

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

The Cambodians and the Siamese throughout their history had many wars with each other. The Siamese had sacked the Khmer's capital of Angkor. Later on, Lovek, another of Cambodia's capitals in the 16th century, was also captured by Siam. The Siamese after their successful capture of either Angkor or Lovek were believed to have brought many precious objects, statues, texts, learned men and many prisoners of war from Cambodia to their capital of Ayutthaya. The loss of these materials and human resources had a tremendous effect on Cambodia. The country had declined and lacked signs of progress in the later periods*. To explain these historical events and to express the great sadness over the loss of these priceless resources, the Khmer composed a legend called the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo. The exact period the legend came into existence is unknown.

The Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo told about twin brothers who were born in Cambodia. The older brother was an ox called Preah Ko and the younger was a man named Preah Keo. Preah Ko was an animal possessing great divine power. His belly contained precious objects and valuable things that people wanted very much. Both sacred brothers were believed to bring peace and prosperity to the place where they resided. Before long, the news about them reached the Siamese King. The King of Siam wanted to have Preah Ko and Preah Keo in Siam so that his whole kingdom and

* See Chapter II for detailed information about the war between Cambodia and Siam.

population would be peaceful and prosperous. Therefore, the Siamese King came with his officials and soldiers to Cambodia to propose animal fights with the King of Cambodia. Preah Ko the Bull helped the Cambodian King by transforming himself to various animals to fight with the animals of the King of Siam. Preah Ko managed to defeat the animals of the King of Siam several times. Finally, the Siamese brought a mechanical bull to fight with Preah Ko. During the fight, Preah Ko could not defeat the mechanical bull. Therefore, he flew up bringing Preah Keo and Preah Keo's consort, Neang Pov, to escape from Siamese capture. Preah Ko and Preah Keo went to take refuge in many places like the bamboo forest at Lovek. Finally, the Siamese managed to capture them and brought them to Siam. In Siam, Preah Ko and Preah Keo were kept in a gigantic palace and were guarded days and nights by soldiers, from where they could not escape back to Cambodia until the present-day.

The Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo is popular in Cambodian society. The story has existed in several versions including oral, written, film and painting. Although not all Cambodian people at present can tell the story, many of them know the important episodes of the story like Preah Ko and Preah Keo going into hiding in the bamboo forest at Lovek and the Siamese firing silver coins into the forest to encourage Cambodian villagers to destroy the trees. Many of them also knew from the story that Preah Ko and Preah Keo were brought to Thailand. The Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo has played several important roles in Cambodian society. These include historical, political, nationalist, religious and psychological. In the modern time, the story has been sometimes used by Cambodian leaders to promote nationalism among the Cambodian population or to explain the legacy of the loss of Preah Ko and Preah Keo on the contemporary situation of the country. Besides that, the story also has some influences on the perception of Cambodian people, at the present time, about Thai people.

1.2 Objectives

The main objectives of this thesis are:

- To analyze the Cambodian people's perception of the Thais as reflected in the various versions of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo.
- To explore the popularity and influence of the story on the Cambodian people's contemporary perception of the Thais.

1.3 Hypothesis

The Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo, which has been very popular in Cambodian society, tells the lives of a sacred bull and a young man, both of whom symbolize Cambodia's peace and prosperity. This story is believed to have its root in real historical events during the post Angkorean period when the wars between Cambodia and Siam frequently occurred and a large number of prisoners of war and valuable things were taken from Cambodia to Ayutthaya. Being passed on for hundreds of years, this legend has provided strong influence on the emotional and historical thought of Cambodian people and the way they have perceived Thai people. In every version, the Thais are seen as expansionist, ambitious and threatening etc. As the legend ends with the Thai king taking Preah Ko and Preah Keo to Siam, the Thais are also perceived as the cause of the decline of Cambodia. In the modern time, the legend has been especially influential when the political tensions or conflicts between the two countries have occurred.

1.4 Methodology and Scope of the Research

1.4.1 Documentary Research

The information about the history of Cambodian-Siamese relations is in Chapter 2, the background and analyses of the legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo is in Chapter 3, and the legend and its functions which is about half of chapter 4 come mostly from documentary research. Various published sources in Khmer such as books, articles, magazines and newspapers are relied upon. Besides, VCDs and information from reliable internet websites are also included. The materials relied upon consist mostly of written works in English, and some in French. A few written sources in Thai are also studied. The different versions of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo are oral, written both in verse and in prose, painting, and film. They form integral parts of this research.

1.4.2 Interview

About half of the information in Chapter 4 about the influence of the legend on the modern perception of Cambodian people towards the Thais, and some information in other preceding chapters come from the result of fieldwork research conducted in Cambodia between 04 November and 09 December 2006. The people selected for the interview comprised of three groups.

