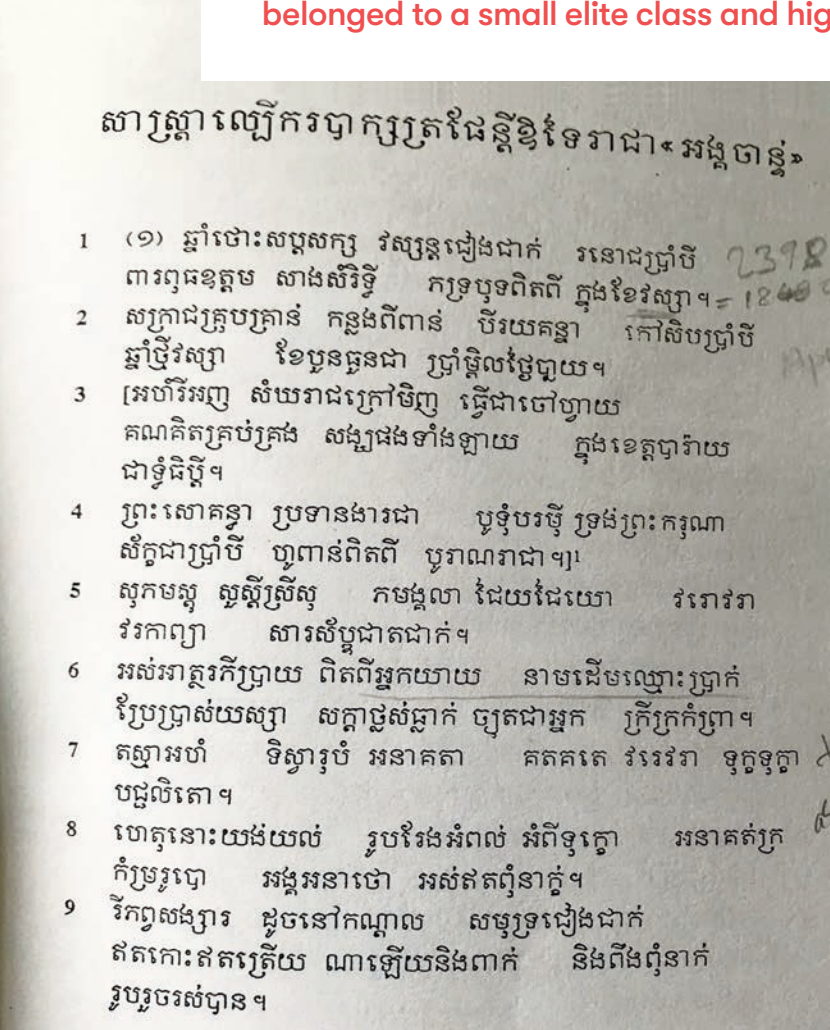


# Representations of the past in a pre-colonial Khmer monastery manuscript

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Prior to the arrival of Western notions of history in Cambodia, *bangsāvātār* writing was the most popular genre used to record events and stories about the past.<sup>1</sup> Literally meaning ‘annals of a family or kingdom’ and commonly translated as ‘chronicle’, the *bangsāvātār* was a type of writing that belonged to a small elite class and highly respected religious leaders.



Cover page of the Pich 1855 (Courtesy of Khin Sok)

These texts were often associated with the royal palace and Buddhist monasteries. Those produced by the palace almost entirely focus on stories and events surrounding royal family members, especially the genealogy of rulers and their conflicts either among themselves or with the neighboring royal courts of Siam and Vietnam. Those produced by Buddhist monasteries, besides covering some major events about the royal court, mostly recount events at the local/provincial level. Composed in a poetic format, these particular texts were also known as the *rabā khsatr* writings, with their name referring to ‘line’ or ‘lineage’ of the kings.

