitiveness denotes a certain apprehension over his increasing isolation from Sihanouk's inner circle. Thus, much of his criticism of Sihanouk's character and behavior during these years seems to reflect personal resentment of a patron who has betrayed him rather than disinterested analysis of the social forces which slowly drained Sihanouk's regime of its real political and economic power. It is this subtle confusion of political history with personal experience which

explains in part why Cambodians of all political groups are confused by and unhappy with this book. If the *coup d'état* was a "brutal awakening" for Sihanouk, the demise of Sihanouk's regime was no less painful for Charles Meyer who was no longer a hero or an "expert" in his adopted land and simply forgotten in his native France.

Paradise Lost

In addition to this confusion of perspectives, *Derrière le Sourire Khmer* is complex because of the wide variety of psychological, social, economic and political data Meyer brings to bear on the central theme of the book. He is embarked on a search for the nature and fate of Khmer civilization which seems to him to suffer under the sheer weight of its glorious past, merely enduring and surviving neo-Angkorian tyrannies (including Sihanouk's), yearning for but never achieving renaissance. This theme and the strikingly asocial and romantic way in which it is developed, immediately bring to mind the "white man's burden" *genre* of colonial literature which, for all its peculiarities and fantasizing, might have important things to say about the psycho-cultural aspects of decolonization in Cambodia. For example, while most scholars of international relations discuss Sihanouk's policy of neutrality in terms of the economic aid it secured from both communist and capitalist powers or in terms of its political expediency vis-à-vis the problem of hostile, pro-American neighbors, Meyer emphasizes its importance in the accumulation of international sympathy, capital which is "indispensable" for the well-being of the ruling elite. This observation and others remind the reader of the difference between an externally-oriented elite and inner-directed nationalist leaders in other countries who reject outside assistance and sympathy along with the cultural and social penetration which they imply. In an oblique way, this observation reveals the persistence of a colonial dependence mentality among Khmer bureaucrats and values which contradict their nationalism.

In a less satisfactory way, Meyer also challenges the myth of the passive, lazy and politically uninvolved Buddhist. In appearance, Meyer writes, the peasants are very respectful of authority but, in fact, they have resisted all attempts at central organization which they perceive as restricting their natural liberty. This liberty also entails a certain

vagabondage and social banditry in traditional rural life. Meyer sees the passivity of the peasant before authority and his penchant for rebellion and violence as complementary manifestations of self-pride, a desire to be admired, and competitiveness. Travelers visiting Khmer villages receive extraordinary hospitality and attention even from the poorest of families. Nevertheless, the peasant is totally unpredictable in his behavior, particularly in his emotional reactions. "His patience and prudence might be exhausted without warning and he then becomes capable of all excess." Collective mob violence often assumes the aspect of a ritual feast; unpremeditated murders or atrocities can be committed in a moment of folly similiar to the chaotic, mindless behavior of the Malay *amok*. In reality, Meyer writes, the Cambodian has a depth of cruelty which emerges on the first occasion.

In spite of some of the qualities he attributes to them, Meyer finds Khmer peasants "very engaging with all their contradictions, prisoners of tradition and impervious in their reactions." The essence of their nature is summed up for him by the indefinable, inscrutable Khmer smile, the half-smile which floats on the stone lips of the gods of Ankor:

> "Dans toute l'Asie extrême-orientale le sourire est le masque de la politesse derrière lequel on s'observe, on se congratule ou on se bat. Mais au Cambodge ce masque est plus souvent une barrière d'indifférence, ambiguë et aimable, que l'on dresse entre soi et les autres. Il ne faut jamais considérer le sourire comme une invitation au dialogue mais bien au contraire comme la marque d'une certaine inquiétude et d'un embarras devant un intrus, comme l'indication que l'on n'a l'intention ni de répondre á des questions indiscrètes ni d'en poser. Sourire c'est signifier à l'autre, à l'étranger : "pas d'ingérence dans mon domaine". Souvent même on aura le sentiment que l'écran du sourire en vient à cacher un vide intérieur créé comme une défense absolue contre un éventuel viol de la pensée." p. 33.

