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Performance as (re)incarnation: The Sdech Kân narrative

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A narrative sponsored by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen posits the prime minister as the reincarnation of sixteenth-century king Sdech Kân, a commoner who toppled the king at the time and ascended the throne. Whilst reincarnation narratives have wider Southeast Asian resonances, the reinvention of Sdech Kân is central to the redrawing of boundaries of power between a politically weakened monarchy and the Cambodian People's Party-led government. This article traces the meanings of reincarnating Sdech Kân in the contemporary Cambodian context, and what consequences this has for contemporary bids for political legitimacy.

On 5–6 July 1997, Cambodia's First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh was overthrown by Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, ending their co-premiership and the coalition government between royalist party Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique Et Coopératif (FUNCINPEC) and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) which had been instated in 1993. A few years thereafter, a narrative started spreading in Cambodia. This centred on the idea that the life of Prime Minister Hun Sen was somehow intimately connected with that of sixteenth-century king Sdech Kân, a man of the people who rose through his own prowess to topple the king at the time. Although this was always suggested implicitly, the idea conveyed was that the prime minister was the reincarnation of the legendary king.

Since the 1993 reinstatement of the monarchy and of a multi-party system, following on from more than a decade of one-party rule under the CPP and its predecessor, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), a rickety relationship had developed between the royalists and the CPP. With the reinstated monarchy, Nation, Religion and King (*Cheat*, *Sasana*, *Mohaksatr*) became the national motto of the new, second Kingdom of Cambodia.[1] These three notions and their historical

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1 The 'second kingdom' refers to the post-1993 Kingdom of Cambodia, the state with a reinstated monarchy after a hiatus of 23 years.

precursors stand at the centre of historical Cambodian imaginations of power and moral order.[2] The reinvention of the Sdech Kân narrative can be understood as Prime Minister Hun Sen's bid to remould the relationship between the nation, religion, and the monarchy in his favour, using a potent cultural legend which invokes a deeply engrained tension between inherited and non-inherited leadership within Khmer Buddhist kingship. The reinvention of the narrative is in this way central to the reworking of boundaries of power in the second kingdom between the monarchy and the royalist faction on one hand, and the CPP, and, primarily, Hun Sen on the other.

The narrative has wider Southeast Asian resonances, with similar goings-on in, for example, Burma, Thailand and Laos,[3] where historical kings have been used to bolster political legitimacy, at the same time as the idea of reincarnation has spread. As examples of 'performative politics', each of these interacts with the fabric of political, historiographical and moral imaginations of their polities in different ways. In looking at the Sdech Kân narrative, I seek to trace the meanings and consequences of reincarnating this particular king in the contemporary Cambodian context. This article examines what the Prime Minister's claim to incarnation entails, and how this attempts to remodel the 'ideal' configuration of political power in contemporary Cambodia.

In the period leading up to the second kingdom, the then State of Cambodia (SOC) leaders had tried to assert their legitimacy as rulers of Cambodia ahead of the reinstatement of the constitutional monarchy by means of seizing control of the right to define the concepts nation, religion, and king to their own advantage.[4] In offering a further redefinition, the Sdech Kân narrative makes new claims that go beyond those of the SOC period when the triumvirate of Hun Sen, Heng Samrin and Chea Sim acted as kings ceremonially and politically. By engaging with historical ideas of kingship, the Sdech Kân narrative posits Hun Sen himself as the legitimate national leader.[5] The narrative is part of the increasing symbolic and political power tied to the person of the Prime Minister.

2 Heng Monychenda, 'In search of the Dhammika ruler', in *People of virtue: Reconfiguring religion, power and moral order in Cambodia today*, ed. Alexandra Kent and David P. Chandler (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), p. 310.

3 See, for example, on Burma, 'Burma: The end of an era or a dynasty's beginning?', *Irrawaddy*, 26 Jan. 2011; on Laos, Volker Grabowsky and Oliver Tappe, '"Important kings of Laos": Translation and analysis of a Lao cartoon pamphlet', *Journal of Lao Studies*, 2, 1 (2011): 1–44, and on Thailand, Irene Stengs, *Worshipping the great moderniser: King Chulalongkorn, patron saint of the Thai middle class* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), and Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, 'The spirits, the stars and Thai politics', lecture, The Siam Society, Bangkok, 2 Dec. 2008.

4 Judy Ledgerwood, 'Ritual in 1990 Cambodian political theatre: New songs at the edge of the forest', in *At the edge of the forest: Essays on Cambodia, history, and narrative in honor of David Chandler*, ed. Anne R. Hansen and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2008), p. 213.

5 Steve Heder identifies three 'claims of qualification to rule' in postcolonial Cambodia: being *sdech*, 'king' or 'prince', a title associated with the royal family; *neak cheh doeng*, a person with higher education; and *neak tâsou*, a person who has taken part in armed struggle. Hun Sen routinely portrays himself as a military figure, *neak tâsou*. His claims to being a *neak cheh doeng* are epitomised by his election into the Royal Academy of Cambodia (RAC) on 28 April 2010. Performing Sdech Kân can be seen as his ultimate claim to being *sdech*. See Steve Heder, 'Cambodia's democratic transition to neoauthoritarianism', *Current History*, 94, 596 (Dec. 1995): 425–9.

Changing conceptualisations of kingship

Sdech Kân is known in Khmer historiography as the quintessential *neak mean bon* (man of merit). He is a famous and controversial figure who, after killing a supposedly unjust king, ascended the throne himself. By invoking him, the narrative engaged with ideas of kingship itself.[6] These ideas are enmeshed in historical Cambodian Buddhist conceptualisations of authority and moral order, linking power to karmic laws of rebirth based on merit accrued in previous existences. Since the establishment of Theravada Buddhism as the dominant religion in the country, kingship has been bound up with the notion of *neak mean bon*.[7] The *neak mean bon* is associated with revolutionary activities, typically denoting a man who rises to power through his own prowess. His right to rule is a consequence of the accumulation of good deeds in previous lives. When recognised, his merit bestows him with the legitimacy to take the fate of the country in his hands or to ascend the throne.[8] The *neak mean bon* is a potent cultural concept alive in Cambodian collective memory.[9]

Cambodian kingship was traditionally associated with extraordinary virtue, leading the country to prosperity.[10] The organic link between the moral behaviour of the king and the welfare of the kingdom was conceptualised as a structure which, as in theories of kingship in many other parts of the world, presumed the unity of the physical, mortal body of the king, and his mystical body, the 'body politic'.[11] In Khmer Buddhist kingship, Ashley Thompson identifies the royal body as 'one in a series of substitute bodies, including the Buddha and the stūpa, each being an image of Mount Meru, which substitute one for the other in substituting for the kingdom or the universe governed by the *dharma*'.[12] The 'king as a substitute body' meant in the Khmer Buddhist context that Khmer royalty had multiple substitute bodies, and that the king was 'both transcendent or universal *and* uniquely particular'.[13]

6 Steve Heder, 'Political theatre in the 2003 Cambodian elections: State, democracy and conciliation in historical perspective', in *Staging politics: Power and performance in Asia and Africa*, ed. Julia C. Strauss and Donal B. Cruise O'Brien (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 162, suggests that Hun Sen has 'occasionally attempted to present himself as a neak mean boun', and quotes a 1993 United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) report. The reinvention of Sdech Kân is a first more or less coherent form of narrativisation to frame such claims.

7 Ian C. Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), p. 50; for a discussion of the historical Sdech Kân as a *neak mean bon* see Khing Hoc Dy, 'Neak mean boun, "Être de mérites", dans la culture et la littérature du Cambodge', *Péninsule*, 56, 1 (2008): 6; see also Ashley Thompson, 'The future of Cambodia's past: A messianic Middle-period Cambodian royal cult', in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, ed. John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004) on the *neak mean bon* during Cambodia's Middle Period (i.e., after the fall of Angkor and before the French protectorate, c. 1450–1863).

8 Khing, 'Neak mean boun', p. 1.

9 Ibid.

10 Ashley Thompson, 'The suffering of kings: Substitute bodies, healing, and justice in Cambodia', in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, pp. 91–112; Alexandra Kent, 'The recovery of the king', in *People of virtue*, pp. 109–27.

