



## Book Review: History of Cambodia 1st Edition. By Adhemard Leclère, 1914. Translated by Tep Meng Khean 2005. 490 pp. Prince: \$ 20 (Paperback)



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### Introduction

Adhémar Leclère's *History of Cambodia* (1914) is a seminal text that chronicles Khmer history from its mythical origins to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century during French colonial rule. Written by a former French resident in Cambodia, the book reflects both Leclère's deep interest in Khmer culture and the colonial perspectives of his time. Divided into two sections, it examines Cambodia's ancient empires, regional relations, and eventual subjugation under French protection. Leclère's created his art in Indochina at the height of French colonialism. This historical background greatly influenced his viewpoint and understanding of Khmer history. The historical significance is that it is a masterpiece of Leclère, who published a comprehensive work on Cambodian history in 1914.

This book is carefully divided into two sections. The first segment consists of 10 chapters, and the second one consists of five. In the first chapter's opening section, Leclère dives into the place of origin background of Cambodia, emphasizing the rich soil delta of the Mekong River and its contribution to the development of early agricultural villages. As we dive deeper into Chapter 2, the focus on acceptance of Indian religious and cultural customs has been studied with particular interest in the spread of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sanskrit. Chapter 3, explains the growth of the Khmer kingdoms is chronicled in this section of the book, emphasizing their strong trading networks and concentration of leadership.

As for Chapter 4, Hinduism's centrality in early Khmer society is described in depth, particularly concerning relation to the building of temples as administrative and religious hubs. Chapter 5 points out the complicated

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partnerships between Cambodia and its surrounding nations, including China and Champa, which are examined in this chapter. The next chapter defines the engravings on the exterior of temples, offering insights into Cambodia's administration, religious customs, and historical landmarks, the development of Khmer script is examined.

Chapter 7 explained how military operations help secure Cambodia's borders and increase its power. Chapter 8, this part explores the Khmer Empire's architectural accomplishments, especially the building of temples such as Angkor Wat which highlights the political and spiritual implications of these buildings. The slow ascent of Buddhism to power is examined in chapter 9, emphasizing its influence on Khmer culture, art, and politics as well as the flexibility of Khmer culture to adapt is demonstrated by the incorporation of Buddhist ideas into pre-existing Hindu frameworks for action. The last chapter of section 1 examines the difficulties and triumphs of the Khmer kings while summarizing Cambodia's rise to prominence in this part of the world by representing the pinnacle of Cambodia's early historical development into a prosperous and significant civilization.

The second section, chapter 1, focuses on a pivotal moment in Cambodian history that is said to have occurred with the French arrival in the 19th century. Chapter 2 covered the conflicts between colonial reforms and traditional systems. Chapter 3, focused on the implementation of infrastructure projects and the exploitation of Cambodia's natural resources, the economic changes brought about by colonial policies. Chapter 4 explores the social and cultural changes provoked by French management, such as the development of new intellectual elites and the implementation of Western-style educational institutions.

Even if "History of Cambodia" is still a helpful resource for learning about Khmer history, it is important to read the book critically, taking into account the historical circumstances and possible biases. The book, being a product of its time, represents the colonial era's Eurocentric outlook. But Leclère's viewpoint is unavoidably centered around Europe given that he was a French colonial administrator. This can occasionally result in a skewed perception of what happened and a disregard for the viewpoints of the native Khmer people. Furthermore, some of the material in the book might be out of date due to later historical research and archeological findings, especially regarding the later eras of Khmer history. On the other hand, according to Professor Michael Vickery (Vickery, 1998), Cambodia was not a single nation in the seventh century but rather, he proposes that the distribution of inscriptions points to the presence of two separate locations. One region dominated the northern lands and prospered

economically through commerce, with its center at Śambhupura (present-day Sambor in Kratie province) (Heng, 2022).

Using seasonal dynamics, the other area was probably located in the floodplains close to Tonle Sap Lake. On page 71 of Chapter 6 of Adhémard Leclère's History of Cambodia, he renames King Jayavarman II as Jayavarman III (802-869), which is an interesting fact (see pg. 71). This seems to be a misunderstanding because Jayavarman III (850-877) (Jayavarman III) was a distinct monarch who succeeded Jayavarman II (Jayavarman II) (Ang Choulean, Eric Prenowitz, Ashley Thompson, 1996). This might result in a skewed perception of what happened, frequently giving French interests priority and downplaying the Khmer people's agency. The book's thorough examination of the Angkorian period, a heyday in Khmer history marked by the building of spectacular temples and the emergence of Khmer civilization, is one of its strongest points. Leclère provides an intriguing look into the magnificence of this ancient civilization by exploring the finer points of Angkorian architecture, art, and religion.

The importance of previous and later eras of Khmer history, however, might occasionally be overshadowed by the book's emphasis on the Angkorian period. However, a well-known Cambodian scholar, Professor Dr. Vong Sotheara, is still having difficulty determining the real origins of the Ta Trasak Paem mythology. Because legends lack accurate dating and reliable documentation, they frequently defy historical verification rather than being factual records. Many are narratives that fill in the blanks in historical chronicles (Rinith, 2023). Adhémard Leclère examines the regional changes between the tenth and fourteenth centuries in his History of Cambodia, namely in Chapters 4, 7, and 10. He looks at the rise of neighboring countries like Malaysia, Burma, and Laos in Chapter 10, emphasizing their past and present relations with Cambodia. Because of his prolonged stay in Cambodia, Leclerc was able to highlight how these areas are interconnected and how their shared history is shaped (Leclère).

