

## Suzanne Karpelès and the Buddhist Institute

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### *Biography (b. Paris 1890 - d. Pondichery 1968)*<sup>1</sup>

SUZANNE KARPELÈS WAS BORN IN FRANCE IN 1890. Upon graduation from secondary school, she continued her studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, where she took courses on India with Professor Sylvain Lévi, Alfred Foucher and Louis Finot during the First World War (1914-1918) and graduated in 1919.<sup>2</sup> She published a research article, “*Lokeçvaraçataka ou cent strophes en l’honneur du Seigneur du Monde par Vajradatta*” in the *Journal Asiatique*.<sup>3</sup> In 1921, she received her diploma in Siamese (Thai) language.<sup>4</sup>

On 1 January 1922, Karpelès journeyed to Hanoi as an employee of the EFEO. She began studying Pali texts published in Sri Lanka, and compared them with other texts from Cambodia. From May 1923, she completed an assignment in Bangkok to research similar texts, and also worked on improving her proficiency in Thai.<sup>5</sup> After returning from Siam in the same year, she visited Angkor. In 1924, the prominent archaeologist Henri Marchal invited her to visit the temples, and she returned to Angkor. At around this time, she translated *Six Pāli Stories from the Dhammapada Commentary* into French for publication in the *Revue Indochinoise*.<sup>6</sup>

In December 1936, Karpelès held two positions: she became a permanent member of the EFEO again, and she was appointed Secretary of the Cambodian Buddhist Institute.<sup>7</sup> In 1941, during the Second World War, the French authorities of the Vichy regime suspended her from her duties because she was Jewish,<sup>8</sup> and also because through her work at the Buddhist Institute — a centre for resistance to French colonization — she worked more for Khmer benefits than for the French government. The French administration appointed Pierre Dupont to take her place.<sup>9</sup> However, Karpelès returned to work at the end of World War II.

Karpelès made a strong impact on Ven. Chuon Nath<sup>10</sup> and on Ven. Huot Tath,<sup>11</sup> particularly in the general knowledge of Buddhist education and Dharma. These two monks consecutively held the office of the “*Samdech Preah Sanghareac Kana Mahānikāy*” (Supreme Patriarch, or the chief representative of the Mahānikāy Sect), from 1950 to 1975.<sup>12</sup> Upon retirement, Karpelès moved to Pondichery to pursue her Dhamma studies in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where she lived until her death in 1968.

### **Karpelès and the Buddhist Institute**

On August 13, 1925, King Sisowath of Cambodia inaugurated the Royal Library of Phnom Penh, with Mlle. Karpelès, its founder, as first curator.<sup>13</sup> The royal library conserved Buddhist literature in Pāli and Khmer, including commentaries, subcommentaries, *Yojana*, *Gandhī*, and so forth. Her appointment was by a Royal Edict of 1 February 1926, which placed Karpelès under the Presidency of the Samdech Chaufea Veang (Palace Minister) of Cambodia.<sup>14</sup> From that time on, she was no longer a direct employee of the EFEO, but was a correspondent member.<sup>15</sup> She began publishing and disseminating articles on Buddhism and on works of general literature at the Royal Library, and in 1926 established the Khmer journal *Kambujasuriyā* which came under her supervision as chief curator of the Royal Library.<sup>16</sup> In 1929, Karpelès travelled on mission to Cochinchina, where she visited a number of Khmer communities and temples. After making additional visits to temples and Buddhist monks and laity in Laos, she proposed that the authorities establish a Buddhist Institute. On the 25 January 1930, the Buddhist Institute was created in Cambodia and Laos, with Mlle. Suzanne Karpelès as secretary general of both institutions.<sup>17</sup> The