The first group were the authors of some versions of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo. They were Mr. Preap Chan Mara, the author of the Reyum Version, and Mr. Ly Thaily, the author of Ly Thaily Version printed in 2004. The interview with Mr. Preap Chan Mara took place at Reyum Institute. However, for Mr. Ly Thaily, a talk lasting for approximately half an hour was conducted on the phone due to some inconveniences of meeting him in person. The interview with this first group of informants aims at getting

further information and clarification regarding the writings and publications of their versions of the story. Authors of other versions were not included because some of them were anonymous while others could not be contacted. This group also includes Dr. Ros Chantrabot, a historian and the dean of the Faculty of Sociology and Humanity of the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

The second group of people interviewed consisted of six old villagers in the area of Lovek, the place where the majority of Cambodian people believe to be the birthplace of the legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo. With this group of informants, the researcher traveled to a few villages and some monasteries in the area to ask for old natives of Lovek who could tell the story. The informants were simply asked to tell the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo, and what they knew about Lovek. The chief purposes of interviewing these people was to collect oral versions of the legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo, to gather oral traditions related with Lovek and to understand the history of Lovek from the points of view of local people.

The last group of informants was young educated Cambodian people either studying or living in Phnom Penh. Educated people in this sense refer to those who are studying at universities or those with degrees from universities. The main purpose of interviewing these people was to understand the influence of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo on their perception of Thai people and how they perceive present-day Thai people. There are two reasons why young educated informants were the focus. First, their perception represents one important part of the general perception of Cambodian people about Thai people. Second, they are an active group that is likely to influence the present and future relationship between Cambodia and Thailand. There are also two main reasons why Phnom Penh was chosen. First, Phnom Penh is the capital city. It is the place of concentration for important institutions and major events that influence the internal and foreign politics of the country. It is the place from which broadcast news spreads to the rest of the country. Second, the demonstration leading to the burning of the Thai Embassy

in 2003 took place in Phnom Penh. Because this thesis follows a qualitative approach, the number of the informants is not fixed. However, fifteen informants were selected for this third group. Fifteen informants may not be considered a big enough sample size to represent the general perception of young educated Cambodian people in Phnom Penh. However, the fifteen informants selected for the interview come from various backgrounds. Some have graduated from universities already, while others are studying. Some hold Master degrees, whereas others hold a Bachelor. Also, the informants come from different universities and from a wide range of majors. These include sociology, history, English, Khmer literature, business, law, economic, engineering etc. The researcher decided to choose only fifteen informants because when the number of informants reached ten, their answers started to be similar. Another reason is that earlier research projects about the attitude of Cambodian people in Phnom Penh towards Thai people also gave results similar to those of the researcher. With each of the fifteen informants, an in-depth interview was conducted separately to get deeper interpretation and clearer understanding of the gathered answers. The researcher followed two methods in choosing the informants, selection and snowball techniques, a technique that once a key informant is identified, then he or she is requested to locate the next informant. The researcher approached the people he knew who could tell the legend for the interview, and he also asked those people to introduce anyone they knew who could tell the story to him. Both methods allowed the informants to feel more comfortable with the researcher, thus reducing tense emotions and increasing the confidence and trust that allowed the access to the most accurate answers possible.

1.4.3 Field Visit

Visits to a number of places in Cambodia were made during the field research period. The purposes of the visits were to learn more about the areas which had a connection with the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo or had the statues of Preah Ko and Preah Keo or had mural paintings of the story, and to interview local people about the

legend. The researcher spent two days at Lovek where he visited and observed villages, some monasteries, and the geography as well as the historical remains of the area. Lovek used to be Cambodia's capital city in the 16th century. It is the place where many Cambodian people believe to have been the birth place of the story. The researcher also went to a few other places where there are statues of Preah Ko and Preah Keo like the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh and Oudong Hill in Kampong Speu province. A visit to Svay Chrum monastery which has a complete painting version of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo was also made. During the visit to these places, some photographs were taken to add more evidences and understanding of the attempted explanations into this thesis.

1.4.4 Scope and Limitation of the Research

The Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo has had several written versions so far. The study does not include any version released after the period of doing the research. The written versions included in this study are the Kem Ky Version published in 1952, a version published in 1996 with an anonymous author and printing house, the Reyum Version published in 2001, and the Ly Thaily Version published in 2004. The reason the researcher selected only these versions was because it seems that there are no other available written versions. Of course, there was also one written version written by a Frenchman, Par G. Janneau, published in 1870. However, this one is excluded from the analysis, since it is very short and not written by Cambodians.

