

# ARCHIVES IN CAMBODIA; NEGLECTED INSTITUTIONS

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*The authors were in Cambodia from November 1992 to January 1993 and visited the National Archives and interviewed government officials and archivists. They cover the recent history of the National Archives, emphasise the role of the Archives in the growth of national identity, and describe the appalling state of the surviving records. They argue strongly for action, contrasting the lack of support while aid flows to other information and cultural institutions.*

### **The importance of archives in developing countries**

With all the problems that have befallen Cambodia — foreign occupation, international and civil wars, genocide, famine and international isolation — it may appear somewhat luxurious to give priority to supporting its archival institutions. But just as archives are important to western societies so are they to developing countries, if not more so.<sup>1</sup>

Cambodia is on the point of rebuilding its entire administrative infrastructure in which the control of information will be of paramount importance. The national archives of Cambodia will need to play a central role in this process. It must not only be responsible for the administration of its archives but must also take part in the records management development of the Government, ensuring records created are handled correctly and efficiently. Cambodia is going through major economic and social development and will do so for some time yet. Good recordkeeping is essential to enhance these programs and maintain continuity. The National Archives plays an important role in this by not only helping to develop policies and procedures but to enable access to its permanent holdings.

As an archival institution the National Archives of Cambodia provides an indispensable national resource. Through years of war and the genocidal practices of the Khmer Rouge an intellectual vacuum has been created. As peace develops in Cambodia so too will the opportunities for more Cambodians to become educated. For the last ten years there has been a steady stream of books published about Cambodia that are presented through the eyes of western academics. There is a need for Cambodians to write about their country in their own language and the National Archives will no doubt be faced with the responsibility of supporting a broad range of research from government bodies and academics and only then can a 'true national history be built up which will provide the basis for the development of a national identity and national consciousness'.<sup>2</sup> Cambodian history can be reconstructed through reading French novels, newspapers and reports but the picture remains unclear and lopsided. Archival records from the colonial period are essential to gauge the nature of social change brought on by the French presence and the way Cambodians reacted to these influences. Many of the records from the provinces are not accessible in Cambodia and in France until a short time ago records remained closed or unprocessed.

The intellectual development of this country must not be hindered by poor management of its archives.

### **History of the library and archives**

The National Library and Archives was established during the years of French hegemony over Cambodia. The French presence in Cambodia

can be seen basically as comprising two distinct periods, from the establishment of the French Protectorate in 1863 to King Sisowath's coronation in 1906. Following this period Cambodian life became more westernised as French influence grew stronger.

Traditional Cambodian life was based around the exploitation of labour by an elite which taxed harvest rather than land. People did not own property and slavery was the norm. But the French institutionalised land ownership and modernised the administration of the country and in doing so introduced recordkeeping systems to the country. Records created included reports written by the *Resident Supérieur* for the French Government and records of land ownership and personnel. Funds for running the French administration were raised through the imposition of taxes on such things as salt, rice and opium and levying fees on imported and exported goods so as to raise money to pay salaries and public works programs. Records, in particular tax records, had to be kept efficiently and this was in a country where the indigenous people had no perception of recordkeeping. French influence was such that no Khmer-language newspapers or journals appeared in Cambodia until after 1927. Cambodian literature consisted entirely of Buddhist texts and nineteenth century verse epics. In 1936 the first Khmer newspaper, *Nagara Vatta* (Angkor Wat) was published. As David Chandler has pointed out:

Literacy in Cambodia had been linked since Angkorean times with the study and promulgation of religious texts, and in the colonial era, literacy in Khmer was almost in the hands of the Buddhist monkhood. Before 1936, in fact, the only Khmer-language periodical, *Kambuja Surya* (Cambodian Sun) had been published on a monthly basis under the auspices of the French-funded Institut Bouddhique. With rare exceptions, the journal limited itself to printing folklore, Buddhist texts, and material concerned with the Royal family. Even Cambodian chronicle histories in Khmer were not yet available in print.<sup>3</sup>

This placed increasing pressure on *Residents* who were being faced with a growing mass of paperwork which needed to be managed and accessed since records were being written in French.

