

Rapport sur le Cambodge. Voyage de Sai-Gon à Bat-tam-bang:
“Report on Cambodia. A Trip from Saigon to Battambang”

Andrew Spooner¹

Introduction²

This is a slightly abridged translation of a French-language report, dated 30 December 1862. The original document is held in the Centre des Archives d'Outre-mer at Aix-en-Provence (Indochine, Fonds amiraux, dossier 12705).

In mid-1862, the governor of French Cochinchina, Admiral Bonnard, asked a local businessman, Andrew Spooner, to accompany a forty-man naval mission up the Mekong to Angkor and Battambang. Spooner's task was to report on the commerce and potential French colonial economic prospects of the unknown Cambodian interior. His subsequent report is an exceptionally precious historical document, providing as it does a unique snapshot of the mid-nineteenth-century economic life of the country, and of its Chinese residents and sojourners, long before any French influence had reached Cambodia.

The Text

“Having departed from Saigon on 8 November, we reached the four arms³ during the night of the 11th, after various stops [in Cochinchina]. I begin by reminding you of the general divisions of Cambodia, in regard to agriculture, commerce and industry.

The present kingdom of Cambodia comprises five provinces.

1. Srok-tran, which stretches from Houdon [Oudong],⁴ the capital, as far as Chau Doc Province [in Cochinchina].
2. Poursate [Pursat],⁵ bordered to the North by the Province of Bat-tam-bang, to the South by Srok-tran, to the East the great lake, and to the West by the sea.
3. Compong-Soai, to the East, the great lake, extending above the province of Angkor, on the left bank of the Ton-leh Sap canal as far as Ton-leh Thom Province.
4. Ton-leh Thom, comprising the two banks of the Mekong.
5. Ba-Penom [Ba Phnum], interior lands extending from the left bank of the great river to the Provinces of Vinh Long and Tay Ninh.⁶

¹ Andrew Spooner was a young French businessman of American and French parentage. Although only 21 at the time of his journey, Spooner had already been in business in Asia for three years, for one year in Singapore and two in Saigon. He would later go on, in partnership with certain local Chinese, to involve himself in opium revenue farming in both Cambodia and Cochinchina, as well as various other commercial ventures ranging from agriculture (an unsuccessful indigo plantation in 1869), to transport (a bimonthly steamboat service between Saigon and Phnom Penh in 1870) to the provision of urban amenities (gas lighting for Saigon). In the 1870s and early 1880s, he was a partner in a French-operated steam-driven rice mill, one of the few non-Chinese rice mills in Saigon. Spooner died suddenly in 1884. For more details, see Etienne Denis, *Bordeaux et la Cochinchine, sous la restauration et le second empire* (S-I, Impr. Delmas, 1966), pp. 305-12.

² Original French phonetic spellings have been retained throughout for Khmer places, and contemporary ones added in brackets where Spooner's transliteration might not adequately identify the location. All footnotes are by the translator, Nola Cooke.

³ The place at Phnom Penh, called by the Khmer “the four faces”, where four rivers cross.

⁴ In modern Cambodian spelling this is “Odongk”.

⁵ In modern Cambodian spelling this is “Pouthisat”.

⁶ Both were Vietnamese-ruled provinces at the time.

The internal limits of these Provinces are not defined, for reasons I will discuss later.

The Governments of the five Provinces are confided in five Mandarins who often buy their titles; their dependants, officials of lesser grades, live in the large centres of population, and these smaller mandarins themselves hold sway over a certain zone of villages, each of which has its chief, or mayor. In addition, the five Ministers who form the King's Privy Council are each the representatives of a Province at the court. They are the ones that important Governors approach on all matters and the King's orders are transmitted through them.

The revenues of the State are mixed in with those of the King, and have no definite limits; indeed, the royal *corvées*⁷ give the King the right to require everything, and even to reduce the people to slavery.

The regular revenues come from tax farms on gambling and opium, established in all villages of any importance, and whose yield is relatively significant (over 150,000 piastres per year). All the revenue farms are in Chinese hands.

Customs posts are established on the four great waterways; but although the regular rate is a duty of 10 percent on goods that come down river, there are never any precise audits, and the tax is always paid to the great advantage of the exporter.

The annual rental of lands (for all land belongs to the King) on which they grow cotton, rice, and tobacco, is paid yearly, on average, for each *coudée*⁸ of land facing the river; the rental can be extended indefinitely into the interior.

The population of Cambodia, already low before the troubles,⁹ is today even smaller, thanks to the arrests and the flight of the rebels; it is impossible to estimate it at more than one million inhabitants, and this figure is still perhaps higher than the reality. Currently the population no longer even suffices to populate the riverside lands, which alone are and were cultivated. The land in these places is generally more fertile than in the interior and, although the river deposits very little loam, it softens and refreshes the soil, and makes it easier to prepare. . . .

The Cambodians live in bamboo huts on stilts along the waterways that, as in Cochinchina, are their main means of communication. In the interior, a great number of almost impenetrable forests are the home to wild animals; tigers are especially abundant there and the people, already few in number and able to find along the riverbanks all they need for their existence, rarely risk going into the interior. This is what makes it impossible to determine the exact limits of the Provinces. In Ton-leh Thom, there are hardly four or five settlements away from the main waterways. They are in places where wood is exploited, either by Cambodians, when the King requires it as tribute, or by Vietnamese from Lower Cochinchina who, before the war, came in great number during the dry season to cut the *Cay-Yao*, the *Cay-Chao* and some other species,¹⁰ and who took advantage of the high waters to go back down with their rafts to their [home] Provinces.

The foreign peoples established in Cambodia are:

1. The Chinese, those of the South coming from maritime towns. They are all traders, while those who settled up the river, coming from the provinces of Sut-Chuan and Yun-Nan via the Mekong, are cultivators and farmers.
2. The Malays, who seem to have the same origin as the Cambodians; they have many Compons on the banks of the great river where they cultivate

⁷ The forced labour system.

⁸ A *coudée* was a traditional measurement, from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger. It is often equated to a cubit, which is roughly 45 cms.