Thus, Prospero meets his Caliban or Robinson Crusoe confronts his Friday's society. Meyer copes with people whom he finds both reassuring and terrifying by stripping them of humanity. Caliban in the guise of Khmer peasant is portrayed as both slavish and incorrigible. Disquieting feelings articulated by Meyer in the presence of men he

perceives to be primitive ("Khmer peasant life has not changed for a thousand years") and indomitable if not savage in their mindlessness, approach racialism particularly as this assumes personal significance in the physical characteristic of the smile, images of which permeated the French language and French-directed press of Sihanouk's regime. His uneasiness manifests itself in the fantasy of paternalistic virtue and dominance, fantasy because no real relationship exists between him and these elusive, depersonalized distant beings. These are, in fact, his own creations and not real Khmer peasants. It is not coincidental that identical peasant personalities have been attributed to "natives" in other colonial societies with indigenous social structures and cultures radically different from those of the Khmer.* Even Meyer comes close to acknowledging his own stereotyping and racial projection when he mentions in passing a baffling quality of the Khmers "to assume the image projected upon them by others."**

Meyer's fantasies about peasant life explain a discontinuity between the first third of his book and the sections dealing with Phnom Penh politics and Sihanouk's demise. The falseness of his characterization of peasants is revealed by his inability to place them in any meaningful social context. Although he exposes the myths of Cambodia's natural richness by pointing to the poorness of soils and irrigation systems, the absence of mineral resources, the low yield from forest lands and the twin hazards of flood and drought in the monsoon zone, and discusses the natural push of demographic forces resulting in overpopulation, parcellization of landholdings and uncontrollable emigration to the capital city of Phnom Penh, he is unable to link these facts to politics in Phnom Penh and relate them to the rise of the new urban bourgeoisie. From where, then, did this new class emerge? Meyer suggests, in another example of his racialism, that these are descendants of Chinese immigrants, simultaneously stripping them of any links with Cambodia's rural heritage (as he sees it) and avoiding any implication of French colonialism! In still another

* O. Mannoni, *Psychologie de la Colonisation* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1950), *passim*, or its English translation, *Prospero and Caliban* (New York, Praeger, Inc., 1956).

** Readers with an interest in Cambodian peasant life and society should consult May M. Ebihara, *Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia* (Ann Arbor, University Microfilms, 1971), and Jean Delvert, *Le Paysan Cambodgien* (Paris, Mouton & Co., 1961).

paradox, he accuses bureaucrats in this "new bourgeoisie" of being more overtly aggressive and exploitative in their relations with the peasants than traditional aristocratic and feudal patrons had been while repeatedly denying that the depletion of rural resources and increasing rural poverty changed peasant life. A popular movement against Sihanouk was inconceivable because of the "apathy" of a people used to enduring (*"faire le gros dos"*) the exactions of royal mandarins through the ages. He explains away the serious increase in crime and banditry, which officials in Phnom Penh sought to conceal, by suggesting that the violent, indomitable and unorganizable half of the Khmer peasant personality (his imaginary one) has been brought into play, and then, apparently forgetting he has denied the presence of social change, he laments the disappearance of a certain natural honesty and simplicity from rural life.

For Meyer, Cambodian society is held together in rather strict hierarchal and mechanical ways. He evinces no understanding (as distinct from knowledge) of the cultural and social institutions which make up the warp and woof of Khmer society, which define role networks and the ways Khmers relate to each other as individuals or as groups. He opts for the colonial explanation. Problems of disorder are problems with men, not institutions. His psychologizing of essentially social phenomena prevents him from fully understanding the emergence of leftist movements because lateral forces (class consciousness, ideologies), social contexts (interstices of rural-urban "gap"), and cultural-organic strains (religious-secular tension, rural Khmerness vs urban, foreign materialism) cannot be conceptualized in a colonial, hierarchal world view. Meyer talks about leftist *leaders* but his inability to perceive social linkages and discontinuities and his portrayal of peasants as social isolates prevents him from recognizing their organizational and political potential. Consequently, he mistakenly dismisses the Khmer left as weak and ephemeral although he has sympathy for them since they (also) defend peasant interests. Thus, he reduces Cambodian politics to a zero-sum contest between Sihanouk and right-wing urban elites. His reference to the honest, orderly bureaucracy bequeathed to Sihanouk by the French and his persistent invocation of the chaotic circumstances under which France entered Cambodia in 1863, betray his yearning for the return of order, colonial order. Sihanouk fell from power, in Meyer's analysis, because

he was a bad administrator, because he failed to curtail the greed of his civil servants and his entourage, and to coopt his opponents and young people.

The Sihanouk Regime

The last sections of Meyer's book discuss the urban world and elite competition for political power. Here Meyer's discussion is more coherent and contains some interesting bits of information but there is not as much historical data as one would expect from a man with 15 years of participation and experience in the regime. Once again this points to Meyer's overwhelming preoccupation with his own desires and ambitions as distinct from genuine concern for Cambodians. In the interests of brevity and clarity, I think it is useful to summarize these sections in light of what is already known about the period to draw out the contrast between more conventional interpretations of the Sihanouk regime and Meyer's very particular view.

