

E ditorial

by Dr. Michel Rethy Antelme

It is with great pleasure that I take up again my pen for the editorial after having been away from the Center for Khmer Studies to complete my Ph.D. thesis in London, and also because I started to teach Khmer at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) in Paris.

The year's big event for our Center was the workshop held in Siem Reap from January 14 to 17, entitled "The State, Practice and Future of Khmer Studies." I shall not elaborate on this subject and I invite our readers to read the report that CKS is publishing concurrently with *Siksâcâkr*.

The CKS library located in the premises of Wat Damnak is now functioning. Thanks to purchases and generous donations, books are at the disposal of scholars and general readers. The CKS has excellent relationships with the monastery, and we are very glad to see that its monks come and read in our library on a regular basis, as we also have works on Buddhism, Pâli and Sanskrit languages as well as practically the whole set of *Kambujasuriyâ* journal.

I am also glad that proposals of articles arrive in numbers demonstrating the interest of Khmer studies scholars in our Center. I would like to take advantage of the opportunity to remind all that *Siksâcâkr* is trilingual. Unfortunately we cannot systematically translate every text in three languages and the reader has no choice but to be competent – at least in reading – in Khmer, French and English. Articles on Khmer studies do exist in other languages such as Russian, German, Japanese, Vietnamese or Siamese, but due to technical and practical reasons, the choice will be limited to the first three languages. It seems vital that any scholar in the field of Khmer studies can access these three languages, and be able to go beyond political and /or nationalist splits.

I should start with English which has a tremendous impact on Cambodia nowadays. Recent decades have seen numerous publications in sociology, history, on the Khmer Rouge, and other fields in English. The knowledge of English to access this constantly increasing corpus proves to be a necessity.

To turn to French which has been losing ground in Cambodia for a few decades, it would be very unfortunate if non French-speaking scholars who devote themselves to the study of Cambodia's history, anthropology, etc., cannot access sources in French, which represent a rather considerable amount because of historical links between France and Cambodia for over a hundred years. Names such as Étienne Aymonier, Louis Finot, George Coëdès, etc., do not need to be introduced to scholars in Khmer studies. Publishing of works written in French, such as Dr. Saveros Pou's who dedicates her time on the study of Old Khmer and Middle Khmer, remains important. Dr. Ashley Thompson, an American who has a perfect command of Khmer as well as French, has completed her doctoral thesis in French. In some cases, translation from French into English can be better than nothing (but to translate such works

in Khmer is a bet to take up), and a whole body of documentation is to be found in France and in Cambodia that cannot be exploited unless one knows French. Perhaps this could avoid the conduct of research on topics already covered, or to build on prior work found in French institutional archives.

I should finish at greater length with Khmer. To use the services of an interpreter is better than nothing in the case of sporadic researches, but reading and speaking skills in Khmer are a necessity for those working exclusively on Cambodia. Let us remember the existence of a whole written documentation in Khmer: palm-leaf manuscripts, scrolls, "European" notebooks, compilations and research by Phnom Penh's Buddhist Institute on Khmer traditions, and so on. Moreover, for several years, Cambodian students have produced M.A. dissertations in Khmer, many of which are of considerable scholarly interest.

Thus, it is important to try and find a balance between these three languages in our newsletter.

I would like to close this editorial by encouraging young Cambodian researchers to write also directly in their mother tongue as did Ms. Cheam Phally (in *Siksâcâkr's* first issue), Mr. Chhim Phet (in *Siksâcâkr's* second issue) and Ms. Uch Kerya Pechdey (in this issue). Works from the new generation of Cambodian researchers must not be intended for the international community of scholars only but also to their compatriots. In some modern technical fields, Khmer vocabulary – let us not forget that this language has a written tradition since at least the sixth century A.D. – needs to be enriched, but so is the case of any other language. Moreover, for a Khmer to write in his mother tongue means to pass on his knowledge through a language shared by his compatriots and which, by its syntax and vocabulary, gives structure – differently from other languages – to the world perception of its native speakers.

Let us also remember that in Cambodia, in some academic fields for instance, knowledge that is passed on stems from Western research and published works. In the case of Khmer studies, this may be to the detriment of traditional knowledge. The current generation of Cambodian researchers and students, as well as the next one, should benefit from the crossfire between modern international knowledge and the traditional Khmer one. The latter can be acquired through the reading of sources in Khmer (manuscripts, etc.) and by listening to traditional knowledge holders.

We should not forget that country folk master a vocabulary adapted to their environment much better than some of the urban dwellers who are trained in a foreign language or in a Khmer language which is literally translated from some Western languages.

Perhaps it is time to reacquire these specialized lexicons on astronomy, architecture, medicine, etc., that might be dying out which leads some people, foreigners and Cambodians alike, to hastily criticize Khmer language as being poor and unfit at expressing concepts, even though this viewpoint can be contradicted and at the same time going on with the enrichment of the language through a delicate balance between foreign borrowings and lexical coinage. This is an exciting as well as enriching task for Cambodian students.