

Spice Roads, Culinary Traditions and Cambodian Distinctiveness

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Background Readings Presented to the Dinner “Culinary Journey from India to Cambodia”, Monday December 20, 2021, Kravanh Restaurant, under the high patronage of the Embassy of India in Phnom Penh.

1/ India and Cambodian Rural Cuisine: A Significant Absence

*From the Introduction to Cuisine Rurale d’Angkor អាហារនៅជនបទអង្គរ
by Prof. Ang Choulean, Yosothor, 2020, pp 12-18 (English translation by Angkor Database)*

‘Knowing how much Khmer culture owes to India, we can only be struck by the almost total absence of Indian culinary influence in Khmer cuisine (12). Even curry, which has long since become an international ingredient, does not appear in the countryside cuisine of Angkor, not even as a festive dish (13).

‘Some might retort: but in the restaurants and stalls of Pradak, they serve curry among other sauces to sprinkle the *num bonhchok* vermicelli! (14) But precisely, Pradak village (15), in the space of ten years (16), has changed – or, to use the consecrated term, ‘developed’ - in a spectacular way due to its privileged location in relation to tourist circuits. (17) Nowhere else, in the villages of Angkor, is curry served. *Num bonhchok*, holiday food par excellence, always goes well with good old Khmer *somlâ prohoc*, for humans as well as for gods. (...) No one would have thought of preparing a sauce other than *Khmer somlâ* [Khmer stew].

‘The absence of any trace of Indian influence in this area is all the more striking given that the Angkor region is known as the conservator of ancient Indo-Khmer traditions, particularly in the area of ritual, where the weight of Brahmanism is felt here and there again, at least for researchers, because what we distinguish as traces of Brahmanism is not experienced as such by the villagers. There again, one could retort that inscriptions in Old Khmer and Sanskrit mention Indian products and dishes. But these are products and dishes for religious oblations performed strictly according to ritual rules for the gods of Indian origin, which have nothing to do with the daily meal of humans. Thus K. 89 speaks, among others, of *caru*, an oblation made from rice porridge in the morning, at noon and in the evening for the god Jangaleshvara (18), that of midday to be cooked with oil; while K. 689 19 mentions a *caru* cooked in milk, an animal substance that, unlike the Indians, the Khmers never incorporated into their diet. The inscription K. 27Y0, for its part, lists the products for sacrificial meals to

offer to the statue of the late mother of Jayavarman VII and to those who surround it, among which the curds, melted butter, sesame oil, long pepper ..., so many products either unknown or unusual in Khmer cuisine. Regarding the last product (long pepper) (21), it is generally very little known, except in a few villages of Kampot. In the region studied here, only certain officiants keep with them a few fruits carefully enclosed in a small bag to be used in a magico-religious rite.

'The lack of Indian influence in this realm is all the more striking given that the Angkor region is known as the depository of ancient Indo-Khmer traditions, particularly in the area of rituals, where the weight of Brahmanism is still felt here and there -- at least for researchers, because what we distinguish as traces of Brahmanism is not experienced as such by the villagers. Then again, one could object that Old Khmer and Sanskrit inscriptions do mention Indian products and dishes. But these are products and dishes for religious offerings, performed strictly according to ritual rules for the gods of Indian origin, and they have nothing to do with the daily meals of human beings. Thus K. 89 speaks, among others, of *caru*, an oblation made from rice porridge in the morning, at noon and in the evening for the god Jangaleshvara (18), the midday one to be cooked with oil; while K. 689 (19) mentions a *caru* cooked in milk, an animal product that, unlike the Indians, the Khmers never incorporated into their diet. Inscription K. 273 (20), for its part, lists the products for sacrificial meals to be offered to the statue of Jayavarman VII's late mother, and to those who surround it, among which curds, melted butter, sesame oil, long pepper, etc., so many products either unknown or unusual in Khmer cuisine. Regarding the last product (long pepper) (21), it is generally very little known, except in a few villages of Kampot. In the region studied here, only certain officiants keep with them a few fruits carefully enclosed in a small bag to be used in magic-religious rites.

'Even common pepper (22) is rarely used in village cuisine. Only twice have I seen it used. The first time, we were looking for a medicinal effect rather than a culinary flavor (23). The second time around, the food in question was not part of everyday life (24). Let us add to this matter that pepper is one of the ingredients often mentioned in *kbuon thnam*, the traditional medicine treatises. However, the word for pepper is a Sanskrit word (25) and the existence of the plant is attested by Tcheou Ta-kouan [Zhou Dagan] at the end of the 13th century, but rather as a wild plant (26). In a 12th century inscription (K. 258), pepper is mentioned in association with rice and animals intended to prepare "sacred food". There, we read: 'Vah Kriyia Vave Piy Rariko Thlvan Pram Marica Lih Piy, namely "holy food: three goats, five thlvan of husked rice, three lih of pepper" (27).