11 See Kantorowicz's classical study of the king's two bodies as a political theology of early-modern Western monarchies. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The king's two bodies: A study in mediaeval political theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

12 Thompson, 'The suffering of kings', p. 92.

13 Ibid., p. 91.

The conception of just leadership / kingship in Cambodia is epitomised by the *Preah Bat Thommik* (Dharmic King or Just Ruler), a concept with messianic overtones, also engraved in the popular mind.[14] This Just Ruler is thought to uphold what is known in Theravadin terms as the *dasavidha-rājadhamma*, the 'tenfold virtues of the righteous king', and to enjoy invulnerability.[15] In a 'traditional' conceptualisation of the ideal configuration of political power, the *Preah Bat Thommik* was envisioned as a charioteer, supporting himself on the two wheels of state affairs (*anachakr*, the pillar of *Cheat*), and Buddhism (*Putthichakr*, the pillar of *Sasana*) to lead the people forward.[16] The *neak mean bon* and the *Preah Bat Thommik* overlap conceptually.[17]

The well-known nineteenth-century prophecy *Putth Tumneay* foretells the appearance of the *Preah Bat Thommik* as a *neak mean bon* who will come to pacify Cambodia after a period of violent upheavals.[18] These upheavals turn the world upside down: traditional values undergo a complete reversal, Buddhism is destroyed, and the ignorant gain power. Now largely associated with the Khmer Rouge period, the *Putth Tumneay* has been seen by many political opponents, including the royalist faction, to apply to the coming-to-power of the incumbent regime.[19] They point to the communist origins of the CPP and the modest backgrounds of the party's leaders. The recurring messianic search to find the *Preah Bat Thommik* persists in the second kingdom.[20] Royalists have nurtured the idea of reinstated king Norodom Sihanouk as a just leader, as the father of peace and national reconciliation.[21]

The reinvention of the Sdech Kân narrative can be understood as a counter-narrative to a reading of *Putth Tumneay* which casts Sihanouk, and the royalist faction with him, as the rightful leaders of the nation. Immediately before the restoration of the monarchy, when expectations of the imminent coming of the *Preah Bat Thommik* ran high, Hun Sen, Chea Sim, and Heng Samrin, as the then SOC leaders, tried to distance themselves from the infidels mentioned in the *Putth Tumneay* by

14 Heng, 'In search of the Dhammika ruler', p. 310.

15 Ibid., p. 313. The 'tenfold virtues of a righteous king' (*dasavidha-rājadhamma*) are *dāna* (charity), *sīla* (morality), *pariccāga* (self-sacrifice), *ājjava* (honesty), *maddava* (kindness), *tapa* (self-control), *akkoda* (non-anger), *avihimsa* (non-violence), *khanti* (tolerance), and *avirodhana* (conformity to the law). See Heng, 'In search of the Dhammika ruler', pp. 317–18.

16 Ibid., p. 310.

17 Khing, 'Neak mean boun', p. 22, suggests a complete overlap between the *Preah Bat Thommik* and *neak mean bon* through the conceptual link 'dhammik = bodhisatta = neak mean boun'. According to Olivier de Bernon, 'Le Buddh Daṃnāy: Note sur un texte apocalyptique khmer', *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient*, 81 (1994): 91, the word 'dhammik' [thommik], part of the Cambodian royal title, designates in *Putth Tumneay* not only a just monarch, but also the warriors who submit only reluctantly to the sovereign Bodhisattva.

18 Khing, 'Neak mean boun', p. 21; Olivier de Bernon, 'Le Buddh Daṃnāy', p. 91.

19 On the association of the upheavals described in *Putth Tumneay* with the Khmer Rouge, see Carol A. Mortland, 'Khmer Buddhists in the United States: Ultimate questions', in *Cambodian culture since 1975: Homeland and exile*, ed. May Ebihara, Carol Anne Mortland and Judy Ledgerwood (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 82; Frank Smith, *Interpretive accounts of the Khmer Rouge years: Personal experience in Cambodian peasant world view* (Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1989), pp. 18–23; Ledgerwood, 'Ritual in 1990 Cambodian political theatre', p. 216.

20 See Heng, 'In search of the Dhammika ruler', p. 313.

21 Some Cambodians consider Sihanouk as the *Preah Bat Thommik* or as a *Bodhisattva*, which would make him a *neak mean bon*. See De Bernon, 'Le Buddh Daṃnāy', p. 93; Khing, 'Neak mean boun', p. 22.

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sponsoring Buddhist ritual activity.[22] Then, shortly after the July 1997 events, Hun Sen made reference to the short and violent war, lasting only as long as it takes 'to fry a shrimp', which according to *Putth Tumneay* hails in a new era of prosperity — thereby seemingly casting himself as the *Preah Bat Thommik*.[23] In 2003, Hun Sen seemed to suggest an association between himself and King Jayavarman VII, the quintessential *Preah Bat Thommik*, using the language of reincarnation.[24] Hun Sen's subsequent revival of Sdech Kân represents the emergence of a full-fledged counter-narrative to a royalist reading of the *Putth Tumneay*, with the Prime Minister casting himself as a saviour figure, whilst omitting the other two members of the CPP top troika.

This counter-narrative engages with an age-old tension between inherited and non-inherited leadership, deeply engrained in Buddhist thinking on kingship and in the Khmer political and cultural context. The productive tension between inherited and non-inherited leadership is entailed in the terms *sdech*, generally translated as 'king' or 'prince', and *samdech*, an honorific accorded by the King to non-royals including the CPP's leaders. These titles historically covered a semantic range within and outside of actual 'kingship', an ambiguity persisting into the present day. The Old Khmer origin of the word *sdech* is derived from the root verb *tac*, 'to detach, to separate, to be superior', and was used to designate people of the ruling class, only thence the king.[25] Utilising this pre-existing tension, the Sdech Kân narrative employs the *neak mean bon* imaginary to glorify and exalt non-hereditary leadership. Thereby it engages with questions debated by a rapidly changing monarchy which is internally fractured over the meaning of a constitutional monarchy and how it can be reconciled with political royalism. Following his reinstatement as king, Sihanouk continuously sought a political role for himself, often ending up closer to the CPP than to FUNCINPEC. Sihanouk's 2004 abdication in favour of his son Sihamoni, who is disinterested in assuming a political role, has given Cambodia a constitutional monarch along Western lines. Meanwhile, Sihamoni's half-brother Ranariddh, as the leader of FUNCINPEC until 2006, manoeuvred his way through coalition governments with the CPP, which compromised his political independence, as well as his royal stature. The Sdech Kân narrative relates to these different actors and their agendas in different ways. It is primarily understood to justify the July 1997 events and Ranariddh's political downfall. More broadly, it undermines the legitimacy of a national leadership role for royal family members, and particularly the idea of Sihanouk as the father of national reconciliation. By revealing a telling absence of rival rumours concerning the actual occupant of the throne, Sihamoni, it highlights the actual throne's hollowness.

22 Ledgerwood, 'Ritual in 1990 Cambodian political theatre', p. 216.

23 Olivier de Bernon, 'La prédiction du Bouddha', *Aséanie*, 1 (1998): 43–66.

24 Hun Sen released a press statement denying that he was a reincarnation of Jayavarman VII; this was prompted, he stated, by how many people believed this to be the case. Ledgerwood, 'Ritual in 1990 Cambodian political theatre', p. 219.

25 Saveros Pou, 'Dieux et rois dans la pensée khmère ancienne', *Journal Asiatique*, 286, 2 (1998): 656. Saveros Pou, *Dictionnaire vieux Khmer-Français-Anglais* (Paris: CEDORECK, 1992), p. 508, defines the Old Khmer meaning as 'To be aloof, above all. The supreme one. Sacred beings, espec. Princes. (Of these) To be, stand, move.'

