

The relational archive of the Khmer Republic (1970–1975): re-visiting the ‘coup’ and the ‘civil war’ in Cambodia through written sources

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ABSTRACT

If there is a period in Cambodia’s history that has been overlooked and disparaged, it is certainly the republican one (1970–1975). The Khmer Republic is often viewed as a corrupt, incompetent regime – an interregnum doomed to failure. This article revisits this narrative through currently available written sources. It argues that a cultural approach to the existing records helps us understand how such a negative view, still prevailing today, was discursively constructed. The analysis of the interpretations of a range of protagonists, observers and academics contributes to a critical historiography that might challenge assumptions and clichés about the Republic. This implies a re-working of the ‘republican archive’, a multiform and scattered body that presents a structural imbalance due to the discrepancy between the limited sources coming from the Republic itself and the significant amount of US records. The article reassembles these archival materials. It proposes a different reading of these documents in terms of discipline. It suggests that this might be the first step towards reassessing the Republic and the two dominant themes of that period: the overthrow of head of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, in 1970 (which marked the end of the monarchy) and the civil war.

KEYWORDS

Khmer Republic; Cambodia; civil war; narrative; archives; critical historiography

Introduction

If there is a period in Cambodian history that has been both overlooked and disparaged, it is without doubt the republican one. In his article ‘Revisiting Lon Nol’s Cambodia’, journalist Sebastian Strangio rightfully argues that the Khmer Republic remains ‘a blind spot’ caught between the Sangkum and Democratic Kampuchea eras (*Phnom Penh Post*, March 18, 2010). The case of the Republic has long been judged. The regime is generally seen as corrupt, incompetent and disunited. At best, it was a period in brackets, between the post-independence ‘Golden Age’ and Khmer Rouge terror. For its harsher critics, it was, from the start, doomed to failure and brought about Cambodia’s collapse. Is there another side to this story? My aim is not to ‘rehabilitate’ the Republic. Rather, I seek to understand how this negative view of the regime was constructed, the extent to which it might be challenged, and how sources can be used to this effect. I situate my attempt at the interplay

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of two academic bodies of work. The first one is the revision of the republics that fell to communist revolutions in Asia and the mapping of potential arenas of inquiry in terms of periodization, regional interactions, and culture, as has occurred, for instance, in modern Chinese history (Chen 2017). The second, closer to Cambodia, is the work conducted in the past twenty years on the Republic of Vietnam, and more specifically on the Ngo Dinh Diem regime (1955–1963) with a view to going beyond the clichés generally associated with it and discussing anew Diem’s project of nation-building and modernization (Catton 2002; Miller 2013; Nguyen 2020; Vu and Fear 2020).

Since the publication of books on the topic by Ros Chantabot (1993) and Justin Corfield (1994), the Khmer Republic has been little studied, and it has been mostly assessed through the disciplinary lenses of history (including military history), political science and international relations. I argue that a cultural perspective, focused on discourse analysis, might help disentangle the narrative threads that produced this negative view of the regime and contributed to the long-lasting influence of such an assessment. This study, I suggest, opens the way for a discussion on the practices and methodologies that enable a critical historiography of the Republic. As such, it is a preliminary step towards the revision of the republican regime itself. The first section of the article gives an overview of the available sources about the Republic. It falls beyond the scope of the article to discuss in detail the existing records and literature. Instead, I present a portrait of the ‘republican archive’ and the way its structural imbalance shapes research. Each of the four following sections examines the key narrative elements coming from a range of protagonists, commentators and academics with respect to the interrelated themes of the ‘coup’ and the ‘civil war’. Altogether, these narrative elements built a monolithic vision of the Republic, a vision that – needless to say – never reflected reality. The revisitation of written sources, in this case, the reassembling of the existing materials and the attempt to read them differently, might help challenge this perspective and reposition the Republic within a less fragmented view of Cambodia’s modern history.

The ‘republican archive’

The history of the Khmer Republic is, first and foremost, the history of its sources. By this, I mean that, more often than not, the Republic is approached through the records of others – its Khmer opponents of course, but mostly Western officials, diplomats, political and military counsellors, journalists, scholars and activists. Republican voices are hardly audible in such sources. What one hears instead is primarily indirect speech. The explanation lies in the scarcity of the ‘republican archive’ itself, as Ros Chantabot underlined it years ago (1993, 6). The bulk of governmental records disappeared after 1975, probably destroyed or left to rot by the Khmer Rouge. Booklets such as those published by the Ministry of Information on the ‘North Vietnamese invasion’ (1973) or the 1972 report of the Khmer Republic on the war are few. Some documents, published abroad, did survive. One finds, for instance, a number of brochures in international collections, such as Tan Kim Huon’s report on universities in the Khmer Republic (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam) and, in a digitized form, Gaffar Peang-Meth’s *The Khmer Republic* (1974).¹ In other cases, the documents were taken

¹Gaffar Peang-Meth was a Cambodian doctoral student in political science at the University of Michigan who became Press and Information Attaché at the Embassy of the Khmer Republic in the US.

into exile by evacuating officials. The son of General Sosthène Fernandez, for example, mentions papers his father brought with him to France (*CambodgeMag*, 15 April 2019).

Firsthand accounts are few. The key actors of the Republic died in the hands of the Khmer Rouge. Those who survived, in the US or in France, remained silent. Lon Nol, for instance, never wrote anything. In this category, Ros Chantrabot's *La République Khmère* deserves special note, as both a personal account and a study based on his PhD thesis 'La République Khmère et l'Asie du Sud-Est' (1978). General Sak Sutsakhan (the Republic's last head of state) wrote for the US army the report *The Khmer Republic at War and the Final Collapse* (1980). General Fernandez's posthumous *Mémoires d'une Guerre Oubliée* was released only in 2015. As mentioned to me by journalist Richard Werbly in a conversation on 12 June 2020, the manuscript was published in its original form, with only a minimal reorganization of the chapters. There are certainly other accounts, but most are unpublished. The David Chandler Cambodia Collection (Unpublished Reports and Documents) at Monash University includes documents such as diplomat Chhoeur Chhut's *The 1970 Coup d'Etat in Cambodia and its Consequences* and a document entitled 'In Tam 1972'. In his article 'Long Beach Cambodian Remembers Dark Days of Khmer Rouge Rise' (*Press-Telegram*, April 16, 2013), journalist Greg Mellen mentions a memoir by Chhang Song (the Republic's last minister of Information), 'The Loss of Cambodia.' As far as I know, the memoir has not been published. The only document authored by Chhang Song I found is a short text entitled 'Le Clair-voyant' in writer and veteran Al Santoli's book *To Bear Any Burden* (1999).²