There are two monastery texts that have been preserved until the present. They originated from the writings of a highly respected member of the *sangha* (the Buddhist monkhood) named Pich, an abbot in the province of Bārāy. The Venerable Pich’s earliest text dates back to the early 1840s, and another text composed by him is dated 1855. The two texts were later adapted by another highly respected monk, Chan, who composed a manuscript in 1876 by largely copying the two writings of the Venerable Pich. The manuscripts still in existence at present are the Venerable Chan’s 1876 edition and Venerable Pich’s work of 1855, which was preserved by the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh, where it was re-copied in 1951 and entitled it *Sāstrā Lbaeok Rabā Khsatr Pheanday Udai Rājā Eng Chant* [Palm-leaf Manuscript of the Poems of the Lineage of King Udai Rājā Eng Chant]. Khin Sok collected the two texts and published them in a book.<sup>2</sup> This paper discusses the contents and the representations of the past in the Venerable Pich’s text of 1855, referred to as *Pich 1855*.<sup>3</sup>

## Benefitting from three kinds of goodness

The main focus of *Pich 1855* is a noble family associated with the sponsorship of a religious building. The family is that of a lady named Prāk, whose husband, Narentrā, was governor of the province of Kampong Svāy. Narentrā was appointed as governor by the court of King Ang Chant (r. 1806-1834). After the king’s death and Siam’s withdrawal in 1834, he mobilized the people in his province and nearby provinces, including those in Bārāy, to rise up against Vietnamese rule. The revolt was defeated and Narentrā, together with his family, fled to Bangkok for safety. He fell sick and passed away in Siam leaving behind his wife Prāk and a young son named Moen Meas.

The text goes on to depict how, after the end of Vietnamese rule over Cambodia during the early 1840s, Prāk and Moen Meas returned to their country. Due to the works of his late father, Ang Duong’s court (r. 1848-1860) in Udong awarded Moen Meas an official title: Amrek Moen Meas. He married the daughter of another noble family, who gave birth to a son. Moen Meas passed away soon after due to sickness. *Pich 1855* describes the grief of his wife and of his mother Prāk. It also tells of Prāk’s decision to donate a large portion of her family’s wealth to the construction of a *vihāra* [Buddhist monastery building] in order to dedicate the *dāna* [merit generated by her donation] to her late husband and son. In the last few pages, the text elaborates in great detail on the activities of building the *vihāra*, including the amount of money

donated by Prāk. The text ends right in the middle of the description of a huge religious ceremony held for the new monastery building in 1855.

As the text is written by a Buddhist monk, Venerable Pich, it tends to give priority to the account of religious activities. More specifically, besides events related to wars and politics, the text appears to pay considerable attention to such events as funerals and wedding ceremonies, Ang Duong’s coronation ceremony and his restoration of Buddhism after the Vietnamese occupation, Prāk’s preparations for the Ancestors’ Day (*Pchum Ben*) festival, and the ceremony for the new *vihāra*. In addition, many events incorporated into the text are mentioned in an explicitly Buddhist framework. One finds ideas and philosophies of Buddhism inserted whenever significant events in the views of individuals and families are mentioned, most prominently those in Prāk’s family including the joyful moments, the marriage of Moen Meas, Moen Meas’s passing, and the sponsorship of the monastery building. These teachings help elaborate those events from a religious perspective. They are usually abstract and rationalize the events or activities by associating them with religious teachings. For example, the writer explained that the sponsorship that Prāk undertook for the new monastery building would allow her to benefit from three kinds of goodness, namely earthly goodness, celestial goodness, and nirvana, and thus to escape from all types of suffering and poverty.<sup>4</sup>

