

# Say Phouthang: Memories and Reflections of the Representative of Contemporary Thai-Cambodian Relations

Nathaporn Thaijongrak

**Abstract**—Say Phouthang is a Thai resident in Cambodia or "Thai Koh Kong" who has played an important role in Cambodian politics after the fall of Khmer Rouge. He was a highly respected by both Thais and Cambodians. He was a Vice President of the People's Republic of Cambodia. He supported Hun Sen as a prime minister because he sees leadership ability of Hun Sen to manage the country under 4 faction's circumstances. The purposes of this research are to study the role of Say on the political events of Cambodia and Thailand and to understand the history between Trat and Koh Kong provinces which Say was involved as "Thai two lands man" by using historical research methodology from primary and secondary sources. The research shown that the role of Say and Thai Koh Kong movement, it contributed to strengthening Thai - Cambodian relations during international politics conflicts especially during the peace process in Cambodia. The "Thai two lands man" still has a close relationship as reflecting a good memory through Say.

**Index Terms**—Say Phouthang, Thai, cambodia, relations

## I. INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Thailand and Cambodia dates to the ancient time. In the memories of Thai and Cambodian people, they always remember about wars such as Siamese Attacked on Angkor Before 1430 or King Naresuan of Siam in Ayutthaya period conquered Longvek, the capital of Cambodia kingdom in 1593. This conquest marked a downturn in the kingdom fortunes. In the historical period that followed, Cambodia became a pawn in a power struggle between its two increasingly powerful neighbors: Siam (ancient name of Thailand) and Vietnam.

The relations between Thailand and Cambodia in contemporary period always show the series of conflicts especially the demarcation of borders under French colonialism. Moreover, the situation after World War II in Southeast Asia made more tensions between two countries. As the Cold War spread, Cambodia found itself facing resistance supported by the two neighboring countries. Norodom Sihanouk as a Prime Minister of Cambodia insisted on the fact that Cambodia is a victim of the non-recognition of its borders by its neighbors, this refusal to recognize its borders is even accompanied by claims affecting border villages, coastal islands, and ancient temples. Cambodia as a victims of conspiracies fomented against the Khmer State,

victims of bombardments by aviation and helicopters including mines laid in the border area, inhabitants, guards, and soldiers are beaten or assassinated. Cambodia is also a victim of its neighboring country, Thailand, which is pushing for increasingly serious bilateral conflict in this period. This result appears in Preah Vihear dispute - the long-standing rift has previously led to clashes between the two nations which both lay claim to the land and hate speeches between the medias and the leaders of two countries: Norodom Sihanouk and Marechal Sarit Thanarat. Following the coup fomented by Prince Sirik Matak and General Lon Nol with American help on March 18, 1970 was enough to put an end to the power that Prince Sihanouk, who was abroad, had been detained for fifteen years. Cambodia has entered completely into the Civil War between the republican government and communism. It is worth analyzing Thai foreign policy towards Cambodia which has changed enormously during this period. Thailand started little conflict with Cambodia. Soon after, relations between Cambodia and Thailand became cooperative again, as did relations between the United States and Cambodia.

The fighting in the Civil War reached its peak on April 17, 1975, when the Lon Nol regime was defeated by the Khmer Rouge under the leadership of Pol Pot. They established the government of Democratic Kampuchea (DK). For four nightmarish years, the Khmer Rouge led to the extermination and destruction of the state and the citizens. From 1975 to 1979, populations were displaced throughout the country, religion and all the values of society before 1970 were overturned. Groups of people, members of the same family, gathered yesterday, find themselves face to face as enemies by the decision of the leaders. Approximately 1 and 2 million people were massacred or worked to death in forced labor. The radical vision of the Khmer Rouge transformed the country into an agrarian Marxist society and led to the elimination of the professional and technical classes from the country. On 28 January 1977, some 300 Khmer Rouge soldiers crossed the border into Thailand and attacked three Thai villages, 30 people were killed. Thai ministry of Foreign Affairs published book about the truth of this incident.

A new type of war began on December 25, 1978, a war between two communist countries. The relations between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and Democratic Kampuchea have however deteriorated over the border skirmishes to turn into open war. After years of violent Khmer Rouge attacks on villages in Vietnam, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia, and Phnom Penh in early January 1979 and overthrew the communist regime they had helped to seize power over three years earlier. At the end of this month, the Vietnamese

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Nathaporn Thaijongrak is with Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand.