The only substantial body of material that is readily available to researchers is that produced by the press. The National Archives of Cambodia (Phnom Penh) and the Centre for Khmer Studies (Siem Reap) have small collections of semi-governmental monthlies and dailies in foreign languages (*Khmer Republic*, *New Cambodge*, *Le Républicain*), the *Journal Officiel de la République* and vernacular newspapers.³ There are also a few issues of *The Republic*, the monthly launched in the US by Gaffar Peang-Meth in January 1971. Testimonial literature (by May Someth 1987; Haing Ngor 1988; and Boun Sokha 1979, among others) provides additional information on the Republic, since most survivor accounts of the Democratic Kampuchea period start with the description of life in Phnom Penh before the city fell to the Khmer Rouge. Other elements of information about the Khmer Republic can be found in the 'confessions' of Communist Party of Kampuchea members tortured at S.21 and the documents produced by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). Finally, yet importantly, the Internet offers some more elements, such as interviews of former republican politicians in online media (generally at the anniversary dates of the Republic's proclamation and collapse) and private documents on websites. A group of US-based Khmer Air Force veterans, for example, created a commemorative website, which proposes 'texts written from memory, with the inevitable personal perception'.⁴ In addition, let us mention a number of books authored by Cambodian intellectuals and politicians, such as Nuon Khoeun, that are available today on blogs such as KhmerBooks.

²To which one might add Chhang Song's article 'The Coup against Marshal Lon Nol' in *The Rasmey Kampuchea Daily* in 1997.

³The John M. Echols collection (CKS) and the National Archives also include documents produced by the Ministry of Information and messages of Lon Nol to the nation (Lon Nol 1970, 1972, 1973).

⁴Khmer Air Force <http://khmerairforce.com/AAK-KAF/P-HOME.html> (accessed December 5, 2020).

In contrast, materials held in public archives in the US are significant. These include governmental and departmental records: cables from the US embassy in Phnom Penh and the State Department; reports; National Security Council and CIA memos; presidential briefs and papers; US Senate committee hearings; handbooks.⁵ Newspapers are a second major source of information, especially as some of the journalists who covered the ‘civil war’, such as Elizabeth Becker and Henry Kamm, went on to write books about their experience in Cambodia. There are also numerous memoirs written by protagonists, including those of Richard Nixon (1990), Henry Kissinger (1979), US Ambassador John Gunther Dean (2009), and accounts by military commanders who, like Major General Ira Hunt (2013), served in the region. To which one might add the recollections of former US officials in Cambodia – Ambassador Emory Swank, Political Counselor William Harben – interviewed by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training for its Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, and Chhang Song and Political-Military Counselor Jonathan Fredric Ladd, interviewed by WGBH-TV for ‘Vietnam: A Television History’ (1982–1983).⁶

This structural imbalance between Cambodian and US sources explains why, to some extent, the history of the Khmer Republic has become an American story, a sub-plot in the grand narrative of the ‘Vietnam War’, and a historiographical ‘sideshow’, to draw on journalist William Shawcross’s authoritative book on American policies in Cambodia (1979). A key aspect of my research on the Republic, thus, is to address this imbalance. My intention is not to ‘de-Americanize’ the Republic’s history. It would be preposterous to decouple the Cambodian civil war from the conflict in Vietnam. What I instead suggest is the need to create new relations between existing documents and ‘decentre’ the US archival materials. Due to issues of space and logistics, I have only used in this article English- and French-speaking sources and focused on the narratives that were articulated and circulated internationally at the time and after the fall of the Republic. To date, little – if any – research has been done on the government and media records from Cambodia and other countries that played an important role in the story of the Republic: France, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, the Soviet Union, and of course Vietnam and China. Until new studies and materials surface, however, we have to make do with what is at hand, which means primarily what comes from a number of available sources. These include the Cambodians who opposed the Republic (the ‘insurgency’), the ousted head of state Prince Norodom Sihanouk and his friends, and the Western ‘anti-imperialist’ side, that is, the leftist and anti-Vietnam War academics, journalists, and activists who supported the insurgents.

Sihanouk had always been a communicative leader. After his overthrow, he became even more vocal, providing international media with numerous interviews and statements. Being the insurgency’s ‘commercial salesman’ on the international scene, he also travelled a lot and held press conferences on every possible occasion. The insurgency produced information bulletins and booklets too, mostly meant for external consumption. These publications, usually in English and French, were circulated amongst Western anti-imperialists who themselves were prolific about the struggle of the

⁵These materials are accessible online and/or at institutional archives and libraries in the US, (Virtual Archive). I accessed the documents studied in the paper mostly through Wikileaks (‘Kissinger cables’), the CIA digitised library, and the Virtual Archive of the Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

⁶Boston, MA: GBH Archives. <https://openvault.wgbh.org/collections/vietnam/interviews>

Indochinese peoples against the US ‘war of aggression’. Malcolm Caldwell, Anton Claassen, George Hildebrand (1976) and Serge Thion, to name but a few, gave talks, organized events, and wrote books and articles about the conflict in Cambodia. In bringing the two perspectives together, the American one and the ‘anti-imperialist’ one, I do not try to ‘re-play’ the Cold War logic of confrontation between these two camps. Rather, I seek to analyse the ways this initial confrontation became the building block on which present-day perceptions of the Republic are still based. The extent to which these views overlap, despite using different arguments, shows how the ‘doomed-to-failure’ narrative could develop and take root across the political spectrum. This analysis, I contend, might help ‘un-freeze’ the republican archive, a long-time prisoner of the Cold War’s icy coating.