Although the 'traditional' ideal configuration of power as the trinity of nation, Buddhism and kingship persists in Cambodia today, contestation over the relationship among the three has coloured Cambodian politics ever since Independence. Ian Harris charges that the idea of the king as indispensable to the flourishing of Theravada Buddhism may be a kind of caricature of Khmer Buddhism.[26] The Sdech Kân narrative can be understood as the latest response to a long-standing legitimacy crisis of this trinity, in important ways forming a continuity with that of Sihanouk. Sihanouk's Sangkum Reastr Niyum (People's Socialist Community, 1955–70) and its Buddhist socialism, launched as a social and political foundation for building independent Cambodia, was said by Sihanouk to build precisely on the 'traditional' base of the monarchy and Buddhism as 'irreplaceable factors of unity'.[27] Sihanouk claimed direct descent from Jayavarman VII, the model *Preah Bat Thommik*, and likened his Sangkum Reastr Niyum to the Angkorean era.[28] Yet at the same time, Sihanouk referred to the popular legend of King Trâsâk Ph'aem, a *neak mean bon*, to justify his 1955 abdication in favour of his father Suramarit, and his new role as chairman of the Sangkum Reastr Niyum. According to legend, Trâsâk Ph'aem was a gardener of the Samre minority, renowned for his skill in growing sweet cucumbers. Acting on the orders of the king to kill any intruder, the gardener one night killed a trespasser who then turned out to be the king himself. In recognition of the gardener's obedience, the gardener was then made king and started a new dynasty of popular origin. Harris notes that 'by drawing on the legend, Sihanouk was able to replace the idea of rule by traditional quasi-divine right with a slightly more democratic and popular notion of exclusive political power'.[29] This was reflected in how around the same time Sihanouk started to be called by the newly invented kinship-term *Samdech Euv*, often translated as 'Monsignor Papa', rather than by Sanskrit and Pali terms hitherto associated with high status.[30] Ever so slightly, kingship was shifted towards a more democratic ideal, by referring to the *neak mean bon* imaginary.

In the second kingdom, genealogical lines are again central to the royals' claims to legitimacy. Meanwhile, in contemporary society, historical imaginations of overlapping substitute bodies, whereby the king embodies the people and the state, persist. Alexandra Kent tells the story of how two middle-aged Cambodian women set out

26 Ian Harris, 'The monk and the king: Khieu Chum and regime change in Cambodia', *Udaya: Journal of Khmer Studies*, 9 (2008): 81–112. Anti-colonial Buddhist nationalism was non-monarchist and sometimes anti-monarchist, and several people at its heart later rose to prominence in the Khmer Republic. Their thinking was informed by larger debates within Buddhist thinking on kingship. Harris (pp. 82–8) identifies both Theravada canonical sources and Cambodian *chbap*s, post-canonical sources, which justify insurrection as a consequence of misrule.

27 Norodom Sihanouk, 'Pour mieux comprendre le Cambodge actuel', *Le Sangkum: Revue politique illustrée*, 1 (Aug. 1965): 14.

28 Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The cultivation of a nation, 1860–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), p. 250.

29 Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 146.

30 Sihanouk was granted the title of *dhammik mahārāj* [thommik mohareach] (great righteous king) in the 1947 Constitution, but renounced it by abdicating. He occasionally referred to himself as king-monk (Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism*, p. 144). In contrast, legend has it that after Trâsâk Ph'aem ascends the throne, the title *Preah Bat Thommik* is added to his royal title, underlining the overlap between the *neak mean bon* and the *Preah Bat Thommik*. See De Bernon, 'Le Buddh Damnāy', p. 91.

to recover the king's body through spirit performances in order, ultimately, to reconstitute Cambodia.[31] Just as these women use their bodies to channel that of the king, as the substitute in turn for the body social and the body politic, the Sdech Kân performance can be understood as a mirror response by the Prime Minister to reorient Cambodia — through replacing the ailing monarchy. Through becoming the substitute body of Sdech Kân, the Prime Minister plunges himself into a series of associations, ultimately representing what in the modern context is imagined as the nation. The discourse surrounding Hun Sen's reincarnation of Sdech Kân can be understood as a bid to articulate and cement an interpretation of legitimate leadership to define the present era and to negotiate future political developments; a concern which goes beyond that of convincingly, in any straightforward sense, aspiring to be a *neak mean bon* or *Preah Bat Thommik*.

Performative politics in the second kingdom

By (re)incarnating or performing Sdech Kân, Prime Minister Hun Sen has tapped into the sphere of emotion, drama and performance, testifying to what an important part such performance plays in contemporary Cambodian politics. Julia Strauss and Donal Cruise O'Brien identify three distinct modes of performative politics as the politics of 'affect, emotion and drama': state rituals, primarily staged ceremonies; theatrical performance by politicians and activists, such as elections and street protests; and individual or micro-performances, including speeches or events intended to engage people's emotions and rally support.[32] The performances of the Sdech Kân narrative predominantly belong to the third type. The Prime Minister makes individual performances in the form of elaborate speeches. There are also individual and micro-performances by different members of the political elite and their clientelistic networks, *khsae*. Performing the Sdech Kân narrative exalts the importance of Hun Sen's bureaucratic, military and economic networks, which make up what Steve Heder has referred to as an 'involuted façade state'.[33] It has tied together government officials with artists and academics who have been mobilised in an ongoing process of enlisting intellectuals into the Prime Minister's network. In a way, the narrative has become an inverted 'facade' by providing a platform for these individuals to come to the surface of public space, reinforcing existing power structures and integrating a new set of people into them. Their performances include the erection of statues of Sdech Kân across the country, a book about Sdech Kân, and the work of a research team to locate Sdech Kân's capital. The narrative has also been disseminated nationwide through the media.

These public spectacles contain their own internal logic, aspirations and expressions. In contrast to Cambodian elections, which could be said to (sometimes schizophrenically) interact with both an international and domestic audience, the performances discussed here are aimed quite exclusively at a domestic audience. As a realm 'thoroughly saturated with symbols, as the script for the performance either implicitly or explicitly calls upon tropes, symbols and metaphors presumed to be

31 Kent, 'The recovery of the king'.
32 Julia C. Strauss and Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, 'Introduction', in *Staging politics*, pp. 2–3.
33 Steve Heder, 'Political theatre', p. 162.

well understood by those audiences', performative politics alludes to and draws meaning from a sphere of shared understandings.[34] It thus naturally intersects with the politically embedded contestation of social memories. Sdech Kân was already a controversial figure in Cambodian collective memory prior to his recent reinvention, with interpretations of his rule ranging from a republican one making him out to be a false revolutionary to a royalist one casting him as a simple usurper of the throne.[35] The most recent reinvention thus picks up and utilises tropes and symbols fresh in the collective memory. The performance can paradoxically be understood as a particularly 'sincere' medium by which Hun Sen communicates with the citizenry. Its indirect communications convey important messages, yet these are always subject to interpretation and bound to the context of the performance's enactment.

Sdech Kân: The 'original' narrative

Sdech Kân, also known by his royal name Preah Srey Chettha, is known in Khmer history as the commoner who became the leader of a popular uprising toppling King Srey Sokonthor Bât (r. 1504–12). Though several written versions of the story exist, Adhémard Leclère narrates the story of Sdech Kân as follows.[36] Kân belonged to the temple-servant class. When his sister was offered to Srey Sokonthor Bât as a concubine, Kân came to live in the royal palace where he soon built up a certain standing. One night in 1508, Srey Sokonthor Bât had a nightmare in which he saw an ominous *neak* (dragon) drive him out of the palace and wreak havoc on the kingdom. Gathering with all the members of the royal family and court dignitaries, who offered him candles and flower garlands, the king then had a vision of two dragons hovering around either side of Kân's head. Immediately thereafter, he received news of ominous signs from all parts of the kingdom. Perturbed, King Srey Sokonthor Bât gathered his fortune-tellers, who foresaw that he would be toppled by a man born in the year of the dragon, a man who would reign in the direction of the east. Given that Kân was indeed born in the year of the dragon, the king schemed to have Kân killed in what was to seem like a fishing accident. The king's ignoble plot failed, however, as Kân was warned by his sister who had overheard the conversation. Escaping the king's trap, Kân fled eastwards to build up an

34 Strauss and Cruise O'Brien, 'Introduction', p. 3.

35 Saing Hell, *Neak bodevott klaeng klay* [The false revolutionary] (Phnom Penh: Ed. Ariyathor, 1972); Tauch Chhoung, *Sdech Kân chrek reach* [Sdech Kân the usurper] (Paris: Ed. Association des écrivains khmers à l'étranger, 1995).