Meyer correctly sets the stage for the urban power struggle by discussing the disorder which characterized Cambodian politics in the immediate aftermath of its independence from France in 1953. The countryside was economically devastated by the extensive military activity of the final years of the first Indochina war. In Phnom Penh, elite cleavages were sharp and well-defined after several years of French-sponsored parliamentary rule and democratic elections. The monarchy itself was under serious challenge by young, "modernist" civil servants who made up the Democratic party. At one and the same time, Meyer reports, King Sihanouk was compelled to find a solution to the economic crisis, to fulfill election requirements laid down by the Geneva Accords on Indochina and to weld together a regime which would engender support in the countryside and unite elite factions in the dual cause of national independence and development. After an initial attempt to impose direct monarchal rule was vetoed by his advisers and representatives of the International Control Commission, Sihanouk hit upon the formulas which were to characterize his regime from 1955 until 1970.

Abandoning formal pretenses to monarchal rule, Sihanouk announced the *rassemblement* of all parties and individuals in a mass move-

ment called the Sangkum Reastr Niyum which received immediate support of conservative parties representing the old aristocratic and mandarinal families. These parties shared with Sihanouk the desire to suppress the anti-monarchist Democratic Party. Sihanouk abdicated the throne in favour of his father and personally campaigned in all subsequent elections on behalf of Sangkum candidates. The Democratic Party, lacking strong leadership, party discipline and financial resources was overwhelmed by the Sangkum at the polls and was gradually absorbed into the movement. The small, well-organized Pracheachon group, an association of former Khmer resistance fighters of socialist persuasion, was similarly pushed out of public, electoral politics but acknowledging the essentially conservative character of the Sangkum, it refused collaboration and went underground in 1963.

The resulting unity and harmony within the Sangkum and Cambodian politics was more apparent than real. Meyer feels on the basis of his colonial perspective that things fell apart for essentially administrative and economic reasons. This explanation is much too simplistic and mechanical. It obscures more subtle and interesting aspects of the dynamics of power and Khmer politics. Sihanouk wielded the symbols of traditional monarchal authority side by side with those of European socialism. The result was a curious Buddhist Socialism characterized by the rapprochement of social classes rather than class struggle and the enhancement of mutual aid and self-help in this life in contrast to the other-worldliness of orthodox Buddhism. While these distinctions were apparent to committed socialists and devout clerics, such ideological fabrications were generally acceptable to traditional Khmer elites; more modern, upwardly mobile French-trained administrative elites; and the bulk of the rural peasantry. Such ideological abstraction offered something to everyone and meant the retention of existing social structures, their expansion and their enhancement. Failures in attempts at modern organization and industrialization as well as traditional inequities in wealth, power and social status were all "papered over" by imaginative verbal constructs invoking the prestige of Buddhism and socialism. The euphoria and mystique of Sihanoukism, never too profound on the elite level, began to fade when revenues from foreign aid and domestic agriculture declined and the costs of central administration increased.

The End of an Era

Under economic pressure throughout the 1960's, Sihanouk's regime gradually assumed the attributes of direct monarchal rule which he had unsuccessfully advocated in early 1955. Nevertheless, Meyer argues, Khmer society was plunging into total disarray. Sihanouk, to Meyer's dismay, didn't seem interested in a rational administration along colonial lines. The idea that Sihanouk might have decided such administration was impossible or undesirable never occurs to Meyer. Post-colonial elite cleavages of republicans opposed to monarchists and revolutionaries opposed to both had deepened under economic pressures created by pupulation increase, decline in world market prices for rice and natural rubber, bad harvests, inadequate organization and funding of rural credit, black market rice sales to NVA and NLF forces, financial speculation in commerce and housing, and administrative corruption. Sihanouk's commendable expansion of public education facilities had generated an excess supply of intellectuals and technicians for the limited number of openings available in the civil service and the struggling industrial sector. The army and the police were particularly hard hit by the scarcity of economic resources lacking the means to replace or update their equipment. Corruption, speculation and anxiety fed upon each other; tension and competition among families, cliques and ministries were uncontrollable. Indeed the situation was so bad that attempts to straighten things out threatened total collapse as a few anti-corruption campaigns demonstrated. In this type of situation, foreign colonial power and administration cannot be equated to or used as a model for national politics and administration.