'Another inscription (28) mentions pepper (*marica*) and cardamom, the only spices, next to a whole series of valuable objects (metal containers, an elephant, fabrics) offered to the god of the place. Thus, the borrowing from the Indians of the words for pepper (*marica*) and for long pepper (pippali / tipali) (29) was done in a medical and medicinal context, outside any domestic culinary context. Rather, it would be a medical and medicinal context that would explain the acclimatization of these plants. A final word on pepper, to avoid any misunderstanding: pepper is used in daily domestic cooking in the coastal region just like any other ingredient. It seems established that it

is Chinese immigrants from Hainan, who came at a very late stage, who are at the origin of "Kampot pepper", now famous (30). But this pepper was above all intended for export, via Ha-tien, then Saigon, to reach even more distant destinations. Its fame is the result of above all external recognition, while the Khmer peasant, who does not necessarily know the "crab (sea) sautéed with pepper", and even less the "steak with green pepper", considered (and still does, in many cases) pepper and other similar plants as falling within the sphere of medicine.

'In contrast to pepper, we can cite the case of the aromatic herb *mreah preou*. Used in Khmer cuisine, especially the rural type, in India this plant is not widely used in culinary preparations but piously offered to the god Vishnu, because thought as an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi, hence its European name: "holy basil"(32). In view of what has been said about pepper varieties, some nuance must be added here. The phonetic corruption of *preah preou*, the "holy herb", in *mreah preou* (term which no longer has a plausible explanation) is telling us that, while this plant had probably the same ritual use in Ancient Cambodia than in India, it became a mere culinary ingredient when Brahmanism faded away (33).

'In any case, we can see that if the whole Khmer culture was limited to the sole domain of cooking, it would be absurd to speak of "Indianization"!

'About Tcheou Ta-kouan's account

'Does the fact that India does not have its share in Khmer cuisine make the latter an utterly original cuisine? Obviously not. As any other cultural expression, a specific cuisine is never exempt from borrowings and influences. Mention has been made of the coastal regions and Chinese immigrants from Hainan. The cuisine of these regions, which includes, among the compulsory staples, fish sauce (*teuk trei*) and soy sauce (*teuk si-iv*), has long enjoyed great success in urban settings throughout Cambodia. It is obvious that I am simplifying a lot here, and that the great success of these two sauces also comes from other circles, imbued with Chinese or Vietnamese culinary culture. On the register of liquid ingredients, we must also add vinegar, the absence of which Tcheou Ta-kouan noticed, as he did for soy sauce. The famous visitor makes this insightful remark: "The natives do not know how to make vinegar. If they wish to make a sour sauce, they add leaves of the *hien-p'ing* tree to it (34). If the tree is budding, they use the buds; if the tree is in seeds, they use the seeds". Obviously, it is not only tamarind that brings the sour taste in, but many other fruits and leaves as well (35). But here it is the principle of the use of the non-preserved and non-conditioned plant which is to be stressed, because it is still relevant today. In the context of this essay, it does not seem irrelevant to quote Tcheou Ta-kouan, since his stay of a little over a year took place precisely in Angkor. Six centuries after him, not once have I seen the use of soy sauce or vinegar, although they exist in commerce unlike what was at the end of the 13th century. The same goes for the fish brine, *teuk trei*, which I have seen used only in relatively urbanized areas called *srok phsa* and, of course, in all urban areas.

'Let us add here that Tcheou Ta-kouan made no allusion to this sauce for the good reason that it was then unknown to the Cambodians or the Chinese: the Vietnamese, who allegedly invented it or, in any case, have always used it profusely, were at that

time still absent from the region. Today, *teuk trei* factories belong, perhaps in the majority, to the Sino-Khmers of Kampot and other coastal regions. But when the production is of a smaller size, with restricted distribution, it is often processed by the Vietnamese communities established on the banks of the Tonle Sap, for example near Kompong Chhnang. To a much lesser degree, the Khmers also process it for domestic use. The sheer popularity of fish and soy sauces in urban and semi-urban settings, and their absence in rural Angkor villages, testifies to a difference between these worlds. In rural Cambodia, salt and prohok are systematically used for salty seasoning, the latter being the fermented fish paste typical of Khmer cuisine, always close at hand. Apart from its manufacturing on a commercial scale, for instance on the edge of the Tonle Sap, farmers make it in sufficient quantity for family consumption during the rice growing season, before the monsoons. Even in non-peasant households, it is often made to be preserved as kitchen supply, especially when one is particularly demanding with the choice and quality of the fish.'

12 This observation is corroborated by the results of linguistic research. See Pou 1992.

13 From a linguistic point of view, Professor Saveros Pou noted only one borrowing from the languages of India, in this case from Tamil: *kari* (curry), precisely, which is very striking when we know how much the Khmer vocabulary in general owes to Sanskrit (Pou 1992).

14 *Num bonhchok*, whatever its origin, is an extremely popular dish, often featured in meals at community festivals (chap. III, point 7). It is the making of rice vermicelli, a very long and complex process, which explains its rarity in daily meals. But in urban areas, it can be eaten for breakfast in restaurants and stalls in markets and streets.

15 Mention will be made of this village in several places, in various chapters.

16 Roughly from 1995 to 2005.

17 Cf., for example, chap. III, point 1, and VI, point 1.

18 Teuk Chha site, Kompong Cham province. Cf. Cœdès from 1951: 166.

19 Vat Po Rong, Takeo province. Cf. Cœdès from 1954: 48.

20 Inscription of Ta Prohm, stanzas XVII-XLI. Cf. Cœdès from 1906: 75.

21 *Piper longum*. The current Khmer name is *dey pley*, from *tipali* (or "Bengal pepper", Cf.. Paulin 1808: 473). The classical Sanskrit form is *pippali* (Cf. Monier-Williams).