main role of the Buddhist Institute was to conduct research on Buddhism, and in particular, various texts related to Buddhism and to this end, the institution published various articles related to Buddhism. The institute would also conserve manuscripts and Buddhist scriptures and commentaries and preserve them as the cultural heritage of Cambodia.<sup>18</sup> The Tripiṭaka Commission was created in 1929, and the first volume of the *Tripiṭaka* was published by the Buddhist Institute under the direction of Mlle. Karpelès in 1931.<sup>19</sup> In 1934, the Mores and Customs Commission of Cambodia was established. Its most important publications were its three volume work “*Preah reach Pithi Tveatasameas*” (*Brah̄ Rājavidhī Dvādasamās* – Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months),<sup>20</sup> its nine volume “*Collected Khmer Folktales*” (*Prajuṇ Rīeñ Breñ Khmaer*), and the following titles: “*Folk dance*” (*Rapāṇ Prājāpriy*), “*Folk pastimes*” (*Lpaen Prājāpriy*), and “*A Concise Introduction to Khmer music*” (*Laṇṇāṇ Sañkhep nai Bhleñ Khmaer*).<sup>21</sup> Under the Presidency of Mlle. Karpelès, the Buddhist Institute also published the first ever edition of the “*Cambodian Dictionary*” (*Vacanānukram Khmaer*) with volume one appearing in 1938, and volume two in 1943.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to Buddhist works, the Buddhist Institute also published a number of Khmer literary texts including such famous stories as “*The Story of Maraṇamātā*” (*Rīeñ Maraṇamātā*), “*The Story of Kāki*” (*Rīeñ Kāki*), “*The Story of Dibvasaṅvāra*” (*Rīeñ Dibvasaṅvar*), “*The Story of Sabvasiddhi*” (*Rīeñ Sabvasiddhi*), “*The Story of Brah̄ Jinavaṅs*” (*Rīeñ Brah̄ Jinavaṅs*), “*The Story of Brah̄ Sudhana*”, “*The Story of Haṅs yant*” (*Rīeñ Brah̄ Haṅs Yant*), “*The Story of Buddhisaen*” (*Rīeñ Buddhisaen*), “*The Story of Sāñkhasilpajāy*” (*Rīeñ Sāñkhasilpajāy*), “*The Story of Khyañ Sāñkh*” (*Rīeñ Khyañ Sāñkh*), “*The Story of Supinakumāra*” (*Rīeñ Supinakumāra*), “*The Story of Sradap Cek*” (*Rīeñ Sradap Cek*), and so forth. Most importantly, as a result of her own research efforts, Karpelès organized the publication of the *Reamker* (*Rāmakerti*) by the Buddhist Institute in an edition appearing in 1937 that featured the first to tenth episodes, and the seventy-fifth to the eightieth episodes. Karpelès wrote an introduction to each episode and a summary in French.<sup>23</sup> Her interests, however, were not restricted to Buddhist scriptures and traditional literature: it was due to Karpelès’ interest in modern literature, that *Kambujasuriyā* began publishing contemporary works, a trend begun with Kim Hak’s novel *Dīk Danle Sāp* (Waters of the Tonle Sap) in 1939.<sup>24</sup> Modern works published after her departure from the Buddhist Institute included *Pisāc Snaehā* (Love Demon) by Nhok Thaem in 1942,<sup>25</sup> *Kaṅbūl Kaṅsat*’ (Very Poor) by Han Yeng in 1944,<sup>26</sup> and *Kaṅbūl Snaehā* (Great Love) by Heng Yan in 1946.<sup>27</sup> She researched oral literature as well as written literature. Having heard of the reputation of the folk singer Grandfather Phirum Ngoy,<sup>28</sup> Mlle. Karpelès invited the famed bard to perform and play the *sadeav* (a Cambodian string instrument) at the Buddhist institute, and in the 1930s asked her colleagues Mr. Chap Pin, Bou Po, and Chea You to write down all his songs for publication in small books so as to conserve his works for future generations. She gave Grandfather Phirum Ngoy a donation of one piastre as a gift.<sup>29</sup> Her story shows that not all French people were colonizers, but that some loved Khmer culture and civilization and wanted to preserve it as the heritage of humankind for as long as possible.<sup>30</sup>

Because George Cœdès, the director of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient, researched Cambodian inscriptions, Karpelès asked the Buddhist Institute to publish the *Nagaravatta Inscriptions* in 1941.<sup>31</sup>

The Buddhist Institute published 281 titles in Pāli, Khmer and French, including the 110 volumes of the Tripiṭaka.<sup>32</sup>