Sihanouk, the civil service, and the army, all lacking the commitment to and the courage for reform, looked to the resumption of American foreign aid as the principal way out of their grim situation, according to Meyer. Between 1967 and 1970, Sihanouk maneuvered for a rapprochement with the Americans on his terms, which included recognition of Cambodia's neutrality and territorial integrity within its present frontiers. Meanwhile a military clique led by Lon Nol, in alliance with commercial-cum-parliamentary groups led by Sirik Matak and In Tam with the support of an irredentist organization of Khmers born in the former French colony of Cochinchina, sought to eliminate

Sihanouk and his entourage in the process of changing Cambodia's foreign policy posture. Pressures to step down led Sihanouk to restrict democratic liberties. Press and mail censorship were imposed in the mid-1960's. Anti-Sihanoukists on the right and the left were kept under surveillance by military and civilian police forces. All private newspapers and associations were dissolved in 1967; "official" newspapers and government-sponsored associations were created to replace them. Restrictions were placed on foreign travel and study in an attempt to control the flow of foreign ideologies among urban intellectuals. An expanding ambiance of fear and desperation was deepened by armed repression of peasant uprisings and student organizations in 1967-68 and of upland Brao and Tampuon tribesmen in 1968-69. Leftist insurgency and banditry spread in the countryside. General social anxiety was reflected in urban centers by an increase in delinquency, prostitution, astrological and magical practices, gambling and crime.

Could Sihanouk have prevented the coup? Meyer says yes, but this would have entailed recognition on Sihanouk's part of the necessity for urgent reform as distinct from repression. Instead, he argues, Sihanouk gave the conspirators precisely the issue they needed in order to disguise their selfish elite, economic motivations as Khmer nationalism. According to Meyer, the anti-Vietnamese propaganda campaign was actually conceived by Sihanouk in 1968 as a means of simultaneously blackmailing the Soviet Union, China and the United States for diplomatic and economic assistance while safeguarding Cambodian neutrality. The coup group, through their links with Son Ngoc Thanh's Khmer Serei organization which was at that time an important group in the US Special Forces Civilian Irregular Defense Groups in South Vietnam, apparently let the Americans know they were more sympathetic with the US war effort in South Vietnam than Sihanouk would be in the event of renewal of diplomatic relations. Meyer cites compelling evidence that Americans knew about and supported the coup. Members of Son Ngoc Thanh's Khmer Serei organization who were often used in reconnaissance missions in Cambodia after 1966 were infiltrated into Lon Nol's army throughout 1969 and 1970. In retrospect, foreign support and Sihanouk's absence from Phnom Penh appear to have been essential for the success of the coup as only ephemeral success was

achieved by the conspirators in convincing the urban population that Sihanouk was responsible for the Vietnamese presence. Meyer points out, for example, that some demonstrators got their cues mixed up and began chanting, "Vive Samdech Sihanouk."

Once in Peking, Sihanouk, refusing to lend legal credibility to the coup, dissolved the Lon Nol cabinet and the National Assembly, formed a new government in exile and organized a national liberation movement in a united front with many underground groups which had previously challenged his regime In Phnom Penh, the coup group in turn abolished the monarchy and proclaimed a republic. Meyer believes the coup group has been unable to reorganize the Republican administration or army into viable political or military forces because of their lack of national commitment and their generally opportunistic and naive attitudes towards international politics. Corruption, a serious problem under Sihanouk, is rampant in the newly named Khmer Republic. American aid, once perceived as the panacea for elite unhappiness, is consumed by war profiteers, army officers and inflation. Americans are criticized for not helping enough now that Cambodia has joined "the free world," a phrase consistently invoked by pro-Lon Nol Cambodians because it entails for them the right to the explicit, *public* economic and ideological support associated with American foreign policy in the 1950's. Support for the coup in Phnom Penh declined sharply when the United States failed to come forth with "indispensable" moral aid and the coup group split into rival factions. One realizes finally that Meyer feels the Phnom Penh elite is just as unorganizable as his stereotyped peasants. Only when all remnants of colonial order have disappeared (and Frenchmen are back in France) does Meyer in his distorted way acknowledge a common unity and khmerness to people who have only one home.

In the meantime, as the war rages on and the American government shuns its burden, Meyer sees no hope for his lost paradise. In conclusion he writes; Khmers kill Khmers and Cambodia is doomed to destruction by American airpower.