22 In general: *Piper longum*.

23 Cf. chap. V, entry 2.1, note 17.

24 Cf. chap. I, entry 6.

25 *Marica*, pronounced *m'rek*.

26 Pelliot 1951: 27. Wild pepper is still found in forests. On the Kulèn mountain, a locality well known to archaeologists, in particular experts in ceramics, bears the name of *Thnol M'rek*, or "Pepper dike", because of the important presence of this plant.

27 Cf. Cœdès from 1952: 200.

28 K. 207, temple of Vat Basét, 11 th century. Cf. Cœdès 1951: 20.

29 Borrowing maybe late, for this last word.

30 Leclère 1907: 838.

31 *Ocinum Basilicum*. See the unaltered name pt · eah preou in chap. I, point 1.9.

32 The Sanskrit name is *tulasi*. See Sinclair-Stevenson 1920: 141, among others.

33 Cf. KhmeRenaissance, section 6, n ° 54.

34 Pelliot proposed to see there the tamarind tree (ompil) Pelliot 1951: 30.

35 See also Ang 2017.

(Original text in French)

Une absence de marque

'(...) Quand on sait combien la culture khmère doit à l'Inde, on ne peut qu'être frappé par l'absence, pour ainsi dire totale, d'influence culinaire indienne dans la cuisine khmère (12). Même le curry, pourtant devenu depuis longtemps international, ne rentre pas dans la cuisine campagnarde d'Angkor, même pas comme mets festif (13).

'D'aucuns pourraient rétorquer : mais dans les restaurants et échoppes de Pradak on sert entre autres sauces le curry pour arroser le vermicelle *num bonhchok* ! (14) Mais précisément le village de Pradak (15) en l'espace de dix ans (16) s'est transformé -employons le terme consacré : développé- de manière proprement spectaculaire, en raison de sa situation privilégiée par rapport aux circuits touristiques (17) Nulle part ailleurs, dans les villages d'Angkor, on ne sert le curry. Le *num bonhchok*, nourriture de fête par excellence, s'accommode toujours du bon vieux *somlâ prohoc khmer*, pour les humains comme pour les divinités. (...) Il ne serait venu à l'idée de personne de préparer une sauce autre que le *somlâ khmè* [Khmer stew].

'L'absence de toute trace d'influence indienne dans ce domaine est d'autant plus frappante que la région d'Angkor est connue comme conservatrice des traditions antiques indo-khmères, notamment dans le domaine du rituel, où le poids du brahmanisme se fait ici ou là encore sentir, du moins pour les chercheurs, car ce que nous distinguons comme des traces de brahmanisme n'est pas vécu comme tel par les villageois. Là encore, on pourrait rétorquer que des inscriptions en vieux khmer et en sanskrit font mention de produits et de mets indiens. Mais ce sont des produits et mets pour oblations religieuses accomplies strictement selon les règles rituelles pour les dieux d'origine indienne, qui n'ont rien à voir avec le repas quotidien des humains. Ainsi K. 89 parle, entre autres, de *caru*, oblation à base de bouillie de riz le matin, le midi et le soir pour le dieu Jangaleshvara (18), celui de midi devant être cuit avec de l'huile; tandis que K. 689 (19) mentionne un *caru* à cuire dans du lait, substance animale que, contrairement aux Indiens, les Khmers n'ont jamais intégré dans leur alimentation. L'inscription K. 273 (20), elle, énumère les produits pour repas sacrificiels à offrir à la statue de la défunte mère de Jayavarman VII et à celles qui l'entourent, parmi lesquels le lait caillé, le beurre fondu, l'huile de sésame, le poivre long..., autant de produits soit inconnus soit inusités dans la cuisine khmère. A propos du dernier produit (le poivre long) (21), il est généralement très peu connu, à part dans quelques villages de Kampot. Dans la région ici étudiée, seuls certains officiants en gardent avec eux quelques fruits soigneusement enfermés dans un petit sachet à utiliser dans un rite à caractère magico-religieux.

'Même le poivre commun (22) n'est utilisé qu'assez rarement dans la cuisine villageoise. Par deux fois seulement, je l'ai vu utilisé. La première fois, on recherchait un effet médicinal plutôt qu'une saveur culinaire (23). La deuxième fois, le mets concerné ne faisait pas partie du quotidien (24). Ajoutons à ce sujet que le poivre figure parmi les ingrédients fréquemment cités dans les *kbuon thnam*, traités de médecine traditionnelle. Or le mot pour poivre est un mot

sanskrit (25) et l'existence de la plante est attestée par Tcheou Ta-kouan à la fin du 13^{em} siècle, mais plutôt comme une plante sauvage (26). Dans une inscription du 12^{em} siècle (K. 258) le poivre est cité en association avec le riz et les animaux destinés à préparer de la "nourriture sacrée". Ainsi lit-on : *'vrah kriyia vave piy rariko thlvān pram marica lih piy'*, à savoir « sainte nourriture : trois chèvres, cinq thlvān de riz décortiqué, trois lih de poivre » (27).