## Journeys, behavior and heartbreak

A close reading of the text shows that in its account of Prāk’s family, it also incorporates a mixture of elements from several pre-colonial literary genres such as the *nirās* and *chbāp*. The *nirās*, known in Thai literature as *nirat*,<sup>5</sup> which literally means memorable journey or departure, is a literary genre narrating someone’s journey to a particular place. Conveyed in poetic form, the *nirās* usually recount in detail each step of the journey from beginning to end. In the text, for example, a long *nirās* passage was inserted when describing the journey of Prāk’s family when they escaped from Kampong Svāy province to Bangkok. It describes different landmarks, including the names of the forests, rivers and localities through which they travelled, their difficulties and happy moments, people they met, and the natural beauty they encountered.<sup>6</sup> The *chbāp*,<sup>7</sup> which literally means the code of conduct, is another literary genre conveyed in poetic form that describes and analyzes people’s behavior and, at the same time, suggests norms and roles for people to follow. A *chbāp* passage was incorporated, for instance, when Moen Meas’s mother-in-law gives instructions to her daughter (Moen Meas’s wife) about how to serve and obey her husband by following five principles including honesty, patience, and politeness.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, some events in the text are heavily romanticized. When the writer covers dramatic moments, such as a death, he goes

into considerable detail so as to capture the grief of the relatives of the deceased person. The writer does so by highlighting how one or two family members express their sadness and mourning. Using the voices of the deceased person’s relatives, the writer poetically romanticizes the moment by interspersing personal expressions of love, loss and heartbreak. For example, at the passing of Prāk’s husband in Siam, the writer conveys Prāk’s feeling at that moment:

Remembering the sad moments we ran through the forests facing great difficulties and risking our lives. Thinking of those moments, it hurts my [Prāk’s] feeling very much. My darling, you have forever gone and left me alone without caring about me anymore. If it was me alone, it wouldn’t be a problem. But, we have our baby son. Why did you suddenly die and leave him behind without providing food? I’m deeply distressed for our baby who loses his father and lives with no one to take care of him.<sup>9</sup>

Based on what has been examined in the text so far, it is evident that, besides keeping a record of events about the past, this monastery text combines several forms of knowledge and literary genres. First of all, apart from recounting past events concerning wars and politics, it associates some of those events with the ideas and philosophies of Buddhism. This indicates that the teachings of Buddhism were a vital element of the perceptions of the past in this text. Secondly, the choice of several literary genres, including the romanticization of certain events, indicates the importance of foregrounding people’s feelings and behaviors. In this sense, the representations of the past in this pre-colonial text can be partly understood as recalling memorable moments and places, enforcing rules and regulations of how to behave, and romanticizing tragic moments such as the passing away of a loved one.

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### Notes

- 1 For further discussions on Khmer *bangsāvātār* texts, see Vickery, M. 1977. ‘Cambodia after Angkor: The Chronical Evidence for the Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centuries’ (Vol. I and II) Doctoral Dissertation, Yale University; Chandler, D. 1973. ‘Cambodia before the French: Politics in a Tributary Kingdom, 1794-1848.’ Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan; Mak Phoeun. 1981. *Chroniques Royales du Cambodge (De 1594 A 1677)*. Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient; Khin Sok. 1988. *Chroniques Royales du Cambodge: De Bañā Yat à la prise de Lanvaek, 1417-1595*. Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient.
- 2 Khin Sok. 2002. *L’Annexion du Cambodge par les Vietnamiens au XIX siècle: D’Après les Deux Poèmes du Vénérable Bâtm Baramey Pich*. Paris: You-Feng.
- 3 Even though the edition we have is not the original one, the contents of the text seem to be largely intact. This is mainly because it was originally composed in a poetic format that demanded that those who copied it paid great attention to the consistent lyrics, syntax, and rhyme in each verse. This does not necessarily mean that there are no errors in this copied edition. Thanks to Khin Sok’s intelligent and painstaking work, however, many errors could be identified, corrected, and the meanings of many terms clarified.
- 4 *ibid.*, Khin Sok 2002, pp.324-325.
- 5 For a good discussion on the *nirat* writing of the early Bangkok period (1767-1855), see Nadhi Eossewong. 2005. *Pen & Sail: Literature and History in Early Bangkok*. Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, pp.126-143.
- 6 *ibid.*, Khin Sok 2002, pp.290-294.
- 7 For a good discussion on *chbāp* writing, see Chandler, D. 1984. ‘Normative Poems (*Chbap*) and Pre-colonial Cambodian Society’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15(2):271-279.
- 8 *ibid.*, Khin Sok 2002, p.310.
- 9 My own translation from the Khmer text in Khin Sok 2002, p.295.