⁹ There were revolts in 1860-61, following the accession of Norodom. Many lives had also been lost during the long and brutal occupation by Vietnamese forces in the 1830s and 1840s.

¹⁰ Spooner provides more information about commercially significant wood later.

cotton near Penom Penh and Houdon; they also engage in fishing which supplies the markets every day.

3. The Vietnamese, previously in large numbers but now quite badly regarded and not very numerous.
4. The Muslim Chams, forming three or four small colonies; they do not mix with the rest of the population. Everyone fears them.¹¹

From time to time, some Europeans, Portuguese, Dutch, French, came to settle individually in Cambodia for a short time. Several died there. None founded any significant settlements.

The Great River

The Great river of Cambodia, whose course and name in the upper regions is basically unknown to us, is called in Laos the Meinam-Kong, which by abbreviation gives Mekong (Kong is a wealthy Laotian province, formed by four islands, which has more than 50,000 inhabitants). The Cambodians call it the Ton-leh Thôm (the great river) It leaves Laos, through the Province of Stung Trêng, and enters Cambodia to form a vast Province, Ton-leh Thôm.

In September and October each year, the waters of the Mekong rise rapidly seven to nine meters and flood all the low-lying lands of Cambodia,¹² except for the high ground that begins at Cholon [in Cochinchina] and heads North. This considerable volume of water, which undoubtedly comes from snowmelt in the higher basins, would inevitably flood the provinces of Lower Cochinchina if it did not find at the four arms two immense outlets, the Bassac River, flowing straight to the sea, and Ton-leh Sap, of which I will speak later.

The four arms, located in the centre of the kingdom, are:

1. The upper arms, formed by the great Mekong River (East) and the Ton-leh Sap canal (West);
2. The lower arms by the continuation of the Mekong (East) and the Bassac (West).

Penom Penh is located at this spot, the biggest, and one might say only, market in Cambodia.

In the lower basin, the land that had been cleared of undergrowth and grasses before the flood is immediately put into cultivation (November).

Annual *cotton* is the most important crop; sown in November, it is harvested in April-May. The plant is about three to four feet high at this stage. A second harvest occurs in June, but is only of an inferior quality.

Next is *tobacco*, which is harvested all at once at the same time (April-May), but they cut the leaves and not the plants as people do in Cochinchina. In February, when the plant has reached a certain stage of development, they remove the lower leaves, which are hard and damaged, in order to increase the plant's strength; at harvest time they only cut leaves of a certain size and then they uproot the plant. The leaves are partly dried in sheds and then cut into strips that are as long as the plant's size allows. Finally, they package them into the small slabs that you see in the markets. Tobacco never appears for sale in any other form, nor was I able to get a single leaf in the villages, for in November–December the plants that I saw were hardly twenty centimetres above the

¹¹ In part, because Cham magical spells were reputed to be very powerful.

¹² By this term Spooner means the wider Mekong Delta geographic region.

ground. The price varies according to quality, from 50 to 70 ligatures,¹³ or 10 to 14 piastres per picul.

Silk. Cambodian silks are generally of an inferior quality and always expensive. The usual [poor] quality of the silk is due to the degeneration of the silkworm eggs and worms, which are raised without much care. The cocoons are thin and the thread hard. The large mulberry tree doesn't exist in Cambodia; the mulberry shrub is reproduced by cuttings placed in the ground, in bundles of three or four branches. They plant them in August, before the flood; the Cambodians keep the same plant for four or five years; around the time of the flood they let two or three branches grow, so as not to drown the plant, and as soon as the waters have fallen they cut the plant down to ten centimetres from the soil.

The method of weaving fabrics is the simplest expression of the Jacquard technique; odd and even threads go up and down the warp alternatively by means of two levers, worked by foot; the shuttle is a cylindrical wooden rod around which the woof is wound and which is enclosed in a small bamboo tube. For weaving silk cloth, either brocaded or flowery, the method is the same, although there is a complication in the way the warp is set that varies with the design.

For *rice* there are two main seasons, December and July. The first, sown in June, is transplanted in October; the second, sown in January, is transplanted in March–April. All Cambodian rice is of the same type, long grained and pointed; the best is from Ba Penom, which produces a great quantity of it. The hinterland of this province is the most heavily populated. Rice is very scarce this year in Cambodia; war and flooding have brought about a big famine, and we have seen the natives reduced to digging up the roots of marshy plants and bananas to feed themselves until the next harvest.

Other crops are very much less important, but all are capable of development and some, such as sesame and hemp, deserve our serious attention. Along the great river there is a large amount of abandoned land which, given the nature of its soil, would give certainly give excellent [agricultural] results. In the rich elevated lands that are never flooded, without every being really dry, you can obtain *hemp*; the sample I brought back from Stung Tran¹⁴ would give an idea of it. It grows about a metre and half in height. In the lowest-lying and richest lands, such as the islands in the great river, *indigo* grown with care achieves the same degree of perfection as in Java and in India; but unfortunately, its cultivation and processing are as badly carried out in Cambodia as in Cochinchina. Seeds from the harvest are used to sow the fields for the next crop and, often, they grow it on the same land for three or four consecutive years. At harvest time they throw the bush into a tank full of water, and mix in a disproportionate quantity of lime to cause the material to fall out. This changes the colour and makes drying impossible. They only make and sell indigo as a liquid. When dried it gives poor results; it is a slate colour and cracks and sheds powder.

As for *sesame*, there is hardly any of it at the moment; there are one hundred tonnes in all of Cambodia. It sells for one piastre per picul;¹⁵ corn is not an object of commerce, there is so little of it.

Small beans and peas are quite plentiful, above all in the province of the great river. Sown in November, they are harvested in February–March. The price varies enormously, with the average about 8.5-9 ligatures, or 1.75 piastres, per picul, but it often rises to 15 to 18 ligatures.

The forests of Cambodia are filled with a countless numbers of magnificent trees of various species, almost all of which can be used in building, whether for land or sea

¹³ A ligature was a Vietnamese *quan*, comprising 600 small coins strung together. On the exchange rate given here, five *quan* was worth about one silver piastre in late 1862.