'Une autre inscription (28) mentionne le poivre (*marica*) et la cardamome, les seules épices, à côté de toute une série d'objets de valeurs (récipients en métal, un éléphant, des étoffes) offerts au dieu du lieu. Ainsi l'emprunt aux Indiens des mots pour poivre (*marica*) et pour poivre long (*pippali / tipali*) (29) s'est-il fait dans un contexte médical et médicinal, en dehors de tout contexte culinaire domestique. Ce serait plutôt un contexte médical et médicinal qui expliquerait l'acclimatation de ces plantes. Un dernier mot sur le poivre, pour éviter toute méprise : le poivre est utilisé dans la cuisine domestique quotidienne en région littorale au même titre que n'importe quel autre ingrédient. Il semble établi que ce sont des immigrants chinois de Hainan, venus à une époque bien tardive, qui sont à l'origine du "poivre de Kampot", aujourd'hui fameux (30). Mais ce poivre était avant tout destiné à l'exportation, via Hatien puis Saïgon pour aboutir à des destinations plus lointaines encore. La renommée de celui-ci est le fait d'une reconnaissance avant tout extérieure, alors que le paysan khmère, qui ne connaît pas forcément le "crabe (de mer) sauté au poivre", et encore moins le "steak au poivre vert", considèrerait (et considère toujours, dans bien des cas) le poivre et autres plantes assimilées comme relevant de la sphère de la médecine.

'A l'opposé du poivre, on peut citer le cas de l'herbe aromatique *mreah preou*. Utilisée dans la cuisine khmère, surtout celle de type rural, cette plante ne connaît pas un tel usage en Inde où, par contre, elle est pieusement offerte au dieu Vishnu, car pensée comme une incarnation de la déesse Lakshmi, d'où son nom européen de "basilic sacré" (holy basil) (32). Au regard de ce qui a été dit sur les variétés de poivre, il faut introduire ici une nuance. La corruption phonétique de *preah preou*, la "sainte herbe", en *mreah preou* (nom qui n'a plus d'explication plausible) est significative. Sans doute, dans l'ancien Cambodge, cette herbe avait-elle le même usage culturel qu'en Inde, avant de devenir un simple ingrédient aromatique culinaire, avec l'abandon du brahmanisme (33).

'En tout état de cause, on voit bien que si toute la culture khmère se limitait au seul domaine de la cuisine, il serait absurde de parler d'"indianisation" !

'Autour des témoignages de Tcheou Ta-kouan

'Le fait que l'Inde n'ait pas sa part dans la cuisine khmère fait-il de celle-ci une cuisine absolument originale ? Evidemment non. Pas plus que n'importe quel domaine de la culture, une cuisine ne s'exempte d'emprunts et d'influences. On a mentionné les régions littorales et les immigrants chinois de Hainan. La cuisine de ces régions, qui intègre parmi les éléments jugés indispensables la sauce de poisson (*teuk trei*) et la sauce de soja (*teuk si-iv*), a depuis longtemps connu un grand succès dans les milieux urbains du Cambodge tout entier. Il est évident que je simplifie beaucoup ici, et que le grand succès de ces deux sauces vient aussi d'autres milieux, imprégnés de culture culinaire chinoise ou vietnamienne. Sur le registre des ingrédients liquides, il faut aussi ajouter le vinaigre, dont Tcheou Ta-kouan a noté l'absence, comme il l'a fait pour la sauce de soja. Le fameux émissaire fait cette remarque perspicace : "les indigènes ne savent pas faire de vinaigre. S'ils désirent rendre une sauce acide, ils y ajoutent des feuilles de l'arbre hien-p'ing (34). Si l'arbre bourgeonne, ils emploient les bourgeons ; si l'arbre est en graines, ils emploient les graines". Evidemment, il n'y a pas que du tamarin que l'on tire le goût acide, mais de bien d'autres fruits et feuilles encore (35). Mais ici c'est le principe de l'utilisation du végétal non conservé et non conditionné qui est à retenir, car il est toujours