In 1911 the *Résident Supérieur au Cambodge* (RSC) issued a decree for the establishment of a central archives in Cambodia. A civil servant was to be designated as librarian-archivist, working under the Cabinet of the RSC. However, nothing eventuated and it was not until 1917 that a further report recommended the implementation of the 1911 decree be given urgent attention and that a new archives and library be constructed. Paul Boudet was appointed Director of Archives and Libraries for Indo-China. In 1921 M Larriu was appointed archivist-librarian in Phnom Penh. Construction of the building began in 1923 and its doors were opened to the public on 24 December 1924.<sup>4</sup>

While European staff formed the core of the archives and library, the Director of Library and Archives wanted to see a stable indigenous component on the staff. In October 1930 a Decree was issued establishing a special corps of indigenous archivists to be located in the Archives and Library and government offices. A course for these staff commenced in April 1931.<sup>5</sup>

The National Library and Archives continued to be administered by the French up to and during the Second World War when the colonial administration was deposed by the Japanese in May 1945. The French reinstated themselves after the war and remained until Cambodia declared independence in 1953. Prince Norodom Sihanouk ruled the country until 1970 when he was ousted in a coup by the Prime Minister, Lon Nol. During this time the Cambodian countryside was being carpet bombed by the United States. In 1975 the radical communist group, the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, ousted Lon Nol and immediately emptied the cities of their population, education was abolished and a four-year period of violence and murder commenced. It has been estimated that up to three million people died from ill treatment, famine or execution. The educated in particular were targeted as enemies of the state and were sought out and killed. Among these would have been Cambodia's librarians and archivists.

There is a popular misconception that the Khmer Rouge destroyed all books and records held in libraries and archives in Cambodia. This was not entirely the case. The National Library and Archives buildings were used as living quarters for pig keepers and shelving used to store supplies. It was mainly through neglect that much of the collection was damaged or lost. Catalogue cards were strewn around the premises and records and books used to light fires and make cigarettes.<sup>6</sup>

In 1979 the Vietnamese and Cambodian rebels forced the Khmer Rouge to the borders of Thailand. The Vietnamese installed the Hun Sen government which the western world did not recognise and Cambodia experienced a period of isolation until 1989 when the Vietnamese withdrew the last of their army from Cambodia. Since then a United Nations brokered peace plan was implemented in 1991 which has succeeded in its aims of holding elections in May 1993 and installing a government for Cambodia.

### **The National Archives today**

A meeting was organised by the authors with Sin Khin, Chef-Adjoint du Département des Archives du Cabinet du Conseil des Ministres, Peou Cheng, Senior Professional Archivist and Chein Neang, Deputy Chief Technical Section.

During the meeting the general situation and background of the NAC was discussed. In March 1986 the National Archives of

Cambodia was separated from the National Library which comes under the control of the Ministry of Information and Culture and placed under the control of the Council of Ministers, based on the Vietnamese model, and administered by a Management Committee of Archives and Council of Ministers Staff.

The National Archives consists of three sections: Administration, Technical Services and Training, and the Repository. It has a total staff of approximately sixteen of whom six work in the repository.

The Administration and Technical Services sections are located in the Council of Ministers building, while the repository is the old archives building running along the rear boundary of the National Library property.

Each Ministry still holds its own records. It was pointed out to us that Cambodia lacks archival legislation. There were administrative circulars sent to Government Ministries in 1986 and 1989 containing directions on how to deal with records, but this did not provide a legal basis for the transfer of records to archives. Sin Khin said he would be interested to look at the archival legislation of Australia and other countries to help him construct draft legislation for Cambodia.

Staff who maintain files have received some training in creating files and handling archives. Each province has its own archives and there are twenty-one provinces.

Every dossier created belongs to one of three classes: 1. 'Temporary', 2. 'Long Term', 3. 'Permanent'. A committee made up of the Deputy Minister, Chief Archivist and Staff from the central office determine the classifications. Records in the first category are kept by the staff for five years. If records belong to the second or third category they are sent to the Ministry's archives after one year. Because of financial constraints, lack of legislation and the poor condition of the National Repository records have remained with the Ministries.

Following the meeting we toured the NAC repository and were dismayed at what we saw.

The Repository building is a three-storey structure with a central atrium from floor to ceiling and balconies around each of the two upper levels. The interior is well-ventilated, with windows both front and back and openings in the floor under each shelving unit. Combined with the open central atrium this allows for free airflow throughout the building, but has the unfortunate consequence of providing access for dust and insects, as no screens have been installed. The roof of the building leaks and is in need of repair. Staff do not have a working area and the electrical system poses a very real fire hazard.

Valuable records from the French colonial days are on the floors and shelves rotting away. About 50% of the records — and there are about 2000 linear metres of records all up — are either wrapped in brown

paper or still in their original boxes. The boxes have been constructed from acidic pasteboard, starch-filled cloth, and protein adhesive which has promoted insect infestation, mainly termites and beetle larvae.<sup>7</sup> Other records are sitting on shelves unwrapped gathering dust, mould and also being attacked by insects.