36 Adhémard Leclère, *Histoire du Cambodge depuis le 1er siècle de notre ère, d'après les inscriptions lapidaires: les annales chinoises et annamites et les documents européens des six derniers siècles* (Paris: Paul Guethner, 1914), pp. 235–78. The account given in Adhémard Leclère, 'Le Sdech Kân', *Bulletin de la Société des études Indochinoises (BSEI)*, 59 (1910): 17–55, is largely identical, but omits king Srey Sokonthor Bât's dream. Leclère does not provide a reference for the chronicle on which he based his account. But see Eng Soth's *Aekâsar Mohaboros Khmer* [Documents on the great Khmer heroes] (Paris: Association Culturelle Pierres d'Angkor, 1985 [1969]), vol. 1, episodes 7–10; vol. 2, episodes 11–19, of which pp. 8–19, largely mirrors Leclère's account as retold above, whilst providing a lengthier account of events. Leclère's *BSEI* article was reprinted in the volume edited by Michel Tranet, *Le Sdach Kan* (Phnom Penh: Atelier d'Impression Khmère, 2002). *Chroniques Royales du Cambodge: De Bañā yāt à la prise de Laṅvaek: de 1417 a 1595*, ed. and trans. Khin Sok (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1988) discusses Sdech Kân's reign, but does not retell the legend recounted above, for which Khin instead references Leclère's 1910 account (p. 258).

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army. Marching against Srey Sokonthor Bât in 1512, Kân finally defeated the king, who was struck down by one of his aides. Thereafter, Kân ruled benevolently over Cambodia, bringing order and prosperity. He introduced the first currency in the kingdom, the *sleung*, with the image of a dragon imprinted on it. However, a few years into his reign, a civil war broke out in 1516, which ended in 1525 with Sdech Kân being killed by the soldiers of King Chânt Reachea. The story allows plenty of space for interpretation as to whether Kân was a traitor or a just warrior rising against an unjust king. Historians have dwelt on the Sdech Kân story because it is perceived to tell important things about what Michel Tranet terms the 'psycho-sociological reality' of Cambodian history, whilst aspiring to historical truth-value.[37]

Sdech Kân and the royal family: (Re)birth of a modern saga of realpolitik

From the early 2000s onwards, Prime Minister Hun Sen started bringing Sdech Kân to mind in a number of speeches. Several remarks by the Prime Minister seemed to suggest that there was an intimate connection between himself and Sdech Kân. The similarities between Sdech Kân and Hun Sen were given particular attention. They were both born in the year of the *neak* (dragon). Just as Sdech Kân came from the class of temple-servants, Hun Sen famously spent part of his youth as a pagoda boy. The main similarity, alluded to implicitly, was the idea of a commoner, rising through his own revolutionary prowess to govern the polity by toppling an unjust king.

This narrative emerged in the context of Hun Sen's restructuring of relations between himself and the royal family to the detriment of the latter, and particularly in relation to his ultimate outmanoeuvring of Prince Ranariddh. Ranariddh was dealt *the* major blow by the July 1997 events that ousted him as co-prime minister, effectively ending any real influence he might have had over national politics. The Sdech Kân narrative appeared in the aftermath of the 1997 events, in a period when Ranariddh was struggling to reinsert himself into national politics.[38] In 2006, the conflict between Ranariddh and Hun Sen reached a new peak, leading to Ranariddh's resignation from the presidency of the National Assembly in March. The same month, the National Assembly amended the constitution enabling it to pass bills with a simple majority, rather than the previously required two-thirds majority. This move effectively eliminated royalist party FUNCINPEC as a political actor with agency.

Shortly before Ranariddh's resignation, on 26 February 2006, Hun Sen went with his wife Bun Rany to visit what had been identified as Sdech Kân's former capital, Srolop Prey Nokor in Kompong Cham province. Here, Hun Sen gave a speech, providing the fullest account to date of his perspective on Sdech Kân. Hun Sen started out by declaring that a religious ceremony had been conducted to ask permission from former king Sdech Kân's spirit for a restoration effort aimed at developing Srolop Prey Nokor into a tourism site. He then spoke at length about how the development of Srolop was to take place. An irrigation system was to be constructed, bringing water to the 213-hectare inner area of the former city or palace, as well as almost 2,000 hectares in the vicinity; 519 metres of the seven-metre-high city wall were to be rebuilt.

37 Tranet, *Le Sdach Kan*, preface.
38 Ranariddh was appointed President of the National Assembly in 1998, and again in 2003.

Water reservoirs around the palace were to be restored. Canals were to be dug, ranging from 2,750 to 4,000 metres long. Four water gates were to be put in, and a new water system extending the water current from the canal to be constructed. Two other canals were to be restored together with a number of water regulatory mechanisms. As Hun Sen concluded, 'I think we have a long-term involvement here.'[39]

Hun Sen went on to narrate his version of the Sdech Kân story:

> After the Ponhea Yat reign, Cambodia was ruled as a Kingdom that was divided into three separate areas … The war later broke out. It is interesting to study its cause for the sake of preventing mistakes in the present. King Preah Srey Sokonthor Bât had a concubine whose brother was named Kân. One day the King dreamed of a fire-breathing dragon and fortunetellers spread rumours of instability believed to originate from Kân, since everyone was unhappy about him being promoted from the status of an outcast. A plot to kill Kân was hatched but Kân was saved by a secret letter from his sister and fled to gather forces, which later fought and defeated the forces of the King Srey Sokonthor Bât. He became King himself and was named Preah Srey Chettha. Sdech Kân or Preah Srey Chettha did a wonderful work in what should be termed a democratic revolution because he liberated all outcasts under his area of control. Because of this he became the strongest commander and King in his own right.[40]

Hun Sen continued the speech by addressing the deal struck between the CPP and opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) for the constitutional amendment mentioned above, requiring a simple majority rather than a two-thirds majority to pass a law in the National Assembly. Hun Sen referred to his recent audience with King Sihamoni to address rumours that this 'reconciliation approach' would lead to the monarchy's downfall. Hun Sen had informed the king that the constitutional amendment was aimed merely at avoiding a political deadlock, not at abolishing the monarchy. He further stated that the CPP should be called the monarchy's supporter, 'if not the monarchist', and that anyone wishing to abolish the monarchy had to first 'get me [Hun Sen] out'.[41] In his speech the Prime Minister had explicitly addressed the recent moves affecting the royalist party by claiming to be the monarchy's defender. He had also given a much longer account retelling the historical legend of Sdech Kân defeating the king at the time, and he had delivered it all at the site of Sdech Kân's capital. If read as a statement on the present situation, this latter part seemed to contradict the more explicit assertions.

Shortly after the speech, Ranariddh resigned from the presidency of the National Assembly, perhaps giving clues to *his* reading of the above speech and to which performance he attributed 'sincerity'. One month later, Hun Sen delivered another forceful speech reiterating the Sdech Kân story. This time, he drew exact parallels between present and past actors, stating that 'we should not be afraid to get exposed to history as some people should', and this 'we should not be afraid of the *truth*

39 Hun Sen, 'Visit of Samdech Hun Sen and Bun Rany to the former Royal City of Sanlob Prey Nokor in Kompong Cham', *Cambodia New Vision* (*CNV*), 97, 28 Feb. 2006.
40 Ibid. This account of the Sdech Kân story as typically referred to by Hun Sen evidently picks the parts of the legend that serve to deliver his message whilst omitting other parts, such as how Sdech Kân was ultimately killed and replaced by another monarch.
41 Ibid.

recorded by history', as presumably, others should.[42] He noted the historical events as proof that 'all are born equal', and that 'it was not true at all that some people are born to be respected people and some are not', a message not lost on the royal family.[43]