¹⁴ Modern Stueng Trang, which is downriver from Krouch Chhmar. It should not be confused with Stoeng Trêng, upriver near the Lao border.

¹⁵ One picul equals 60 kilos.

use. Ba Penom is the single Province in which wood is not abundant; still in the North of this Province you find an abundance of Chutiel, the tree that gives resinous gum.

Here is a note of the main types of wood that are used by Vietnamese and Cambodians.

Kakir – *Cay chao* to the Vietnamese, this wood resembles teak in its grain, but is less red.

Popil – same type; these two woods, with andronil, are the most highly regarded for naval purposes.

Karkoh – brown reddish black, very heavy, a sort of ironwood used for bridge pillars (*cay-vay* in Vietnamese).

Kakirtchmo – the same appearance but very rare

Khen hong – same species

Rang phnom – ditto, grayish

Phé-tiok – hard, resinous, reddish grey [these four species above are excellent for building houses.]

Stra-bock (*goyavier*) – flexible and resistant; it makes the best oars.

Salaou – light grey; similar to dressed planks from Singapore but with closer grain. They also make oars from it.

Talah and the Traitch are hardwoods that are less well regarded than the earlier ones.

Chutiel (Vietnamese *cay-yao*) is the most plentiful wood in these regions; it yields the resinous gum they use to caulk junks. (According to region, the price of this gum varies from 40 cents to 1.20 piastres per picul.)

Klon, a reddish wood used inside houses that deteriorates quite quickly when exposed to water and sun.

Néan-pahek has the same use.

Kou-ao, a yellowish wood, is used for planks and everyday furniture.

Mite (*jacquier*), gives a yellow colouring, and the trunk is used to make mortars for pounding rice.

Sappan

Cay-vieng, which gives a bright red colouring

Prohok, whose bark gives a golden yellow colour.

Some species are native to the area of the great lake, or rather are rare in other Provinces. Here is the list of the most valued wood types:

Andronil – hard red wood that they use to make small craft and boats

Nisan – very hard black wood, growing tall and straight

Satruver – yellowish wood used in construction and very plentiful around Angkor

Thaouor-Tomat – blackish, very hard (from Battambang)

Creul – red wood for furnishings; it yields an abundance of a black wood sugar that, being kept in liquid form, is mixed with ground up resin and lampblack to make a very beautiful black lacquer. (It costs 1 ligature per litre.) The wood is only found in the Provinces of Angkor and Compung Soai

Cay-nhioum – very hard, deep brown colour, very heavy

Cay-Thom – a sort of fir tree, plentiful in the Don-Rek and Compung-Lên mountains.

Currently, the commerce of Cambodia is all entirely in Chinese hands. The reason for this is quite natural. They are the only ones in contact with the outside world, who receive foreign merchandise and export products; the King himself has only a small boat that travels from Kampot to Singapore or Bangkok twice a year.

Weights, measures, and money

The measures of volume used in Cambodia, in the markets and the interior are:

a *tào*, which is the volume of twenty-four catties of rice
 a *thang*, which equals two *tào*, so by straining the measure a little we could
 say one picul equals two *thang*.

The weights used are: the picul, divided into 100 catties.

The currency used is: the Vietnamese *sapek*;¹⁶ and the *Nên*, a bar of pure silver with an absolute value of 14.75 piastres.

A Trip to the Four Arms

Among the products of some importance in the Cambodia markets, some come down from the southern Provinces of Laos, such as: shellac, gambodge, wax, honey, resin, and *Corco*, a sort of cardamom of very inferior quality. But the single means of communication at present, the Mekong, makes almost all transactions impossible; indeed, without taking into account the countless islands and rapids that shape its course in the Provinces, the great river is crossed by two natural barriers. The first, located below the island of Kon at the southern limit of the [Lao] Province of Kong, is a real waterfall or cataract that drops four to six metres in some places; the second is located immediately below Sombor; the natives are able to build specially designed craft that can overcome these obstacles [but] they are not appropriate to transport any merchandise.

The first Cambodian centre of population one encounters when going down the Mekong is Sombor (on the left bank) which where the Laotian products mentioned above are carried. This area, along with that of both Sombuk and Kretché [Kracheh] which are located a little lower on the same river, is surrounded by forests in which are found all the trees that grow along the banks of the Mekong; but these forests are in a flat basin, relatively low and crisscrossed by streams that overflow during the high water season. According to the inhabitants, this results in malignant fevers that have caused people to stay well clear of [the area].

A trip of three days in the neighbourhood of Sombuk has convinced us of the impossibility of any commercial development in this place.

In the environs of Kretché they grow a small amount of cotton. Here is the price of various products there:

shellac, 35 ligatures per picul, about 0.7 piastres; wax, 190 ligatures per picul, or about 38 piastres; resin, 7 ligatures per picul, or about 1.5 piastres; cotton, 18-20 ligatures per picul, or about 0.4 piastres.

We should add sappan wood to this list [but] they don't trade in it here. In the villages you also find a number of different fruits, bananas, guavas, mangos, jackfruit, and tamarinds.

Two adjacent villages (on the left bank), Roka-Knor and Krotch mâl [Krouch Chhmar], [are] located at the first point below Kretché. This is the most populous centre on the great river. Chinese are very numerous here; [but] there is no market, properly speaking. There are trading posts of sorts [*comptoirs*] belonging to commercial houses of Penom Penh and Cochinchina; it is to this place they send their boats, seeking local products in the small villages along the riverbanks. The area around here is very well

¹⁶ One of the 600 small coins strung together to form a *quan*. The individual coins (or *sapeks* in French sources) are called *mach* in Vietnamese.

cultivated by Cambodians, and also by some Chinese, above all the island which is situated level with these villages; cotton seems a specialty there. Rice, small beans and some fruits occupy a very small area, almost insufficient to feed the inhabitants; cattle are very numerous and are worth from 12 to 18 ligatures according to size and strength. Above Roka-Knor (on the right bank) [there is] an immense raised horizontal plateau, which extends a long way into the interior. Before the troubles, it was populated by Chams and Malays who had made it the most important point on the river for the cultivation of cotton; this product was then worth 12 to 15 ligatures per picul. This spot is now deserted. Opposite Krotch-mâl, on the right bank, there begins a series of hills covered in magnificent forests. Level with this point is found the most difficult part of the river for navigation between the four arms and Sombuk. A dozen kilometres above Roka-Knor (on the right bank) is located Prec-Tchlom, whose banks are covered with Chutiel trees that the Vietnamese previously used to exploit.

