

Almost Forgotten: Cambodia's Anti-Colonial Nationalists

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Today, Con Dao prison in southern Vietnam is a museum dedicated to the Vietnamese who fought for independence from the French. But Cambodian nationalists were also locked up in that brutal space, and their story has been largely overlooked over the years.

It was a windy evening in February 1945 on Con Son Island (known as *Koh Tralach* in Khmer), off the coast of southern Vietnam. The island was home to the French Administration's notorious Con Dao prison, where political opponents of French colonial control over Indochina were held.

Three Cambodian men stood on the deck of a Japanese destroyer, gazing at the tropical island. For three years, they'd believed that it would not only be their prison, but also their grave. 24-year-old Bun Chanmol, the youngest among them, waved goodbye—not to the island nor the prison, but to the spirit of Hem Chieu, a monk and prominent player in the Cambodian nationalist movement, who passed away from dysentery just a few months after arriving on Con Son.

Three years earlier, Hem Chieu had been defrocked and arrested by the French administration for allegedly attempting to instigate a revolt by preaching anti-French sermons to Khmer troops in the colonial militia. Two days after his arrest, Pach Chhoeun, the publisher of a pro-independence Khmer-language newspaper, *Nagaravatta*, and Son Ngoc Thanh, the leader of the nationalist movement, organised a large demonstration. They were joined by 500 monks in Phnom Penh demanding Chieu's release.

The protests were violently broken up by the French, and Chhoeun was arrested along with fellow activists Bun Chanmol and Noun Doung. After being confined in Phnom Penh for nearly a month, Chieu, Chhoeun, Chanmol and Doung were sent to prison in Saigon, where they were tried. They were given sentences that ranged from five years to life in prison, but in the end only spent three years on the island.

The men were released by the Japanese who had swooped in and seized the French colonies during World War II. Those three years led to the book Chanmol wrote decades later, providing the a rare insight into the fate of Khmer prisoners on the island.

More than 70 years later, Chhoeun's granddaughter Vany Wells is trying to put more pieces together.

A rare memoir

"I knew he was a scholar, but he did not talk much about his life before I was born after the declaration of independence from the French," Wells says about her grandfather. "According to history books, Prince Sihanouk was the hero."

King Sihanouk, who personally declared independence from the French in 1953, was at the time

considered solely responsible for the achievement, and crediting others might have been seen as a slight to the King's reputation. Nationalists like Chhoeun were also ignored because of their opposition to the monarchy. This may have even delayed the release of Chanmol's memoir, according to historian David Chandler.

Chanmol's book, *Kok Niyobay* (Political Prison), was finally published in March 1972, giving a firsthand account of his experience as a political prisoner. The book quickly became a bestseller in Phnom Penh and prompted a second edition just three months later.

According to Chhang Song, a former minister of information and friend of Chanmol's, *Kok Niyobay* gained its huge popularity because it shed light on a story not many people knew.

"It is the first account about Koh Tralach from a Cambodian prisoner," Song says. "Many people heard about it, but not so many knew what it was like. At that time, it prompted the public to reconsider their nationalist sentiment and have more respect for those nationalist prisoners."

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For decades, *Kok Niyobay* has been an important reference for historians studying the Cambodian nationalist movement, and an indispensable account of life in Con Dao prison and the treatment of its inmates. It's virtually the only written mention of Cambodian inmates at the prison.

"I can't believe Koh Tralach is so big, even bigger than Kampong Speu's [a province less than 50km outside of Phnom Penh] municipality, with rows of houses," Chanmol wrote of the place he would come to call "the island that murders people".

"It is wonderful sightseeing, with beautiful mountains, beach, seas, and forests, but as prisoners, how could we be excited about that?" he continued.

According to Chanmol, there were about 6,000 inmates in Con Dao prison in 1942, most of whom were Vietnamese. Among them were rebels who had joined the Viet Minh, the independence movement led by Ho Chi Minh, as well as Vietnamese criminals convicted of crimes like murder and robbery. Only a smattering of Cambodians joined the prisoners' ranks, and their presence has been largely forgotten by history.

Chanmol vividly described the inhumane treatment of the prisoners. He wrote of their hard labour, including working in quarries, chopping wood in the forest without adequate clothing and diving to catch fish or to pick corals, with only a small meal of rice and "stinky" dried fish twice a day.

Hard labour and starvation caused hundreds of deaths, as did inadequate medical care. Treatment by both French and Vietnamese staffers was closer to experimentation than healing, he wrote, and usually led to infection and even death.

Chanmol also gives vivid descriptions of beatings and torture at the hands of the guards and officials.

"They [the guards] stripped the prisoner of his clothes, and made him lie on the table," he wrote about one incident. "They tied his testicles with a rope, hanging from the ceiling. Then, they tightened the rope or squeezed the testicles, as the prisoner was crying with pain."