A contested legitimacy

On 18 March 1970, the National Assembly and the Council of the Kingdom voted unanimously for Sihanouk’s removal from power. The process that led to the vote had started a few days prior with a series of anti-Sihanouk demonstrations in provincial towns and in Phnom Penh.⁷ The prince was accused of financial and moral corruption, and more importantly, of treason for having facilitated and supported the presence of the Vietnamese communists in Cambodia. Sihanouk, who was in Moscow when he learned about his overthrow, flew to China. For a short period, Beijing and Hanoi thought they could come to an agreement with the new leadership (Premier and Defense Minister Lon Nol, First Deputy Premier Prince Sirik Matak, Provisional President Cheng Heng, and President of the National Assembly In Tam). At stake was the delivery of weapons to the Vietnamese insurgency through Cambodia, previously authorized by Sihanouk (Fernandez 2015, 48; Meyer 1971, 360–362). When the Cambodian government rejected this proposal, China and North Vietnam decided to back Sihanouk. Zhou Enlai convinced the prince to form an alliance with his former enemies, the communists or ‘Khmer Rouge’, a term coined by Sihanouk himself in the 1960s to designate his opponents. The new coalition established a double structure including a government-in-exile, the GRUNC (Royal Government of the National Union of Cambodia) headed by Sihanouk, and an interior resistance, the FUNK (National United Front for Kampuchea). In a radio speech on March 23, the prince denounced his deposition as illegal and anti-constitutional and called on the population to take up arms against the usurpers in Phnom Penh.

It was only on 9 October 1970, that the Republic was officially proclaimed.⁸ In the groups who had supported Sihanouk’s ouster, there were ‘hardcore’ Republicans, especially amongst the intellectuals educated in France in the late 1940s and 1950s (Ros 1993, 22). Yet, the first weeks of the regime confirmed the concerns of other

⁷Local authorities possibly organized the anti-Vietnamese demonstrations on the orders of Lon Nol’s government. The demonstrations culminated in the march of students and civil servants to the National Assembly in Phnom Penh and the sacking of the North Vietnamese embassy and the representation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (11 March 1970). According to some observers, these events were staged in agreement with Sihanouk, who hoped that this would give him leverage in negotiating with Moscow and Beijing concessions from the Vietnamese communists (Becker [1986] 1998, 115; Caldwell and Lek Tan 1973, 271; Corfield 1994, 64; Meyer 1971, 306).

⁸The ceremony did not bode well for the regime’s future. The planned 101-gun salute fire from a gunboat ended after seven shots, the last misfiring and injuring five sailors (Kamm 1998, 87).

major March 18 actors about the reception of such a political transformation. While intellectuals and students in Phnom Penh welcomed the change, the situation was far more volatile in the countryside. At the end of March 1970, revolts in Kampong Chang and Takeo Provinces, harshly repressed by the new authorities, showed the hostility of peasants towards the National Assembly and the measures it had passed (Summers 1972, 262). The legitimacy of the new regime was thus very fragile and relied in good part on the definition of the March 18 events. Was it a coup or a constitutional deposition? This issue continues to be debated in Cambodia to this day, and the republican archive gives a good insight into the different positions. The republican side argued its case clearly. What had taken place was a strictly Khmer affair (and as such, a matter of sovereignty) as well as a legal action, in conformity with the Constitution, carried out by an entitled institution. It was the National Assembly that had nominated Sihanouk head of state in 1960. What it could do, it could undo. The prince had long exceeded his mandate (constitutionally limited to four years) and was thus in an unconstitutional position at the time of his deposition.⁹ Moreover, Sihanouk's removal from power was a response to popular aspirations.¹⁰ The demand for a democratic government had sprung 'spontaneously in the national capital and provincial cities, spread to universities and schools, infected the press and exploded in an irreversible tide' (*Khmer Republic*, September 1971). By deposing Sihanouk, the new leaders had simply listened to and acted upon the anger from the street.

For most observers, however, if 18 March was not a coup, it looked very much like one. In all likelihood, the anti-Sihanouk demonstrations were staged. Orders to gather students, monks, and civil servants and make them march to the National Assembly had come from top levels. The leaflets and posters were printed in advance by the Ministry of Information and Education. In the days preceding the vote, the military presence in Phnom Penh had been increased, with tanks and armoured vehicles patrolling the National Assembly area, and the houses of prominent pro-Sihanouk people put 'under protection'. The deputies had been threatened before the sessions and forced to write their names on their ballot paper. There were even armed troops inside the chambers during the debates (Becker [1986] 1998, 116; Caldwell and Lek Tan 1973, 264–265; Corfield 1994, 76–77; Meyer 1971, 317, 321; Ros 1993, 18–22; Sihanouk 1973, 44). If it was a coup, who was behind it? For diplomatic circles and the international press, the army's involvement made little doubt. Parallels were drawn between Indonesia and Cambodia, Sukarno and Sihanouk, Suharto and Lon Nol, or between Lon Nol and Georgios Papadopoulos, the head of the 1967 military coup in Greece ('Pragmatic Cambodian Leader', *The New York Times*, March 19, 1970; Sihanouk 1973, 12).

Of course, Sihanouk tried to 'set the record straight'. Later on, drawing on journalist TD Allman's articles in *The Guardian* (August and September 1971), he denounced a long-planned 'putsch' executed by a group of traitors with the help of the CIA (1973, 20, 27, 44). Daniel Roy, Sihanouk's press advisor in the 1960s, published in *Le Monde Diplomatique* a long analysis, according to which the ouster was the product of a power struggle between different clans, those of Lon Nol, Sirik Matak, and nationalist leader Son Ngoc Thanh's (June 1971). Charles Meyer, another French advisor and

⁹'Why a Republic?' and 'Prince Sihanouk's removal is constitutional' in *New Cambodge*, no. 1, May 1970.

¹⁰'Non, ce n'était pas un coup!' *Le Républicain*, October 15, 1974.

assistant of Sihanouk, thought it was ‘the convergence of a military coup and a palace revolution’ (1971, 325). In general, observers agreed that March 18 did not emerge from a popular movement of revolt but from a minority of power-thirsty individuals. Against this reductive view, leftist academic Malcolm Caldwell and GRUNC/FUNK representative in London Lek Tan argued that the coup was not just the result of clique manoeuvring, but part of larger dynamics and social forces (1973, 274–275). Furthermore, observers considered that the coup was not an ‘indigenous’ but a remotely guided event, in which the Americans (or at least the CIA) and their regional ‘friends’ had a hand (Kahin 2002, 282). Charles Meyer was one of the few who interpreted the events as an entirely Cambodian affair originating in Sihanouk’s gradual slip of power from the 1960s onwards (Chandler 1972, 730).

