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Divergent perspectives on the Cambodian 'harem' in the reigns of Norodom (1863–1904) and Sisowath (1904–1927)

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> [The king] summoned the officials to the throne room because one of his officials, Kuy, had dared to fall in love with one of his consorts, the *moneang* Chhay. The lover had been introduced into the palace of the king and had slept with this woman in the chamber she occupied for two days and two nights. He was arrested by the palace guards and the king gave the order that they should all be judged according to the law for the crime they had committed. Kuy was condemned to death along with the women Kanteang He and Me Khieu, who had acted as intermediaries between Kuy and Chhay. The three accused were shot with a dozen rounds; then their heads were cut off and displayed on bamboo stakes. As for the woman Chhay, she could not be shot because she had two children by the king (a daughter and a son who are still alive), so she was decapitated with the sword (Leclère 1898:176).

This excerpt, the preamble to a Cambodian law originally dating back to at least the 17th century,[1] has all the hallmarks of a despotic society: a jealous tyrant; an illicit palace liaison; and barbaric punishments enacted upon the condemned. Yet these executions took place in 1875, during the reign of King Norodom (r1863–1904), when Cambodia had already been a French *Protectorat* for over a decade. Although the French had kept Norodom on the throne believing him to be amenable to the colonial project, the administration had found him reluctant to abandon elements of traditional Cambodian kingship that they found archaic. Amongst their concerns was the Cambodian 'harem'. A large number of women, their number 'varied and considerable' (Moura 1883:231), who existed for the sexual pleasure of the king was, frankly, embarrassing. How could the colonial project be deemed successful when institutional slavery was permitted to continue? The emancipation of the women of the palace became a key platform of the process of modernisation that the French were 'bestowing' upon their colonial subjects. The 1875 executions intensified the pressure on Norodom to disband or at least reduce his 'harem'. Yet what has never been sufficiently understood in analyses of this event is that the women who lived in the palace were living embodiments of political fealty between the king and powerful families elsewhere in the kingdom and beyond. This expression of mutual respect and loyalty was manifested in the sexual act (or the potential for such an act to occur) between the king and the female representative of the various clans. Thus a sexual transgression on the part of one of these women was tantamount to treason. Moreover, as this paper will show, the women of the palace led lives far removed from the drudgery of everyday life in Cambodia, with diverse responsibilities, secure in the knowledge that they played a vital role in the relationship between the mundane and celestial worlds which would ensure the harmony of both.

Harem discourse and the universality of the 'Other'

The terms *harem*, from the Arabic root *h-r-m* ('forbidden, sacred') and *seraglio*, from the Persian *saray* ('palace, enclosed court') entered the European consciousness in the 17th century by way of the Ottoman Empire which was then at the height of its influence. Further popularised by Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes,* first published in 1721, cosmopolitan Europeans spent a great deal of the 18th and 19th centuries oscillating between obsession and disgust at the harem and alternately lusting after and reviling its inhabitants (Del Plato 2002). In the 19th century harems became a frequent subject of painters, for example the artists Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867) and John Frederick Lewis (1805–75). Originally designating 'a social space where women could gather and talk' (Foster 2004:7n5), harems and similar cultural institutions have come to symbolise a set of assumptions held about non-Western cultures; and to in turn legitimise forcible intervention in practices that do not satisfy Western notions of individual freedom.

The harem was construed as a place of sexual licentiousness (Peirce 1993:3). The idea that a large number of women were reserved for the exclusive sexual pleasure of one man simultaneously titillated and outraged the sensibilities of many monogamous Christian Europeans. At the same time, the idea persisted that a single (non-European) man could not possibly satisfy the sexual appetites of such a large number of women. This both served to emasculate the non-European male, and constructed the harem as a place of sexual frustration for the women who did not enjoy the favour of their master, leading to lesbian trysts (Montesquieu 1768:97; Dobie 2001:56; Lewis 2004:183; Yee 2004:10). All female occupants of harems, regardless of geographical or

cultural disparity, became conflated into a single notion of 'Other' women—at first those of the Ottoman Empire, but over time extending to India, China, and the Southeast Asian kingdoms—as interchangeable symbols for 'the Orient' as a passive, beautiful, bizarre, unexplored entity waiting to be emancipated and so awakened to purposeful endeavour through conquest by virile (male) Europeans (Lewis 2004:183; Del Plato 2002; Dobie 2001:1; Cooper 2001:133–6). Serge D Elie has called this the *harem syndrome*, 'a complex ensemble of ideas and of nearly indelible images that have constituted a kind of doxology informing the discourse on gender' in cultures where harems were found (Elie 2004:140).

In the middle of the 18th century French and English philosophers began to use the existence of the harem to symbolise Oriental despotism. Montesquieu's 1748 *De l'esprit des lois* greatly influenced French explorers and colonists.[2] Although it is his description of different types of governments and the preconditions for each that are most familiar to political philosophers, Montesquieu also theorised a set of social and political models based upon climate. Countries that were constantly hot could expect early marriage of their women, as they would age faster than women from colder climes: 'old at twenty, they never find their wits while they have their looks'. These countries could also expect fewer male offspring, thus requiring the institution of polygamy to absorb the excess numbers of women. Polygamy itself was described as reprehensible, not only for the children of polygamous unions—'a father cannot love twenty children in the same way that a mother can love two'—but because of the lack of homogeneity from a racial standpoint: 'They say the king of Morocco has in his harem white women, black women, and yellow women. The poor unfortunate! Bad luck if he desires a particular colour'. The harem as 'domestic slavery' was seen as a hallmark of 'despotic government, which aims to abuse all' (Montesquieu 1768: 97, 103, 107; see also Dobie 2001:40). Thus the idea of the harem as 'a cruel polygamous sexual prison was a titillating but pitiful emblem of the aberrant sexuality and despotic power that characterised all that was wrong with the non-Christian Orient' (Lewis 2004:13).

The abolition of the harem was a key element in legitimising the colonial project, yet few of the recipients of this 'grace' displayed any appreciation. Indeed, disentangling 'despotic' rulers from their harems proved exceedingly difficult. The obstinate refusal of a people to relinquish customs that marked them as barbaric both perplexed and infuriated the colonising powers. Control over the sexual behaviour of subject peoples—the most private of private concerns—meant that domination over all aspects of life, public and private, was virtually assured. Resistance in this arena was a clear indication to the colonisers that total obedience had not been fully achieved (Levine 2002:55; 2004:135). Moreover, the continued existence of institutions in which 'crucial distinctions between domestic and political, male and female, are imperilled' could only threaten the superiority of rational Enlightenment reasoning and Western models of government (Dobie 2001:49). These ideas were not restricted to harems, but also to other 'irregular' unions such as mistresses and temporary or lesser wives, as the ties that bound these women to their lover, husband or patron were not subject to colonial law. The women involved in these sexual contracts, however, were as hidden from public sight as those in a harem. Nevertheless their existence was a constant reminder to the colonisers that some of their conquests refuted the Europeans' claims of superiority. Even when institutions such as the harem were forcibly dismantled by the colonial powers, people found ways to maintain them. Some, such as the Siamese kings and provincial governors, maintained their harems in new guises, such as official ballet corps, acting troupes, or even civil servants, which were more acceptable to Western notions of modernity. Others were able to construct barriers, enabling virtual 'walls' in place of the physical space of the harem. In some Islamic societies, this took the form of wearing the veil (Levine 2002:59; Yegenoglu 1998:41). Foreigners accepted this on the grounds of religion. As Richard Dawkins has pointed out, Western thinkers have a tendency to believe that 'religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect' (Dawkins 2006:42). The particular biases of Europeans, however, meant that some religions—namely monotheistic Judaism and Islam—were perceived as more legitimate and worthy of respect than others.

