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Researchers Explore Khmer Memories Linking Past to Present

by Michelle Vachon | December 15, 2016

A sense of Khmer history has persisted through centuries of Cambodian upheaval and turmoil, a tenuous, ambiguous chain of memories sinking and resurfacing over a vastness of forgotten time. Those shifting sands of memory—created, shared and lost—are explored in a collection of research being presented tonight at the Institut Francais.

In recent years, the notion of “memory” surrounding the Khmer Rouge era and Cambodians’ remembrances of that time has become a popular theme in books and documents about the country. With the Khmer Rouge tribunal shining new light on the regime’s mass killings, foreign researchers have focused on studying Cambodians’ memories of those years.

Some have used approaches that were developed to study the tragedies of World War II, rather than looking into the ways Cambodians have themselves lived through and interpreted upheaval over the centuries, historian Gregory Mikaelian said last week.

“Cambodia’s society is one of the oldest in the Indochinese Peninsula, and actually constitutes an example of resilience over two millennia,” Mr. Mikaelian said.

Looking into some of the ways that Cambodians of the past dealt with devastating events led him, Khmer-language linguist Joseph (Deth) Thach, and Nasir Abdoul-Carime, a historian of Cambodia’s 1960s, to compile the book “Le passe des Khmers” (“The Past of the Khmer”). Published two months ago, it includes articles by researchers from several institutions in France and Cambodia that address the ways Cambodians have understood and absorbed tragedies across the centuries, whether through legends or official documents.

At times, Cambodians have even incorporated shared understandings of the past into turn of phrase. The Khmer word for memory, “cham,” also means “to look after,” “remembering” or “needing”—connotations so diverse that research has barely scratched the surface of how they may reflect the ways Cambodians live with the concepts of memory and remembrance, Mr. Thach writes.

Some contributors to the book will present their findings at tonight’s conference in Phnom Penh.

In one chapter, Mr. Mikaelian explores a 300-year-old memory—surviving, if necessarily and vastly transformed—among Cambodians in the early 20th century. In 1594, forces from Siam—the empire preceding modern-day Thailand—seized the then-Cambodian capital of Longvek in a defeat that later came to signify the start of centuries of crisis and decline, Mr. Mikaelian writes.

Cambodian authorities never recorded the defeat in official documents. Instead, tales and poems were created. According to one legend, originating in the early 19th century, a glorious Cambodian king was defeated by trickery: Siamese forces threw silver at Longvek’s bamboo barricades, and entered when Cambodians brought down the barricades to get the money. The event was said to be part of a 5,000-year cycle of darkness that would eventually lead to a new golden age.

They may have used legends to explain historical events, Mr. Mikaelian writes, but “Cambodians of every social status were demonstrating an irrefutable awareness of the past.”

Documents from the early 17th century in Siamese archives suggest the Cambodian king surrendered without waging war. While ordinary people blamed Siamese treachery, and clung to legends, Cambodian officialdom preferred to keep a veil of secrecy over matters.

The book was released as part of the research component of the Manusastra program, launched in 2012, at the Royal University of Fine Arts.

University rector Bong Sovath noted in a recent letter that the program’s ultimate goal was “to contribute to the emergence of a scientific community in Cambodia and Laos.” This year’s graduates are receiving their diplomas during a ceremony at the Chaktomuk Conference Hall this morning.

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Khmer’s Past: How to Comprehend?

When:

Thursday at 6:30 p.m.

Where:

Institut Francais

What:

Conference in French, English and Khmer

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