> ". . . les paysans trouvent refuge dans des campements forestiers et conservent leur sourire et leur humour, mais ajout-t-on, il est difficile d'imaginer l'intensité de leur haine à l'endroit de ceux qui anéantissent leurs villages et leurs biens.

> Peut-être faut-il rappeler que les Cambodgiens ont la réputation méritée d'être le peuple le plus rancunier et vindictif de tout le Sud-Est asiatique, et ceci devrait tout de même retenir l' attention du président Nixon.
>
> En fait, il apparait dès à présent que, lorsque leur rage de destruction aura pris fin, le Cambodge se retrouvera à peu près en l'état dans lequel les Francais le découvrirent vers 1860. Et le sourire khmer risque alors d'avoir disparu à jamais de notre univers vivant. pp. 405-6.

It is unclear for whom Prospero weeps, but the fact of the situation begs both compassion and understanding.

On Historiography and Politics

Derrière le Sourire Khmer draws attention to the pressing need for a serious study of the impact of French colonialism in Cambodia. (Only nine pages in this extremely long book are devoted to Cambodia's colonial heritage). Such a study might deal with some of the issues I have raised above, particularly in regard to social mobility and the growing interdependency between rural and urban life as a result of international commerce, the development of internal communication and transportation networks, the shift from a barter to a cash system, the creation of private property and land registration, and the nature of rural credit and production systems. Certainly in economic terms, the urban-rural "gap" is one of the most glaring misnomers perpetuated by social science. The epistemological and metaphorical connotations of this phrase embody, I believe, a colonial perspective on developing social systems not altogether different from Charles Meyer's.

In addition, a good history of the consequences of French colonialism in Cambodia would, I believe, place the Sihanouk regime in its proper historical perspective as the decolonization phase of Cambodian politics and avoid the oversimplified explanation of administrative failure as the reason for the collapse of 1969-70. In this regard, histories readily available in French or English are generally more confusing than illuminating because of the absence of sociological insight into Khmer stratification systems before and after the French entry into Khmer politics. The French correctly recognized the provincial mandarins as the real threat to their power in Cambodia, not

the enigmatic King Norodom or his small court. Using the monarchy to legitimize their "reforms", the French systematically stripped the traditional provincial elites of their powers of taxation, adjudication and ultimately of administration. A new class of administrators arose adjacent to the court, a corps composed of marginal men of largely non-royal status who owed their opportunities for influence and advancement to the French. The transfer of political power from old mandarins to new bureaucrats under the guise of modern administration was represented in the phenomenal career patterns of men like Thioum who became, in one French colonial's description, king in everything but name towards the end of Norodom's reign. This class gave birth to the modern civil service and, to a lesser extent, the modern Khmer left.

Two observations can be extracted from this historically unprecedented emergence of a non-royal administrative class. First, Norodom as inheritor of the post-Angkorian kingdom was a weak king with limited temporal control over his kingdom, a loosely, integrated system of patrimonial estates. To develop the protectorate, the French had to recreate a temporal political center for Khmer society, a center which had been dislocated by the fall of Angkor and totally fragmented by the Thai victory at Lovak in the 16th century. Popular images of Khmer civilization with a highly developed center after this time are, I would suggest, a confusion of a philosophical ideal-type with historical reality in all its richness and diversity. Second, the class of French-selected and French-trained administrators in Phnom Penh had no antecedents in Theravada Buddhist culture and society comparable to the Confucian administrative tradition in Vietnam or China. This raises the question of legitimacy in the eyes of the peasant masses in the event of the removal of French power. Unlike the French, this class did not act in the name of the King but in the name of the protectorate. Emerging as it did from marginal, often half-Khmer ethnic origins, it simply lacked the genuine cultural nationalism which characterized, for example, the Meiji oligarchy. The honesty and efficiency which Meyer attributes to these administrators is simply his acknowledgment albeit naive of their loyalty to France. This fundamental change in Khmer social stratification was further complicated by the organization and separate adminis-

tration of *congregations* of Chinese and Vietnamese residents in Cambodia.

Sihanouk was an exceptional king in the post-Angkorian tradition in that he wanted to rule as well as to reign. In theory, this required dismantling the colonially created civil service and transferring power to the court. In fact, this was impossible because the court was financially dependent upon the administration and the French had taken the precaution of setting up multi-national financial and commercial arrangements throughout the late 1940's as a means of protecting their interests and the most trustworthy of their proteges. Sihanouk's genius lies in his perception that politics was a domain separate from administration, and that the distribution of rewards and services in Khmer society was a question to be re-opened for public debate. The origins of elite antimonarchism in Cambodia seem to rest in the realization that the King, not the traditional rural elites, was the principal threat to administrative power as well as the recognition that traditional Buddhist notions of state and kingship precluded development into international modern society. Sihanouk, however, was in fact prepared to play royal politics with new ground rules. Ironically, it was the presumably modern, French-created administration which he successfully penetrated and dominated with his Sangkum party which couldn't function in the new national state.