Sdech Kân, the win-win policy and national reconciliation

Hun Sen's reinvention of Sdech Kân transmits a particular idea of national reconciliation in contemporary Cambodia. Hun Sen has stated that he has taken late Lao prime minister Kaysone Phomvihane's way of national reconciliation following the 1975 revolution as a model for the recreation of the Cambodian monarchy, in terms of how Kaysone's new regime dealt with the Lao monarchy that it replaced.[44] This, he has specified, particularly refers to how Kaysone integrated leading royalists such as former prime minister Prince Souvanna Phouma into the new regime.[45] Through these measures, in Laos, royalists came to lend traditional notions of legitimacy to the new regime.[46] In Cambodia, FUNCINPEC has been weakened by a series of coalition governments with the CPP, whilst King-Father Sihanouk sometimes appeared more supportive of Hun Sen than of FUNCINPEC. Paradoxically, Laos's transition from monarchy to a people's republic has provided the model for the reverse transition in Cambodia to a constitutional monarchy from a communist system.[47]

The Sdech Kân narrative supports this agenda, further inserting the fate of the monarchy into a discourse of national reconciliation. In many of Hun Sen's speeches, the reinvention of Sdech Kân has in different ways been integrated into supporting his claims to be the main architect of peacebuilding in post-conflict Cambodia. Royalists and other members of the political opposition generally identify the signing of the Paris Peace Accords (PPA) on 23 October 1991 between the SOC government and the tripartite resistance coalition as the end of the civil war. Crediting Sihanouk with the successful negotiation of the PPA and pointing to how he presided over

42 Hun Sen, 'Inaugurating Buddhist temple in Serei Suosdei Pagoda', *CNV*, 99, 27 Apr. 2006.

43 Author's interviews with senior royal family members suggest that they generally perceive of Hun Sen's references to Sdech Kân as a pledge to take revenge on the monarchy, by means of invoking their wrongdoings against Sdech Kân.

44 Author's interview with Prime Minister Hun Sen, 29 Sept. 2011.

45 With the establishment of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, Souvanna Phouma became 'Counsellor to the Government', King Savang Vatthana abdicated and was appointed 'Counsellor to the President', former Crown Prince Vong Savang was appointed member of the Supreme People's Assembly, and Prince Souphanouvong was made President of the new republic. Martin Stuart Fox, *A history of Laos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 170.

46 In a further parallel to contemporary Cambodia, the use of traditional notions of legitimacy became even more pronounced following the collapse of communist ideology in the late 1980s, when the Lao regime turned to employ a Buddhist discourse centred on righteous kings. Today, historical kings have increasingly been integrated into what Grabowsky and Tappe refer to as an 'official national hero pantheon'. See Grant Evans, *The politics of ritual and remembrance: Lao since 1975* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998), p. 70; Grabowsky and Tappe, 'Important kings of Laos', pp. 1–44; Grant Evans, 'Revolution and royal style: Problems of post-socialist legitimacy in Laos', in *Elite cultures: Anthropological perspectives*, ed. Chris Shore and Stephen Nugent (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 189–206.

47 This is even more paradoxical given that the Laotian transition is believed to have entailed putting the king to death. Ex-king Savang Vatthana, his wife and two sons are believed to have died under arrest in Houaphan. Evans, *The politics of ritual*, pp. 99–100.

the Supreme National Council (SNC), the transitional government during the peace process, the idea of Sihanouk as the father of national reconciliation constitutes a main claim to legitimacy for second kingdom royalists in resonance with the promises of the *Putth Tumneay*. Hun Sen, whilst still regularly referring to Sihanouk as the father of peace and national reconciliation, has increasingly downplayed the importance of the PPA, pointing to how the peace accords were the product of external intervention and to how civil war between the new government and the Khmer Rouge resumed after their conclusion.[48] Instead, Hun Sen credits his win-win policy, whereby defectors from the Khmer Rouge (KR) were offered full integration into Cambodian society, with having achieved national reconciliation with the integration of the last KR forces in 1998.[49] The win-win policy thereby achieves the promises of 7 January 1979, celebrated by the CPP as the 'nation's second birthday', when the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, out of which the PRK government would develop, with Vietnamese backing, overthrew the Khmer Rouge-regime of Democratic Kampuchea.

The reinvention of Sdech Kân advances an idea of the curbing of royal power as integral to national reconciliation and prosperity. Whilst the win-win policy constitutes Hun Sen's final defeat of the Khmer Rouge, the Sdech Kân narrative represents how he has clipped the royalists' wings, leading to their reintegration into national politics under the leadership of the CPP. The reinvention of Sdech Kân also supports the attribution of post-conflict national reconciliation to Hun Sen's win-win policy, outperforming Sihanouk. In a number of speeches, Hun Sen has recalled how the war that broke out during Sdech Kân's reign started a period of civil war lasting over three hundred years, until Hun Sen ended the chaos.[50] Here Sdech Kân and Hun Sen, rather than overlapping, are intrinsically linked as instigator and conciliator respectively of a defining phase of Cambodian history. National reconciliation is typically defined as the 1998 integration of the last Khmer Rouge defectors under the win-win policy. At other times, Hun Sen links the achievement of the win-win policy in 1998 to the July 1997 events.[51] These were justified by Hun Sen as a counter-attack against an alliance between royalists and the Khmer Rouge. The July 1997 events

48 See Hun Sen's speech at the twentieth anniversary of the return of Sihanouk from exile and Sihanouk's ninetieth birthday, *CNV*, 164, 30 Oct. 2011, in which Hun Sen, whilst still referring to Sihanouk as the 'father of peace', stops at emphasising 'the brilliant reflection' of Sihanouk and Monineath in 'the creation of [the] policy of national reconciliation and healing'.

49 See, for example, Hun Sen, 'Speech at Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Jakarta, 16 Mar. 1999', cited in *Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen: Neayok Rothmontrey brosaut chenh pi trokaul kâsekâr* [Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen: Prime minister born in a farmer's family], ed. Chhay Yiheang (Phnom Penh: Ponleu Pech, 2007), p. 79.

50 In yet other speeches, Sdech Kân brings peace in a straightforward parallel to Hun Sen more than three hundred years later. See Hun Sen, 'Inaugurating Buddhist temple in Serei Suosdei Pagoda'.

51 For speeches in which Sdech Kân's killing of Srey Sokonthor Bât is linked to the win-win policy, as the start and end-point of civil war respectively, see, for example, 'Address to the closing session of the national conference: "Peace, national reconciliation and democracy building: Ten years after the Paris Peace Agreement"', *CNV*, 45, 22 Oct. 2001; 'Address on the occasion of the acceptance of the Honorary Doctorate Degree of Political Science from the University of Ramkhamhaeng, Kingdom of Thailand', *CNV*, 46, 15 Nov. 2001; for a speech in which 1998 as the end-point of national division since the time of Sdech Kân is put explicitly in relation to the 1997 events, see 'Inaugurating Bayon TV/Radio broadcast station', *CNV*, 110, 11 Mar. 2007.

are thereby tied up with the win-win policy, and together made to define national reconciliation in the second kingdom.

Establishing origin: Co-creating Hun Sen and Sdech Kân

The reinvention of Sdech Kân built crucially on academic work on the historical Kân by former vice-president of the Royal Academy of Cambodia (RAC), historian Ros Chantraboth. Having spent the previous thirty years in France, Ros was called back to Cambodia in 2000 to help set up the Royal Academy re-established the previous year.[52] He immediately set about the task of identifying the location of Sdech Kân's second capital, recorded by historical sources as Srolop Doun Tipichey Prey Nokor. Ros's research team decided to search for it in Kompong Cham's Tboung Khmom district, following Khmer historical sources.[53] Finding a square brick wall at the nearby site of the pre-Angkorean temples Banteay Prey Nokor, the research team concluded that this matched the description of Sdech Kân's capital in Khmer sources.[54] The development of the area for tourism was commenced at the height of the conflict with Ranariddh in 2006. As part of this, the pagoda known variously as Wat Angkor Knong, Wat Prasat or Wat Khmau, has been renovated. The pagoda consists of a newer *vihear*, raised on the site of an older one; behind it, there are two smaller, pre-Angkorean *prasat*. So far, however, Srolop has yet to become a popular destination for domestic tourists in spite of television broadcasts that advertise the site as a place for leisure and historical discovery.