The Republic was thus often seen as being doubly illegitimate, an American ‘puppet’ state that represented no-one but itself, as the GRUNC/FUNK publications claimed it. The US government denied any involvement in the events. Indeed, the Americans saw the regime change as a poor political choice. Bring the monarchy back, the US Ambassador to Laos urged Washington: ‘We are convinced that a republican form of government is most undesirable and untenable at this time’ (quoted by Corfield 1994, 82). At best, the Republic was a pragmatic move that might solve some state legitimacy issue, but it could be done with as soon as it had fulfilled its function. As for Western leftists, they saw the abolition of the monarchy as a trick of the ‘small educated stratum’ who had shed ““feudalism” in the form of the monarchy’ in an attempt to look modern (Caldwell and Lek Tan 1973, 273). Yet, the violence of the ‘de-Sihanoukisation’, as journalist Henry Kamm called the iconoclastic wave that gripped Phnom Penh in March and April 1970, points to something more complex (1998, 53). For a while, the plotters had pondered Sihanouk’s assassination, before rejecting the idea (Caldwell and Lek Tan 1973, 270; Corfield 1994, 57). Yet, if the prince could not be eliminated physically (he was sentenced to death in absentia in July 1970), he could at least be erased from the public space, and therefore perhaps from people’s minds. His photos were removed from billboards. The newspapers and the national radio conducted an unrelenting smear campaign against him and his wife, Princess Monique. In *New Cambodge*, Nuon Khoeun underlined the ‘rare violence’ with which the Cambodian press had been attacking Sihanouk and interpreted it as the ‘explosion of anger of a suppressed people’ (‘Prince Sihanouk’s removal is constitutional’ *New Cambodge*, no. 1, May 1970, 53). For French newspaper *Le Monde* correspondent Jean-Claude Pomonti and pro-FUNK historian Serge Thion, it was nothing short of a ‘regicide’, rooted in ‘Oedipus’ complex of the plotters vis-à-vis Sihanouk (1973, 160, 157). The psychological dimension does not explain it all. The streets named after kings and queens were rechristened. The adjective ‘royal’ was eliminated from official writings and inscriptions. It was the entire *ancien régime* that had to go.

The abolition of the monarchy encapsulates the ambiguities of the Republic (and possibly of March 18 itself, in a grey zone between coup and deposition). The ‘de-Sihanoukization’ was an *ad hominem* attack, a cathartic moment for the new leaders and some segments of the population who had long resented the prince and his policies. This emotional episode also had a rational side. It aimed to defuse Sihanouk’s nuisance potential in the event of his return to Cambodia. At the same time, the ‘de-Sihanoukization’ was the destruction of a system deemed anachronistic and dangerous. Through (symbolic) foundational violence, the regime signalled that there was no way

back. Even constitutional monarchy was not in the plan. The previous decade had shown how quickly Sihanouk, who might have had democratic intentions at the beginning, had reverted to the despotic rule of the ‘god-king’. This was proof that the monarchic system was incompatible with democratic institutions and had to be replaced (*New Cambodia*, May 1970). Among the political personnel and intellectuals who supported the republican regime, some saw it as their mission to write a new page of Khmer history. By negating the *ancien régime*, they created the very thing from which they proposed to break off, and so doing, they defined who they were and what they wanted for their country.

The issue that looms large behind the definition of the events is that of the relationship between the birth of the Republic and the awakening of political consciousness in Cambodia. As we have seen, there was, on both the American and ‘anti-imperialist’ sides, a widespread rejection of the new regime’s capacity to embody popular political aspirations. Still, whatever happened in March 1970 did because there was in Cambodia a broader desire for change. Faced with a rapidly changing world, the Khmers were in search of the ‘new identity’ that Sihanouk had failed to provide despite his modernization policies (Chandler 1991, 191). The Republic was thus the logical consequence of Sihanoukism. By improving the educational system, the Sangkum period had produced a new generation of intellectuals and students but not followed-up with jobs, social status or political representation. With its promise of a new era, the Republic responded to the frustrations of this nascent class. Since Cambodia had gained its independence (1953), the relation between leadership, militancy/engagement and pedagogy had been a problem, as many Cambodians saw the world of politics as the preserve of the privileged. It was now the Republic’s turn to redefine this relationship within a new model of nation-building. The ‘republican archive’, however, gives limited insight into the republican conception and implementation of this relationship. What it allows us to understand, though, is how this widely shared dismissal of any serious republican political project was discursively articulated and sustained.

Personalities politics

From the start, the Americans, officials and journalists alike, saw the Republic as an expediency born through ‘last-minute improvisations’ and ‘borrowed forms devoid of meaningful content’ (Kamm 1998, 87). The US archive materials make it difficult to think differently about the Republic. Now and then, the US embassy cables and reports praise Cambodian politicians, such as Long Boret, whose nomination as prime minister in 1973 was met with approval, and ‘energetic and fairly competent’ or hardworking young ministers like Thach Toan, Kim Vien, and Chhang Song (1975PHNOM05248_b).¹¹ Yet, this was outdone by a general view of the republican political scene as filled with ‘personalities’. The term, used by Sihanouk a few days before his removal, became for US officials and CIA analysts the framework by which they understood Cambodian political dynamics. For the Americans, everything in the Republic boiled down to the ‘bickering and personal political maneuvering’ of officials

¹¹The paper uses the numbering system of Wikileaks: year, provenance of the cable (PHNOM for the US embassy in Phnom Penh, STATE for the Department of State in Washington DC, PARIS for the US embassy in Paris), and the reference number of the collection.