Why were people (and by no means all of them male) so reluctant to leave the sexualised idea of the 'harem' behind? The answer lies partly in a fundamental misunderstanding of the function of the harem and the people who lived there. Annouar Majid argues that in premodern times, harem women were 'sexually and economically freer than their European contemporaries' (Majid 1998:335). Although this is a generalisation that does not take into consideration variables of time and space, there is an element of truth attached to it. Because male primogeniture was the norm in most European kingdoms and laws regarding property reflected this, and because paternity could not be proved, female chastity had to be rigorously policed. Divorce and remarriage, therefore, were problematic. This was not the case in cultures where women could inherit not only goods and property, but power. The fact that women were removed from public sight did not diminish their power as political players in a complex web of alliances, interests and family groups (Isom-Verhaaren 2006:170). The West became aware of the harem and other institutions like it at a time when the notion of a public/private space dichotomy was at its height as a symbol of modern, 'enlightened', rational thought. Thus the assumption was made by Western thinkers that because the harem and what goes on in it was *unseen*, dominated by women, family-oriented, and private, it must be non-political and therefore powerless. Although feminist scholarship has since challenged this view, emphasising that the family is itself a political entity, the dominant view on public space as the only space that matters has prevailed (Peirce 1993:6). In any case, most Western feminists persist in their ethnocentric views which have been condemned by Chandra Talpade Mohanty:

> [Assuming] women as a coherent, already constituted group which is placed in kinship, legal and other structures, defines third world women as subjects *outside* of social relations, instead of looking at the way women are constituted as women *through* these very structures. Legal, economic, religious, and familial structures are treated as phenomena to be judged by Western standards (Mohanty 1984:351).

Some scholars have successfully removed their Western post-Enlightenment blinkers and examined the harem from within the cultural context in which it was placed, eschewing the received wisdom of universality embedded in harem theory. Tamara Loos, in her excellent analysis of the Inner City of Siam under the monarchs Mongkut, Chulalongkorn and Vajiravudh, is one such example (Loos 2005: 881–909).[3] Loos is one of a small yet growing body of scholars including Ruby Lal, Reina Lewis and Leslie Peirce seeking to return agency to a category of women who for centuries have been perceived as pawns in a male politico-sexual utopia. Yet far more prefer to retain the image of the harem as 'a site of sexual license, forbidden territory, a segregated space barred to men and charged with erotic significance' (Foster 2004:7). This is despite the fact that these depictions are drawn from the observations of Europeans, few of whom ever saw the inside of a harem, and had to rely on hearsay and speculation for their descriptions. Those who did manage to observe harem life first-hand were almost exclusively women.[4] Lady Mary Wortley Montague (1680–1762), who lived in Constantinople from 1716 to 1718 as the wife of the British ambassador, is perhaps the most renowned of these. Her *Turkish Embassy Letters* contained many details about harem life, showing it as a place of honour and dignity. However because more salacious details such as those produced by male 'adventurers' were absent, her book was ignored (Isom-Verhaaren 2006:161, 181). Similarly, studies of life at the Mughal court in India have ignored women's contemporaneous accounts of their own lives in favour of the more sensationalist descriptions written by European men (Lal 2004:593). The unsensational harem, it seems, does not make for successful copy.

Colonial encounters with the Cambodian 'harem'

The first French explorers to reach the Cambodian court at Oudong in the late 1850s found all their preconceptions of 'despotic monarchs' well and truly realised:

> [We] proceeded along an avenue about half a mile in length, planted with young trees, and bounded on either side by a wooden fence. The ground slopes gradually from hence, and is laid out in gardens and lawns, encircling which are a hundred little cottages with walls of clay and thatched roofs. 'All these houses are inhabited by my father's

wives; there is not a man in them', said the young king (Mouhot 1966:52). This was the 'harem' of King Ang Duong (r. 1848–1860), perhaps only months before his death. Mouhot was also led through the quarters of the 'young king' (almost certainly Norodom), where he saw 'at least a hundred…whom curiosity had brought out to gaze at the stranger' (Mouhot 1966:51). Most well-to-do men maintained more than one wife; polygamy was a respected institution in Cambodia, as has been the case elsewhere in Southeast Asia before the modern era (Mouhot 1966:75).[5]

Aside from rare invitations into the private apartments of the royal family, however, the only contact foreign men had with the women of the palace in these early days was at audiences with the king. These would almost invariably include performances of stories from the Ramayana or other well-known texts by women talented in the arts of dance, music, or chanting. Descriptions of the women glimpsed on these occasions tell us a great deal about the particular biases of the authors. Foreigners could understand why the Cambodian king wished to surround himself with young women of 'sturdy but supple body' (Pavie 1901:61) and those 'whose features were delicate and pretty, dressed in the European style, and wearing long hair'. Less comprehensible was the presence of others, 'fat, with bloated faces and vulgar features…teeth blackened by betel and anack' (Mouhot 1966:35), or worse still, 'the ghastly old women with which the palace is peopled' (Meyer 1919:161–2; Groslier 1913:117–18). The foreigners could not understand why women who were *not* sexually attractive (in their eyes, at least) should be in the harem which, after all, existed to satisfy the carnal desired of the king. Some authors were more obtuse about this than others: Jean Moura wrote delicately that in 'the interior of the palace, the wants of the king are attended to by the ladies' (Moura 1883:223); whereas Adhémard Leclère made no bones about referring to the female 'slaves' of the palace as *sauchey*, a term synonymous with 'prostitute', and elsewhere employed the phrase 'femme du lit (du harem)', that is, 'woman of the bed (of the harem)' (Leclère 1898:122).

Many colonisers viewed the local women of Southeast Asia (and, indeed, throughout the world) in sexualised terms. This phenomenon is marked in 19th- and early 20th-century works of fiction that are set in the 'exotic East'.[6] The women of French Indochina were no exception; their submission to the sexual advances of French men was a metaphor for colonial conquest. As they accepted sexual congress and other 'irregular' unions with men with whom they had no marriage contract in a European sense, these women were also reviled as immoral, especially when compared to their metropolitan counterparts (Andaya 1998:14, 19; Cooper 2001:135, 157; Edwards 1998:109–110; Malleret 1934:216fn2; 219–20; Said 1979:190). The women of the palace were particularly despised, not only for exchanging their bodies in return for luxurious and indolent lives, but also for accepting the 'monstrous' institution of polygamy, in which thwarted 'natural' sexual desire developed into perversion.[7] Lesbian trysts abound in *Saramani*, *danseuse khmère*, a work of fiction ostensibly based upon detailed revelations from an inhabitant of the palace (Meyer 1919:161–2). The potential for such liaisons clearly titillated the imaginations of French writers in describing the women of the palace: 'In warm weather, the dancers, half-naked in a thin sarong, naked about the breasts, came to bathe in safety. They played with each other in the limpid water and laughed out loud' (Groslier 1913:109).

As if these factors did not provide sufficient legitimacy for the colonial project of abolishing the 'harem', there was the repugnant issue of how women came to be there in the first place. Ibrahim Roy Solemanjee, an Indian merchant living in Phnom Penh in the late nineteenth century, was known to the French authorities as a procurer of fresh Siamese additions to Norodom's court.[8] Metropolitan readers were horrified by accounts of parents willingly giving their terrified daughters to the king; they cried 'in seeing their mother disappear' (Leclère 1898 1:122n, 45; Groslier 1913:28) to the palace in order to become sexual playthings. They were equally horrified to read of long hours spent learning the intricate art of Cambodian dance so that the new arrivals might outshine their competitors in performance and thus gain the king's favour; of false accusations or court intrigues leading to death by poison; and the unending ennui that came from imprisonment within the palace, restricted from the everyday pleasures of walking through the town by the insane jealousy of a despotic king. Not even the king's own daughters were excluded: 'Princesses do not leave the palace in order to marry princes. One never gives them

in marriage to the officials; often they do not marry at all and live their lives sequestered so that the daughters of the ordinary people do not envy them at all' (Moura 1883:232). Toward the end of their lives, when ostensibly their utility as sexual objects was gone, women of the palace had nowhere to go: 'Her parents are dead and her friends scattered by intrigues' (Groslier 1913:117–18). With such evocative descriptions, who amongst the good people of the metropole would not agitate for the abolition of the Cambodian 'harem'?