Locating Srolop in Kompong Cham provided another parallel between the trajectories of Sdech Kân and Hun Sen. Hun Sen was born in Steung Trang district, Kompong Cham in 1952; he claims to have joined the maquis in Kompong Cham's Memot district in 1970, and later married Bun Rany in Tboung Khmom district, Kompong Cham, where they also lost their first son. The narrativisation of Hun Sen's life as a *neak tâsou*, a person who has taken part in armed struggle, prior to assuming national leadership outlines a series of events taking place in Kompong Cham, well engrained in the popular imagination. Hun Sen has explicitly put his personal history of revolutionary struggle in the area in relation to that of Sdech Kân. In his speech delivered at his visit to Srolop Prey Nokor, Hun Sen started out by recalling that not only had several senior CPP leaders lived in the area during the revolution, but also that he and his wife had a memorable history there.[55] He recalled how he and his wife had reunited in the area after two months of separation, citing widely known songs about the fate of a woman separated from her husband, and compared his story to that of Sdech Kân, finding it no less pitiful.[56] This was

52 The RAC, the nation's highest academic body, falls directly under the Office of the Council of Ministers and its Minister DPM Sok An, Hun Sen's close associate. In April 2010, Hun Sen and Sok An were appointed as full members of the RAC, and in April 2011 Hun Sen was appointed its Honorary President.

53 Leclère, *Histoire du Cambodge,* p. 252, situates Srolop at the border of the historical provinces Tboung Khmom and Ba Phnom.

54 Ros Chantraboth, *Preah Sdech Kân* (Phnom Penh: Bânnakear Angkor, 2007), p. 225.

55 Hun Sen, 'Visit of Samdech Hun Sen and Bun Rany to the former Royal City'.

56 These episodes from Hun Sen's and Bun Rany's life during the time of revolutionary struggle have been made famous through songs such as *Tukkh srey bdey proat* (The sorrow of a woman separated from her husband), authored by the PM himself. It is included in *Samdech Hun Sen: Tossanah noyobay*

arguably intended to ensure that the well-known story of Hun Sen's revolutionary activities throughout the 1970s — including his ultimate toppling of the Khmer Rouge-regime — would henceforth invoke the image of Sdech Kân. In a later speech delivered in Memot in 2007, Hun Sen outlined his relation to the area as follows:

> [E]veryone knows that I started my political life in Memot from April 4, 1970 as I decided to join the Maquis in response to the appeal made by Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk … At another juncture, on June 20, 1977, I left the district of Memot to lead the struggle movement for national liberation against Pol Pot's genocidal regime, which later achieved victory on January 7, 1979. However, another event that shocked me the most happened right before this building … My first son died on November 10, 1976. My other son, who is also here today, was born not far from this place. January 5, 2007 is indeed our 31st wedding anniversary. We got married in the commune of Chrab, Tboung Khmom District with twelve other pairs. … My star had been full of dangers, not just simple hardships and comforts ….[57]

In this speech, Hun Sen describes his distress when in 1976 his wife Bun Rany, pregnant, is sent to work at the site of Srolop Prey Nokor. He takes her to nearby Memot to give birth, but during the night she delivers the baby he is away on a mission. Returning the next morning, he finds his first-born dead. Hun Sen asks for a proper burial, but is denied even this. He remarks, 'I was accused of being a traitor for a long time, but I knew that it was not my time yet. I could have taken revenge because I had a pistol with loaded chamber already in hand. I did not do it.' Instead, Hun Sen leaves Memot on 20 June 1977 for Vietnam. From there, Hun Sen builds up his army and power base, culminating in his revenge — the toppling of Democratic Kampuchea on 7 January 1979. In this *neak tâsou* narrative, well-known to the public, Hun Sen's revolutionary activities recall those of Sdech Kân. Like Sdech Kân, when accused of treachery and struck by misfortune, Hun Sen 'kills his anger' and escapes eastwards, to Vietnam, where he builds up an army that eventually returns to topple the regime.[58] The Sdech Kân narrative resonates with the earlier narrativisation surrounding Hun Sen, an association encouraged by the prime minister, and draws strength from this.[59] In turn, this analogy bestows Hun Sen's personal revolutionary history with the range of meanings attached to that of the historical king.

aphirok selobah aphivoddh sangkom neung chomrieng 115 bot [Samdech Hun Sen: Political thought, arts conservation, social development and 115 songs], ed. (Phnom Penh: Im Savoan, 2005).

57 Hun Sen, 'Opening Junior High School Bun Rany — Hun Sen Memot', *CNV*, 108, 5 Jan. 2007.

58 Although Hun Sen now claims to have joined the maquis in 1970 responding to Sihanouk's call to arms, during the PRK, he claimed to have joined the resistance in 1967, long before the anti-Sihanouk coup of 1970. For the former, see, for example, Chhay, *Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen*, p. 32. On his claims during the PRK, see Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot came to power: A history of communism in Kampuchea, 1930–1975* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 254.

59 The consequence of aligning the *neak tâsou* narrative with that of Sdech Kân, is, evidently, how this shifts the enemy from the monarchy to the Khmer Rouge; and further serves to conceptually link the monarchy to the Khmer Rouge, as suggested above. This could also be read to indict Sihanouk, whose call to arms Hun Sen now claims to have motivated him to join the revolution which would go so frightfully wrong that he had to overturn it; emphasising Sihanouk's alleged complicity in the horrors of Democratic Kampuchea.

Drawing a 'new vision' from the past

Ros was commissioned by the Prime Minister to author a book about the historical king. Published under the name 'Preah Sdech Kân' in October 2006, the book was intended to find a political doctrine and ruling strategy in Khmer history for how to best govern, develop and rebuild the nation.[60] Funded privately by the Prime Minister and first lady Bun Rany, 5,000 copies of the book were distributed to libraries around Cambodia.[61] Ros identified three major political events in Khmer history which had changed the way of governing, when a commoner had dared to stand up to dismantle a royalist regime. These were the rise to power of, in turn, Trâsâk Ph'aem in the thirteenth century, Sdech Kân in the sixteenth century, and lastly Lon Nol, through his 1970 coup which overthrew Sihanouk as head of state.[62] These extraordinary events, Ros stated, begged the question of why so many people had come together to overthrow the king. As a character routinely referred to at times of conflict between a commoner and the king, when the commoner would typically be likened to Sdech Kân as a traitor and usurper, he sought to reexamine Kân.[63] Setting out to contextualise Sdech Kân's rise to power and to scrutinise the ideas and actions of King Srey Sokonthor Bât, Ros's findings thus aspired to offer insights to guide contemporary politics.

In his preface to the book, Hun Sen interpreted its findings as follows:

> Preah Sdech Kân has been continuously written down in Khmer history as a man who betrayed the King, or a usurper … we can note that Preah Sdech Kân was a Khmer, born in the class of temple-servants, that he was not a man who betrayed the King, or a usurper, as is always said.[64]

Hun Sen suggested the following points to be reexamined in order to provide a better understanding of Sdech Kân's actions:

- The manner of doing things and the behaviour of King Srey Sokonthor Bât.
- The popular movements throughout the country which joined Sdech Kân's struggle against the King. The monks and pagodas that had previously received support, benefits and privileges from the King and Royal family turned to support and protect Preah Sdech Kân.
- What was the reason that brought people from all classes to rise up to fight the King?
- What kind of problems did Khmer society have with the tenfold conduct of the King, justice, society, agriculture and economy during the period of King Srey Sokonthor Bât?

60 Ros, *Preah Sdech Kân*, p. 1; all citations from this book are the author's own translations.
61 Leang Delux, 'History: Hun Sen finances a book about Sdach Korn', *Cambodge Soir*, 29 Mar. 2007. A second edition was released in 2007. See Bo Proeuk, 'Hun Sen-sponsored 'Preah Sdach Korn' book needs 2d edition to meet demand', *Reaksmey Kampuchea*, 25 Sep. 2007.
62 Ros, *Preah Sdech Kân*, pp. 3–4.
63 The seriousness with which Hun Sen takes allegations of being a traitor to the nation was highlighted by how he warned critics of the 7 January ceremony that anyone accusing him or senior government officials of being a 'national traitor' would be arrested. See Cheang Sokha and Rebecca Puddy, 'Don't call me a traitor: PM', *Phnom Penh Post*, 10 Jan. 2011.
64 Hun Sen, 'Preface', in Ros, *Preah Sdech Kân*, p. i.