NOTES

1. CHERCHEURS D'ASIE, *Répertoire bibliographique des membres scientifiques de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient 1898-2002*, Paris, EFEO, 2002, p. 128-129. Cf. <http://www.efeo.fr>.
2. S. KARPELÈS, "Lokeçvaraçataka ou Cent strophes en l'honneur du Seigneur du Monde par Vajradatta," *Journal Asiatique*, 14, p. 357-465.
3. Jean FILLIOZAT, "Suzanne Karpelès," *BEFEO* 1969 (56): 1-3.
4. LANGUES'O (1795-1995), *Deux siècles d'histoire de l'École des langues orientales*, Paris, Éditions Hervas, 1995, p. 455.
5. S. KARPELÈS, "Un épisode du Rāmāyaṇa siamois," *Études Asiatiques*, II, 1925, p. 315-342.
6. S. KARPELÈS, "Six contes pālis tirés de la *Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*," *Revue Indochinoise*, 1924, 1-2, p. 1-30; 3-4, p. 205-234; 5-6, p. 323-350; 7-8, p. 11-44.
7. J. FILLIOZAT, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
8. A victim of anti-semitic laws, Suzanne Karpelès was retired from her post in 1941. This measure was annulled on France's Liberation from the Vichy regime in 1945. *CHERCHEURS D'ASIE, op. cit.*, p. 129.
9. From August 1941, Pierre Dupont moved to Phnom Penh where he had just been appointed to the vacant post of Secretary General of the Buddhist Institute. Two years later, he also became the curator of monuments in Cambodia (except for the monuments of Angkor) and from February 1944, he became curator of the Musée Albert Sarraut. George CEDÈS, "Nécrologie : Pierre Dupont (1908-1955)," *BEFEO*, XLIX, Vol. 2, 1959, p. 639.
10. *Brah̄ Buddhaghosācārya* Chuon Nath was a respondent member of the EFEO in 1943 and an honorary member of the EFEO in 1948. See *CHERCHEURS D'ASIE, op. cit.*, p. 306.
11. *Brah̄ Sakyavaṇs* Huot Tath was a respondent member of the EFEO in 1943, 1948, 1951, 1954. *Ibid.*, p. 308.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
13. J. FILLIOZAT, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

14. Royaume du Cambodge, Ordonnance Royale

Nous

Préa bat Samdach Préa SISOWATH Chamchakrapong Hariréach Barminthor Pouvanay Kraykéofa Soulalay Préa Chau Crung Campuchéa Thippedey

ROI DU CAMBODGE

- Vu l'Ordonnance royale du 11 juillet 1897, sur l'Administration Générale du Royaume ;
  - Vu l'Ordonnance royale du 3 juillet 1905, fixant les attributions du Conseil des Ministres ;
  - Vu l'Ordonnance royale du 15 juillet 1921, portant fondation d'une Bibliothèque Nationale à Phnom Penh ;
  - Vu l'Ordonnance royale No. 23 du 18 mars 1926, portant réorganisation de la Bibliothèque royale notamment en son article 4 ;
  - Vu le contrat d'engagement de Mademoiselle KARPELÈS en date du 1er février 1926 ;
  - Vu l'entente intervenue entre Monsieur le Résident Supérieur et Nous ;
- Sur la proposition de Monsieur le Résident Supérieur de la République Française au Cambodge ;

ORDONNONS :

Article premier – Mademoiselle Suzanne KARPELÈS Membre temporaire de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient pendant les années 1923 et 1924 diplômée de l'École des Hautes Etudes Pratiques (Sorbonne) et diplômée de l'École des Langues Orientales vivantes, est nommée Conservateur de la Bibliothèque Royale.

Article 2 – Nous autorisons Notre Ministre du Palais a passer en Notre nom, un contrat fixant les conditions d'engagement de Mademoiselle Suzanne Karpelès.  
Fait en notre palais royal à Phnom-penh, le 18 mars 1926.

SISOWATH

Vu et rendu exécutoire  
Par l'arrêté No. 936 du 20 avril 1926  
Le Résident supérieur  
BAUDOUIN.

15. See Document No. 421, Karpelès to the Head of the EFEO, 12 August 1927:

“Le Conservateur de la Bibliothèque royale à Monsieur le Directeur de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient, Hanoi.