Much of what remains from the French period are residual holdings of the Cambodian section of the Archives Centrales d'Indochine, Résidence Supérieure du Cambodge. Following Cambodian independence in 1954 a significant portion of the holdings was taken to France.<sup>8</sup>

Records from Cambodia can be found in a number of repositories in France. The *Archives Nationales de France* holds records relating to the establishment of the French Protectorate over Cambodia, while the *Archives Nationales de France, Section Outre-Mer*, has important manuscript documents regarding the history of Cambodia during the colonial period. The records are those from the former *Ministère de la Marine et Colonies* and *Ministère des Colonies*, *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Quai d'Orsay)*, *Archives de la Marine*, and the *Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Section Outre-Mer*.<sup>9</sup>

The NAC collection is divided into two principal parts: Research, located on the ground floor; and Conservation on the upper two floors. There is also a collection of books.

The Research collection consists of printed reports, journals and bulletins; as well as documents in archives boxes arranged by provenance, principally government department, such as 419 boxes in Group One (Ministry of Information and Culture); but also including groups for such entities as the Buddhist Institute and a series of Sihanouk personal files and several of foreign provenance (Indo-China and France). A particularly valuable series is that from the Democratic Kampuchea (Pol Pot) administration 1975-1979. These documents have been kept in three locked cabinets. One cabinet contains twenty-six numbered sets containing documents relating to commerce and industry, such as the Import-Export Plan for 1977-1978. Others appear to be less rigorously organised. Apparently other documents from this period may exist elsewhere such as the collection of school textbooks now located at the Council of Ministers, and the 'confessions' of political prisoners held at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide archive.

The Conservation collection on the upper two floors is far less organised overall, although it does include a number of series from the French Colonial administration and from the Sihanouk period (1953-1970). Evidently most of the Lon Nol period documents (1970-1975) have not survived. Some of these documents are in named and numbered boxes, while others are unsorted in tied bundles on the floor. These are gradually being sorted and tied into brown paper covered bundles arranged by provenance and given running numbers.



*One of the storage areas of the Cambodian National Archives building.*  
Photo: P. Arfanis.



*Provincial records dating from the French presence in Cambodia.*  
Photo: P. Arfanis.

The Archives also contains several stacks of books that were apparently placed in the building when it was one entity with the National Library. Some may be from the legal deposit collection of Cambodian imprints, but most appear to be French language leather-bound novels. Clearly they do not belong in the Archives, and should be moved to the National Library. A number of newspapers and journals are also to be found in the National Archives, some of which probably are runs found partly in the Library and partly in the Archives. There seems to have been no systematic decision as to how and where the legal deposit collection should be held.

To let any archives reach this stage is disappointing but when it is the country's National Archives, the records of the Governments of Cambodia, then it is totally unacceptable and all archivists should be concerned. There simply are no funds for them to buy supplies and no skilled staff to even use the supplies if they had them.

### **What can be done?**

Cambodia is probably fortunate to have any records at all remaining after what it has experienced. While the opportunity presents itself something must be done to save these archives from deteriorating further, to do nothing would be disastrous.

Prior to the introduction of western aid into Cambodia, Vietnam provided the principal assistance to the National Archives between 1979-1989. Vietnamese experts worked in the archives, and a number of staff visited and trained in Hanoi. A three-month workshop was held at the Council of Ministers building in 1986. Taught by Vietnamese archivists, it had around 200 participants, including the Chef du Cabinet and one Vice-Minister from each Government Ministry as well as the full complement of National Archives staff and representatives from provincial and ministry archives. Two staff members spent six weeks in the Soviet Union, and there may well have been Soviet experts working especially in the Technical Services area, as well as providing some equipment and supplies.

Following the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 western aid started flowing into Cambodia. Examples of assistance given to libraries and related institutions include the following:

- This year, with funding from the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB), three Cambodian librarians studied for two months at the University of New South Wales. They completed the BISA training program (Bibliographic and Information Services in Asia and the Pacific) in computer based cataloguing and spent two weeks on attachment to the NSW State Library.
- He Hin, Deputy Director, the National Library of Cambodia, was recently presented a BISA certificate in Library Management,



along with the Diploma in Information Management — Librarianship which he has completed since arriving in Australia in early 1992.