- Can Preah Sdech Kân, who escaped his attempted murder by the King just to survive, be considered to have committed an act of betrayal?[65]

These points can also be read as outlining a 'timeless' scenario centred on the relationship between an unvirtuous king and an emerging *neak mean bon*. Applied to the relationship between the royalist faction and Hun Sen, these suggest that in the period prior to Hun Sen's actions to limit the royalists' power, there was something problematic about the behaviour of the royalist faction, that Hun Sen enjoyed the unanimous support of the people and of the *sangha*, and that their support indicated underlying societal problems stemming from the morally flawed conduct of the royalists. It suggests that Hun Sen was justified in curbing the power of the royalist faction by alluding to the imaginary of the *Preah Bat Thommik*. It is because of the royalists' failure to uphold the 'tenfold virtues of the king' which define the *Preah Bat Thommik* that the people and *sangha* rally to protect the *neak mean bon*.

Reassessing the historical Kân also offered an opportunity for the Prime Minister to reinvent his political identity. Kân provides Hun Sen with a new vision to guide the present era.[66] Kân's political thinking is said to have rested on two conceptual innovations; freedom rights (*setthi seripheap*) and class struggle (*tâsou vannah*). These radical innovations predated the emergence of similar notions in Europe, making Cambodia the birthplace of democratic politics.[67] In Hun Sen's preface, we read:

> Preah Sdech Kân … can be considered as a brilliant hero in the world, who raised the doctrine and vision of freedom rights, and was the first to speak about and practice this, in the sixteenth century. France, famous as the country of human rights, started discussing freedom rights only in the eighteenth century. Something even more special is how Preah Srey Chettha Preah Sdech Kân raised the theory of class struggle to become the base of building Cambodia. Karl Marx, the father of Communism, raised this thought and wrote down the theory of class struggle only at the end of the nineteenth century.[68]

These two conceptual innovations together make up early democratic beliefs, providing a blueprint for contemporary politics:

> Can the political theory of Preah Srey Chettha Preah Sdech Kân that advances freedom rights and class struggle, which became the base in building the nation, the motherland, be considered to be the first step in history towards democratic beliefs? Also, for my own vision, I can note that the doctrine and activity of Preah Srey Chettha Preah Sdech Kân has the characteristics of the first democratic revolution of the people in Cambodian history, thanks to Sdech Kân who liberated them from the class system, letting there be freedom and equality in society ….[69]

The toppling of the unjust monarch results from the belief in freedom rights and class struggle and constitutes a national democratic revolution, which in turn is posited as

65 Ibid, p. ii.
66 Ibid., p. iii.
67 Ros, *Preah Sdech Kân*, p. 271.
68 Hun Sen, 'Preface', pp. ii–iii.
69 Ibid., p. iii.

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an integral part of the very fabric of the nation.[70] This particular nationalist vision turns the trinity of Nation, Religion, and King on its head and not only closely knits together the notion of democracy with opposition to a morally flawed royalist faction, but also situates this within broader ideas of equality and social mobility. The leader who dares to challenge the hereditary leader achieves the democratic revolution and embodies the nation's aspirations.

The conceptualisation of democracy as a fusion of class struggle and freedom rights refashions an earlier discourse which firmly integrated the notion of democracy as part of revolutionary history. Hun Sen invoked both concepts during the PRK, depicting democracy and the securing of freedom rights as the unchanging objective of the Cambodian revolutionary quest pursued through class struggle from the pre-protectorate era onwards.[71] Having cast off his previous socialist identity, the changing revolutionary imaginary provided by Sdech Kân allows Hun Sen to reorient the notion of democracy to respond to the novel threat of the reinstated monarchy.[72]

In this attempt to reconcile the Marxist concept of class struggle with freedom rights, now primarily imagined as part of a liberal tradition, Hun Sen echoes and challenges Sihanouk, whilst inheriting the same paradoxes that Sihanouk once faced. Just like Hun Sen, Sihanouk identified the beginnings of Cambodian socialism in the monarchy — but with Angkorean kings. These were taken to have demonstrated incipient socialism through the traditional pattern of land use whereby the king was the guardian rather than proprietor of the land, making Cambodians 'free men', and through economic and social projects such as irrigation projects and hospitals.[73] The Sdech Kân narrative is a counter-narrative to Sihanouk's, in that it challenges socialism's Angkorean roots by ascribing the beginnings of class struggle to a *neak mean bon*. It offers an alternative, moral, genealogy of just leadership where the emphasis lies on a notion of democracy, which neatly cuts it off from the aristocratic kings who came before and after Sdech Kân.

Statuemania

The intended overlap between Hun Sen and Sdech Kân is perhaps most prominently manifested in the statues of Sdech Kân that have started dotting the Cambodian landscape. The first statue of Kân was made in 2006 by a student at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) in Phnom Penh. An equestrian statue of Sdech Kân was thereafter commissioned for Srolop from a team of sculptors at

70 In some of the PM's speeches, it is the very death of Srey Sokonthor Bât that marks the national democratic revolution. See Hun Sen, 'Educational achievements in Kompong Thom's Santuk District', *CNV*, 121, 11 Feb. 2008.

71 Hun Sen, *13 tosâvot nei domnaoer Kampuchea* [13 decades of Cambodia's evolution] (Phnom Penh: Pracheachon, 1991), pp. 76, 280.

72 Reflecting the transformation of regime identity with the transition to a free market economy, Kân is credited not only with having invented the Marxist term class struggle, but also commemorated for having introduced Cambodia's first monetary unit, the *sleung*. The National Bank of Cambodia has reproduced the *sleung* coin. See National Bank of Cambodia, 'Cambodia ancient naga coin nordic-gold proof-like coin', http://www.nbc.org.kh/english/nbc_gallery/more_info.php?id=4 (last accessed 1 July 2012).

73 Sihanouk stated that 'we must go back to the past to find the veritable origins of a socialism that did not yet have this name. The installers of this socialism were our Kings of Angkor.' Norodom Sihanouk, 'Pour mieux comprendre le Cambodge actuel', p. 18.

RUFA by Oknha Sim Vanna, a native of Kompong Cham involved in the development of Srolop, upon orders from Hun Sen. Subsequently, statues modelled on the one in Srolop have been erected in Preah Vihear and Kep provinces and at the Ministry of Commerce in Phnom Penh; a further one is to be erected in Banteay Meanchey province. At least two different sculptors have been commissioned to make these. There are two main variations to the statue; an equestrian and a standing pose. The faces on these statues clearly resemble Hun Sen's. Indeed the sculptors for the Srolop statue, which subsequent statues have generally been modelled on, were instructed to make the face similar to the Prime Minister's.[74] Sculptors from the same team also made one of two statues of general Ta Di, erected near Preah Vihear temple, commissioned to resemble Hing Bun Heang, chief of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit.[75] All of these statues have been commissioned by members of the political elite as a means of showing their loyalty to the Prime Minister.[76] One sponsor of a Sdech Kân statue explained that he had the statue erected in recognition of how the Prime Minister feels that he shares the same fate as Sdech Kân.[77]

Some time after these sculptures of historical figures made in the likeness of present-day political leaders started emerging, the Prime Minister declared that sculptures of contemporary leaders were forbidden. In June 2010, Om Yentieng, personal adviser to the Prime Minister and head of the Anti-Corruption Unit, was chastised in public by Hun Sen for ordering a 3-metre-high statue of the Prime Minister to be put in front of the Anti-Corruption Unit. The statue was removed, and Om Yentieng had to offer a public apology. The reason given for the removal by Hun Sen's cabinet chief, Ho Sithy, was that making statues of living people ran counter to Cambodian culture, according to which statuary was said to be associated with honouring the dead.[78] Following this incident, all display or sale of statues of top leaders was ordered to be stopped.

How can we account for the seeming paradox that the making of portrait-statues of historical figures in the likeness of the political leadership is encouraged, whilst portrait-statues overtly depicting political leaders have been forbidden outright? A statue of the historical Sdech Kân, with what seems to be the Prime Minister's face, makes particular claims which go beyond those of a statue plainly representing the PM. Portrait-statuary as a genre in Khmer art was since Angkorean times bound up with worshipping the merit of the king as the statue was seen to represent the

74 Statues of Sdech Kân's four closest aides, namely *Oknha*s Vieng, Veang, Lompeang and Sral (see Eng, *Aekâsar Mohaboros Khmer*, pp. 242–3), are being crafted at the time of writing, to accompany the statue in Srolop. Whilst it is unclear whether these are being made in the likeness of particular individuals, this possibility cannot be excluded.