(1973STATE098300_b). The pragmatic US approach to politics clashed with what CIA analysts described as the ‘byzantine and contentious nature of Cambodian political life’.¹² Ambassador Dean saw it as the duty of the US embassy to step in every time it looked like the Khmer government could not function properly (1974PHNOM13020_b, 1974PHNOM06315_b). The attempt could go far since Dean’s idiosyncratic style was not averse to micro-management on certain occasions. In March 1975, for example, he organized himself the luncheon for the congressional delegation visiting in Phnom Penh, for fear that the Cambodians, left to their own devices, would be unable to project the ‘atmosphere of austerity and military determination’ that was needed in order to convince the delegates of the Republic’s dedication to the pursuit of the war (1975PHNOM03776_b).¹³

The personality-oriented view was partly correct (Corfield 1994, 171). Even Ros Chantrabot blamed the failure of republican politics on the petty motivations and rivalries of Cambodian politicians (1993, 58). It was also largely shaped by Orientalist clichés. The political procedures of the Khmers were ‘strange’ and ‘[made] sense only to them’.¹⁴ Cambodian politicians were emotional and mercurial (In Tam, for example, 1973PHNOM08216_b). From ‘personalities’ to colourful characters, there is but one step, that was often easily jumped. *New York Times* journalist Donald Kirk, in search of ‘*la guerre populaire*’ (popular war), describes the parody of propaganda he came across in Kompong Speu. General Fernandez (not yet commander-in-chief of the Khmer National Armed Forces or FANK) spent more time stuffing himself with meat, rice and whisky than addressing the villagers he was meant to cheer up (June 27, 1971). Kirk’s article offered a welcome counterpart to glossy accounts of popular enthusiasm in the republican media. Yet, the journalist’s exotic *opera buffa* with Fernandez as a local Falstaff was also characteristic of the tendency among international correspondents to paint the Republic in a farcical light. The patronizing, even condescending tone of American governmental records and, to some extent, of the media is striking. It requires the researcher to read the materials if not against the grain, at least with great caution. The work of Ann Laura Stoler (2008), Michel-Ralph Trouillot (1995) and Sonal Khullar (2015) – to name but a few scholars who addressed the question of the archive and asymmetrical power relations – has taught us to consider the affective states and silences of records. This shows the importance of making the republican archive a ‘relational’ one in the sense that it gets linked to a new social/cultural context of interpretation, defined by postcolonial and decolonial views.

This is nowhere more evident than in the treatment of the Republic’s leader, Marshal Lon Nol, often depicted as a mystical loon. To warn Washington of the situation, US embassy Political Counselor William Harben compiled accounts of Lon Nol’s measures, such as the monk-bless bullet-proof T-shirts for soldiers. Some are nonsensical, to say the least: yet, it is revealing that Harben entitled his report ‘The Anthropological Lon Nol’, as

¹²CIA memorandum 1633/73. ‘Lon Non, Cambodia’s prime troublemaker,’ 16 March 1973 (CIA-RDP85T00875R00110060041).

¹³The delegation flew from Saigon on March 2, 1975. It included Senator Bob Bartlett (Democrat), and representatives Frank McCloskey (Democrat), Bill Chappell (Democrat), Bella Abzug (Democrat), John Murtha (Democrat), and Millicent Fenwick (Republican), accompanied by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Philip Habib and Deputy Assistant Secretary Erich von Marbod.

¹⁴Political-Military Advisor Fred Ladd quoted in memorandum from Henry Kissinger to President Nixon, 21 April 1971 (LOC-HAK-512-5-6-1).

though observing the Marshal demanded an ethnographic eye.¹⁵ The international press did not deal kindly with Lon Nol either, whose reliance on astrologers and magic was often ridiculed, for instance by Judith Coburn in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (March 1972) or Henry Kamm and Mark Gayn in *The New York Times* (January and April 1973, respectively). Moreover, Lon Nol's theories about Mon-Khmer civilization and his dream of a pure Khmer race were mostly considered mere fantasies. In 'Cambodia Prints Lon Nol Thought', Sydney Schanberg reported that Lon Nol's book of thoughts *The New Khmer Way* had been derided in Phnom Penh circles (*The New York Times*, January 7, 1973). Few observers took the Marshal's ideas seriously. Journalist Elizabeth Becker is one of them. She noted how these fantasies had long haunted Cambodia's vision of national identity and could appeal to common people ([1986] 1998, 120–121). Seen against the backdrop of the stroke Lon Nol had suffered in February 1971, however, these fantasies also cast doubts over the Marshal's physical and mental aptitude to lead the country. His health was carefully monitored. The reports of his Cambodian and American physicians were transmitted to the embassy, the Department of State and the Pentagon (1974PHNOM09849_b). Under such conditions, the question arises of the support the US government provided to Lon Nol despite potential opponents and the threats of a military takeover (1973PHNOM03397_b).¹⁶

In American circles, opinions over Lon Nol were divided, reflecting the tensions between various groups who held contrasting views about US intervention in Cambodia. For the White House, Lon Nol was the 'predominant political figure' in the country and, as such guaranteed Cambodia's stability (1973STATE059091_b). On the other hand, the Pentagon and the CIA warned of the effect of the Marshal's ineptitude and suggested that the presidential elections of June 1972 could be used to get rid of him (Shawcross [1979] 1986, 231–233). The opposite happened. In spite of the 'skulduggery' that ensured Lon Nol's success, and which they were fully aware of, the US government and embassy praised the result as the victory of democracy.¹⁷ To what extent was the information filtered? Ambassador Emory Swank and Deputy Chief of Mission Thomas Enders did not report everything to Washington (Harben, Self interview, 1998, 55; Shawcross [1979] 1986, 275). In contrast, Swank's successor Ambassador Dean complained regularly about Lon Nol's shortcomings and ramblings and thought he did not give the nation 'the kind of leadership which inspires men to sacrifice' (1974PHNOM04853_b; 1975PHNOM03148_b; 1974PHNOM06315_b). Apparently, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger thought differently. Lon Nol was exactly the kind of leader they needed. They knew from the start that the Marshal was a 'loose cannon'. After his meeting with Lon Nol in May 1970, envoy General Alexander Haig had described him as 'an emotional and not very realistic leader'.¹⁸ As William Harben put it succinctly, it was the Marshal's incompetence that had gained him his appointment (quoted by Shawcross [1979] 1986, 235).

The real question, then, is why the US government made no effort to find a suitable alternative. The straitjacket thinking about personalities in official and intelligence

¹⁵William Harben, Self-interview, 1998, 55–56.