It may be true that contemporary Cambodian people's perception of Thai people are influenced by other factors besides the legend. However, the focus of the research is regarding the influence of the legend on the attitude of Cambodian people towards the Thais.

The fifteen informants selected for the interview are educated Cambodian people who are studying or living in Phnom Penh. Therefore, the result from the research about Cambodian people's perception of Thai people does not entirely represent the perception of Cambodian people as a whole. It gives only the general perception of the young educated people in Phnom Penh. The attempt to include research from the perception of ordinary Cambodian people such as the old and the lesser educated throughout Cambodia is beyond the capacity of the researcher. Before the research commenced, the researcher had the objective to study the influence of the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo on the Cambodian people's contemporary perception of the Thais. The researcher had the intention to include in the study people from different social and educational backgrounds and from different age groups. However, when he began the research, he encountered a big problem that made him decide to make a mid-course change. The research approached a number of ordinary, less educated Cambodian people for the interviews. However, those people could not tell the story from the beginning to the end. They could remember only very few important episodes of the story. Besides, they did not know much about Cambodia's history. They also did not know much about Thailand. These posed a big challenge for the researcher, since his objective is to study the influence of the legend on Cambodian people's perception of Thai people. To achieve the objective, it was essential that the informants could tell the story, know Cambodia's history, and have some knowledge about Thailand. For these reasons, the researcher selected only young educated Cambodian people as his informants, since this group best matched the criteria.

1.5 Significance of the Research

- Understanding the Cambodian people's perception of the Thais as reflected in every complete form of the legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo.
- Understanding the influence of the legend on the Cambodian people's contemporary perception of the Thais.

- Being a reference for the future study of the Cambodian people's general perception of the Thais.
- Being a reference for the study of the Cambodian-Thai relationship.

1.6 Literature Review

As far as the researcher knows, so far there have been only three important academic studies about the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo. They are the separate works by Cambodian scholars, Khing Hoc Dy and Ang Chouléan, and a Thai scholar, Santi Phakdeekham. Below are the brief reviews of each of the works of these scholars.

Khing Hoc Dy wrote an article in French about the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo. His article entitled *La Legende de Brah Go Brah Kaev* was published in 1991 in Cahiers de l'Asie du Sud-Est, n° 29-30, National Institute of Languages and Oriental Civilization, 1991, pp. 169- 190. The first few pages of Khing Hoc Dy's article are about the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo and its link with Cambodia's history during Lovek period, and the information about the first printed written version of the legend by a French researcher, Par G. Janneau. The rest of his article is devoted to the summary of the legend, which he based on Kem Ky's written version. His work offers brief information about the old written versions of the story including the palm leaf manuscripts, Par G. Janneau's printed version, and the Kem Ky Version.

Another major study by a Cambodian scholar about the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo was published in 1997. Ang Chouléan wrote an article whose title is *Nandin and His Avatars*. The article was published in a book called Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia: Millennium of Glory. Eds. Helen I. Jessup, and Thierry Zephir. Washington: Thames and Hudson, 1997. In the article, Ang Chouléan attempted to suggest that Preah Ko in the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo referred to *Nandin*, the Bull used as vehicle by Lord Siva. He tried to explain the deep root of Preah Ko in

Cambodia's civilization. His work also looked into the living nature of the cult of worshipping for Preah Ko the Bull.

The academic research about the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo was also carried out by a Thai scholar. Santi Phakdeekham wrote an article in Thai with its title *Prah Keo nai tam nan Prah Ko Prah Keo Khamen: Prah Keo morokot ching re? (Prah Keo in the legend of Khmer Prah Ko Prah Keo: Is Prah Keo the Emerald Buddha or not?)*. His article was published by Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University in 2002. In his work, Santi attempted to explain that Preah Keo in Cambodian legend was not the Emerald Buddha housed in the Grand Palace in Bangkok at present, but was a metaphor for a Khmer Prince or important Khmer Royal family member who was brought to Ayutthaya when Angkor was sacked by the Siamese.

Although there was earlier academic research on the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo, none of them have studied the story in broad context. Each one simply focused on certain aspects of the legend. This thesis looks beyond the earlier works. The thesis is probably the first study of the legend, which attempts to explain or examine the story in its broad and multi-dimensional aspects. The researcher's work also covers the interpretations done by earlier scholars. However, some of the findings are different from earlier research. For example, the Legend of Preah Ko Preah Keo was not a story belonging to a particular period of Cambodian history as put forward by earlier studies; it was a story that combined three major periods of Cambodian history together—Angkor, Lovek, and Oudong. This thesis's most important and most original points of emphasis are its analyses of various versions of the legend in its different forms—oral, written, film, and mural paintings—and the study of the influence of the legend on the contemporary perception of young educated Cambodian people in Phnom Penh of Thai people.