75 One is equestrian and the other standing; one of these was commissioned by Hing Bun Heang, and the other by Bayon TV, owned by Hun Sen's daughter Hun Mana. A section of the Prime Minister's Bodyguard Unit is stationed at Preah Vihear.

76 The statues in Kep and at the Ministry of Commerce, both erected in 2010, were commissioned by Minister of Commerce Cham Prasidh; the statue in Preah Vihear, erected in 2011, was reportedly commissioned by the son of four-star general Kun Kim, Deputy-Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and chairman of Hun Sen's advisers; and the statue in Banteay Meanchey, yet to be erected, reportedly by governor of Banteay Meanchey province Ung Oeun and DPM Yim Chhay Ly.

77 Author's interview, Aug. 2011.

78 Chun Sakada, 'Hun Sen statue removed after dust-up', *Voice of America (Khmer)*, 18 Jun. 2010.

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king as dharma, embodying moral order.[79] The statue served as a bridge between future and past, in that the future kings' dharma in turn was embodied by the maintenance of the statuary and thereby the moral order.[80] In modern times, many of these ancient statues continue to be venerated by royal family members and ordinary Cambodians alike, maintaining their association with Khmer royalty and with national political integrity which follows from their 'cosmic ordering role'.[81] Contemporary worship of statuary, in different ways associated with today's king, is both of the statuary as representations of ancient kings and of the statuary as incarnations.[82] The political embeddedness of this worship is well-documented, such as in the case of the statuary of Stec Gaṃlaṅ', also known as the Leper King, and Yāy Deb, sponsored primarily by royal family members.[83]

The recent statuary of Sdech Kân competes with ancient royal statuary as embodied memories of the royal past, offering newly manufactured memories belonging to a different imagined lineage — one which uproots the very idea of genealogy. By tapping into this series of connotations, Hun Sen claims the moral ancestry of a rival imagined community, joined with Sdech Kân through the statue to embody national leadership.[84] Just as today's royalty through the intermediary of the statues is 'endowed with divine stature', the Sdech Kân statues in some sense confer an association with the immortal and divine.[85] Conversely, and more sinisterly, a direct depiction of present leaders could suggest, if not their death (as suggested by the Prime Minister's cabinet), then at least their mortality.[86] It is perhaps no coincidence that the other person represented

79 Ashley Thompson, 'Angkor revisited: The state of statuary', in *What's the use of art: Asian visual and material culture in context*, ed. Jan Mrázek and Morgan Pitelka (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), p. 187.
80 Ibid., pp. 186–7.
81 Hang Chan Sophea, 'Stec Gaṃlaṅ' and Yāy Deb: Worshipping kings and queens in Cambodia today', in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, pp. 113, 125.
82 Hang, 'Stec Gaṃlaṅ' and Yāy Deb', p. 113.
83 A cement replica of Stec Gaṃlaṅ' was erected at Wat Unnalom in Phnom Penh by CPP officials ahead of the 1993 national elections, seemingly to compete with the royal cult — yet its cult turned out to be, in the words of Hang, a 'discreet' one. Ibid., pp. 122–3.
84 That association with royal statuary is an association primarily with national leadership rather than with kingship as such is clearly evidenced by an incident during the Khmer Republic, when the statue of Braḥ Aṅg Saṅkh Cakr, the Leper King, at the Phnom Penh riverfront was beheaded in an attack on Lon Nol, who as the national, Republican, leader at the time the statue was imagined to substitute for. See John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie, 'The icon of the Leper King', in *History, Buddhism, and new religious movements in Cambodia*, pp. 87–8.
85 Hang, 'Stec Gaṃlaṅ' and Yāy Deb', pp. 113–14. Classical Cambodian portrait-statues typically represented kings, princes or high dignitaries after their death in their divine aspect. See George Coedès, 'Le portrait dans l'art khmer', *Arts Asiatiques*, 7 (1960): 179–98; Saveros Pou, 'Dieux et rois dans la pensée khmère ancienne': 653–69; Thompson, 'Angkor revisited', explores the conceptual complexities of the portrait-statue in terms of the relationship between king and the god it represented, suggesting that the old Khmer portrait-statue 'was and is conceived as the posthumous abode of the person/god embodied within, and as an embodiment of the reign of successive kings' (p. 203).
86 The notion of invulnerability is well documented as central to social and political imaginations across Southeast Asia as a core of imaginings of the foundation of political power. See, for example, Andrew Turton, 'Invulnerability and local knowledge', in *Thai constructions of knowledge,* ed. Chitakasem Manas and Andrew Turton (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991), pp. 155–82; and Tony Day, *Fluid iron: State formation in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002). Invulnerability is an important characteristic of both the *neak mean bon* and the

in this iconographic form, through the statues of Ta Di at Preah Vihear, is the person with the utmost responsibility to protect Hun Sen's personal safety.

The statuary also plays a decisive role in spatially defining the nation. Perhaps in line with lingering *mandala* conceptualisations of space, the contest for central authority in the capital is privileged, as it defines the contest to represent the nation and define its borders. Contemporary worship of royal statuary acts to maintain the substitution between ancient and modern capitals.[87] The erection of a Sdech Kân statue at what has been identified as the ancient capital of Srolop symbolically shifts the nation's substitute centre to Hun Sen's home province. Imagined in the context of the new–old struggle with royals, the statue particularly provides a counterpoint to the worship of royal statuary in a mirror fashion linked with national reconciliation after the 1997 events.[88] The role of the recent statuary in claiming the right to define the nation's boundaries is perhaps most obvious in the placement of the statues of Ta Di at Preah Vihear temple, the centre of a border conflict with Thailand. By establishing an identification between the ancient monument and Hun Sen's network, these create a link between the newer statuary and a royal site which is the focus of much contemporary nationalist sentiment.[89]

Conclusion

Though he publicly claims to be the monarchy's defender, Hun Sen makes use of his implied reincarnation as Sdech Kân to remodel the relationship between the nation, Buddhism and kingship to weaken the national leadership role of the monarchy and the royalist faction in Cambodia's second kingdom. By drawing on the historical ambiguity between inherited and non-inherited leadership that the historical Cambodian monarchy entails, kingship is challenged from within its very discourse, and genealogy is uprooted. The reinvention of Sdech Kân exalts non-hereditary leadership, which is inserted into a modern discourse of democracy, equality and even social mobility. Hun Sen's reincarnation of Sdech Kân can be understood as fundamentally a bid to embody national leadership, rather than to incarnate kingship as such. As the man of prowess at the centre of the polity, Hun Sen personally represents the nation. Defining Hun Sen as a man possessing merit, the narrative testifies to the importance of moral claims in contemporary Cambodian politics. In its different forms of expression, his reincarnation as Sdech Kân powerfully delivers the message that Prime Minister Hun Sen is personally the architect of post-conflict national reconciliation, peacebuilding, and democracy in Cambodia, and that these achievements are founded, in turn, on his curbing of royal power.

Preah Bat Thommik. Turton, 'Invulnerability', p. 171; Khing, 'Neak mean boun', p. 10; Heng, 'In search of', p. 313.

87 Hang, 'Stec Gaṃlaṅ' and Yāy Deb', pp. 124–5.

88 Sihanouk phrased his return to Angkor after the 1997 events to 'pay his respects to the statues' as a metaphor for reestablishing peace and reconciliation in their wake. Thompson, 'Angkor revisited', p. 181. In 1998, Sihanouk and Queen Monineath sponsored a pavilion for Yāy Deb shortly before a summit to resolve conflict in the wake of the first national elections after the 1997 events. Hang, 'Stec Gaṃlaṅ' and Yāy Deb', p. 116.

89 See further Ashley Thompson ('Angkor revisited', pp. 203–6), who traces how the struggle for central authority through identification with monuments was bound up with the representation of the nation and borders at the time of the 2003 anti-Thai riots.