King Ang Doung died in 1860 and his son Norodom succeeded him. He was not a universally popular choice for the Cambodian *oknha*, but representatives of the French government believed him to be more aligned to their interests than his half-siblings and made their preference clear. It was Norodom who signed the treaty making Cambodia a French *Protectorat* in 1864 and who signed a number of later treaties giving the French greater and greater involvement in Cambodian administration. Dismantling the harem became a key objective of the French administration. This institution, in addition to being an abhorrent form of slavery out of place in a kingdom enjoying the benefits of 'modernisation', consumed vast amounts of state revenue. Paul Doumer described the women of the palace as wearing 'silk clothing…[and] masses of jewels on their persons…[The king's] dancers possessed costumes [and] golden, peaked crowns, each covered in stones of an incalculable value' (Doumer nd:248). King Norodom could be dissuaded from distributing this largesse freely to his favourites or from placing control of palace resources in the hands of certain women of the palace. French officials also seem to have objected to what they perceived as his lack of sexual restraint: 'There are, in the immense interior of the palace of Phnom Penh, many houses available for the king, who lives now in one, now in the other, following his caprices and without doubt also following the exigencies of the season and his health' (Moura 1883:232), wrote Jean Moura; and at the end of his posting Gouverneur Général Jean Le Myre de Vilers complained that Norodom had, 'to crown it all, a harem, made up of four hundred women, which becomes larger each year through the recruitment of young girls carried on in Siam' (Osborne 1969:202). Equally worrying was the notion that the king 'may give away to courtiers those whose services he does not care to retain' like so many coins scattered to beggars (Thompson 1937:327). There was also the distasteful issue of the virtual imprisonment of those women whose services Norodom wished to retain:

> The royal dancers do not go out of the palace…On this point, His Majesty Norodom was ferocious. He authorised, only once a year, the dancer who asked him, to go and see her parents in the town. Leaving at dawn, she had to return before nightfall. She had to be accompanied by a guard comprising mothers and children (Groslier 1913:29–30).

It was best for the country and for the reputation of the French *mission civilisatrice*, therefore, that Cambodians be persuaded to abandon the barbaric custom of the 'harem'.

Snang, sex and symbolism

The French may have seen the liberation of the women of the palace as the ultimate act of benevolence and modernisation; to many Cambodians, it was unwanted and unwarranted interference in the most sacred of spaces, that in which the celestial and mundane worlds converged. The Cambodian ruler had always been seen as the intermediary between these two realms. In Cambodia's classical or 'Angkor' period, the legitimacy of a king rested largely on his identification as an emanation or reincarnation of the brahmanical god Siva (or, in the case of Suryavarman II, Vishnu), demonstrated through iconography and inscriptions. The advent of Buddhism as the religion of the elite did little to change this perception. Jayavarman VII (1181–c1215) incorporated elements of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism with pre-existing brahmanical cults and associated himself with the bodhisattva Lokeśvara. During the so-called Middle Period (15th to 19th centuries), the elite turned to Theravada Buddhism, but the king continued to be viewed as a Buddha-in-waiting, endowed with vast stores of merit and supernatural powers that enabled him, it was thought, to rule wisely.[9] The space occupied by the sovereign was equally revered.[10] As a microcosmic representation of the kingdom, the palace had to be protected from malignant and destructive

forces; unchecked, these would affect the wellbeing of the entire kingdom. Blood spilled 'unnaturally' in the palace was particularly dangerous. If a woman miscarried or an intruder was wounded or slain within the palace environs, a ritual known as *pithi polikar* was carried out for purposes of purification (Leclère 1898 1:179).

The women of the palace were crucial to the observance of rituals that ensured the continued sanctity of the palace and thus the kingdom. Women were organised into groups with specific purposes and connotations. Norodom had eleven queens in the 1860s. Those designated grades 1, 4, 5, 8, and 10 were 'right-hand' queens' and 2, 6, 7, 9, and 11 of the left; the queen whose grade was 3 was placed 'between the two groups in official ceremonies' (Moura 1883:231). It was imperative that the queens, and other women of the palace who fell into categories such as widows of earlier kings, sisters of the reigning monarch, daughters of the king's brother, and of course the lesser wives and their children and servants, restricted themselves to their prescribed places and activities, as any spatial misalignment could result in disharmony. The *Kram Monteiro Bal*, originally written in the 17th century and updated during the reign of Norodom, stated that if

> the women of the palace do not go to their proper places, according to their rank, that they should occupy, they must rearrange themselves when they are told. If they do not obey, they will be punished with 5 blows of the cane. If their leader does not make them, they will be punished with 10 blows (Leclère 1898 1:185).

It is no coincidence that the women closest to the king—the first five ranks of queens—were known as *snang* before coronation (Leclère 1898 2:3; 1:51). This word also designates women who assist spirit mediums, or are mediums themselves. *Snang*, therefore, were those who facilitated journeys between the mundane and celestial worlds. Dance sequences performed by women of the palace were necessary for the observance of religious rituals, incurring merit for the king (and thus the kingdom) (Chandler 1996a:191), as well as comprising an important element of diplomatic relations. Ambassadors to the court would be impressed by the skill and splendour of the king's dancers. His ability to maintain such a large court would also have bolstered his virility and thus his ability to command effectively.[11] More importantly, the presence of large numbers of women in a king's retinue represented the fealty of diverse factions and elite families throughout the kingdom, and alliances with powerful families and courts in other lands.[12]

Since time immemorial, sexual contracts have sealed military truces, confirmed trade agreements, and indicated mutual goodwill between families across the globe.[13] Cambodia is no exception. Such alliances ensured that premodern Cambodia was ruled by one extended family for at least four centuries (see Jacobsen 2002:14–16; 2003). During the Middle Period kings maintained households of princesses from many neighbouring courts, such as Lan Xang, Ayutthaya, Champa, and with the Nguyen dynasty of Vietnam. Provincial *oknha* often sent their daughters to live at the court as a mark of political fealty. This was particularly important after times of civil unrest, as people scrambled to ally themselves with the victor. The women of the palace thus played an important role in the legitimacy of a new king. As representatives of different families, factions and geographical areas, acceptance of an incoming king by the women of the palace symbolised a wider loyalty than the consent of one individual. As the French administrator Jean Moura described it:

> In the interior, the old 'guardians of the gynaecea' present the princesses, the attendants, the other ladies of the court. The eldest among them takes the oath and implores, on behalf of them all, [the king's] protection and the interest of their new lord, promising in return great devotion and complete fidelity. All salute in inclining toward the sun, signalling their tacit adherence to the vow of fidelity that has been made on their behalf by an old woman in their name (Moura 1883:242).

