

# A Tribute to the Last Khmer God-King

By Kenneth T. So  
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Norodom Sihanouk Varman of the small but rich kingdom of Cambodia was a giant among the giant politicians of the world. His Majesty the King Father, fondly known as *Samdech Euv* by the older generation and *Samdech Ta* by the younger generation, had passed away on 15 October 2012, just sixteen days shy of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was the last Khmer God-King, the lofty epithet bestowed on Khmer kings during the Angkor era which was started by Jayavarman II.

Because King Father Norodom Sihanouk Varman was the last Khmer God-King, it would be amiss not to talk about the concept of the God-King and how it was originated.

After his return from Java, Jayavarman II settled at Indrapura. The country was still unruly at the time. Jayavarman II instructed his general Prithivinarendra to pacify the country. His chief priest, Sivakaivalya, and his brother Sivavinduka also accompanied Prithivinarendra on this mission. They were successful in putting down all kinds of resistance and made the districts under their control pay tribute to Jayavarman II. After having achieved his first goal, Jayavarman II continued to search for a more suitable and secured location for his capital. He moved to Hariharalaya, identified to be in Ruluos — approximately 15 km southeast of present-day Siemreap. After staying there for a while he moved again and decided to settle at Amarendrapura, located at present-day Angkor Thom near West Baray. Again, Jayavarman II was not happy with Amarendrapura because he seemed to be looking for a place where he could symbolically liberate himself from Java's yoke. He seemed to have found a place that would suit all his needs. He founded his capital at Mount Mahendra (Phnom Kulen) that he called Mahendraparvata. Phnom Kulen is the source of the Siemreap River. In order to liberate himself from Java, he called on a Brahman named Hiranyadama from Janapada, (from the province of Mlu Prei). Hiranyadama's expertise in magic and sacred rituals was required to liberate Kambuja from Java and to establish Jayavarman II as the sole ruler. The ceremony would elevate Jayavarman II to be a Chakravartin. It essentially meant he was a world ruler. Chakravartin literally means "wheel ruler" in the sense that the wheel is turning without being obstructed or impeded by anybody. The ceremony was performed on Mount Mahendra in 802. Hiranyadama taught Sivakaivalya, Jayavarman II's *purihota*, to perform the *Devaraja* (God-King) ceremony. The inscription of Sdok Kak Thom mentions the following four sacred *sastras* required to perform the ceremony: *Siraccheda*, *Vinasikha*, *Sammoha*, and *Nayottora*. They represent the four mouths of Shiva. The first *sastra*, *Siraccheda*, was very symbolic. The ceremony called for the simulation of the decapitation in effigy of the king of Sailendra to liberate once and for all Kambuja from Java's subjugation. The sacred ceremony was a powerful symbol for Jayavarman II to send a message to Java and any potential enemies that he was the universal ruler and nobody else was above him. It was a strong statement of declaration of independence by Jayavarman II to Java. Only Sivakaivalya and his descendants were allowed to perform this sacred ceremony that was taught by Hiranyadama. It seemed that Jayavarman established his residence at Mount Mahendra only to perform the sacred ceremony. The location of Mount Mahendra may have more to do with symbolism. Jayavarman's choice of Mount Mahendra may symbolize the title of "Kings of the Mountain" from the old tradition that was attributed to Funan kings. After residing at Mount

Mahendra for a period of time, Jayavarman II may have figured out that it would not be a good strategic location to defend against potential Javanese invasion or any invasions from his enemies. He may be able to hold off his enemies for a while but not indefinitely. Staying at Mount Mahendra would be suicidal from a strategic standpoint. Finally, he decided to settle down and reestablished his capital at Hariharalaya probably for logistic reason. His settlement at Hariharalaya would allow him to take advantage of the fertile land and the natural resources of the Great Lake, and also to foresee any attacks from his enemies without being trapped if he were to stay at Mount Mahendra.

Unlike previous kings before him, Jayavarman II descended from another Solar Dynasty that was founded by Sambhuvarman in the 7<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Jayavarman I. During this period Funan had disappeared and was completely annexed by Chenla. The newly formed Solar Dynasty of Sambhupura broke away from the original Solar Dynasty and settled around Sambor and Kratié. He was called the “guardian of the honor of the solar race of Sri Kambu.” It is believed that Jayavarman II was the person who brought up the name Kambu and connected it to the founder of the Solar Dynasty. Under his reign, Jayavarman II introduced the concept of Devaraja (God-King) as the universal monarch and according to Georges Maspero, he may have also started the ritual of *Preah Khan Reach* (Sacred Sword) that was used for the consecration of a new king when he ascended the throne. He also made the position of *purohita*, Chief Priest, to be hereditary and elevated it to be the most important position in the service of the monarch.