- The National Library of Australia in September 1992 arranged for the return to Cambodia of fifty-one volumes of Buddhist writings which the library had been holding in safekeeping for eighteen years. The Friends of the National Library and ACPAD have sent over 5000 books to NLC as well as tertiary libraries.
- In 1989, Cornell University, through funding from the Henry Luce Foundation, began a program to preserve some of the unique library and archival material surviving the country's holocaust. Staff from Cornell University paid a visit to Cambodia to assess the country's conservation needs, to study the feasibility of establishing a microfilming project and to begin developing a plan to train Cambodian librarians to stabilise endangered materials. In a project carried out by Judy Ledgerwood the palm and mulberry leaf manuscripts in the Library as well as the National Museum and libraries of the National Buddhist Institute have been cleaned and placed in specially made boxes, microfilmed and catalogued on computer. Work is currently underway at Tuol Sleng, the Museum of Genocide, to film its archives which consist of thousands of photos and written confessions forcibly extracted from the victims.<sup>10</sup>
- The Australian National Commission of UNESCO gave \$30 000 to help renovate the NLC building and to provide some training and equipment, including a new 486 computer.
- For about two years Gail Morrison, an Australian volunteer librarian sent to Cambodia by the Overseas Service Bureau (OSB), assisted staff at the National Library to reinstate technical services, and Eric Marsh has just commenced a similar appointment. Also, Dr Helen Jarvis from the University of New South Wales and an Australian Cambodian librarian from Perth, Saing Chouly, have conducted two BISA Services Workshops at the NLC.
- In 1992 Australia won the right to host a unique exhibition of art treasures from Cambodia. This was seen as an 'extraordinary gesture of friendship'. Australia has shown an interest in preserving Cambodia's art treasures and AIDAB has commenced a program to help renovate the poorly maintained National Museum of Cambodia. Considering also that only one art curator survived the Pol Pot period they will also be looking at training a new group of curators and conservators.<sup>11</sup>
- Em Theyay, the only survivor out of ten classical dancers from Cambodia's Royal Court, has been assisted by the OSB, Save the Children Fund Australia (SCFA) and Cambodian authorities in passing on her dance skills to young Cambodians. Through the Australian Volunteers Abroad Program, the OSB sent

ethnomusicologist Bill Lobban to work with the Ministry of Culture and the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh. SCFA assisted with workshops in the manufacture of traditional instruments. The program was supported by funds raised in Australia. Musical instruments and sheet music were donated to the university.<sup>12</sup>

- AIDAB, Community Aid Abroad, Quaker Service Australia, SCFA and the International Women's Development Agency contributed funds towards the production of a documentary on the dance project.
- In 1992 AIDAB and the National Film and Sound Archive combined to send Mark Nizette to Cambodia to preserve photographs in the National Museum of Cambodia and provide training to staff.

The National Archives of Cambodia was not deliberately omitted from these examples. The NAC has not received any significant aid to date. Aid does not need to be expensive or extravagant. What is needed are the basics. For example there are no professional archivists in Cambodia and it is essential that some be trained immediately. This would probably mean training Cambodians first then setting up courses in Cambodia. One or two Cambodians could be sponsored to come to Australia on some form of scholarship to learn basic archival principles and tour Australian archival repositories. The University of New South Wales has in the past shown itself keen to participate in these types of projects.

Basic supplies could be sent. The biggest contributing factor to the rapid deterioration of the archives is insect infestation. Arresting the spread of insects needs to be done first and foremost. While fairly extensive repair work needs to be done to the building, there are some essential items that should be taken care of, such as repairing leaks in the roof and installing insect screens. Fundamental supplies such as boxes are non-existent. Even brown paper used to wrap records is in short supply.

Ideally an experienced archivist should be sent to Cambodia with the assistance of the Overseas Service Bureau to oversee and provide advice and basic training while a major inventory of the repository is conducted. From there a plan can be developed as to how to best approach the problem. Sin Khin, the Director of Archives, has already stated he would like an archivist to be sent around to the provinces of Cambodia to teach basic archival principles to staff in provincial offices.

Organisations such as the Australian Society of Archivists have the opportunity to broaden their horizons and take the lead in saving the records of a country — not of a person or company — but of a country that has been in turmoil for so many years. It would be a project that

should generate a lot of pride for participating organisations. So much could be done for this country with so little effort. Such assistance to Cambodian archives must be seen as a necessity rather than an extravagance.

#### ENDNOTES

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3. David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, Allen & Unwin, 1993, p. 159.
4. Helen Jarvis, *The National Library of Cambodia. Surviving Seventy Years of Drastic Socio-Economic Impact*, Paper delivered at CONSAL9, the ninth Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians, Bangkok, 2-6 May 1993, pp. 2-3.
5. *ibid.*, p. 4.
6. *ibid.*, p. 1.
7. John F. Dean, *Conservation Survey Visit to Cambodia: Project Report. 12 April to 14 May, 1989*, Cornell University, Unpublished paper, p. 2.
8. Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochín China and Cambodia. Rule and Response, 1859-1905*, Ithaca, New York, 1969, p. 357.
9. *ibid.*, p. 355-7.
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11. 'Unique Exhibition', *Focus*, September 1992, p. 3.
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