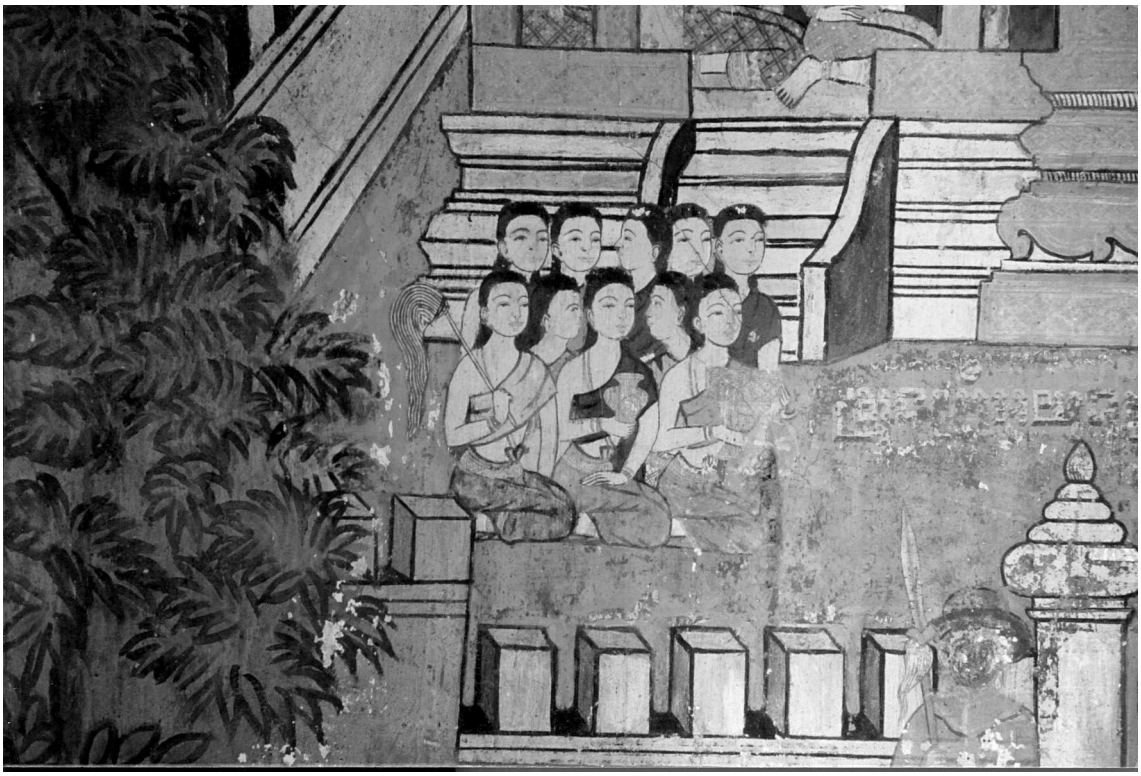

Figure 1: Women at court
Detail from wall mural, royal palace, Phnom Penh, c1900

Kings who came to power with less than universal popularity could be expected to have larger than usual retinues of women in their palaces, as could men who attempted to make themselves out to be more important that their extent of power or influence warranted. Ang Duong came to the throne after decades of war, with different members of the royal family calling upon the Thais and the Vietnamese to support them for various reasons. Taking into his palace the daughters and sisters of Cambodian *oknha*, including those of his uncles and brothers, demonstrated that he was accepted as king by their families; hence the 'hundreds' of women installed in his palace at Oudong in the late 1850s. French observers acknowledged that people voluntarily offered their daughters to the households of elite men, especially the king, but they dismissed the practice as a superstition rather than an integral part of Cambodian political culture: '[Their] fathers are persuaded that their daughters offered to the king will bring to them and their families the favour of the spirits and great protection' (Groslier 1913:27). It was also a way of escaping imprisonment; two Vietnamese girls were offered up as surety in return for their father's sentence being commuted, after which they joined the theatre troupe of the governor of Battambang (Tauch Chhong 1994:89). The Cambodian palace was therefore a place of tremendous diversity (see Figure 1).[14] As one observer noted:

> [The palace] is dressed in a thousand different fabrics, bare shoulders and arms, heads of black, short hair. There are old, wrinkled women, shaven-headed, collarbones like ropes, spines hard and curved under their white robes. There are opulent matrons with tight jackets who eat betel like ruminating cattle; women of round and soft figures, holding naked children, squatting on their haunches; girls dressed in *sampot* shining and brittle as stars; servants carrying boxes of betel…One sees also some Annamite women with their black clothing, beads of gold at their necks; and Malays of opulent hairstyles. They are seated on mats, squatting, lying down, leaning on their elbows (Groslier 1913:17).

The political symbolism of the women of the palace and other elite households meant that sexual transgression in the palace equated to treason. Thus, anyone 'who seizes a woman of the palace and takes her to the provinces will be punished by 50 lashes and a double fine', and 'if she was one of the women the king particularly liked, the thief will be decapitated and his goods confiscated' (Leclère 1898 1:187). Moreover, anyone 'who takes for his wife a widow in the service of the king, without royal authorisation, will be punished by one of the two punishments that are 30 lashes or a fine' (Leclère 1898 2:274). Women of the palace were therefore watched

carefully lest would-be usurpers compromised the alliances that they represented. The *damrut veang*, older women past childbearing age, were 'ordered to keep continuous watch upon the princesses, the women of the entourage as in the time of other kings' and accompany them when they ventured out into the town or undertook journeys across country (Leclère 1898 1:195; Moura 1883:231). Women of the palace had to remain sexually faithful, even if they never received the king personally in this capacity. As Loos stated with regard to Siam, any transgression of this fidelity by a woman of the palace

> was not simply sexual but also political. Her loyalty was not to [the kingdom], but to the king personally; her patriotic duty, as it were, was to embody a political alliance between the king and her lineage in addition to providing heirs and comforts of a sexual nature to him (Loos 2005:889).

Most European observers believed that the functions of the women of the palace were purely sexual, but the women who dwelt in the inner apartments of the king had diverse roles and responsibilities, as was the case throughout Southeast Asia (Hong Lysa 1998; Reid 1988:638). In the 1860s Preah Moneang 'Srey Tep Canha' (Srei Tep Kanha, 'Revered Woman of Royal Blood') was in charge of warehouses, wardrobes, and deciding which clothing should be bequeathed to monks and as uniforms for the army and navy; Preah Moneang Bopha Kessa was in charge of the palace theatre; Preah Neang Sucheat Bopha was in charge of making donations to monks that called at the palace; Preah Neang Suda Bavor was responsible for the kitchens; and Preah Neang Srey Tep Eksar ('First Princess') was entrusted with the clothing and jewels of the king himself (Moura 1883:231). Undoubtedly, many more had less glamorous duties in the orchestra and choir, as seamstresses, cleaners, and guards. Light is shed on some of these everyday roles by the court chronicle of the governors of Battambang, a semi-autonomous dependency of Siam during the 19th century. The lord governor required 'massaging' the entire night, so two or three women were rostered to fulfil this obligation .The only time they were excused was when the governor was away from home on a shooting expedition when teenaged boys would step in, as 'the presence of women led to poor hunting' (Tauch Chhong 1994:115, 123). It would be easy to see a veiled reference to sexual duties here if it were not for the precedent across premodern Southeast Asia for rulers to have female bodyguards (Reid 1988:637). Other women were selected for the dance corps or choir because of their abilities in these areas. Two girls, Neang Nhoeng and Neang Nhiv, 'exhibited…great skill in jumping from one tree to another and in climbing down an areca tree head first' and joined the theatre of the governor of Battambang at the tender ages of 13 and 15 (Tauch Chhong, 1994:89).

Women were paid an annual salary according to their rank and the particular duties they performed. Besides this stipend and their clothes, those at Norodom's court received 'every month, rice, oil and candles necessary for their maintenance and around thirty francs for their marketing' (Moura 1883:231). Those who were visited by the king had a unique avenue for increasing their wealth: childbearing.

> When one of the women is pregnant in the palace, the bakus [court officials descended from Brahmans] pass around her neck a long chain in gold furnished by the king and on which the holy men have recited mantras. This amulet prevents accidents that may occur during pregnancy. The delivery over, the woman keeps the ornament which becomes for her a piece of jewellery and at the same time evidence of fertility (Moura 1883:231–232).

Norodom's favourites received additional presents. One of these, Neak Moneang Sum, a consort of the third rank, had received so many 'jewels, diamonds, gold, and silver, and also cash amounts of gold and silver', that his successor, Sisowath, tried to force her to relinquish them after Norodom's death in 1904 (Moura 1883:231).