Although they are mentioned, the Funan and Chenla periods are often overlooked as the sole precedents of the Angkorian period. In a similar vein, the post-Angkorian era, which was characterized by decline and outside influence, is comparatively short and has little information. The early Khmer eras, such as the Funan and Chenla kingdoms, are covered in detail in this section. It looks at the building of great temples like Angkor Wat, the emergence of the Khmer Empire, and the intricate relationships between the Khmer and nearby civilizations like China, India, and Champa. The Funan and Chenla kingdoms are the main subjects of this chapter's exploration of early Khmer history. It explores how these ancient states came to be, their political and economic systems, and their relations with China and

India in particular. One major issue is the impact of Indian religion and culture, particularly Buddhism and Hinduism, on Khmer society. Adhémard Leclère is one of the writers who explores the mysterious territory of Funan, a maritime nation that thrived between the first and sixth centuries CE. He examines how its advantageous position at the intersection of the Chinese and Indian commerce routes promoted both economic growth and cross-cultural exchange.

The majesty of the Angkorian age was made possible by the unique Khmer art and architecture that emerged during the Chenla period. Regarding Adhémard Leclère's work, the Angkorian period is its high point (Chandler, 2009). He offers a thorough analysis of the Khmer Empire, emphasizing its accomplishments in politics, the economy, and culture. Furthermore, Leclère is very good at gathering and arranging facts, but his analysis is frequently shallow. He frequently presents historical documents without questioning their veracity. This is especially clear in the way he handles controversial topics, and several historical errors, like calling King Jayavarman II Jayavarman III (see. pg. 71-83), undermine the book's legitimacy. Furthermore, as a Cambodian representative, there are holes in the story since Leclère ignores some important people and occasions. One of the main themes is the building of beautiful temples like Bayon and Angkor Wat. The publication explores the finer points of Angkorian art, architecture, and religion, providing insightful information on the magnificence of this ancient society.

Regarding the contemporary era, Adhémard Leclère talks on the elements that led to the Khmer Empire's downfall, including environmental problems, internal strife, and outside influences. The fall of the Khmer Empire and the ensuing era of foreign influence are the main topics of this section. It looks at how the French protectorate over Cambodia was established, as well as the effects of the Siamese and Vietnamese invasions. Analyzed are the effects of the Vietnamese and Siamese invasions on Khmer land and sovereignty.

Adhémard Leclère's colonial viewpoint is frequently reflected in the work, which minimizes the exploitative and oppressive elements of French power while presenting France as a kind guardian. His focus on France's contribution to "reviving" Khmer identity, for example, ignores the misery brought on by colonial practices like high taxes and the brutal suppression of uprisings. Leclère emphasizes France's role in promoting harmony and innovation by presenting French colonial control in Cambodia under King Sisowath as a kind protectorate. Leclerc admits that French control increased Cambodia's area in spite of these objections, highlighting the complicated and conflicting effects of colonialism in the nation.

Lastly, even if "History of Cambodia" is still an informative resource, it is important to reflect on the book critically in light of its historical setting and possible biases. Apart from being a product of its time, it represents the colonial era's Eurocentric outlook. This might result in a skewed perception of what happened, frequently giving French interests priority and downplaying the Khmer people's engagement. Most importantly, the work on "History of Cambodia" by Adhémard Leclère gave the Khmer people a better grasp of their past by revealing long-hidden facets of Khmer history. The publication is noteworthy for its meticulous arrangement of events, which makes study and research easier. It was written during a six-year period (1907-1913) and draws from more than 22 years of materials gathered from Cambodia, China, and Europe.

The cooperation with numerous authors who helped create the work was beneficial. Nevertheless, the book contains significant flaws in spite of its advantages. Adhémard Leclère frequently relied on assembling sources without offering a thorough analysis, which resulted in gaps in his references. Additionally, the book mostly emphasizes France's beneficial contributions to Cambodia while ignoring the pain, disregard, and damage brought about by nearly a century of colonial control, demonstrating his nationalist bias toward France, yet the work's impartiality and thorough depiction of Khmer history are constrained by this partiality.

In summary, these works of literature offer future readers and scholars a good place to embark on learning about the broad order of events of Cambodia's history, but they should be supplemented by more recent works that focus on indigenous sources, colonial frameworks, and a more in-depth examination of Cambodia's internal development independent of outside influences. To recognize the accomplishments and hardships of the Khmer people throughout history, especially during the colonial era, modern historical narratives must aim for a more nuanced and balanced perspective. Furthermore, these volumes can be interpreted as a call to inquiry—a call for scholars and students to inquire further and look for more varied, genuine sources that represent the real voices of Cambodia's past.

Adhémard Leclère's book *History of Cambodia* has historical relevance for Cambodians and researchers since it collects and attempts to synthesize many key documents from that period, particularly those from the post-Angkor period. However, this book contains significant flaws, particularly in the first section, with the majority of the errors being confusion over the years and names of the Khmer rulers of the Angkor period. On the other hand, if I were the author of this book, I would arrange the Khmer kings' reigns and names in chronological sequence of their authority over the land.

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## Author's Biography

In 2015, Mr. HEM Thel graduated from Phnom Penh International University with a bachelor's in hotel and tourism management. He received his master's degree in Khmer history from the Royal University of Phnom Penh in 2023. In addition, he finished numerous tourism-related training programs in Thailand, Japan, the Philippines,

and China. Following graduation, Mr. Hem Thel spent roughly three years working as a history-focused tour guide in the tourism industry. He has been employed with YMCA Cambodia since 2018 as the Global Alternative Tourism Program Manager and the Cambodia YMCA's acting general secretary. As a project manager, he plans, organizes, and oversees the project in addition to choosing all participants. He mostly investigates and chooses locations for tourism activities and homestays. Above all, he oversees the training of members in both national and international tournaments. Mr. Thel produced numerous publications, policy briefs, and historical and tourism-related perspectives in the field of research.

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