Some leagues¹⁷ lower, on the right bank, is located Stung Tran, or rather a suburb of the town that is itself four hours' march into the interior. The bank is high, with the land between the river and the town very well cultivated in rice, cotton, and tobacco. Behind there extends a vast forest, rich in construction woods. The only way to get a large amount of it, in a short period of time and at a fixed price, is to deal with the Governor of the Province, via the intermediary of the King, whose authority and right to *corvée* labour can alone secure a prompt and satisfactory answer. A raft [of logs] takes at least twenty-five days to go from Stung Tran to Saigon. Vietnamese were still heavily exploiting this forest in 1860. The most highly regarded wood that it produces is Kakir, Soucrom, Kackôh, and chutiel. No navigable waterway traverses this forest, [so] the felled timber had to be dragged by buffaloes as far as the river, about twelve to fifteen leagues from the places where it was cut. Delivered to the riverbank, the logs yield about 12 to 15 ligatures per cubic metre.

The most important product of Stung Tran for European commerce is unfortunately the one least grown. It is flexible white hemp that could rival the best hemp of Siam. Its current production is insignificant, but the whole countryside would be fit for its cultivation. It is worth 50 ligatures, or 0.1 piastres, per picul.¹⁸ A kilometre above Stung Tran there stands a vertical cliff, raised about 20 metres above the high water level; it is the end of a series of hills that vanish onto the interior. They are made of rather white kaolin¹⁹ and at their base is a thick layer, about a metre and a half, of iron-bearing minerals. For as far as I could go into the interior, I saw these hills, covered to the summit with beautiful trees; the surface of the soil varied; on the crests it is a very fine, grey sand, in some places reddish and lumped together by the iron-bearing element; in the small valleys, it is a muddy clay Further down, the islands of Côt-Tranh and Côt-Tamban, and both banks of the river, are quite regularly cultivated as far as Côt-Sumrum [Kaoh Samraong]. This island, one of the most beautiful on the river, produces cotton, beans and tobacco. Chinese live there in quite large numbers; they are have intermarried with the Cambodians, cultivate the land and their wives weave a sort of strong but crude cotton cloth. At Côt-Sumrum this year non-ginned cotton sells for 23 ligatures or about 4.5 piastres per picul, beans 15 ligatures or three piastres per picul (very high) and tobacco 60 ligatures or 12 piastres per picul.

Côt-Sutine [Koah Soutin], a low island and the richest of the Mekong, is completely covered during the high water season, as are the two neighbouring islands that are less important; its length is about four kilometres, its width on average one and a half kilometres. It contains three large villages forming together a population of about 4,000 inhabitants. The main product is cotton that, according to the head of the village,

¹⁷ A measurement of distance equal to 4.8 kilometres

¹⁸ This figure is incorrect and should read 10 piastres per picul.

¹⁹ Kaolin is a form of clay used in the manufacture of certain porcelain.

averages about 1,500 piculs per year. Here is a comparative table of prices for the last three years:

1860	8.3 ligatures, or 1.7 piastres per picul
1861	12.5 ligatures, or 2.5 piastres per picul
1862	20 ligatures, or 4 piastres per picul.

Other products are less grown. They are: beans, 0.3 piastres per picul; sesame, 1.2 piastres per picul (they do very well in the surrounding land); indigo and silk, both very little and very ordinary, 200 piastres per picul.

The riverbanks are higher than the island. The bank to the left is separated from the land by a small canal, long and very narrow. It is well cultivated [with] tobacco, rice, cotton, corn; there is a small forest whose centre is populated by bucks and deer. Chutiel trees are plentiful and reach colossal heights. I have seen some trees whose first branches were more than twenty metres above the ground. Cattle are very numerous around Côt-Sutine. You can easily buy them for 12 to 15 ligatures. On the right bank in the interior there are Kakir Houcrum and other species of trees that are not exploited by the inhabitants. In their view, the wood would be worth 15 to 18 ligatures per cubic metre, if brought to the river.

Below Côt-Sutine the land is generally low-lying and well cultivated (cotton, mulberry trees, tobacco). The main plantation centres are: Recey-Tenol, Soai (mango land), Pthéan'ai, Phoum Kondal,²⁰ Mon-Dâp, Larrey, Ta-Hek [Ta Aek], Swai-Remiet, Tre-Mak, Ksaek-Kondal [Khsach Kandal], Lavean-Hem, Khe-Nong (whose forest abounds in wood which gives their names to the villages), Bat Lop, Prec-Cai-Mérétchi, and finally Don Man, before the four arms.

The two most important points are, first, Tre-Mak, where cotton is very well cultivated. Lengths of cotton cloth destined to be worn as sarongs²¹ are manufactured here in great number. Each is worth 0.75 piastres. But the most remarkable industry is that of creating fine woven mats that, for their regularity and the brilliance of their hues, certainly have no rivals in Asia; [however] the amount produced is insignificant, for the reeds from which they are made only grow in a swamp located behind the village. They are 0.65 meters wide and 1.9 meters long and are worth 1.5–2 ligatures. The ground of Tremak is quite high; there is in the village a great quantity of fruit that supplies the Penom Penh market. In the lower part they cultivate sesame, corn, beans and peas.

Second is the island of Ksaek-Kondal, which is more than six kilometres long. It is the place on the great river where they raise the most silk worms. The country is almost entirely covered in mulberries, with the exception of a small wood in the middle and around which the houses are built. This island is submerged during the high waters, which however do not destroy the mulberries for the branches of the shrub grow with an astonishing speed, according to the progress of the flood. When the waters fall, the people immediately cut off these enormous stems. They grow a little cotton on the steep riverbanks.