His Majesty King Father Norodom Sihanouk Varman was the last Khmer king who acceded the throne according to the *Devaraja* ceremony that started since the time of Jayavarman II. Preah Eisey Phoat, the Chief Brahman who performed the ceremony was a descendant from a long line of the *purihota* of the Angkor time. King Father Norodom Sihanouk was a direct descendant of King Nippean Bat (1405-1409) that went all the way back to Jayavarman II (802-850). The life story of His Majesty King Father Norodom Sihanouk Varman is full of love, tragedy, and redemption that is even better than all the Shakespeare's plays put together.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk was put on the throne on 25 April 1941 by Admiral Jean Decoux, the Governor-General of French Indochina of the Vichy government. The French saw in the young 18 years old king a person they could manipulate to fit their colonial rule. When Prince Sihanouk became king, the world event was in turmoils and World War II had started. Like Jayavarman II had done in the past, King Norodom Sihanouk declared Cambodia's independence from France on 13 March 1945 but it was short-lived because after the war the French returned to rule over Cambodia again. Cambodia was a young country trying to exercise democracy. Cambodia was impatient to obtain full independence from France. Again, King Sihanouk decided in March 1953 to go to France and asked the French President Vincent Auriol to grant complete independence to Cambodia. The French government turned a deaf ear to King Sihanouk's demand and threatened to replace him with a new king if he continued to be in an uncooperative mood. After the French refusal to King Sihanouk's demand on Khmer independence, he decided to elevate the Khmer struggle against the French to the international level. King Sihanouk decided to risk his future as king of Cambodia by campaigning against the French. The meeting with the French government was a failure. Therefore, instead of going home directly from France, the king made a brilliant political decision by stopping in the United States, Canada, and Japan to publicize his "royal crusade for independence." It was a bold move by the king, because his action could trigger the French to replace him as king of Cambodia with another prince. To put the French in a corner, in June 1953, the king declared that he would take a self-imposed exile in Thailand and would not return to Phnom Penh unless the French granted

full independence to Cambodia. The Thai government did not cooperate with the king and did not welcome his stay in Bangkok. Since the king was not welcomed in Thailand, he decided to establish his headquarters in the autonomous zone in Siemreap. It was at this time that the bond between King Norodom Sihanouk and Lieutenant Colonel Lon Nol was formed. Lon Nol commanded the autonomous zone of Siemreap, established in 1949 by the French agreement. Finally on 3 July 1953, the French declared they were ready to discuss the full independence status of Cambodia. The king insisted on his own terms, demanding total control of Cambodia in four main areas: National Defense, Police, Judiciary, and Finance. The French agreed to the demands and King Norodom Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh with great triumph. The Khmer Independence Day was proclaimed on November 9, 1953. Recognizing that in order for Cambodia to prosper the country must model after Switzerland. In a symbolic announcement the king declared Cambodia's neutrality in Geneva in 1954. His reign did not go smoothly because he was confronted by both the Democratic and the Liberal Parties. Finally, King Norodom Sihanouk abdicated on March 1955 in favor of his father, Prince Norodom Suramarit, so that he could enter into politics in order to chart the course for Cambodia. He became a prince again and took the title of Head of State. He founded the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum*, a populist party dedicated to modernize Cambodia and bring the country to prosperity.

Cambodia was at peace and would have prospered after its independence it had been left alone without interferences from the other countries. Cambodia was caught between the forces beyond her control. The US was fighting communism that caused Cambodia to get involved in the Vietnam War which spoiled the effort that Prince Sihanouk had worked so hard to keep the country at peace. Prince Sihanouk wanted Cambodia to be the Switzerland of Asia but the superpowers, for their own selfish interests, would not allow it. Cambodia has gone through some economic hardship but remained relatively peaceful until the overthrow of the prince as the Head of State. The coup d'état of March 18, 1970 by Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak and General Lon Nol, his most trusted man, ended Cambodia's monarchy that has existed for almost two thousand years. It replaced the monarchy with a republican government. A Khmer Republic was officially declared on October 9, 1970. The National Assembly voted Cheng Heng for president and Lon Nol for prime minister and sentenced the prince to death in absentia. Coerced by the Chinese the prince made an alliance with the Khmer Rouge as the Head of State. The Lon Nol government that brought Cambodia into the Vietnam War collapsed after the communist Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. The Khmer Rouge renamed Cambodia to Democratic Kampuchea. Prince Sihanouk was put under house arrest. He would have been killed if it were not for the personal intervention of the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai who told Khieu Samphan that Prince Sihanouk was the link between the people and the revolution. Vietnam invaded Cambodia on December 25, 1978 and on the eve of the collapse of the Democratic Kampuchea on 7 January 1979, a Chinese plane came to rescue the prince to transport him to China. Vietnam installed a new Cambodian government called the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) with Heng Samrin as the Head of State. Once again, Prince Sihanouk had to make an "alliance with the devil", which were the Khmer Rouge, in order to liberate Cambodia from the yoke of the Vietnamese. The regime of Heng Samrin lasted until June 27, 1981. Thereafter, Pen Sovan took over as the new prime minister. During its 1989 session from April 29 to 30, the National Assembly voted to rename the People's Republic of Kampuchea to the State of Cambodia (SOC) — *Roat Kampuchea* — as in an attempt to soften its image and gain acceptance into the United Nations. During this period, Vietnam fell on economic hard time without the aids from the Soviet Union after its collapse on December 26,