“Monsieur,

“Je viens de recevoir votre note du 6 août 1927 m’apprenant que j’étais membre correspondant de votre Institution depuis près d’un an, ce que j’ignorais totalement.

“Je vous serais donc reconnaissante de me faire savoir ce que l’École réclame de ses membres correspondants.

“En qualité d’ancien membre de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient et de correspondant, est-il besoin de vous assurer que vous pourrez toujours compter sur mon entière collaboration.

“Trouvez ici, Monsieur, l’expression de mes sentiments les meilleurs.”

Signé : Suzanne Karpelès.

16. See J. Népote “Introduction à une histoire de la presse au Cambodge,” *Présence indochinoise*, N° 2, Paris, août 1979, pp. 96-129.

17. See 2 sub-decrees signed by GGI Pierre Pasquier:

1. “Le Gouverneur Général de l’Indochine  
Grand Officier de la Légion d’Honneur

“Vu les décrets du 20 octobre 1911, portant fixation des pouvoirs du Gouverneur Général et organisation financière et administrative de l’Indochine,

“Vu l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930 créant un Institut indigène d’étude du bouddhisme du Petit Véhicule à Phnom Penh,

“Vu l’arrêté du 12 mai 1930 portant nomination de M<sup>lle</sup> KARPELÈS aux fonctions de Secrétaire de l’Institut indigène d’études du bouddhisme du Petit Véhicule,

“Vu l’arrêté du 13 mai 1933 modifiant l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930,

ARRÊTE :

Article 1<sup>er</sup> : L’Article premier de l’arrêté du 13 mai 1930 survisé est modifié ainsi qu’il suit :

Article 1<sup>er</sup> : M<sup>lle</sup> KARPELÈS, Conservateur de la Bibliothèque Royale du Cambodge, est appelée à remplir les fonctions de Secrétaire Général de l’Institut indigène d’études du bouddhisme du Petit Véhicule.

Article 2. - Le Secrétaire Général du Gouvernement Général de l’Indochine et le Résident Supérieur au Cambodge, sont chargés, chacun en ce qui le concerne, de l’exécution du présent arrêté.

Hanoi, le 6 octobre 1933.

Signé : P. PASQUIER.

2. “Le Gouverneur Général de l’Indochine  
Grand Officier de la Légion d’Honneur

Vu les décrets du 20 octobre 1911, portant fixation des pouvoirs du Gouverneur Général et organisation financière et administrative de l’Indochine,

Vu l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930 créant un Institut indigène d’études du Bouddhisme du Petit Véhicule,

“Vu l’arrêté du 13 mai 1933 modifiant l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930,

ARRÊTE :

“Article 1<sup>er</sup>. – M. Silvestre, Résident Supérieur au Cambodge est nommé Président d’honneur de l’Institut Indigène d’Études Bouddhiques.

“Article 2. – S.A.R. le Prince Sotharoth et S.E. Tiao Phetsarath sont désignés pour assurer les Présidences des sections de Phnom Penh et de Vientiane de l’Institut Indigène d’Études Bouddhiques.

Saigon, le 31 juillet 1933.

Signé : P. PASQUIER.

18. The Buddhist Institute conserved *sātrā* (traditional manuscripts, usually on palm leaf) and *gambīr* (Buddhist scriptures) until 1972, according to the BI catalogue at the time, from numbers 1 to 1647, including 13,471 *gambīr*.

19. The Tripiṭaka Commission commenced their translation from the Pāli text into Khmer from 1929, and finished the translation in 1968, totalling 39 years work. The Buddhist Institute published 110 volumes altogether, and the 110<sup>th</sup> volume appeared in 1968. Each volume comprised on average 500 to 600 pages of bilingual text, with Pāli on one side and Khmer on the other.