Ksaek-Kondal silk is worth 1,000 to 1,800 ligatures, depending on its regularity and fineness. Cooked silk is worth 1,400 ligatures, or 280 piastres. These silks principally go to Bat-tam-bang and Angkor where they weave the most beautiful Siamese sarong-lengths. A small part goes down river as far as the Singapore market, where the Chinese sell them to the Malay Rajas, to use as sarongs (Terengannu and Lingah buy them in great quantity).

The only important point on the Mekong below the four arms is Ba Penom, capital of the Province of the same name. It is from this spot that most rice is exported, and it is

²⁰ Pthéan'ai and Phoum Kondal might now be Pteah Kandal, near Srei Santor.

²¹ *Langoutis* in the text.

the principal crop. Penom Penh and Vinh-Long are the two main markets towards which the boats head. Some go downriver as far as My-Tho [in French Cochinchina]; the Cambodians also take it overland to the market in Tay-Ninh.

The Cambodian banks of the Bassac are quite well populated. This is where they grow the most indigo, after the floods. There are also several mulberry plantations, rice fields and fruit trees, among which it is worth noting the *soai-voi* (elephant mango) that hardly grows anywhere else but here.

Penom Penh . . . is the great market to which all the products of Cambodia are brought, and even those of the provinces bordering Siam and Laos. This town is located at the four arms on the right bank of the Bassac. The first of these great arteries (the four arms) brings to Penom Penh the products of Laos and of the great river; the second, those of the great lake and the rich lands that surround it. The third [arm] is the means of communication with all the markets of Cochinchina; and finally the fourth arm, communicates with the Mekong by the Wamnao canal above Vinh Long, beyond Chau Doc, and from there to Compoot [Kampot] via the Ha Tien or Kan Kao canal. This almost inaccessible port is the only one in Cambodia; it sends by junk to Siam and Singapore, and often even by English boats, rice, cotton, skins, horns, shellac, tobacco and dried fish. In exchange, Campoot receives fabrics, opium, some Straits produce, and too often, perhaps, English gunpowder and firearms. It is worth noting here that a Vietnamese customs post set up, on the Bassac below Chau Doc, levies a duty of 10 percent on all the goods that come down the river and that as a result the goods going to Kampot via the Kan Kao canal are saddled with this tax; on the other hand, the direct route, in the kingdom of Cambodia itself, [goes] through the forest and is almost impassable for goods of any value.

In former times some small commercial craft went upriver to the four arms. Taking advantage of the high tides and southwest monsoon in April–May, they crossed the bars and came down again with the flood and the wind. To go further up, they had to be towed and only arrived at Penom Penh after a long and difficult voyage, in order to go back down again at high water, in August and September. But for nearly a century no European-flagged boats have been seen in these parts.

The population of Penom Penh is currently about 5,000 inhabitants, with a mixture of Cambodians (5/10), Chinese (3/10), Malays (1/10) and Vietnamese (1/10).

The exceptional position of this market made the town in previous times the richest in Cambodia; several Kings have lived there, and in more favourable circumstances it would certainly regain all its importance. There are numerous brick habitations covered in tiles, but almost all were destroyed during the last wars and bamboo huts have replaced them. The lay-out of the town, as with all Cambodian population centres, is one long street, parallel to the river with some small unimportant ways coming off it at a right angle. In the upper part of the town there is an artificial hill, surrounded by monasteries and surmounted by a modern Buddhist temple.

The Cambodian population is slowly massing around this point, and in a great number of huts they weave silk and cotton fabrics. Higher up, two small arroyos, over which wooden bridges have been erected, cross the main street; beyond the first is where the market is held; beyond the second, and making a continuation of the main street, they have recently built a long earth rampart . . . at the foot of which gather all the Cambodian boats bringing commodities; some huts on stilts, inhabited by fishermen, are built between the river and the rampart.

The Chinese, who have long been installed in all these lands new to us, form a great part of the commercial population, and certainly the richest part. The riverbanks are covered with their boats; the finest houses belong to them. A great number of them—agents or correspondents of the rich commercial houses of Cholon or of Singapore—sell all the goods imported into Cambodia; ordinary English cotton cloth, Indian grey-shirting, everyday hardware and cutlery, opium, tea, camphor, Chinese medicines,

crude Chinese porcelain of the sort made in Petcheli, pepper, spices, Singapore gambier and other ingredients, accessories for betel nut, Cochinchinese salt and betel nuts. Such things form the base of all the various Cambodian markets, to which should be added local products like rice, fish, vegetables, cotton, tobacco, silks, cloth, etc.

Below Penom Penh, on the left bank of the Bassac, is the Cambodian customs house. The current of the river in front of the town is usually very fast, and often reaches five knots. This is a real inconvenience for all communication by boat.

Table of average prices of various commodities at the Penom Penh market²²

Cardamom #1 quality	\$60	Fish oil, #4	\$0.04 (3 ltrs)
Hemp	\$10	Small white beans	\$2
Bees-wax	\$40	Small green beans	\$2.25
Vegetable wax	\$28	Indigo	\$0.2 per litre
Fish viscera glue	\$25	Morac (lacquer)	\$1 (3 ltrs)
Corco (inferior cardamom)	\$26	Dried fish, #1 quality	\$2.75
Buffalo horns	\$4	Dried fish, #2 quality	\$1.25
Horns of young deer	\$2-\$10	Rice	\$0.75
Rhinoceros horns	\$18-\$70 each	Paddy	\$0.4
Cotton, #1 (ginned)	\$6	Sappan wood	\$1.20
Cotton, #2 (not ginned)	\$3.75	Sesame	\$1.50
Bark used to make rope	\$7.50	Silk (#1), average	\$380
Gambodge	\$20	Silk, inferior quality	\$220
Shellac	\$10	Tobacco, #1 quality	\$14
Gum resin	\$1.25	Tobacco, inferior quality	\$9
Liquid gum	\$0.10	Resinous torches	\$1.50 per 100
Fish oil, #1 quality	\$0.15 (3 ltrs)		

Once in Saigon, ordinary merchandise from the Penom Penh market returns up to 80 percent on the prices listed above, Customs' duty included. The trip by boat takes a fortnight.