¹⁶See also message from John Holdridge to Henry Kissinger, 27 March 1973 (LOC-HAK-32-2-12-0) and National Security Council memorandum, William L. Stearman to Henry Kissinger, 17 September 1973 (LOC-HAK-39-3-24-9).

¹⁷President's daily brief, 9 June 1972 (CIA-RDP79T00936A010800080001-9).

¹⁸CIA online library: Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon, 26 May 1970 (LOC-HAK-503-2-6-4).

circles explains it partly. It combined with a disregard for civilian politics. Ambassador Dean saw the National Assembly members as ‘irresponsible free agents’ (1974PHNOM07864_b). ‘[Politically] conscious Cambodians’ were described as ‘congenital oppositionists’.¹⁹ The Khmer political scene was primarily judged in binary terms: Lon Nol versus Sirik Matak, or Lon Nol versus Sihanouk, when the latter’s possible role in negotiations began to emerge. This left little discursive space for any third force that tried to emerge. The Americans did not take seriously the proposals for change Cambodian politicians such as Keng Vannsak or Son Sann discussed with them. They quickly brushed them aside, unless they endangered US interests (1973PHNOM11405_b; 1973PHNOM07967_b; 1974PHNOM00526_b). It was essential not to derail the strategy that had been devised in Washington – a strategy that did not care much for reformism in Cambodia. To the US government, the very idea of a republican political project appeared irrelevant within the wider context of the Second Indochina War. Deprived of this dimension, the Republic was thus reduced to a façade, a scenery for the meaningless agitation of its protagonists, a political void not meant to last.

Something is rotten in the Republic

This view was not exclusively American. In *Le Monde Diplomatique* (April 1970), Daniel Roy explained that new political ideas in Cambodia could not come from the ‘blues’ (landlords, businessmen opposed to reforms, pro-US personalities, and the organized crime), but only from the ‘reds’ (intellectuals from poor classes, youth eager for reforms, workers, teachers and a few liberal personalities). The ‘anti-imperialist’ leftists blamed the Republic’s political vacuum on social class. The ruling class was not revolutionary enough and therefore could not embody the ‘revolutionary strength [that] had been growing steadily in Cambodia long before the coup in response to domestic political and economic factors’ (Caldwell and Lek Tan 1973, 274). Even Cambodian intellectual Vandy Kaonn considered that the bourgeoisie lacked republican convictions and was thus unable to generate the ‘revolutionary romanticism’ critical to the change of regime (1993, 123). For Pomonti and Thion, the Republic’s anti-Communism and anti-Vietnamese racism masqueraded as a political programme, but they could not replace an actual one (1973, 182).²⁰ It was generally thought that Lon Nol and Sirik Matak had used the ‘Vietnamese aggression’ for internal political ends (Sihanouk’s removal) and with a view to harnessing domestic and international support for the new regime. Of course, the republican media presented the founding of the Republic as an act of patriotism and the start of the resistance against the enemy (*New Cambodge*, January-February 1972). Charles Meyer, however, had a different interpretation. The ‘war was the reason the regime did not collapse’ immediately after it was established (1971, 330). It had enabled a strong and immediate mobilization of the population, some segments of which deeply resented the Vietnamese, as was demonstrated by the violence against the Vietnamese ethnic community living in Cambodia in March and

¹⁹CIA Memorandum. ‘Political developments in Phnom Penh. Period of unrest due to Lon Nol’s action with respect to the National Assembly,’ 26 October 1971 (CIA-RDP85T000875R00110000127-5).

²⁰There was obviously more to it. Lon Nol saw the conflict as a civilization war against the *thmil* (the impure).

April 1970 ('Refugee and Civilian War Casualty Problems in Laos and Cambodia: Hearing before the Subcommittee', May 1970).²¹

For the Western Left, the main argument for the absence of a republican political project was that the Republic was the continuation of the old system in a new guise. The concentration of power in the hands of one man and his clan, the governance by decree (thanks to the 'nation in danger' law and states of emergency), the suspension of the National Assembly, the freedom of the press being regularly curtailed, the rights of assembly, domicile, and correspondence being suspended reminded of Sihanouk's authoritarian rule. The old monarchy might be dead but the 'general architecture [stayed] in place' because it represented the interests of a class (the Cambodian 'bourgeoisie') that would never relinquish its privileges (Pomonti and Thion 1973, 193). This architecture was the legacy of the French Protectorate (1863–1953) and of the elites and institutions it had produced. In the same way, as Sihanoukism had never really broken away from the colonial period, the Republic was not a radical break either from Sihanoukism. The system now in a late stage of decay was the long nineteenth century. The advent of the Republic marked the 'culmination of a process of internal decomposition that was accelerated by the Indochinese conflict and fueled by the regime's internal contradictions' (Pomonti and Thion 1973, 156).

The theme of decomposition was ubiquitous in 'anti-imperialist' and American analyses and media. This theme found a most powerful expression in the Republic's endemic corruption. In the early days, the republican leadership had pledged to eradicate this plague inherited from the Sangkum era. However, the Sangkum personnel had remained in power positions and corruption had returned with a vengeance. It was 'an integral part of political action' (Ros 1993, 102). The highest echelons, generals and ministers with access to American military and economic aid, were involved: brass trafficking (December 1973), diversion of aviation gas from FANK to the civilian sector (April 1974), trafficking of exit permits for Khmers at the Ministry of Interior (January 1975), and the wages of FANK 'phantom' soldiers (1973PHNOM12210_b; 1974PHNOM02940_b; 1975PHNOM02101_b). These scandals were reported in US governmental cables (1973PHNOM14296_b; 1973PHNOM14450_b; 1974PHNOM05245_b; 1975PHNOM00543_b), the international press and Khmer non-governmental newspapers, insofar as the latter could write about it without being threatened or shut down. Corruption had spread everywhere. In the context of a hyperinflation-riddled war economy, multiple forms of bribery and corruption were practised on a smaller scale too – civil servants, doctors, nurses, soldiers, teachers, shopkeepers (Steinbach and Steinbach 1976, 62–65). The Republic, as a political body and society, appeared thus rotten to the core.

