

Murder and Mayhem in Seventeenth Century Cambodia

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The so-called middle period of Cambodian history, stretching from the abandonment of the imperial urban complex we know as Angkor in the 1430s until the imposition of the French protectorate in 1863, has recently begun to attract renewed scholarly attention.

While sources for the 15th and 16th centuries in Cambodia are sparse and unreliable, those from the 1600s, which include records produced by Europeans, Chinese, Japanese and the Khmer themselves, are far more numerous. They allow us to construct a narrative not only of local Cambodian events but also to examine the often-tumultuous interplay between the Khmer polity and foreign powers.

In the mid 17th century Cambodia was a relatively major player in the theatre of Southeast Asian international trade. Other local actors included the kingdom of Ayudhya to the west and the Nguyen principality with its capital at Hue to the east. More distant regional traders included the Philippines, Tonkin, Japan (until 1636), Holland (via the Dutch East India Company), Portugal, England and China.

The Dutch East India Company's commercial efforts in Cambodia, which were considerable in the 1630s and early 1640s, started well and ended in disaster. The turbulent closing years of the relationship are the subject of Alfons van der Kraan's lively, insightful monograph, elegantly produced by Silkworm Books. Van der Kraan has made good use of Dutch archival sources and has mastered most of the secondary literature about the period.

The story he tells is one of initial success and subsequent disaster. In 1637 the Dutch East India Company, based in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) established an entrepot in Cambodia, located on the riverbank some

20 kilometres south of the Cambodian royal capital of Udong, and near the commercial city of Phnom Penh. The Governor General of the Indies, Anthony van Diemen, was eager to capitalize on the recent Japanese ruling that closed Japan to foreigners, forbade Japanese expatriates to come home and allowed only Dutch and Chinese vessels to engage in trade with Japan. The ruling was aimed primarily at the Portuguese, Holland's rivals in Southeast Asia. It was also part of an ongoing anti-Christian campaign, from which the Dutch as non-proselytising Protestants were happily exempt but which affected many expatriate Japanese, who had fled the country to escape anti-Christian purges.

Trade with Japan was important to the Dutch because copper and silver bars, the main Japanese export, enabled the Company to earn high profits by minting and marketing coins in India and elsewhere. The Japanese, for their part, were eager to obtain forest products, ivory and hides from Cambodia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia – provided that they came to Japan in the holds of Dutch or Chinese ships.

Ironically, the new Dutch factory in Cambodia was built alongside the Japanese quarter of the town, inhabited by several hundred expatriates (almost entirely Catholic) who were allied for the time being with local Portuguese (a community numbering more than a thousand, including 'black Portuguese' from Goa, Ceylon and Africa). The Japanese community included a number of sword-wielding warriors who were available for hire.

Until 1642, Dutch-Cambodian relations prospered and a profitable, Dutch-sponsored trade developed between Cambodia and Japan. Relations deteriorated swiftly, however, when a 22-year old usurper, crowned as King Ramathipothi (r. 1642–58), came to power. To reach the throne, the new king presided over the massacre of his predecessor, his predecessor's father, several other members of the royal family and hundreds of their supporters. He drew his allies from the local Malay population, as well as from the Japanese and Portuguese communities. The king's alliance with the Portuguese endangered the Dutch community because Holland was at war with Portugal as part of its effort to eliminate Portuguese traders from Southeast Asia.

Less than six months into his reign, the young king converted to Islam, for reasons that remain obscure, thereby alienating the Buddhist monastic order – many of whom he had ordered killed during his rise to power – and a good many ordinary Khmer.

Ramathipothi had already taken a strong dislike to the Dutch resident in Cambodia, Pieter van Regemortes, who had been there since 1637, and had been angered by Cambodian *sub rosa* assistance to local Portuguese traders in allowing them to ship goods to Japan aboard Chinese vessels. In late 1642, a Dutch ship had captured two of these junks at the mouth of the Mekong and had taken all their cargo. On behalf of the Portuguese, the king had demanded recompense from the Dutch, but Van Regemortes secretly bribed him to accept the loss of the junks as a *fait accompli*. Nonetheless, the Dutch position had become uncertain. At once stage the king had told van Regemortes that if he persisted in his hectoring behaviour he might be trampled to death by elephants. In March 1643 van Regemortes decamped for Batavia, where he reported to Governor van Diemen about developments in Cambodia. The governor asked him to return to Udong to remonstrate with the King, and overcame Van Regemortes' reluctance by giving him full ambassadorial status.

The embassy headed included three warships and over a hundred soldiers and seamen. It sailed from Batavia in September 1643 and arrived at the Dutch trading post six weeks later. It carried a letter from van Diemen to the king asking him to pay back the secret bribe he had received and also to locate and punish the murderers of two Dutch traders killed in a brawl in 1641. The king had previously refused to act on the second request and would not have been pleased to have a secret bribe mentioned in an official letter. If the king refused to accede to these demands, van Regemortes was secretly authorized to remove goods from the Dutch warehouse and to declare war on Cambodia, sail away and blockade the Mekong River downstream so as to isolate the kingdom from seaborne trade. It seems likely, as van der Kraan suggests, that a copy of van Diemen's letter had been slipped secretly to Ramathipothi before van Regemortes had time to present it.