Above Penom Penh there begins the natural canal that goes to the great lake; its mouth in the Veal-Pock (valley of mud) or small lake is an immense delta whose appearance constantly changes with the rising and falling of the waters. In June, the waters of the Mekong begin to rise; the course of the Ton-leh Sap canal, which is fed only from the lake water and is then almost dried up or at a low level, flows back towards the lake, so that its waters rise until October; there are then several weeks of flat water after which, with the Mekong flood ending, the level falls and the equilibrium on Ton-leh Sap is broken, so a new current flows in the canal. This current persists from November to April-May, then the waters stay dead, so to speak . . . until June [when] the phenomenon of the previous year starts up again. As the currents are often very swift, and the low water level sometimes makes communications impossible, it will be very important for fishing and commercial expeditions to take account of the seasons. Low water is from about 15 January to 1 April.

The Ton-leh Sap canal is very sparsely populated; going up towards the great lake the most important point is Compong Luong, the suburb of Houdon, which is about 15 kilometres from the four arms (on the right bank). It is a big market for dried fish and other lake products. Its population is about 4,000 souls, including a Malay village that stretches as far as the village of Pignaleu [Ponhea Lueu], located three kilometres further down, which is the residence of the bishop of Cambodia. From Compong Luong, a wide road of about six kilometres crosses the marshes to Houdon, the King's

²² Unless otherwise stated, the quantities are in piculs and the currency in piastres.

residence. I had the occasion three times to visit His Majesty,²³ who received me extremely well and was obliging enough to provide me with the information I needed. He is very well disposed towards Europeans and it would be something important, for transactions and business to come, to keep his [good] opinion and intentions by always justifying the confidence that he and his subjects have in us.

Above Compong Luong, a series of hills form almost two separate courses; that of the left is bordered with low, submerged and uninhabited forests; the only place worth mentioning is a huge village that stretches along the side of a small arroyo; it is called Compong Tchenang [Kampong Chhnang]. All the pottery in Cambodia is made there. In its vicinity one continually encounters big boats full of pots, receptacles, plates, and jars of all sorts. During the fishing season, almost all its inhabitants leave their manufactures and set themselves up for six weeks or two months along the side of the lake; this emigration is moreover common in all Cambodian villages. Its population could be about 1,500 to 1,800.

The right arm of the canal (going up towards the lake) is larger, the banks generally higher. You see several small hamlets along the riverbanks, growing rice. In line with Compong Tchenang moving inland there is a small chain of mountains, the Pram-Lên (Five summits). They are partly covered with fir trees which, when taken to Saigon and properly squared, yield up to 25 ligatures a piece; a small canal leads to the foot of the mountains, in a place where enormous deposits of shellfish form the solitary lime quarry in Cambodia. In this place is the village of Compong-Lên (the name is also given to the mountains).

The Small Lake or Veal-Pock is fifteen kilometres from Compong-Tchenang. You get there via two principal mouths, the Prolaï-Leas and the Peam-Niong. During the low water season, it is almost dried out and people grow rice there, as well as along the sides of the Ton-leh Sap River. This latter forms a sort of elongated gourd stretching to the northwest; it goes at least thirty-five leagues in that direction and is twenty leagues wide at its broadest point. Of the two basins it forms, the one to the southeast is the smaller, but it is also wide; the large bends are in the left bank. Boats never go across the middle of the lake in the high water season but follow the right bank in the southwest monsoon and take the other route during the northeast monsoon, and even going into the sunken forests. It generally takes two days to make the crossing at the widest part.

The months of November and December are very unhealthy around the Ton-leh Sap and as far as Houdon; the waters begin to fall, leaving a great expanse of forest uncovered, and the sun striking this half-decomposed vegetation releases toxic vapours that spread fevers throughout the countryside. These fevers, although not dangerous, are extremely fatiguing, and they often return in the good season; of the forty-some Europeans that made up our expedition, two only were not struck by this epidemic. The locals are not more immune to it than strangers. For the rest of the year, the climate is very healthy.

The surface area of the plains and forests under water during the flood should extend to at least five times that of the real lake. During the low waters, the banks of the great lake are verges of sweet mud, on which they grow rice; further away there extend low-lying forests that are flooded in September, October and November. In the interior, one sees some mountain chains . . .

Four large provinces surround Ton-leh Sap, all four inhabited by Cambodians although two belong to Siam. They are Bat-tam-bang and Angkor. The other two are Compong Soai, the most populous province in Cambodia, and Poursate, whose

²³ Ironically, this king was Si Votha, not Norodom, whom the French would support against his older half-brother.

governor, when we arrived at the Lake, had left for Bangkok to offer the Province's submission to the King.

The town of Bat-tam-bang is two days by boat from the great lake; it communicates with it by a river that divides into two at a village called Compong-Prohok, a few kilometres from the lake into which these two branches discharge; they call them Mot-Peneong and Mot-Pir; the regular passage is via the latter. Halfway between the entrance to the river and the town there is a Customs post at Peam-Sema; it levies 10 percent on the following goods going down to the lake: dried or salted fish, resins, torches, wax, and honey. Not far from this place are two arroyos; one goes up to the north to Touk Tchou, a day and a half away; this village exploits a rich forest which extends very far . . . The second arroyo leads northeast and divides into two branches, the northern one going to Soaï, an area of much rice cultivation, the west-north-western one going to Ang-Kol-Borey, also a rice growing area where they make very beautiful mats, incorrectly called Pursat mats. . .

Bat-tam-bang is an elevated area. In this place the river is on average about 40 metres wide; the banks are high, and covered with very varied vegetation that gives them a very picturesque appearance. Huts, surrounded by small gardens, continue in unbroken succession on both sides of the river for the length of about ten kilometres; the population is 15–18,000. A citadel, built towards the top of the town (on the left bank), is inhabited by the Governor. . .