If the theme of decomposition could take hold so easily – besides the fact that it was attuned to the atmosphere of *fin de règne* in Phnom Penh – it is because it also had a strong resonance with the larger narrative of Cambodian history that, since the 1930s,

²¹Pogroms and killings made hundreds, possibly thousands, of victims. International outrage and the reaction of the Republic of Vietnam, Cambodia's new ally, forced the Phnom Penh leaders to put an end to the violence. See the statement of the Foreign Ministry of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on the machine-gunning of a hundred Vietnamese civilians in Svay Rieng. Wire stories on Killing of Vietnamese Residents in Cambodia, 2430203023. Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive. 12 April 1970, Box 02, Folder 03, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 15 – Cambodia, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

many Khmer intellectuals had adopted. This narrative came, for a great part, from the French colonizers. As many other European imperial powers in the late nineteenth century, the French were preoccupied ‘with the themes of decadence and decline’, which they projected in turn onto their colonies. In Cambodia, this projection became the trope of the vanishing Khmer, always on the verge of extinction (Edwards 2007, 7–14). It paved the way for viewing the Republic as ‘doomed-to-failure’. Decomposition spoke to the insurgency as well. In his article ‘Cambodian Regime Slips Economically and in War’, journalist David Shipler reported a conversation with an American analyst about the strategy of the Khmer insurgents (*The New York Times*, June 19, 1974). They do not want to overrun Phnom Penh, they wait for its collapse, the man told him. ‘Their feeling is that this society is so corrupt and so putrefied – a regime ready to die in the Marxian sense – that all it needs is some pushing.’ Former Provisional President of the Republic Cheng Heng had heard the same analysis, but from members of the GRUNC he knew personally. As he reported to the American embassy in Paris, the men had told him that the Khmer communists thought ‘it was necessary for the fruit to ripen’ (1974PARIS18384_b).

This ‘ripening’ echoed older ideas of imminent disappearance. At the same time, it had roots in Marxism-Leninism. For the Khmer Rouge, the outcome (the fall of the Republic) was inevitable once the objective social conditions for the revolution would be fulfilled or ‘ripe’. In contrast to the Republic’s decomposition, the insurgents presented themselves as healthy forces of change embodying progress, democracy, sovereignty and freedom (GRUNC 1972). In the republican media, the Khmer component of the insurgency had long been invisible and inexistent. Cambodian guerrillas were just ‘Vietnamese propaganda for external consumption’ and ‘figments of fertile imagination’.²² The ‘other side’ – as the insurgents were to be called – fought for regaining its visibility. Its emergence into the public arena became closely tied then with this discourse of rejuvenation. The ‘anti-imperialist’ leftists bought it and saw in the (increasingly probable) victory of the FUNK good reasons for optimism. Shortly, they thought, Cambodia would finally enter the postcolonial era (Pomonti and Thion 1973, 149).

(Un)stable states

The ‘ripening’ of the Republic had another meaning for the Americans. It related to Henry Kissinger’s theorization of conflict resolution, according to which ‘stalemate is the most propitious condition for settlement’ (*The New York Times*, October 12, 1974). Conflict studies often refer to this principle within the context of ‘ripeness theory’, when the conflict’s escalation leaves the belligerents with little choice but working out a solution together.²³ Stalemate was the objective to be reached in Cambodia. Once the two parties would agree on a cease-fire and sit at the negotiating table, the US government considered a range of options for the country’s future: either a partition on the Korean and Vietnamese model or a coalition government with representatives of the two sides on the Laotian model. The latter option explains why John Gunther Dean,

²²‘The Constitution,’ *Khmer Republic*, vol. 1, no. 1, September 1971, 76.

²³The ‘ripe moment’ happens when the escalation and intensity of a crisis lead the parties involved to a ‘mutually hurting stalemate’ that forces them to engage in negotiations (e.g. Zartman 1985; Hass 1988; Pruitt 2005).

one of the architects of the Laotian solution, was appointed in Phnom Penh in 1974. Cheng Heng's warning that the Laotian model could not work in Cambodia because of differences in monarchical traditions and the conflicted relationship between Sihanouk and Sirik Matak fell on deaf ears (1974PARIS14805_b). The US view of the situation was defined by both a 'lack of American diplomatic imagination' (Clymer 2004, 62) and the pursuit of 'Vietnamization' (the transfer of the war effort to local powers and the withdrawal of American troops from the region).

From the start, there was thus a fundamental misunderstanding between Phnom Penh and Washington on the meaning of US intervention in Cambodia. 'How soon will the Americans come to help us? I was asked by ministers and pedicab drivers', Henry Kamm recalls, wondering whether they knew 'their timing was completely off' (1998, 37). The republican leaders believed that the Americans would not let them down because they did not want communists taking over the area (Ros 1993, 116). More than a political imperative, intervention was a 'moral obligation' from the US to their country, as Cambodian politicians sometimes told their American interlocutors (Dean 2009, 92; Peang-Meth 1974, 15). The Americans, however, saw their engagement in Cambodia only as a step towards their disengagement from the Indochinese war theatre. The year 1973 was a turning point in this process. The signature of the Paris Peace Accords by Hanoi, Saigon and Washington (January 27), the resulting general cease-fire in Vietnam, and the end of US tactical air support to the Khmer Republic (August 15) created a new environment for the Cambodian conflict and its resolution. With the Vietnamese out of the picture, there was a shift from a fully military solution to a negotiated one (Ros 1993, 121–122).

This certainly played a role in the gradual official recognition of the indigenous nature of the rebellion. The 'war of aggression' became a civil war, and the 'other side' increasingly real. By then, the insurgency looked nothing like it was in 1970. It had grown and radicalized, and the Khmer Rouge had purged their ranks from Hanoi influence (Whitaker et al. 1973, 189; Kiernan [1985] 2004, 357–365). At first, the republican government began by publicly admitting the presence of Khmers among the insurgents. Cambodian guerrillas were just cannon fodder manipulated by external forces (Fernandez 2015, 114, 117). Later on, the insurgents became brothers who were misled by an 'alien' ideology (1975PHNOM03767_b). Then, the term 'enemy' itself disappeared from the official discourse and Lon Nol launched a call to the 'fellow citizens from the other side', as reported in the daily *Le Républicain*, (October 11, 1974). The Republic made the insurgency several peace offers.²⁴ The Americans encouraged the move. In a letter to Lon Nol (August 1973), special advisor and counter-insurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson suggested a new 'psychological campaign' conveying the message 'that Khmers should not fight Khmers, they have only done so because of the foreign invader; if the foreign invader leave..., there will be no problem in reaching a settlement' (1973PHNOM08775_b). The idea of an 'entre-nous' negotiation fit within the belief of the republican leaders that everything could be arranged with the insurgency chiefs, with whom they had studied or worked in the past, or even had family ties (1973STATE116455_b). Yet, the insurgency's lack of response to the Republic's openings

²⁴The peace offers included the six-point one (6 July 1973) and the unconditional one (9 July 1974, repeated in August and November 1974).

showed that the old-boy network was meaningless for ‘the other side’, which instead produced a list of seven (soon expanded to twenty-one) ‘traitors’ to be executed after the victory.