1991. Vietnam finally agreed to negotiate its plan of withdrawal from Cambodia. This event resulted in the Paris Conference on Cambodia in 1991 from October 1 to 23. Prince Norodom Sihanouk was elected Chairman of the Supreme National Council (SNC). He represented Cambodia that included the four warring factions namely: 1) FUNCINPEC (Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif), with Norodom Sihanouk as its founder and Norodom Ranariddh as its president; 2) BLDP (Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party) with Son Sann as its president; 3) Democratic Kampuchea with Pol Pot as its leader; and 4) PRK/SOC (People's Republic of Kampuchea/State of Cambodia) with Hun Sen as its prime minister. The other main participants were the United Nations five permanent members of the Security Council (USA, USSR, China, France, and United Kingdom), the six members of ASEAN (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand), Yugoslavia (representing the Non-Aligned countries), and the following countries: Vietnam, Laos, Japan, India, Australia, and Canada. The conclusion of the Conference resulted in a comprehensive political settlement adopted by all participants. An agreement known as the Paris Peace Agreements was signed on October 23, 1991. Prince Sihanouk was vindicated and reentered Cambodia as a hero.

After the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, PRK/SOC was renamed to the Cambodian's People Party (CPP). The Peace Agreements allowed a transitional period to prepare for a United Nations-sponsored election that would take place in Cambodia within two years. Immediately upon signing the Peace Agreements by the four parties, the United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC) was created. Its mission was "to assist the Cambodian parties to maintain their ceasefire during the period prior to the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC)". On March 15, 1992, UNTAC was created and it absorbed UNAMIC under its operation. A national election took place on July 1993 under the supervision of UNTAC. The Democratic Kampuchea of Pol Pot refused to participate in the elections. FUNCINPEC won the majority of the votes but Hun Sen of the CPP refused to abide by the election results and threatened a civil war. UNTAC yielded to Hun Sen's demand for a power sharing with FUNCINPEC. Norodom Ranariddh was elected First Prime Minister. Under the agreement, he shared power with Second Prime Minister Hun Sen. A Constitutional Monarchy was established in Cambodia on September 24, 1993 and Prince Norodom Sihanouk was reinstated as king of Cambodia. The Article 7 of the new Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia stated that "The King of Cambodia shall reign but shall not govern. The King shall be the Head of State for life. The King shall be inviolable." UNTAC completed its mandate in September 1993 after the Constitution for the Kingdom of Cambodia was proclaimed. In the meantime, the sharing of power between Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen did not go smoothly. Finally Hun Sen had the upper hand by outmaneuvering Norodom Ranariddh and ousted him from power. Because of poor health, King Norodom Sihanouk abdicated on October 7, 2004. One week later, on October 14, 2004, the Royal Council of the Throne unanimously voted Norodom Sihamoni — the eldest son of Norodom Sihanouk and Norodom Monineath Sihanouk — to be the new king.

After his abdication, the National Assembly voted unanimously to bestow the title of "The Great King-Heroes, Father of Independence, of Territorial Integrity, and of National Unity" to King Father Norodom Sihanouk Varman.

The journey traversed by Norodom Sihanouk throughout his life is fit for a Shakespearean play. He had been to the mountain top, he had walked the deepest valley, he had been betrayed by people he trusted, he had been loyal to his friends, but he never gave up fighting for the

country and his people. As Norodom Sihanouk himself put it, “*J’ai tout vécu, tout gagné, tout perdu, j’ai vu faux, j’ai vu trop tôt, je n’ai pas vu le poignard dans mon dos, je me suis trompé, j’ai souvent menti, j’ai beaucoup dit la vérité, beaucoup trop.*” (I experienced everything, won everything, lost everything, I saw wrong, I’ve seen too early, I have not seen the dagger stabbed in my back, I was mistaken, I often lied, I have told a lot of truth, too much truth).

Farewell our Beloved Samdech Euv, King Father Norodom Sihanouk Varman, the last Khmer God-King. May His Majesty rest in peace and join all the Khmer heroes of the past.