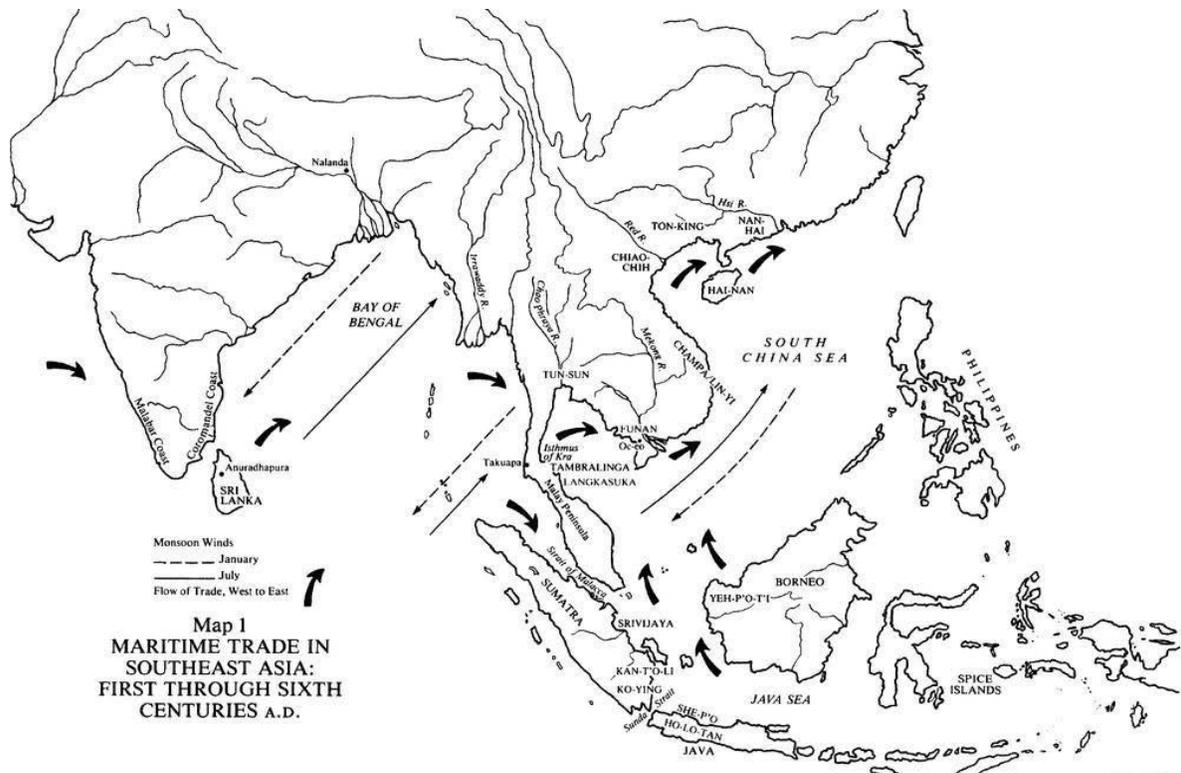
d'actualité. Dans le cadre du présent essai, il n'est pas hors de propos de citer Tcheou Ta-kouan, puisque son séjour d'un peu plus d'un an s'est déroulé précisément à Angkor. Six siècles après lui, pas une seule fois je n'ai vu l'utilisation de la sauce de soja ou du vinaigre, alors qu'elles existent dans le commerce contrairement à ce qui était à la fin du 13^{ème} siècle. Pareillement pour ce qui concerne la saumure de poisson, teuk trei, que j'ai vu utilisée seulement dans les zones relativement urbanisées dites *srok phsa* et, bien sûr, dans toutes les zones urbaines.

'Remarquons à ce propos que Tcheou Ta-kouan n'a fait aucune allusion à cette sauce pour la bonne raison qu'elle n'était connue ni des Cambodgiens ni des Chinois, les Vietnamiens, à qui on en attribue l'invention ou, en tout cas, une grande consommation, étant à cette époque encore inconnus dans la région. Aujourd'hui, les fabriques de *teuk trei* appartiennent, peut-être en majorité, aux Sino-Khmers de Kampot et autres régions côtières. Mais lorsque la fabrication est de taille plus modeste, à diffusion restreinte, elle est souvent le fait des communautés vietnamiennes établies sur les bords du Tonlé Sap, par exemple vers Kompong Chhnang. A un degré beaucoup moindre, les Khmers aussi en fabriquent pour un usage domestique. La seule popularité des sauces de poisson et de soja en milieu urbain et semi-urbain, et leur absence dans les villages ruraux d'Angkor témoigne d'une différence entre ces mondes. Dans ces villages pour le salé on a recours systématiquement au sel et au prohok, le dernier étant cette pâte de poisson fermenté typique de la cuisine khmère, toujours à portée de la main. En dehors de sa fabrication à l'échelle commerciale, exemple au bord du Tonlé Sap, il est très fréquent qu'avant les moussons, les paysans en fabriquent suffisamment pour la consommation familiale durant la saison des travaux rizicoles. Même dans les maisonnées non paysannes, il arrive souvent l'on en fasse pour être conservé comme provision de cuisine, surtout quand on est exigeant avec le choix et la qualité des poissons.'

12 Ce constat est recoupé par les résultats de la recherche en linguistique. Cf. Pou 1992. 13 Du point de vue linguistique, professeur Saveros Pou a relevé un seul emprunt aux langues de l'Inde, en l'occurrence au tamil : kari (curry) précisément, ce qui est très frappant quand on sait combien le vocabulaire khmer en général doit au sanskrit (Pou 1992). 14 Le num bonhchok, quel qu'en soit l'origine, est un mets extrêmement populaire, souvent vedette dans les repas des fêtes communautaires (chap. III, point 7). C'est la confection du vermicelle de riz, procédé très long et complexe, qui explique son absence dans le repas quotidien. Mais en milieu urbain, on peut en manger comme petit déjeuner dans les restaurants et autres buvettes des marchés et des rues. 15 Mention sera faite de ce village dans plusieurs endroits, dans divers chapitres. 16 Grosso modo de 1995 à 2005. 17 Cf., par exemple, chap. III, point 1, et VI, point 1. 18 Site de Teuk Chha, province de Kompong Cham. Cf. Cœdès 1951:166. 19 Vat Po Rong, province de Takéo. Cf. Cœdès 1954: 48. 20 Inscription de Ta Prohm, stances XVII- XLI. Cf. Cœdès 1906:75. 21 Piper longum. L'appellation khmère actuelle est *dey pley*, de *tipali* (ou "poivre du Bengale", cf. Paulin 1808 : 473). La forme classique sanskrite est *pippali* (Cf. Monier-Williams). 22 En général : Piper longum. 23 Cf. chap. V, point 2.1, note 17. 24 Cf. chap. I, point 6.25 Marica, prononcé *mrec*. 26 Pelliot 1951 : 27. Le poivre sauvage se trouve encore en milieu forestier. Sur les Kulèn, un lieu-dit bien connu des archéologues, en particulier des céramologues, porte le nom de Thnol Mrech, ou "Digue du poivre", en raison de l'importante présence de cette plante. 27 Cf. Cœdès 1952 : 200. 28 K. 207, temple de Vat Basét, 11^{ème} siècle. Cf. Cœdès 1951 : 20. 29 Emprunt peut-être tardif, pour ce dernier mot. 30 Leclère 1907 : 838. 31 *Ocinum Basilicum*. Voir l'appellation non altérée *pt-eah preou* au chap. I, point 1.9. 32 Le nom sanskrit est *tulasi*. Cf. Sinclair-Stevenson 1920 : 141, entre autres. 33 Cf. *KhmeRenaissance*, rubrique 6, n° 54. 34 Pelliot proposait d'y voir le tamarinier (ompil) Pelliot 1951 : 30. 35 Cf.. aussi Ang 2017.