Wealth was only one of the privileges that came with being a woman of the palace; the position of power it afforded was far more valuable. As was the case in other so-called 'harem' societies, the French assumed that the women inside the Cambodian palace were politically passive and powerless, whereas in fact admission to the palace on any terms, as *oknha* or as a servant of either gender, was seen as a legitimate avenue of social and political upward mobility. Women of the palace in 18th- and 19th-century Java were far more powerful than Europeans originally believed (Peirce 1993:130; Carey & Houben 1987). Mary Ann Fay stated that this

was a cross-cultural phenomenon that arose in pre-colonial times as 'elite women…benefited from the fact that power was located in households rather than in the more formal mechanisms and structures of the centralised, bureaucratic state' (Fay 1998). The most powerful woman in Cambodia was the queen mother (Samdech Preah Voreachini Kambuja), described during Norodom's reign as

> a woman of sixty-three, well-preserved, lively, intelligent, tidy, exercising a tangible authority, great prestige, and much influence; she governs three provinces and administers the taxes therein. She is accorded royal honours and, when her son was crowned, she herself consecrated his head with the holy water (Moura 1883:228).[15]

The influence that certain women of the palace had over the king is discernible in many of the laws Norodom made or revised during his reign. The *oknha* were told that in the event Norodom gave orders that conflicted with Cambodian custom, 'they must write a short note and pass it to him, through the queen, through one of the titled ladies, or one of the women estimated highly by the king, until the note reaches him' (Leclère 1898 1:208).[16] Norodom seems to have been surrounded by women of the palace at every turn and measures were put in place to ensure their silence:

> If the king is attending to political or serious matters with the head of the army, senior or junior ministers, and it is found that one of his wives, having overheard what was said, told other women what she heard, she can be punished by one of the following six punishments: decapitation and confiscation of her belongings; the confiscation of her belongings and placed in the pol smau damrey; mutilation of her mouth and removal of her ear; 50 lashes with the whip; four times the fine; three times the fine (Leclère 1898 1:186).

Of course some women were trusted more than others. Only Neak Tes, Norodom's aunt, was permitted to accompany the king and his wives in a small boat: 'Anyone who attempts to join the party will be put to death' (Leclère 1898 1:220).

There is no doubt that some women found themselves in superior positions because of their relationship with Norodom himself, but a definite hierarchy existed within elite polygamous households. Women could style themselves as patrons, employing a poor female relation to be their servant, who would sleep in a corner of their dwelling (Moura 1883:231). Life was harder for those who lacked a position of influence. Wives of the third rank in the court of Battambang, for example, had food of poor quality, according to a woman, Um, who had been one of them until 1907. During lean times the parents of the women would bring supplemental food to their daughters. They were also beaten for mistakes, such as incorrect posture during dance training. At the same time, these women lived lives of luxury in comparison to their counterparts outside the palace walls. Their environment was a far cry from the harsh poverty experienced by most Cambodians. For instance the governor of Battambang hired Italian architects to design his new residence in 1905 (Tauch Chhong 1994:88–9, 121, 123); the palace gardens in Phnom Penh had 'great pools in which lotus flowers floated. A machine filled and poured fresh, clear water each morning' so that the women of the palace might bathe unmolested by spectators (Groslier 1913:109); the governor of Battambang had a raft built on the river in front of Wat Sangke for the same purpose (Tauch Chhong 1994:122). Far from a constant atmosphere of jealousy, pettiness, and boredom, at least some of the time the women of the palace were content: 'In the evening the great ladies of the court gather in the dining hall and arrange themselves near the table of the king and pass the meal-time agreeably together' (Moura 1883:231).

Although it is likely that few women of the palace were fulfilled in the sense that we understand the term today, individual happiness was not something that most Cambodians could ever attain. Nobody in society was free of the *khsae* (networks of obligations and reciprocal relationships) that bound them to their families, patrons and clients. Shirking one's duty, whether as a farmer whose role was to grow food upon which the town elite depended, as a monk whose daily recitation of Pali texts warded off natural disasters, or as a daughter whose obedience to her parents increased the good standing of her family, was unthinkable. Compared with the lives of toil and hardship experienced by women in the countryside, the lives of women of the palace were better—as long as they did not act in a way that threatened the prestige of the king.

The price of privilege

In 1875, the palace guards arrested a minor palace official named Kuy on charges of sedition. He had spent two days and two nights in the quarters of Neak Moneang Chhay, a consort of the third rank. Also arrested were two women of the palace, Kanteang He and Me Khieu, who had acted as intermediaries between Kuy and Chhay, and the queen herself. The king gave orders to his officials that a punishment 'according to the law' be exacted. The officials turned to the *Kram Monteiro Bal*, parts of which dated back to the 17th century, for advice, and determined that Kuy, He and Khieu be 'shot with a dozen rounds' after which their corpses were to be decapitated and the heads placed outside the palace on bamboo stakes as a warning to others who might consider such perfidy. Chhay could not receive the same treatment 'because she had two children by the king, a daughter and a son living', thus elevating her to an exalted position through association with the divine person of the king. Decapitation by sword was deemed more suitable. Norodom ordered the royal printery to disseminate copies of the law as a new edict, the *Lakkhana Montiro Bal,* 'so that youths, women, and girls would not follow bad examples' (Leclère 1898 1:176). The stipulations describing appropriate behaviour n the *Lakkhana Montiro Bal* included a stern prohibition against anyone 'who puts oil on his hair or powder on his body, or colour, and a flower or a cigarette behind his ear and walks with a swagger' (Leclère 1898 1:210).

The *Lakkhana Montiro Bal* stipulated that princesses and consorts of the king were not permitted to leave the interior of the palace, even in the event of the illness or even death of their parents:

> If she goes beyond this limit, she will be punished with fifteen lashes and a month in prison. If she goes outside the palace by day, she will receive 30 lashes and three months in prison. If by night she leaves through a hole or underneath a wall, she will receive 60 lashes and six months in prison. If she goes out to find a lover or if she is trying to run away, she must be condemned to death (Leclère 1898 1:181).

Such women were, however, allowed to receive their parents at the west gate. Anyone caught making 'a hole in order to get into the palace or to get out' would have their hands and feet cut off (Leclère 1898 1:182). Norodom, like kings before him, saw infidelity on the part of the women of the palace as treason, as it compromised the relationship established with their families and thus the geographic area they represented. Any sort of sexual activity involving a woman of the palace, including rape, was seen as sedition and punished as such. This included same-sex liaisons where women were caught 'caressing each other, one being the man and the other the woman' (Leclère 1898 1:183–4). Degrees of punishment depended on the exact status of the woman concerned and her relationship to the king: 'Anyone who has relations with a princess or with a wife of the king who has children, or with one of his wives whom he particularly loves' received more blows with the cane before death than had the same transgression occurred with 'one whom the king does not visit' (Leclère 1898 1:181). Male servants were warned not to tempt women of the palace through dressing 'in a manner to attract young girls', which included wearing cigarettes and flowers tucked behind the ear, playing the violin, flute or guitar, or whistling, on pain of losing their lips, ears or hands (Leclère 1898 1:192). Possession of items that might excite the passions, such as 'alcohol, opium, hashish, and any sort of gambling' was a punishable offence (Leclère 1898 1:184). This strict control of sexual activity was also seen in other elite households. In Battambang, 'if found guilty of romance, they were executed…accused of being "faithless to the palace"'. The governor had his own brother executed on just such a charge (Tauch Chhong 1994:122–3).

Such strict control required a large and dedicated corps of guards and spies. In Norodom's palace, the *neak yeay chastum*,[17] elderly women who had lived their lives at court, were appointed as chaperones; the *krommo veang*, palace guards, were drawn from the ranks of lesser consorts, disgraced officials' families, and children left at the palace gates. If a woman managed to convince the *neak yeay chastum* and *krommo veang* that she had permission to leave the palace and they allowed her to leave or accompanied her, they would each 'receive 50 lashes and be put in prison until it pleases the king that they should be allowed out' (Leclère 1898 1:186).