The discursive transformation of the ‘war of aggression’ into a civil war gave the US additional means of pressure on the Republic. The Phnom Penh leaders were told that now that the American public was no longer interested in supporting a strictly Khmer conflict, the White House had to work hard to keep a strong hand with Congress (1973PHNOM03200_b). Anything that weakened its position (coup threats, cabinet reshufflings) was viewed as a problem (1974PHNOM06588_b, 1974PHNOM07769_b). Under such conditions, the duty of the republican leadership was to maintain the balance or, as Sir Robert Thompson put it, to establish ‘a state of stable war’.²⁵ This notion of stability strongly resonated with an older narrative, that of Sihanouk’s tightrope politics in preserving Cambodia’s neutrality. However, it was a special kind of stasis the Republic was asked to perform, under the American eye, in every possible field – social, economic, political and military. Being the dominant factor in all aspects of the Republic’s life, US aid was possibly the only thing standing between the Republic and collapse. To keep getting it, the Cambodians had to demonstrate all the time their will to survive. Khmer Air Force veterans, for example, recall that ‘we constantly had to prove our capabilities before obtaining the minimum aids’. Survival became a performative feature of the Republic, something to be said, repeated and enacted on every occasion. In his first courtesy call to Lon Nol, Ambassador Dean made it crystal clear: ‘I raised the need for Cambodians to make maximum effort in every field of endeavor ... to convince the US that they should continue to receive the full support that Phnom Penh is presently getting to withstand communist aggression.’ To which the Marshal replied that he was ‘fully aware of the need for the Khmer to prove that they are worthy of continuing US assistance’ (1974PHNOM04853_b).

The republican archive suggests, though, a more nuanced view. Some materials point to the inertia or resistance the Cambodians sometimes opposed (not necessarily for good reasons) to American orders. Journalist Marcel Barang, for example, observes that while the republican leaders did their best to give the impression that they met American expectations, they systematically undermined anything that could challenge the status quo (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, April 1973). Nevertheless, the relationship between the US and the Republic remained a ‘highly dependent’ one (1973PHNOM09170_b). When the first signs of withdrawal appeared around March 1975, many Cambodians saw the likely departure of the Americans with anxiety, anger and a strong feeling of betrayal. The newspaper *Koh Santipheap*, for instance, claimed that the naive Cambodians were sacrificed at the altar of US interests (1975PHNOM04933_b). In some cases, the betrayal took a personal dimension. General Fernandez, for example, tried to disassociate the American technicians on the ground, who were ‘men with whom we often had personal friendly relations’, from the ‘doves’ in Congress who did not hesitate to sacrifice the Cambodians (Fernandez 2015, 107, 112). Sirik Matak’s last letter to Ambassador Dean, as he refused the latter’s offer to evacuate with the US embassy staff, read, ‘I have committed only one mistake, that of believing in you, the Americans.’ Looking back at that period, Chhang Song once declared, ‘We try [*sic*] so hard to

²⁵Report, 17 February 1972 (CIA-RDP80R0172R001300060010-7).

please the Americans but ... I think we should not have done that ... because the withdrawal of the Americans was decided upon without taking into consideration all the Cambodian affairs'.²⁶

In the end, there was no stalemate, no ceasefire, no settlement. Instead of assisting the two parties into working out a negotiated solution, Ambassador Dean found himself, in the first days of April 1975, driving the US embassy car with the flags flying through the more populated sections of Phnom Penh to dispel rumours of American departure (1975PHNOM05946_b). A week later, he himself folded the American flag brought down the embassy's pole, before evacuating to Thailand. What the republican archive tells us is a story of abandonment. The US governmental records do not give the Cambodians much space. Still, read in a certain way, with attention for the unheard, they make it possible to capture the human dimension of this desertion and the feeling of existential threat that imbued the Republic's every move, and which, to no small extent, contributed to the enduring idea of the inevitable end of the regime.

Conclusion

The Republic is a political spectre that continues haunting Cambodia to this day, as might be seen with recent verbal skirmishes between the US and Chinese embassies in Phnom Penh, after Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen delivered a speech in which he made a direct connection between the coup, the civil war and Democratic Kampuchea (Dech Mara, *The Phnom Penh Post*, February 1 and 4, 2019). Despite the persistence of the 'doomed-to-failure' closed narrative, there are still many unresolved matters when it comes to the Republic. That the latter keeps fuelling political tensions in Cambodia signals how urgent it is to reconsider the history of the republican regime. The article proposed a critical historiography based on new archival assemblages of records and the attempt to read the materials in a different way. It showed that the overlaps of the US governmental (and sometimes journalistic) and 'anti-imperialist' discourses produced in part the negative view of the Republic that still dominates our present-day understanding of that period. This kind of historiography, I argue, might open the way for future inquiries into the Republic. While this article invites a renewed discussion of the narratives by which the Republic was represented internationally, subsequent studies might go further by deploying Khmer sources and shed a new light on Cambodia's intellectual history and vernacular political ideas. Moreover, the regime's temporal scope, its relations with regional and international powers, and many more aspects, including media, visual culture, and gender, demand further investigation. This reassessment of the republican period is crucial to rethinking Cambodia's history of modernization and transformation in the twentieth century.

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²⁶Interview with Chhang-Song. 1982. *Vietnam: A Television History; Cambodia and Laos*. Boston, MA: GBH Archives. https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_B3E47AC75D1A498BBF8C3626AA6FA88A

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