2/ Maritime Trade Routes in Early Southeast Asia

Source: Kenneth Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia, 1985*



The map clearly shows how maritime constraints led the Spice Trade originating from India to transit through the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Javanese, with the growing importance of Malay- and Javanese-originated trade towards Southeast Asia. Naturally, these traders tended to give priority to spices originating from their own lands. Hence the predominance of *Galangal*, a mostly Southeast Asian spice, in the Cambodian *kroeng* ក្រឿង (spice mix).

While Indian trading was directly connected to pre-Siam polities in the Thailand area, and to important kingdoms such as Srivijaya in the south, the connection to Cambodia was mostly indirect, except in the 2d-4th centuries CE, when the Funan port of Oc Eo (south of modern Vietnam, earlier part of Cambodia) flourished as a trading post on the maritime route MiddleEast-NorthwestIndia-

SoutheastAsia-China, after the caravan routes across Central Asia had been disrupted by local conflicts.

For instance, various Roman medallions and coins dating back from the reign of Antoninus Prius, Marcus Aurelius' predecessor, have been unearthed at Oc Eo. At around the same time, a commercial center developed at Ko-ying, in the Sunda Straits, and Malay seamen brought spices and forest products to Funan.

3/ Spices and Khmer Kings: From Ritual Offerings to Commercial Items

From Kenneth Hall, op. cit.

Changes in regional trends

“It is unlikely that the same group of sailors made the complete journey from the Middle East to China or vice versa, in part due to the seasonal nature of the monsoon winds, which were critical to navigation. Westerly winds from the southern Indian Ocean begin in April and peak in July. In January the wind flow reverses direction as the northeastern monsoons bring easterly winds. This means that voyagers had to wait at certain points until the next season’s winds could take them to their destinations. Because the complete transit from one end of the route to the other was not possible within a single year, sailors found it expedient to travel only one sector of the route.

“One group would make the trip between Middle Eastern ports and India, and another made the Bay of Bengal voyage to the Isthmus of Kra, where their goods were transported across the isthmus and shipped from the Gulf of Thailand to the lower Vietnam coast. There commodities from the West were exchanged for those of the East. Another group of sailors then made the voyage from Funan to south China. By the time fleets arrived in Funan ports, those ships traveling the China leg of the route had already gotten underway.

“Initially no local Southeast Asian products were exported from Funan’s ports. During this second-and third-century era a second commercial zone emerged in the Java Sea region. This Java Sea network was chiefly involved with the flow of gharuwood, sandalwood, and spices such as cloves among the Lesser Sunda Islands, the Moluccas, the eastern coast of Borneo, Java, and the southern coast of Sumatra. The development of a commercial center, known in Chinese records as Ko-ying, on the northern edge of the Sunda Strait region, was critical in connecting the riches of the Java Sea region with the international route. (...) A Sunda Strait entrepot offered easy access to Funan and its international clientele.

“Malay sailors initiated the transport of spices from Ko-ying to Funan. They also began to supplement Eastern and Western products with products from the forests of the Indonesian archipelago. Ko-ying well represents the indigenous response to the

potential for trade provided by the new maritime activities. By the early fifth century the southern Sumatra coast assumed an additional importance, due in part to Java Sea spices. (...)

“The destruction of Śrīvijaya’s hegemony also allowed the reemergence of the southern Vietnam coast as a commercial power, as coastal centers in the Cham domain became more prominent ports of call on the way to China. The relationship of the plain-based and internally focused Javanese state to the outside world changed radically during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. (...) Expansion of the state’s agricultural base allowed the dramatic political expansion of the Khmer state during the tenth and eleventh centuries.”

A Commercial Empire

“By the first half of the eleventh century Khmer monarchs had pushed their control to the west into the Chao Phraya Valley of present-day Thailand and toward the Isthmus of Kra of the Malay Peninsula. While tenth-century Khmer political interests had been directed toward the eastern portion of the realm, Sūryavarman I reversed this pattern with his activities in the west. Sūryavarman’s extension of Khmer authority into the Lopburi region had strong economic implications, for control of the lower Chao Phraya provided access to international commerce at Tambraliṅga, the Chaiya-Suratthani area of southern Thailand, giving the Khmers a more direct contact with the international trade routes than had previously been the case.