In Battambang, the governor put a 'Mr. Phouveang' in charge of court security; 'he had the right to strike any of the secondary wives', who 'feared Mr. Phouveang as much as a tiger, and all were beaten by him' with the exception of Loak Srei Ing, the governor's principal wife (Tauch Chhong 1994:123). At the same time, it was not unusual for women to be given permission to leave their places at court in order to marry (Tauch Chhong 1994:124). Norodom is known to have ordered marriages to take place between women of the palace and his officials, yet these women were still regarded as being subject to his will. In 1874 Norodom arranged a marriage for the daughter of Phuong, a woman living in the palace, to one of his Thai *oknha.* Eight years later, the girl fled to her sister's home and refused to return to her husband because of their frequent arguments. Norodom was furious, as by flouting the authority of her husband—the king's proxy—she was going against the wishes of the king himself. In the end the matter was resolved when the girl agreed to return to the palace (Muller 2006:148–9). Situations also seem to have arisen in which certan women were permitted to 'sleep outside the palace with the authorisation of the king', although they were expected to return to the palace by day in order to fulfil their duties (Leclère 1898 1:180).[18]

The 1875 executions and their aftermath

French officials attempted to prevent Norodom from going ahead with the executions in 1875, seeing them as the ultimate despotic act. They failed. The executions (which, because of the Cambodian soldiers' ineptitude with rifles, took an extremely long time) and the grisly spectacle of the decapitated heads impaled on stakes in front of the palace disturbed the French population of Phnom Penh.[19] Pressure on Norodom to act in a manner befitting a modern and progressive monarch increased, placing him in an extremely difficult position. He was well aware that he owed his position to the French; yet for this very reason he was also particularly sensitive to his image as a legitimate king in possession of the necessary attributes of sovereignty. He needed to reinforce his image as a traditional Cambodian king. One way was to appease the *me sa* of Ba Phnom through human sacrifice in 1877 (Chandler 1996b:134; 1996c:39–40). Nevertheless his reign was not universally endorsed by the Cambodian *oknha*. In fact, the revised laws promulgated during his reign indicate that Norodom feared that the *oknha* would try to ally themselves to other power brokers, thus reducing his status as an all-powerful king. The mid-1870s were a time of considerable insecurity for Norodom. In addition to constant challenges to his authority from his relatives, in 1874 a Frenchman, Thomas Caraman, had taken the unprecedented step of suing Norodom for refusing to pay him for goods purchased on his behalf in France, particularly a gilded screen by Denière costing 220,000 francs. Although the tribunal was abandoned, the affair had proved that the French did not view Norodom with the same reverence to which he believed himself entitled (Muller 2006:123–6). Shortly after this incident Norodom decided that 'there were too many abuses of royal edicts' and revised the *Lakkhana Achnha Luong* ('Law on the envoys of the king'):

> Anyone, Cambodian, Chinese, Annamite, Cham, Chvea (Malay of Java), and Mon, seeing that foreigners, English, Dutch, or inhabitants of Malaya have lots of money and jewels, [who] offer[s] them his daughter or niece in marriage, commits a crime against religion and is at risk of one of the following punishments: decapitation and confiscation of goods; life imprisonment; confiscation and slavery; quadruple fine; triple fine; double fine; denouncement. These punishments are promulgated to prevent people from abandoning the religion to follow another (Leclère 1898 2:256).

Norodom also set his judicial officials to work combing the ancient laws for examples of punishment for those who acted contrary to accepted practice. The result was a new law in 1877, the *Kram kbath soek* (Law concerning acts of treason in times of war) (Leclère 1898 2:231), which stipulated that any members of an enemy king's family taken prisoner were to be presented to the king on pain of death. As this law clearly spelled out that 'the wives of an enemy' or 'the enemy queen' were considered the most important, we can deduce that Norodom feared a usurper would marry into a powerful family and threaten his own rule (Leclère 1898 2:246). Finally, he

forbade princesses to marry below their own rank (Osborne 1969:254).[20] Claimants based their right to the throne on the status of their mother (Doumer nd:249). This meant that royal princesses were unable to marry anyone other than their own brothers and uncles (Corfield 1993:38),[21] ensuring that any competition would come from Norodom's own immediate family, all of whom depended upon him for their position and status.

The most crucial aspect of kingship for Norodom, however, was the acceptance of his legitimacy by other elite families in the kingdom through alliances in which sisters and daughters, as representatives of the land from which they came, entered into a contract that was at once sexual and political. To give up any of these alliances—symbolic or otherwise—was to declare his failure as a king and a man. Inevitably, however, as the French tightened their control over the Cambodian state, especially with regard to the revenue that Norodom was able to access and dispense with the signing of new treaties in 1885, he was forced to accept changes to his palace administration and personnel. Eventually the number of queens was reduced to five; Norodom would accept no further decrease. This was the minimum number of queens Norodom could retain and still replicate the symbolic relationship between women of the palace and the land. Five ensured that the king's mastery over each cardinal direction was represented, while the principal queen at the centre of the microcosmic rendition of the kingdom symbolised the ability of the king to connect to the celestial realm.

The 20th-century 'harem'

Norodom's successor Sisowath (r1904–27) was expected to be more reasonable regarding the Cambodian 'harem', as the French administration was responsible for his accession, and this was true to a large degree. Sisowath did not demand large numbers of queens and permitted the French administration to take control of the palace treasury.[22] He agreed to the abolition of private taxation revenue for the royal family and court officials. All now received a civil servant salary. Many women left the palace after the death of Norodom; their king was dead and his replacement had little personal wealth to spare on rewarding favourites. It is also likely that the French told those with no defined role to leave. Sisowath, however, had spent his youth in the Siamese court, and had watched Mongkut and Chulalongkorn amass thousands of women in their palaces (Loos 2005:883). He came to the throne with his own retinue of dozens of women and absorbed some of those from his father's 'harem'. Families continued to bring their daughters to the palace seeking royal favour, but in far fewer numbers; by 1913, the practice was 'on the wane' (Groslier 1913:27). In any case, the girls were no longer destined for lives as consorts of the king; instead, they were accepted on the understanding that they would join the royal Cambodian 'ballet' corps. Other elite men seemed to have developed an interest in the fine arts as a cover for continuing to maintain polygamous households; Col de Monteiro supported 15 'singers' in addition to his eight official wives.[23]

One of the greatest ironies in Cambodian history is that the French, in seeking to liberate the women of the palace, succeeded in creating another avenue through which they could be exploited. During Norodom's reign, it had become usual for visiting dignitaries to attend a dance performance at the palace 'in accordance with the custom of past entertainments at the court of the great king' (Garnier 1996:49). Descriptions of the exotic splendour of such exhibitions stirred the imaginations of metropolitan readers. In 1902, it was suggested that a troupe of Cambodian dancers be sent to Hanoi in order to showcase the culture of Cambodia and the role of the French in preserving it (Edwards 2007:39).[24] Shortly thereafter, the idea was mooted that an exhibition of Cambodian dance would make an admirable addition to the *Exposition colonial* in Marseilles in 1906. Such was the success of the tour, in terms of representing the accomplishments of the colonial project in protecting and exalting the local cultures of its subjugated peoples, that the tradition of Cambodian dance was turned into an industry almost overnight. Whereas once girls had been brought to the palace in the hope that they would rise to become favourites of the king, now they were brought to train as dancers and be exhibited in the *Expositions* along with embroidery and notebooks filled with children's essays.

The French were careful to avoid associations with the supposedly debauched state of the Cambodian 'harem' prior to Sisowath's reign. For this reason the youth and innocence of the Cambodian dancers were emphasised:

> These are the virginal idols of a modest and gentle people. The ballerinas of faces pale as a drop of milk, after having taken off the golden tiara, cannot compromise themselves, not sell themselves. They sleep in the palace, on their mats, continuing in their sleep the dream that they offer to us. The spectator, back in his house, humble shack or palace, can say to himself, 'My soul is serene; I have seen the dance of the gods', and he will not be overcome by vile passions for having seen them dance (Groslier 1913:30).