Our welcome by the Governor, who is Cambodian, could not have been more eager; the Siamese general, who lives in the town with 1,500 soldiers, was less gracious; this latter is under the orders of the Siamese envoy living in Houdon.

The Provinces of the great lake have their own money, coined at Bat-tam-bang and called the *Selong*, as well as the *nên* and the *sapek*, which circulate but little here. Although there is only a single coin, the groups [of them] that are created by a progression of amounts have different names and [thus] form a series of monetary values. One *selong* is the single base. It is an alloy of copper and silver, whose value varies with the conscience of the official who manages the revenue farm. This coin only carries one imprint, a sort of fantastic bird. Its diameter is about the same as the old 25 centime piece. Four *selongs* equal one *bât*, four *bât* equal one *Tum-long*; four *tum-long* equal a Siamese *tical*; they call a collection of twenty *tum-long* an *Ant-ching*. The piastre does not have a fixed exchange rate with this money. At certain times one gets up to nine *tum-long* for one piastre, which is a relatively good exchange rate because the Siamese *tical* is worth only 0.60 piastres; the rate of exchange for some of my money was not good (six *tum-long*). Last year they only gave 5 *tum-long*, 2 *bât*.

The great industry of Bat-tam-bang is the making all sorts of sarong lengths, especially fine ones made of silk. The work that these pieces require is so fantastic that it deserves to be mentioned. The fabric pieces are generally of six colours: white, black, blue, yellow, green and carmine. To get any design at all, however simple, like a scattering of diamond shapes in five colours on a bright red background, instead of using five shuttles carrying different colours the Cambodians dye each thread of the woof according to the pattern; and as it varies with each millimetre they have to dye individually as much of the skein as each millimetre repetition of the pattern will require. As for the dyeing, this is how they do it: the parts that are not included in the base colour are wrapped separately and very tightly, with small ties, in banana leaves; they soak the skeins in the bright red dye, then leave them to dry; when the skeins are dry, they wrap the bright red parts and remove the ties of the parts to be dyed blue; then the same operation happens again, and thus in turn for all the colours. Further, because the skeins are very tight, so that the colour takes well, they must make several of the same sort, so that they need more than 300 skeins to make a single item. To dye and weave one length of cloth thus takes a good worker two months of ceaseless toil. At Bat-tam-bang they sell for 6–10 piastres each, depending on quality.

You also find at this market:

Ankol-Borey mats, at \$0.24²⁴ a piece;
 inferior quality cardamom at \$40 per picul;
 Compong soai iron at \$8 per picul;
 tobacco from \$10 to \$12 per picul;
 non-purified castor oil from \$0.35 to \$0.80 per kilo;
 more or less purified castor oil from \$0.35 to \$0.80 per kilo;
 firewood (1.2 m long, 0.9 m in diameter) for \$0.50 per 100 logs;
 resinous torches at \$1 per 100;
 gum resin at \$0.60 per picul;
 indigo at \$0.15 per litre;
 sappan wood at \$1 per picul;
 chickens at \$2-3 for 100; ducks at \$9-12 for 100;
 cattle (according to size) from \$2 to \$3 each;
 harness buffaloes for \$20 to \$30 a pair;
 other buffalos from \$8 to \$12 each;
 rice (at ordinary times) for \$0.40-\$0.45 per picul;
 non-hulled rice for \$0.20-\$0.25 per picul;
 a tiny amount of hemp for \$.14 per picul.

At Bat-tam-bang they build good boats from Andronil, a very hard, red coloured wood; they are covered with small cabins made of wood and mats. Those with six rowers carry from 180 to 200 piculs and are worth about \$48 to \$50. You also find in this town a large part of the fishing industry workers who hire themselves out for \$0.40 per month, but only get \$0.30 for other work.

The province of Bat-tam-bang grows a lot of rice, of four different sorts:

1. the Sro', or ordinary rice, which is small but of very good quality, harvested at the end of December
2. the Sro'ou-on-dêt which, transplanted in March, grows in proportion to the rising waters and is harvested in July (same quality as the first)
3. red rice which, sown at Ankol-Borey, is transplanted on the banks of the Great lake in February and harvested in April
4. wild floating rice which grows in the vast, submerged swamps; the Cambodian name is Sreu-Gnai; its shoots reach seven to eight metres in height. The buffalo and wild elephants find it very tasty. The yield is very small and the natives only harvest it during times of famine. Ong Ko is the Cambodian name for the paddy.

In the forests to the West of Bat-tam-bang, wild elephants abound; you encounter numerous herds of them two hours from the town. P'hé-tiok trees are found in great number there, as in the mountains of Penom-Sampeh, thrity-five kilometres North of Bat-tam-bang; but it will be very difficult to exploit it. . . .

Angkor, the second Siamese province, occupies the North of the lake. A small arroyo, whose mouth is lost in the flooded plains and bush, goes across to its capital, which is six hours by boat from Ton-leh Sap . . . it is a smaller version of Bat-tam-bang. The products there are the same, but you also find vegetable wax at 22 piastres per picul, sesame at 1.50 piastres per picul, tree bark for making ropes at 6.50 piastres per picul, and liquid resin at 0.08 piastres per litre. This latter product is produced in the forests that extend to the North. The large trees from which they extract it have, two feet

²⁴ The \$ sign hereafter in the text indicates piastres.

above the soil level, a hole [hollowed out] like a niche two feet square in which they light a fire after each extraction.

A big road leaving Angkor passes to the North of Bat-tam-bang and goes to Bangkok; but it takes at least a fortnight to cover the distance by elephant; also, all transport of merchandise is impossible by this route, and the products of the former Cambodian provinces always go down to the Capital. The only things they take to Bangkok via the interior are cardamom, sarong lengths, wax and ivory, which is a royal tribute good. . . .