“Merchants active in the Khmer domain shared in this prosperity and these accomplishments. There are over twenty specific references to merchant activity in the Khmer realm during the period from the reign of Harṣavarman I (922) to that of Harṣavarman III (1071). Most of these are concentrated in Sūryavarman’s reign, as the new commercial opportunities available from the extension of Khmer administrative control into the region north of the Dangrek mountain range and into the former Dvāravatī area of central Thailand in the west resulted in the development of new commercial networks. Although the Khmer state was an inland wet-rice state, anything useful to the economic strength of the realm was encouraged. Thus, Sūryavarman himself took an active role in furthering Khmer commercial aspirations.”

“(...) Although the inscriptions record surveys of commercial activity by royal agents, there is no evidence of merchants being heavily taxed. 12 A strong king such as Sūryavarman benefited merchants’ activity by establishing standards of weights and measures. In return, Khmer kings expected certain services, in reality a form of taxation, such as those performed by the merchants who are named in the epigraphy. “Donations” to temples by royal subordinates were encouraged by the Khmer government. Worship services at “central temples,” in which the state took a particular interest, required that scented woods, spices, gold and silver, and cloth goods be presented to the deity. As indicated in the epigraphy, these were acquired from merchants; in return the merchants were reimbursed with land, buffaloes, rice, jewelry, and “slaves.” (...)

“The Khmer state under Sūryavarman developed administrative mechanisms for the extraction of revenues. The epigraphic evidence examined reflects the incorporation of merchants into this revenue collection process. Most notably, merchants became official members of the state’s administration, which bestowed upon them official status as members of a district chief’s retinue or that of the king himself. (...) Khmer kings came to recognize the benefits to be derived from commerce—directly via the flow of goods to their court and indirectly from the prosperity generated by the developing marketing system that encouraged local production and in the end, owing to the king’s right to receive set percentages of local production, brought additional revenues to the treasury. Sūryavarman appears to have been especially perceptive of the contributions that commerce and the activities of merchants made to the economic well-being of his state.

“(...) Mapping shows that commercial communication generally followed the river systems of the Khmer domain. The main routes radiate out from the Khmer core around the Tonle Sap. In the eastern part of the empire a major commercial route followed the Sen River north to Prāḥ Vihār. From this point goods were carried across the Dangrek range to commercial centers in the area of the Bān Thāt Thong inscription. This zone also had contacts with the Mekong communication network. (...) Phimai, which ranks with Lopburi in its importance to the Khmer, was the center for regional government in the northwest. The integration of both areas into the Khmer empire was initiated by Sūryavarman and communication between the two western centers, made by overland transport, was desirable for its economic as well as for its political potential. The development of such communication and exchange networks aided Sūryavarman’s efforts to integrate these outlying territories into his domain.

Increasing Competition with Java on the Global Trade Level

“(...) Control of Lopburi gave the Khmers direct access to the trade routes of the Isthmus of Kra. The Chaiya-Suratthani area, which was known as “Tāmbraḷiṅga” (*Tan-liu-mei*) to the Chinese, was an important commercial center. Mahāyāna Buddhist votive tablets of similar style and dating to the tenth and eleventh centuries have been found between Chaiya and Lopburi, indicating if not a cultural contact between the two areas, then at least communication. (...) Archaeological research on the Malay Peninsula demonstrates that Takuapa was the terminus of the Arab-Persian trade until the mid-eleventh century, when it was shifted to the Kedah coast. “Kalāh,” as Middle Eastern seamen called the Isthmus of Kra region of the western Malay Peninsula coast, was the center of this Arab-Persian trade, while Śrīvijaya-Palembang was the center of China trade. Kalāh’s ability to handle the trade of two worlds was the source of its importance. The Arabs knew it as a place where a large amount of profit could be made, a fact reflected in the quantity and quality of artifacts found there. A Khmer presence in the Suratthani area would have thus given the mainland commercial networks further access to the international China market as well as this Western market of Persian and Indian goods. (...) Such a direct interaction with the international routes no doubt was viewed as an asset to the internal development of the Khmer economy in Sūryavarman’s time.

“Thus Sūryavarman attempted to establish regular commercial intercourse with the south Indian Chola state and the Ly state that was based in the Red River Delta of Vietnam. Sūryavarman appears to have been especially intent upon establishing a flow of trade from south Indian ports to the Southeast Asian mainland via the Isthmus of Kra and Suratthani area. Goods could then have been transported north from the isthmus to Lopburi, where they would have followed the two exchange networks that evolved in Sūryavarman’ s reign. The first entered the royal heartland in the Sisophon area; the second encompassed the region north of the Dangrek mountain range, with a link to the core at Prāḥ Vihār and a possible connection to the Mekong River in the east.

“(…) Under Sūryavarman’s rule the commercial economy of the Khmer state achieved such importance that the upper Malay Peninsula receded from the patterns of power and trade in the island world and was drawn into those of the mainland. The contacts of this area came to Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia not with the international trade route but with a more local route that went across the Bay of Bengal to south India and Sri Lanka.