In the early 20th century the Cambodian court dancers began to be characterised as modern-day incarnations of the *apsara*, divine beings whose images are carved into Angkorian-era temples. Early 20th-century accounts of the lives of the dancers had them do little except eat, practise, adorn themselves, and daydream. Like the *apsara*, they were described as beautiful and graceful in Western terms; the girls were always young and slender (Malleret 1934:230–1).[25] These unrealistic descriptions conveyed the idea that the dancers lacked agency; they implied a passivity that had little to do with the reality of the Cambodian court, which included elderly and pregnant women employed in myriad activities. Moreover, most Cambodian women had their incisor teeth filed and their hair cut short to indicate that they had passed through the rite of puberty known as *joal m'lap*, 'entering the shade', and were married or otherwise sexually experienced. Around the same time as this myth of the Cambodian court dancer was emerging, it was the fashion in Battambang for the women of the palace who danced in the governor's theatre troupe to wear their hair 'wound in tufts' which they smeared 'with elephant fat to stop its growth' (Tauch Chhong 1994:36). This was a far cry from the girl whose 'features were delicate and pretty, dressed in the European style, and wearing long hair' who had so captured the attention of Henri Mouhot in the late 1850s (Mouhot 1966:35).

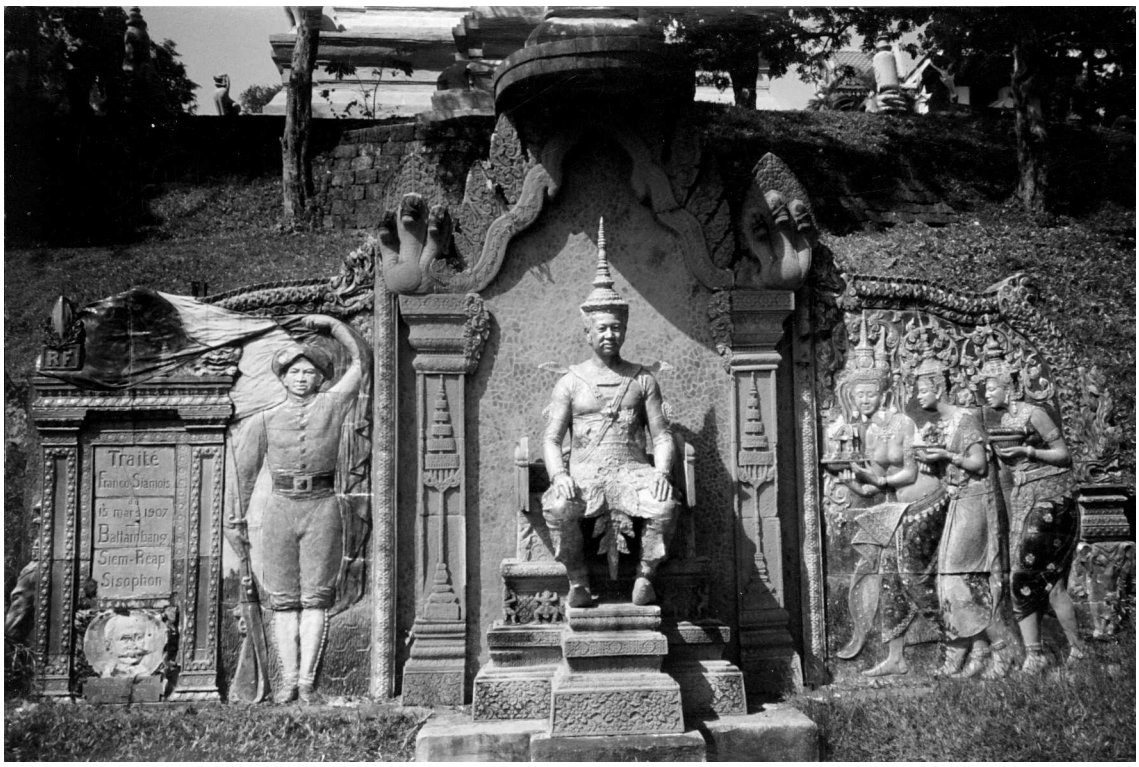

Figure 2: Monument commemorating the return of three Cambodian provinces (anthropomorphised as court dancers) to King Sisowath
Wat Phnom, Phnom Penh, 1907

The function of the women of the palace may have begun to change during Sisowath's reign, but he retained the view that their presence bolstered his reputation as a man and his legitimacy as a king. During the early 20th

century the women of the palace were held to the same strict code of behaviour as their earlier counterparts had been in Norodom's court because their sexual fidelity continued to represent the potency and legitimacy of the king. Although Sisowath was described as more compassionate than Norodom, he nonetheless employed all the measures of his brother in ensuring that the women of the palace did not compromise themselves, and thus his position:

> The gossips wait and follow them, so that they cannot explain away a half-hour. In this little world of grace and charm, a denunciation is rewarded with the protection of an official or a favourite. They are spied upon and watched. Emissaries are sent out to the town while the dancers stay in the palace, to find out what she, with authority, did! Who approached her? Who spoke to her? Who is that man? Is that really her brother? (Groslier 1913:29–30)

Sisowath also refused to allow the Cambodian dancers to travel to France without him on their tour of 1906, despite allegedly saying he was 'happy to offer them to Europeans as an entertainment' (Doumer nd:248). Allowing a large number of women of the palace to leave was unthinkable, as it meant that their fidelity could not be policed to the satisfaction of the king; thus the potential existed for them to break faith with Sisowath and compromise his legitimacy. At the same time, a modern and progressive king had to move with the times, and above all placate his French administrators. Sisowath had no alternative but to agree to the tour and to accompany it in a manner befitting a king; in addition to forty-two dancers, his entourage included cooks, valets, doctors, monks, princes and princesses, eight rhythm-keepers, eight dressers, twelve musicians, eight narrators, and two jewellers (Tully 1996:8–9). The Cambodian 'ballet' had begun.

By the time Sisowath's son, Sisowath Monivong, came to the throne in 1927, women of the palace who did not form part of the royal dance corps were considered disreputable, throwbacks to an earlier and debauched age. It had become more acceptable for women to fulfil roles as dancers. During his father's reign, Monivong had entered into a liaison with a dancer, Long Meak, the daughter of a Cambodian official in the French administration. When he acceded to the throne, he gave her the title *khun preah moneang* and placed her in charge of the other women of the court. He was also very fond of her cousin, Loth Sareoun, herself a dancer in his retinue. But the inhabitants of Monivong's palace were distinctly lower in social status than they had been under any previous Cambodian king, and certainly far fewer in number. Infidelity on the part of women of the palace, however, continued to be construed as high treason. In 1936 an anonymous letter was sent to both the king and the head of the *Sûreté*, accusing a court official, Nang Nuon, of having 'had secret sexual relations with a woman of the palace, a *kanchau* [*sic*] named neang Ouk' and another named khun neang Dak May (on the king's own boat, no less), and of having secretly married two other women of the palace, Neang Khim and Neang Noy. The same letter finished by adding, almost as an afterthought, that Nang Nuon had also stolen money from the king that had enabled him to purchase a villa worth 1,700 piastres, and a car.[26] It was clear where the real crime lay.

Regardless of their social and political status, or lack thereof, the fidelity of the women of the palace continued to represent the masculinity and sovereignty of the Cambodian king well into the 20th century. But it was no longer politically rewarding for the Cambodian *oknha* and the general populace to seek alliances with the king; everyone knew that the real power lay in the hands of the French, who despised such practices. Upon Monivong's death in 1941, the third rank of royal consort was removed from the civil service register and their salaries discontinued. The eleven women of this rank, all of them elderly, had no choice but to remain at court and exist on the charity of those around them, devoid of income, status, or identity.[27] The colonial administration had successfully bureaucratised the women of the palace out of existence.[28]

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Two perspectives on the Cambodian 'harem' have been explored in this paper. The 'dominant Orientalist discourse' applies to the French view, in which

> the harem figures as a polygamous space animated by different forms of tyranny…of excess (the multitude of women, the opulence of the interior, the passions of the despot); and of perversion (the barbarity of polygamy…the sapphism of the women locked up without 'real' men and the illicit affairs carried out behind the despot's back). All these things are found deplorable and enticing by turn (Lewis 2004:183).