Cut off from their central referrent in the Metropole, the civil service, the only social group in Khmer society which based its coherence and identity on principles of vertical hierarchy and dominance, literally disintegrated. Though its claims to nationalism were and are genuine in the sense that the nation is defined by its central administration, the absence of French power left no basis for cooperation and communal action. The structure provided by the American aid program of the late 1950's was only a temporary respite. The civil servant's sense of being cut adrift was aggravated by peasant refusal to pay taxes after independence. The peasants believed taxes were a French invention and independence meant they no longer had to be paid. Without its colonial referrent, under assault by the court and denied legitimate authority by the peasants, the Cambodian civil

service sought only to resist proletarianization, slipping back to the social positions their families held when their fathers were first made interpreters, secretaries or chauffeurs to the French. Their frustrated aspirations and expectations seem to have been displaced onto their children who are encouraged to obtain a good education as a guarantee of the security and livelihood which seemed so vulnerable to their parents after independence. The enlargement of the civil service and increasing corruption in the absence of any serious effort to develop a self-sustaining, nationally coherent economy (a conception which dominates the analyses of progressive politicians) resulted in the nearly total exhaustion of state resources by 1969.

For survival, *les fonctionnaires* required organizational coherence, outside support and foreign aid to provide financial underpinnings for the state they were no longer able to sustain or, more appropriately, which was no longer able to sustain them. Sihanouk, discouraged and overwhelmed (I believe), by the general social and economic chaos after 1966, was prepared to yield on all three points and to retire from the fray by reascending the throne. In 1969, diplomatic relations with the United States were re-established and General Lon Nol, Commander in Chief of the Army, was made Prime Minister. This opened up the possibility of securing American economic aid. The prospect of military rule was also in one sense a welcome one for the civil service because the principles of military command and organization are comparable to those of colonial hierarchy. Sihanouk, in a profoundly appropriate way, dubbed Lon Nol's cabinet, the government of salvation (*le gouvernement de sauvetage*).

Despite these concessions on Sihanouk's part, the plans for the *coup d'état* were under way during the summer of 1969 even while the Salvation Government was being formed. The coup was to serve the dual purpose of stripping Sihanouk and his entourage of their political and economic power and of forcing the United States into a large military aid program. The success of the coup measured against its political objectives has yet to be determined but the costs of the adventure have been and continue to be very high. If the coup is viewed as a critical event in the process of decolonization, it must be pointed out that only Sihanouk and a few of his close associates, among

all the Phnompenghois (including Charles Meyer) who made up the Sihanouk Regime, have escaped from the structural confines of a colonially-determined world. The disjunction between culturally determined Khmer conceptions of statecraft and legitimate authority, and modern, foreign-imposed administration is dramatized by Sihanouk's alliance with well-organized revolutionary forces with deep roots in Khmer history and peasant culture. Thus, the basis for nationalist revolution is laid. Sihanouk at the head of the liberation forces embodies the paradoxical promise of still another revolutionary restratification of Cambodian society in defense of traditional Khmer values. In all of this, there is indeed a large amount of tragedy as the coup regime in Phnom Penh which lacks the capacity to protect its citizenry from its allies even lacks the autonomy required for defeat. The outcome of the Khmer decolonization crisis and civil war is apt to be determined within an international context by forces totally ignorant of or unsympathetic to Cambodia's developmental experience.

In conclusion, I cannot in good conscience recommend *Derrière le Sourire Khmer* to the general reader. Although it is rich in anecdotal data, occasionally eloquent in description and touching in its romance, the author's colonial bias is all-pervasive and, as I have attempted to demonstrate, this has a decisive and alarming effect on the analysis and conclusions of his book. Though I have suggested some alternative ways of interpreting the post-independence period in Cambodia, this discussion should be regarded as a preliminary, interim analysis. It is probably too early to comprehend fully the meaning and the significance of the Sihanouk era in modern Cambodian history. In the final analysis, it is necessary to await the assessments of Cambodian scholars; if they, too, sense the inadequacies and biases of Meyer's study, I would hope this discussion might provoke a long and informative dialogue.*

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