20. In this period, the Mores and Customs Commission included: Mr. Jean Cambefort, Pierre Dupont, Nhok

Thaem, Yoeun Cheum and also: Prince Varacakr Ranaridh Sutharot, Princess Malika, *Samtec Isibhaddādhīpatī* Maing, chief of the Bakous (Brahmins of the Royal Palace), *Brah Brahmajāy* Keo Māk, chief of the guards in charge of the sacred sword in Srok Baray, Kompong Thom province, *Uk Nā Camṇaṇi' Bhaktī* Hem, chief of royal pages, *Uk Nā Rājavārānukūl* Yin, deputy in charge of relationships with the royal elephant brigade, *Ghun Akkharā Biṅ Bādy* Sou In of the royal musician team, under the supervision of the editorial committee comprising: *Uk Nā Deb Bidūr* Krasem, 1<sup>st</sup> pundit at the Buddhist Institute in charge of the writing of books, Mme. E. Porée-Maspero in charge of proofreading, Miss Sim Vansy, librarian of the Buddhist Institute in charge of the translation into French.

21. The Dictionary Commission was established in 1915:

“President and Commission

“Being appointed by Royal Decree No. 17 issued on the 4th September 1915 and in accordance with previous royal decrees to establish a Cambodian Dictionary Commission.” See “The Organization of the Commission” in the *Cambodian Dictionary*, Phnom Penh, Buddhist Institute, 1967, pages xii-xiv (*ta-da*).

22. Please see the *Reamker* published by the Buddhist Institute.

23. Kim Hak's novel, “Dīk Danle Sāp,” was serialized in the following issues of *Kambujasuriyā* in 1939: 11, 1-3: 7-32; 11, 7-9: 17-34; 11, 10-12: 17-42. Mlle. Karpelès approved the full book-length publication of Kim Hak's novel by the “Publications Program of the Royal Library” in 1941.

24. Published in *Kambujasuriyā* 1942, 14, 15-25: 8 - 25; 15, 18-19: 20-41.

25. Published in *Kambujasuriyā* 1944, 1-12.

26. Published in *Kambujasuriyā* 1946, No. 1-11.

27. See LY THEAM TENG, *The Khmer writer Phirum Ngoy (Qnak Nibandh Khmaer, Bhiramy Nūy)*, Phnom Penh, Seng Nguon Huot, 1966. See also San Sarin “Phirum Ngoy, poète khmer d'après Ly Theam Teng” (The Khmer poet Phirum Ngoy according to Ly Theam Teng), *Cambodge nouveau*, 19, 1971: 25-35; KHING HOC DY and Jacqueline KHING, *Les recommandations de Kram Ngoy*, Paris, Cedoreck, 1981 (*Mon-Khmer Studies*, VII (1978): 141-182).

28. See the Normative Poems of Kram Ngoy, *Cpāp' Lpoek Thmī* (New Poems and Codes), *Cpāp' Ker Kāl* (Codes from former times), *Sec Kī Raṃlīk Tās' Tjen* (Pressure to Remember), *Bāky Kāby Praṭau Jan Prus Srī* (Poems to Exhort Men and Women), Phnom Penh, Buddhist Institute, 1973 (Seventh Edition).

29. “All his songs were included in an anthology. They resonated with Mlle. Suzanne Karpelès, then Director of the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. She agreed to have them published and, to reward our poet, gave him a piastre. It was not much, but this gesture was of almost historic significance in demonstrating that the French were not all colonialists, but also included some knowledgeable defenders of the Khmer national culture.” KENG VANNSAK, “Réflexions sur la littérature khmère,” *La revue française présente Le Cambodge*, no. 206, janvier 1968, p. 34.

30. KHING HOC DY and Jacqueline KHING, *Les recommandations de Kram Ngoy*, Paris, Cedoreck, 1981.

31. See the letter written by George Cœdès to Mlle. Suzanne Karpelès on 11 November 1940:

“Dear Friend,

Thank you for the photographs that you sent to me to illustrate your Chronicles.

I am equally grateful for the documents related to the event of 3 November.

I am delighted to learn that my inscriptions from Angkor Vat might see the light of day in 1941.

Here, life goes on. We will resume our lectures next Monday. You might have seen the program in the papers.

Are you planning to visit Hanoi before the year is out?

Most cordially yours,”

Signed: G. Cœdès.

32. See *Liste des ouvrages édités par l'Institut Bouddhique*, Phnom Penh, Buddhist Institute, 1969.