The French believed that Norodom's reluctance to abolish the harem stemmed from his desire to exploit the privileges of traditional, 'despotic' Cambodian kingship that afforded him sexual access to large numbers of women. This was certainly true to a degree.

But there was a second perspective. What the colonial officials did not understand was that they were asking Norodom to willingly give up one of the key elements of Cambodian political culture—that is, alliances to other elite families in the kingdom and the region. They also did not understand that the women of the palace may have considered themselves fortunate to live on a day-to-day basis in such close proximity to the king who was, after all, a *bodhisattva*, and that their roles and responsibilities were as diverse and as significant (if not more so) than those of the *oknha* in the outer, public areas. Finally, what no foreigner could understand was that the women of the palace led lives of privilege far above the imaginings of most Cambodians, in a space where the mundane and celestial worlds overlapped.

Notes

1 I would like to thank David Chandler for his comments and guidance during initial drafts of this paper. The critiques by two anonymous readers were also enlightening and I have incorporated their suggestions wherever possible. All translations in French, Khmer, Sanskrit, and Pali are my own except where stated.

Laws were periodically revised by kings when situations called for them, usually after a new dynasty acceded to the throne or a new set of social conditions made laws unworkable. For a detailed treatment of laws pertaining to women in Cambodia before the colonial era, see Jacobsen (2008:91–102).

2 For an excellent summary of this phenomenon see Isom-Verhaaren (2006:178) and Dobie (2001:40, 51).

3 Other similar works include Holmgren (1983) and Lal (2004).

4 This is not to suggest that European women's preconceived ideas of racial superiority did not influence their accounts of harem life.

5 For other Southeast Asian examples, see Reid (1988:637).

6 While we cannot be sure that the attitudes of colonisers and authors of books written in this genre were identical, we can say that these authors at least imbued their characters with similar perspectives toward women.

7 Surprisingly, the Cambodian 'harem' was not condemned on the grounds of incest, although many of the women within were blood relatives of the king.

8 In 1881 Ibrahim was arrested in Bangkok for 'pilfering' women from the Siamese court for Norodom (see Muller 2002:72).

9 See for example the 18th century *Cbpab Trineti*, verses 20–21, 23 (Pou & Jennar 1981:160).

10 This was also the case in the Middle Eastern context (see Peirce 1993:5).

11 Loos (2005:890–891) posited that:

> Polygamous marriages culturally enhanced the *barami*, prestige, and masculinity of men…*Barami* is a Buddhist concept that refers to an individual's Buddhist merit and virtue that determines his place in the sociopolitical hierarchy…The size of his entourage, then, was an expression of his barami: the larger the entourage, the greater his barami. His conjugal alliances necessarily increased the size of the king's entourage and thus acted as a tangible manifestation and reflection of the king's virtue and ability to rule.

12 This was also the case in the neighbouring Siamese court under Kings Mongkut (r1851–68) and Chulalongkorn (r1868–1910) (see Loos 2005).

13 See for example Peirce (1993:30). Isom-Verhaaren (2006:160) has pointed out that *mythical* marriage alliances between French royal women and Ottoman sovereigns formed the basis for continued political allegiances between the Ottoman Empire and France.

14 Jennifer Yee (2004:9) stated that the 'sameness' of women in photographic images from the colonial period in French Indochina serves a dual purpose of placing the Other as 'a "type" that can be labelled, classified and collected' and reasserting the inherent sexual nature of the subject, far removed from the intelligence, diversity, and respectability of metropolitan women. I would argue that the same trope has been employed in many literary descriptions.

15 She held court at Oudong, where, amongst other pious acts, she caused an enormous *chedi* to be built for the ashes of her dead husband, Ang Duong.

16 There was a widespread belief that women at the Siamese court could influence the king as well (see Hong Lysa 1999:321–2).

17 In many French translations this title appears as *ak yeay chastum*. The '*ak*' could be a version of *neak*, a designator for 'person', or a rendition of the Sanskrit prefix *ek*, indicating the primary ordinal number. Thus the translation could be 'person who is a grandmother' (elderly) or 'first elder'. Most Cambodianists have adopted the former, and I have followed them in this paper. I would point out, however, that most of these Cambodianists are not Sanskritists.

18 Norodom probably had no choice in this, as by the 1890s many Frenchmen had found temporary wives from amongst the women of the palace.

19 Muller (2006:147–8) describes the French as having an obsession with the decapitations meted out as punishment for transgressing the rule of the 'harem'.

20 In Siam, marrying below one's rank was a criminal offence for elite and royal women (Loos 2005:895).

21 Two of Norodom's daughters, Somayadey and Phangangam, married their half-brothers (Ketsara and Sutharot), but at least four who were in their teens or younger when Norodom came to power remained unmarried.

22 He did, however, attempt to prevent one of his brother's favourites from leaving the palace with her property. When Norodom died, Sum turned some of her property over to the royal treasury, but, according to Sisowath, she took a large amount of jewels and cash to her adopted daughter, who was married to an Indian, when she left the palace for good on 10 December 1904. King Sisowath was afraid that these goods would pass into the hands of Sum's adopted daughter and her two nieces rather than return to the treasury; he therefore complained to the French administration (see file RSC/12201, National Archives of Cambodia, in which there is a letter of complaint from King Norodom Sisowath dated 1 November 1905).

23 These women were lesser wives, as 'Col's love for choral music produced a minimum of twenty-six sons and daughters' (Muller 2006:89).

24 Edwards points out that the dancers were requested to perform scenes from the *bas-reliefs* adorning Angkor Wat, not pieces within their repertoire.

25 Penny Edwards (1998:129) has argued that the 'the stereotype of Cambodian femininity' was largely a product of a colonial crisis of masculinity:

> Afraid of the emancipation of Western women, colonizers…retreated into a fictive world where woman's place was to serve and obey. Despite their efforts to divorce themselves from the metropole, both writers were deeply influenced by the intellectual climate in Europe. Reflected in a constellation of monuments, exhibitions, and museums, their female typecasting of Cambodia was rooted in generic occidental conceptions of a quintessential feminine East.

26 Anonymous complaint (File RSC/17593, 28 June 1936, National Archives of Cambodia).

27 Chhim Long was the brother of Phen Saloth, father of Saloth Sar (Pol Pot). Justin Corfield (1993:92) does not include Sareoun in his list of Monivong's consorts (see also Chandler 1999:8). For information on the salaries of women of the palace, see *Tableau de reclassement des fonctionnaires et agents en service palais royal 1943* (File RSC/29012, National Archives of Cambodia).

28 They had also inculcated a legacy of prejudice toward the institution of women of the palace in the minds of Cambodians. The note of outraged sensibility is apparent in the translated version of *Battambang during the time of the lord governor*: 'Over a hundred beautiful women were kept for the pleasure of the governor' (Tauch Chhong 1994:122); 'mere tools to be used for the passions of the governor' (Tauch Chhong 1994:88); the Battambang palace 'could be compared to a prison in which women exchanged freedom for gold, diamonds and cosmetics, which were really no compensation at all' (Tauch Chhong 1994:123). It is unlikely that this commentary, more in keeping with 20th century Western views, was included either in the original text or by the translators of the text into English. Pol Pot was also critical of the Cambodian kings' practice of exploiting women sexually; his aunt Loth Saroeun was a favourite of King Monivong, as has been discussed above.

Glossary of titles

Kanchau	Honorific designating the status of a woman who was born in the palace to a woman of lesser royal rank, usually of Siamese origin
Kanteang	Honorific designating the status of a woman not born in the palace
Khun neang	Honorific designating the status of a woman born in the palace
Me	Polite way to refer to a married woman
Moneang or neak moneang	Queen of the third rank after the principal queen
Neang	Young woman; title given to young women
Oknha	Official title meaning 'Lord'
Preah moneang	Title of a rank of royal wife
Preah neang	Title of female royalty

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