Compong Soaï, located below Angkor (on the left bank) comprises several small Provinces, Compong-Stung, Compong-Plouck, and Compong-Tiam [Kampong Cham], each on a small arroyo. Behind Compong-Plouck, in the Don-Rek Mountains, there are quite a large number of [resinous] fir trees. In Compong-Tiam, creul trees abound, from which they extract Morac lacquer. Then comes Compong-Thôm, capital of Soaï, above the point where three river mouths join, is Peam-Sem; two of the mouths flow into the southeastern part of the great lake and the third into the Veal-Pock. The most generally used route to get to Laos goes through this Province, above the first waterfalls; from Compong Thôm to Ton-leh Repou, located to the northeast; it takes eight hours to cross the forest, and from Ton-leh Repou to Stung Treng, it is four days by boat. You do not find much rice in Compong Soaï Province but good construction wood, Morac, is there in great quantity, and iron, which is exploited above all by the Couys, a semi-savage tribe that recognizes Cambodian suzerainty and lives in the mountains in the northeast of the Province.

On the right bank of the great lake, opposite Compong Soaï, is the Province of Poursate; the capital, located at the northwest extremity of the mountains, is crossed by a small river; in the neighbourhood, you find a seam of magnificent agate [and] there appeared to be diggings around it. Cardamom is the richest commodity produced in the Poursate Mountains, and it grows on the western slopes. Rice is widely grown in the plains, above all at Sroc-Rocy, Don-Tri, Compong Proak, and Bobor. Between the Poursate Mountains and the sea, the forests are inhabited by elephants, rhinoceros, buffaloes, and by great wild, black cattle of a special species that the Cambodians have never domesticated.

Fishing

When the waters of the great lake are low in January, it forms a sort of enormous fishpond that contains, almost uncovered, a prodigious amount of fish. Each village then goes to set itself up in front of its arroyo and to install fishing traps and drying racks. A part of the inhabitants of other Provinces, and even Vietnamese, go for three months to occupy the remaining free stretches of shoreline, and soon an immense village of about 30,000 souls forms around Ton-leh Sap.

According to his means and the number of boats he has, a fisherman hires a proportional number of men for the fishing season; women and children remain on shore, preparing and drying the fish on bamboo trays. One can estimate at 3–4,000 the number of boats that plough the great lake and at 60,000 piculs [1,000 tonnes] the sum total of fish caught.²⁵ The four different species are:

1. Treï-Tcheidor (about 0.5 m in length, very highly regarded), selling for 1.50-2 piastres per picul
2. Treï-Pra (about 1.2 m long, cut into slices) selling at 0.80-1 piastre per picul

²⁵ This total seems far too small, including as it does both Khmer subsistence fishing and commercial fisheries. In 1862 Saigon customs' records show 2,430 tonnes of processed fish were exported, with a French observer claiming it had all come from the Tonle Sap Great Lake. Lt. Rieunier, "Le Commerce de Saigon pendant l'année 1862", *Revue maritime et coloniale*, Vol 12, 2 (1864): 220, 224.

3. Trei-cthipo (small, very delicate flavour, are not preserved)
4. Trei-Réetch (large, not highly valued).

Independently of the lake and the regular course of the canal, all the small waterways, canals and lakes (of which the main one is to the East of Compong-Tiam), are owned by the King, who rents them out each year for the fishing season. This business is usually very valuable, for these small waterways have even more fish than the lake and contain a great quantity of the two most valued species. They dry out completely in January–February, so that, by closing off the ends in advance, people gather enormous quantities of fish without any effort.

One part of the catch is salted, another smoked, but the greatest quantity is dried; the first is sent above all to Java, the rest go downriver to Cochinchina from where they are forwarded to China and the Malay States by Chinese. At Saigon, Trei-Tcheidor costs 20–25 ligatures, or 5–5.5 piastres per picul; but you should not consider this as the base export price because the fish is often sold in Singapore for less.

A large-scale European fishing enterprise would certainly have a chance of success, but [its owners] would do well to remember that they would be competing against people who live without expenses, work without rest, and in conditions that we could not endure. Moreover, most of them have no [distance to] travel, or at least theirs is insignificant compared to ours. The best business would be limited, I believe, to bringing salt from Baria to exchange for fish (salt sells in Baria for 0.20–0.25 piastres per picul and resells in Ton-leh Sap in the fishing season for 0.80 per picul). We could also draw up contracts with the heads of the fisheries and send some supervisors.

In July, the waters have risen once more, the fisheries are abandoned, and the great lake becomes deserted again.

The preceding account glances at what Cambodian might yield if, administered in an appropriate fashion, we were able to place there the elements required for large-scale exploitation. Compared to the immense extent of its territory, the products of this country are completely insignificant, and, better managed, it could yield much more, even with the present elements.

Two great obstacles present themselves: for agriculture, the lack of manpower; for commerce, the lack of accessible ports and the difficulty of communications by river. . . . In the direction of Siam, all contact is impossible, for the generally low value products cannot support the enormous cost of overland transport, through the forests.

As a result, the fortune (the commercial and industrial fate) of Cambodia is eminently tied to that of Lower Cochinchina, whose inhabitants previously came in great number to exploit the soil, and whose markets are its natural outlets and whose river is the sole possible means of communication.

To create a new Cambodia—wealthy, populous and well cultivated, as such a fine country deserves to be—I believe we would need to introduce some colonies of those indefatigable workers, the Chinese; but there is a great stumbling block there, for to be able to use this means there must be a powerful government, able to repress all abuses; the Chinese people is the indispensable enemy of Europe, in Asia. Further into the future, and in more favourable circumstances, it would be advantageous to facilitate the settlement of Vietnamese in preference to Chinese in Cambodia. But from now until some years hence, any such large-scale emigrations would be impracticable without damaging the new [French] Colony.

Despite the present, unfavourable circumstances, there could still be some fine operations carried out in Cambodia and we cannot urge too much that some European

trading outlets be established at the four arms; this spot will always be a great market, from where expeditions could fan out into the interior.

As for agriculture, new establishments of the future must make major reforms in most of its branches, which are [currently] exploited in such a primitive way that they make the products either useless for our needs or too expensive. . . .

It is more or less obvious that France, by a protectorate desired by the Cambodians themselves, could at no cost double the importance and wealth of Lower Cochinchina.

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