In any case, the letter's arrogance, with post-colonial hindsight, is breathtaking, and a more mentally balanced monarch, on grounds of sovereignty, would probably have rejected its demands. It's surprising that van Regemortes, who knew the king and had spent many years in the country, could make such a large miscalculation. As it turned out, the letter's effect, to use an Australian popular expression, was like a poke in the eye with a damp stick. The king, without mentioning the letter, informed van Regemortes that he would receive him on November 27, 1643.

On that day, when van Regemortes and his embassy reached the Udong market on their way to the palace they were set upon by several hundred of the king's troops and killed. Later in the day, another contingent of troops attacked the Dutch factory, killed everyone in it and looted its contents, while boarding parties captured the two Dutch ships that were lying at anchor nearby, and imprisoned their crews.

At the end of the day some 50 Dutch civilians and soldiers lay dead and 60 sailors had been taken prisoner. The factory and the ships had lost their cargo and supplies. Soon afterwards, the king left Udong on an elephant hunt that kept him away from the capital for the next three months.

A third Dutch ship lay at anchor south of Phnom Penh unaware of what had happened upstream. Harassed by Cambodian warships and urged to come ashore, the Dutch captain became suspicious and imprisoned four Chinese who had come aboard offering him quantities of beer and rice wine for his crew. Suspecting a trap, the captain imprisoned the Chinese. Under torture, they admitted that they were agents of the king, and told the captain of the massacre. The ship eluded its pursuers and sailed back to Batavia, arriving at the end of January 1644, a week after news of the Cambodian massacre had reached van Diemen from another source.

Van Diemen's enraged response to the debacle was to order the trial, torture and execution of the four Chinese and to organize a punitive expedition that would, in his words, 'give priority to the punishment of Cambodia ... with orders to inflict as much damage upon the Cambodians as possible to take revenge and ...restore the tarnished reputation of the Netherlands'.

The following pages of Van der Kraan's unabashedly 'Boys' Own History' (pp. 35–62) are concerned with this expedition, which set sail from Batavia in March 1644 bearing an even harsher letter from van Diemen to Ramathipothi, demanding the release of Dutch prisoners and the full restoration of the misappropriated goods and vessels. If the Dutch demands were rejected (as Van Diemen expected them to be) the leader of the expedition, Captain Harouse, was to declare war on Cambodia and blockade the Mekong. Van Diemen's instructions referred to Cambodia as an 'evil and murderous nation' and Harouse was given *carte blanche* in conducting the war that seemed certain to take place.

As things turned out, Harouse was sailing into a trap. His fleet reached the site of the Dutch factory in early June, but he was unable to deliver van Diemen's letter and thus, in his view, he wasn't authorized to launch hostilities against the Khmer, large numbers of whom he could see from his quarter deck openly preparing for war.

Harouse prudently decided to tack downstream. When he reached Phnom Penh he found that the Cambodians had blocked the Mekong south of the city with two recently constructed pontoon bridges. Harouse's flotilla rammed its way through the first bridge but was blocked by the second, much stronger one located some 500 meters downstream. As his boats approached it, Harouse was killed by a cannon ball shot from the riverbank. A Dutch landing party silenced the battery that had killed Harouse but a battery on the opposite bank kept shelling the immobilized ships. A ferocious battle ensued that left less than half of the soldiers and sailors fit for further action – 112 were sick, 245 had been wounded, and 62 had been killed. The battered flotilla slipped away, reaching the safety of the South China Sea by the end of June.

A fifth Dutch warship had been moored at what was known as the Mosquito Passage on the lower Mekong, blockading the river from trading ships. Its commander had not heard of the battle in Phnom Penh, and was

surprised in late July by a heavily armed Cambodian flotilla, with King Ramathipodei aboard one of the ships. The Dutch warship skilfully repelled the Cambodian attackers, inflicting hundreds of casualties, before sailing off to safety comparatively unscathed.

When van Dieman heard the news of the debacle, he began preparing to mount a third, more ambitious expedition which, had it set sail, would certainly have inflicted enormous damage in Cambodia and might have driven Ramathipodei from power. Van Diemen planned to accomplish this mission by forming an alliance with the King of Siam, Prasat Tong, who was less belligerent than he was, but friendly to Holland and eager to re-establish what he saw as Siam's suzerainty over its capricious neighbor.

In April, 1645, before the expedition could be mounted, Van Diemen died, aged only 52. His replacement, van der Lijn, was less inclined than van Diemen had been to attack Cambodia. In van der Kraan's phrasing (p. 67) van der Lijn considered 'an expedition of this magnitude and complexity as too difficult, too uncertain and too costly'. Instead, he proposed that the Cambodian monarch release the remaining Dutch prisoners. The 29 survivors arrived in Batavia in early 1647, effectively bringing hostilities to an end.

Van der Kraan closes his brisk, absorbing study by suggesting that had van Diemen lived to mount the expedition with Siamese assistance, Siamese domination of the Cambodian court might have taken place a century earlier than it did. In any case, Ramathipodei was an anomaly, and was overthrown by a Vietnamese invasion that triggered a Cambodian rebellion. Having relied to a large extent on Malay, Japanese and Portuguese support, the king was removed from the throne by his own people and a neighboring power. Parallels spring to mind from the 20th century, when both Lon Nol and Pol Pot, deprived of popular support, were driven out in one case by local people heavily assisted by the Vietnamese and in the other by Vietnamese, assisted to an extent by local people.

Murder and Mayhem in Seventeenth Century Cambodia is a short book that is both fun to read and provides us with a vivid, well-researched glimpse of a particularly unedifying episode in the history of pre-colonial imperialism and the violent, pre-nationalist responses that it occasionally provoked.

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