In 1972, David Chandler wrote a review of *Kok Niyobay* in which he stressed the memoir's

importance as a historical account.

“Most of *Kok Niyobay* is about the three years that that Mr. Bun Chanmol spent on Poulo Condore [another name for Con Dao], a penal island off the coast of southern Viet Nam,” Chandler wrote. “As a description of conditions there, his book is well worth reading, for he has a good memory and a vigorous style.”

When contacted 46 years later, Chandler still hold this opinion of the book, although he hasn't read it again since writing the review.

“In its own right, the book is a valuable addition to the historical record,” he says.

But historians also warn against treating the memoir as definitive. Sambo Manara, a history professor and an expert in Khmer culture at the Pannasastra University of Cambodia, says the book could be a “biased account” due to Chanmol's strong nationalist sentiment. The stories in the book, he says, come from one person's opinion and experience, which could be tainted by his personal values.

“A writer can always exaggerate, and it is very hard to confirm whether the account is true or not,” Manara says. “Meanwhile, living witnesses will be very hard to come by.”

Even when they can be found, witnesses are often reluctant to share their experiences.

After their time in prison, Chhoeun's family stayed intimately connected with Chanmol's. Vany Wells attended the same elementary school as Chanmol's children. While they visited regularly, neither Chanmol nor her grandfather spoke much about their time on the island.

“His wife was an excellent cook, I remember, but they did not share the past,” Wells says.

The aftermath

Chanmol's imprisonment did little to temper his anti-colonial attitudes. In 1945, he co-founded the Khmer Issarak, an anti-French movement, before defecting when the group became too violent. He eventually worked for republican Prime Minister Lon Nol as an undersecretary of propaganda and religion. Chhang Song claims he refused to leave the city when Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge in 1975, and is presumed to have been killed.

Pach Chhoeun was exiled to France once the French reoccupied Cambodia after Japan's defeat in the war. He returned in 1951, to become the Minister of Information. He also served as an advisor to Prime Minister Lon Nol, but passed away in 1971 prior to the Khmer Rouge's bloody takeover.

Due to the conditions on the island, Noun Doung, the last prisoner released by the Japanese, saw his health deteriorate and died in 1966.

Very few living relatives of these Cambodian freedom fighters are known today, and most live overseas.

“It is very important to acknowledge the effort of those Cambodian nationalists... but our people ignore that because they were against the monarch. I'm afraid one day their names will vanish from the people's memories”

Chhoeun's granddaughter Vany Wells married an American in 1972, just after her grandfather died. She fled Cambodia to escape the growing instability caused by the Vietnam War and a budding civil

war. She now lives in Chicago, where she is the board president for the National Cambodian Heritage Museum.

Now in her sixties, Vany describes her grandfather as “a humble and passionate” man, but doesn’t know much about his time as a political prisoner or his political career.

The unsung hero

In 1954, the French administration ceded Con Dao prison to the US-backed South Vietnamese government. Under new management, the prison was no less controversial. A US congressional delegation discovered shocking conditions at the prison in 1970, and notorious [images](#) of prisoners in cages were published by Life magazine.

Today, the prison is a museum with monuments dedicated to the Vietnamese who fought for independence from France. There is little trace in academic research or online of the Cambodian prisoners who had fought for their cause.

But Cambodian nationalists like Son Ngoc Thanh and Chanmol were among the first to push the desire for independence from colonial rule in Cambodia, even before King Sihanouk embarked on his personal campaign—known as a Royal Crusade for Independence—to demand decolonisation.

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A Cambodian historian, who asked to be anonymous, tells *New Naratif* that the struggle of Cambodian anti-French nationalists is overshadowed by the success of former King Norodom Sihanouk in the Royal Crusade for Independence. It can still be difficult to talk about these early anti-colonial activists; the nationalist movement isn’t taught in great detail in schools, and there is still fear in Cambodia of going against the monarchy.

“It is very important to acknowledge the effort of those Cambodian nationalists,” he said. “But our people ignore that because they were against the monarch. I’m afraid one day their names will vanish from the people’s memories.”

Vany Wells has committed to document her grandfather’s life for her own “family purpose”. His impact on her life, Vany adds, is undeniable because he was to her an inspiration, role model and teacher, who inspired her love for freedom and democracy.

“Grandpa was very sad towards the end of his life,” she says. “I thought he was sad because of the war. Now I understand better. He was heartbroken by [his experiences on the island] and had no desire to fight for his health.”

Rinith Taing is a Cambodian journalist and Khmer-English translator/interpreter. Beginning his career at the Phnom Penh Post, he has more than three years of experience reporting on various issues in Cambodia and other Southeast Asian country. His specialty, however, is feature story, particularly historical and profile features. In 2017, one of Rinith’s stories at the Post “If It Leads, It Bleed” was nominated for SOPA / WAN-IFRA Excellence in Feature Writing.

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