“(…) In the twelfth century Southeast Asia’s spices were becoming popular in Europe; the cure for all sorts of ailments was sought in mixtures of pepper, ginger, cinnamon, sugar, cloves, and especially nutmeg. Furthermore, Southeast Asian spices were useful as flavoring for meats that were increasingly a part of the European diet. By the thirteenth century this Western demand had greatly enhanced the commercial importance of Southeast Asia as a source of trade goods in Western eyes and as the source of valuable spices in particular. The name Java became synonymous in the West with spices; to Javanese ports came Western traders whose bases were spread throughout southern India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia.”

4/ Khmer Cuisine Vocabulary, by Saverous Pou

in Selected papers on Khmerology (Choix d' articles de khmerologie), Reyum, Phnom Penh, 2003, 488 p, pp 343-353. First publication: Kambodschanische Kultur 4, 1992, Berlin.

“In Old Khmer texts, one comes across some Sanskrit words all right connected with food, but a) they are nouns, and b) they referred to sacred food among offerings to the gods. In other words, their adoption answered a specific purpose, and in all likelihood they were not used by Khmer speakers at large. It is more worthy to note that, even in that context, not a single Indian verb (Sanskrit, Prakrit or Dravidian) occurred in epigraphic texts, and predictably none of the nominal loanwords has survived.

“In later times, one word became current in Khmer culture, with both name and referent, i.e. kari designating the Indian type of curry. It was very likely borrowed from Tamil, and has been used ever since as a noun exclusively. **In brief, during twenty centuries of association with the Indian culture, Khmer has borrowed only one word from Tamil along with one type of food, i.e. "the Indian curry."**

CHART 1
COOKED FOOD : LIQUID

Words	Heat	Mode	Materials	Engl. Transl.
ṭām /dam/ (K.)	Any cooker (stove, hot plate, ...)	Plain water	Water, rice, medicinal stuffs	To boil, cook, make porridge
āha /sṃaə/ (K.)	Any cooker	Water, slightly seasoned	Fish, meat, egg, sea-food + a little vegetables	To boil, make broth
sā /sɔtə/ (K.)	Any cooker	Water + many condiments, boiled into thick soup	Fish, meat, + lots of vegetables	To stew, concoct, make a curry
chūn /chəŋ/ (C.)	Boiling water	Poured on ingredients	Tea-leaves and the like	To brew

[Read the paper in Angkor Database.](#)

5/ ‘Indians in Southeast Asia: Sojourners, Settlers Diaspora’

by Dr. Amba Pande, self-published from a research for ICCR, 2018.

Excerpt: “The contacts between India and Southeast Asia since the early times were dominantly characterised by circular migrations, which prevailed almost till the mid-20th century. The Encyclopedia of Indian Diaspora records that the change in the world economy after the 16th century further propelled this process. The large Indian trading settlements strewn along the arc of coasts around the Bay of Bengal witnessed a much more intensive and widespread circulation of people, goods, ideas, cultures and texts from coast to coast, rendering the boundaries fluid. As Sunil S. Amrith (2009: 556) points out, “the sheer scale of movement evoked a sense of continuity between the two coasts of the Bay of Bengal turning it into a cross road rather than a barrier”. The Oriya festival, ‘Bali Jatra’, bears testimony of regular journeys across the sea that shaped the socio-cultural landscape of coastal Odisha. The traffic of overcrowded vessels, loaded with traders, boatmen, labourers, syces, watermen, hawkers and domestic servants, voyaging across the Bay of Bengal, were so brisk that it invoked official concerns and regulatory measures by the British Government.”

[Read the paper in Angkor Database.](#)

6/ Pepper and Power: Chinese Port Colonies and Khmer, Siam and Vietnamese rivalries

SAKURAI Yumio and KITAGAWA Takako, 'Ha Tien or Banteay Meas in the Time of the Fall of Ayutthaya', in From Japan to Arabia: Ayutthaya's Maritime Relations with Asia, ed. Kennon Breazele, Toyota Thailand Foundation, 1999, Bangkok.

This detailed study of Cambodian, Vietnamese and Siamese sources depicts the power struggles around the southern maritime façade in the Mekong Delta during the 18th and early 19th centuries. Commercial 'principalities', often led by local Chinese rulers, saw the military rivalries between Siamese, Vietnamese and Khmer kings as an opportunity to gain more leeway. However, note the authors, *"after the fall of Ayutthaya, because of the confused situation in the kingdoms along these coastlines, the port polities were able to assert greater independence and expand their territories. The progress of this trend was halted by the two big states that emerged at the end of eighteenth century as the result of state consolidation: the Siam of Thonburi and Bangkok, and the Vietnam of the Tay Son and Nguyen rulers. International trade in this period came under the control of the state in the form of royal monopolies. The history of Ha Tien should be regarded as a typical case of the rise and fall of Chinese port polities between the post- "Age of Commerce" and the precolonial stage of history."*

Note: While it has been supposed that the famous Kampot Pepper originated from Kerala, South India, Chinese explorer Zhou Daguan mentioned pepper cultivation in Chenla (Cambodia) as early as the 13th century.

In Kampot, the modern era of intensive pepper production can be traced back to the 1870s, when the Sultan of Aceh, who did not want to leave his wealth to the Dutch enemies, burned his pepper plantations down in 1873. Part of the production then moved to Cambodia's Kampot region.



Kampot pepper (photo Michael Sullivan/NPR)

[Read the paper in Angkor Database.](#)