

Okna Veang Thiounn, *Voyage du roi Sisowath en France*. Translated from Khmer by Olivier de Bernon. Paris, Mercure de France, 2006, xx + 267 pp.

On 7 May 1906, the sociable 66-year-old Cambodian monarch, Sisowath (r. 1904–1927), embarked on a three-month-long journey to France. The voyage was dutifully recorded in Khmer by his Palace Minister, *okna Veang* Thiounn (c. 1860–1944).

Thiounn's text was never published in his lifetime, but to commemorate the centenary of the occasion, it was recently printed in Khmer in full. Olivier de Bernon's deft and accessible translation into French brings this charming, *belle époque* account to the attention of twenty-first century readers.

In 1906, France was 'at the apogee of its power', as de Bernon writes, and Cambodia was a jewel in its imperial crown. King Sisowath, unlike his older brother Norodom (r. 1863–1904), was justifiably regarded as a friend as well as a protégé of France. The overriding purpose of his visit was to display France to the King of Cambodia and the King of Cambodia to France. Judging from Thiounn's account and others published at the time, the visit as an exercise in public relations was an unqualified success.

The appeal of *Voyage en France* stems from the zest and thoroughness of Thiounn's account, especially whenever it frees itself from its dutiful format to display Thiounn's excitement, shared

by the monarch and his wide-eyed entourage, as they encountered a pleasing, tumultuous, hospitable and almost entirely different world.

Thiounn punctiliously reports every stage of the long sea-voyage, starting with a visit to Saigon, which 'had been conquered by the French' (p. 42) and where the King had a tooth removed. Stops and ceremonies followed in Singapore, Ceylon and Port Said before the Cambodians, arriving in France, were greeted (p.105) by 'the entire population' of Marseilles: 'People said that they had never heard or seen anything like it. They had never seen the French people so enthusiastically welcome a monarch from anywhere in the world.'

Soon afterwards, Thiounn lists dozens of hotels, shops and banks in Marseilles – the names presumably taken down from innumerable *cartes de visite*. De Bernon heroically attempts to decode the Khmer transcriptions of these names, which appear *en bloc* and remind us that *Voyage en France* records the surfaces of everything seen, met and experienced by Sisowath and his entourage. Significant and apparently meaningless events receive the same deadpan, fastidious treatment. The costumes that the king wore and the routes he travelled, for example, are set down in as much detail as what he said when he called on the President of the French Republic. Everything that Sisowath did in the eyes of the Khmer, after all, was of sublime importance, and was recorded in a vocabulary reserved specifically for those with royal blood.

Sisowath's *corps de ballet* performed in Marseilles at the Colonial Exhibition. It was its first appearance outside the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. The evening was a great success, and Thiounn tells us (p. 134) that the king, arriving at the theatre in his 'glittering, multi-colored clothing was as beautiful as a god descending into the world of men.' In his introduction, however, de Bernon points out that this public performance aimed at strangers cleared the way, as time went on, for a gradual 'modernization' and cheapening of a sacred artistic genre.

From Marseilles, the Cambodians travelled to Paris, where the crowds were consistently 'delirious' (p. 177). Their seventeen-day visit was crowded with presentations, formal visits and celebrations.

When Sisowath called on Armand Fallières, a perhaps forgettable President of the Republic (p. 162), he expressed his gratitude to France for helping Cambodia to flourish, adding that he considered France to be 'like a mother and a father' to his country. M. Fallières responded graciously by repeating the king's remarks, without the parenthood clause.

Officially, Sisowath visited a range of ministries, high-ranking figures and institutions. He absorbed everything courteously and with pleasure. His ceremonial schedule was lightened by shopping excursions, visits to Fontainebleau, two nights at a circus and one at the Opera (*Samson and Delilah*), as well as an afternoon at the races (pp. 88–90), where

he lost one bet, won another, and was loudly cheered by the crowd. At the end of the day, he presented a carved silver box to one of the winning jockeys.

In Paris shortly before going home, Sisowath sponsored an hour-long performance by the royal ballet at a 'garden party' given in his honor for 30,000 people at the Elysée Palace (pp. 208–210).

The Cambodians then spent three days in Nancy and eight more in Paris, before departing for Marseilles and their voyage home on 18 July. Unfortunately, Thiounn's account breaks off inexplicably on 6 July, when the king arrived in Nancy, although we know from other sources that the rest of the visit was as crowded and as happy as the days that had gone before.

Voyage en France celebrates a signal moment in what Alain Forest has called the 'painless colonization' of Cambodia. Forest's optimistic assessment has been astutely called into question by Penny Edwards and others, but the fact remains that the survival of Cambodia as a quasi-sovereign state in the nineteenth century owes much to France. The enduring Francophilia of the Cambodian royal family and older members of the elite is genuine, a generally positive legacy of the colonial era. In the 'blame game' that occupies so much writing about contemporary Cambodia, France has less to answer for, we would argue, than many other powers, including the United States, China, and Cambodia's larger neighbors. With these ideas in mind, and for friends of Cambodia *tout court* and

for *la belle époque*, this delightful book can be read with pleasure, without being taken, as the visit certainly was not, too seriously.

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Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam: Christoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Barron on Tonkin, introduced and annotated by Olga Dror and K.W. Taylor. Ithaca, NY, Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2006, 290 pp. \$23.95 (paper), \$46.95 (cloth).

One of the standard laments by historians and teachers of early modern Vietnamese history is the relative paucity of primary source materials that can take us beyond the often frustratingly terse style of the various court chronicles. These chronicles tend to emphasize events at the court, descriptions of military conflicts, social upheaval, and other affairs of state. They rarely offer any glimpses into the more mundane aspects of Vietnamese lives, or even much detail regarding life in the capitals themselves. Beginning in the seventeenth century, as increasing numbers of Europeans made their way to the shores of Dai Viet, we begin to have travelers' accounts that offer eyewitness descriptions of some of these sociological details. While often confused in the details and betraying some lack of comprehension of certain elements of Vietnamese society or culture, these accounts are invaluable complements to Vietnamese official court histories.

The volume under review here, *Views of Seventeenth-Century Vietnam: Christoforo Borri on Cochinchina and Samuel Barron on Tonkin*, makes two of the earliest and best-known European accounts of Dai Viet available to a wider audience. This volume