\*Correspondence: nathaporn@g.swu.ac.th (N.T).

people's armies control every provincial town in Cambodia. The day after the liberation of Phnom Penh, a new regime was proclaimed called the People's Republic of Kampuchea (RPK). Heng Samrin became the Head of State and Chairman of the Council of the People's Republic which acted as a government. The RPK government is guided by Vietnamese military and civilian advisers and the regime itself was set up along typically communist lines.

However, this regime, born of a foreign military intervention, is not recognized by the international community especially Thailand and ASEAN. Thailand changed policy to support Khmer Rouge to fight for liberate Cambodia from Vietnam. However, the internal political situation in Cambodia can solve by United Nations cooperate with ASEAN's Nations for living with coexistence and bring peace to Cambodia with the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia. The series of conflicts seems to be over but in 2003 happened Phnom Penh Riots which reflect the fluid historical relationship between Thailand and Cambodia, as well as the economic, cultural, and political factors involving the two countries.

From the conflicting relationship situation, border areas are involved in every political events especially in Thai - Cambodian border provinces such as Koh Kong and Trat. In addition, all border provinces, the identity of the Thai ethnic group in Cambodia that can still maintain its identity is Thai people in Koh Kong, Cambodian People's call "Siem- Koh Kong (Thai - Koh Kong)". This is different from other Cambodian territories that were under Thai rules. Moreover, this group has been involved in politics in Cambodia since World War II. One of the people who is most respected by Thai people in Koh Kong and Trat who can be considered the leader of the Thai people is Say Phouthang. The research will help raise awareness about the role of the Thai - Koh Kong movement in contributing to strengthening Thai - Cambodian relations in an era of conflict contexts international politics. It also gives insight into the local history of Koh Kong and Trat that, to this day, they still have a close relationship through the role of Say as a representative that reflects the good relationship between the two countries which is different from general perception of a full of war and conflict in the past.

## II. BACKGROUND

Koh Kong is a province the present-day in Kingdom of Cambodia which in the past (1795 – 1904) it was under Siamese rules. King Mongkut was given the name of this province as "Patchan Khiri Khet". France and the Siamese government of King Chulalongkorn came to sign the Franco-Siamese Convention of February 13, 1904. According to this, the Siamese government ceded the border territories to France for Laos, in return for the departure of French troops from Chanthaburi, under the terms of the Convention of October 3, 1893. French troops continued to occupy Trat, the neighboring province of Chanthaburi and its islands, including those of Koh Kong. Consequently, the province of Trat, its islands and Koh Kong remain under the domination of the French government. French returned Trat and exclude Koh Kong to Thailand on 23 March 1907, according to the Franco-Siamese Treaty, in exchange for

larger areas along the Mekong River (Battambang, Siemreap and Sisophon) because almost entirely Thai population was hard to rule. After the transfer of Koh Kong to Cambodia, the number of Siamese living in this region migrated to Siam. Most of the emigrants were part of elites or were civil servants: district chief, judge, etc. Those who are not moved, even though the Siamese and French governments were giving them then the possibility, are those who did not want to leave their house and separate of their farm [1].

During World War II, especially in 1940. In the incident in which Thailand demanded the return of territories from France and has expanded into an Indochina dispute, there were many immigrants, and the district officials were properly notified. Thai authorities helped including offered clothing, food, tools for occupation due to urgent immigration. Many did not want to be soldiers in the French Indochina Army to fight against Thailand [2]. This event causing clashes along the border Thailand got the territory back from the help of Japan. In which the land transfer from France was not included in the city of "Patchan Khiri Khet". Although during that time the Thais had clashed with the French in a naval battle not far from Koh Chang, but the matter of Koh Kong was not mentioned in any negotiations. The incident made the Thai Koh Kong people desperate to return to the territory of the Kingdom of Thailand. Many people migrated to Trat, Koh Kood and Khlong Yai. After the war, some groups stayed in Thailand, where the Thai government granted Thai citizenship to those groups while some groups migrated back to Koh Kong.

After Cambodian Independent, Koh Kong returned to Cambodia and was established as a province in 1959. However, Thai ethnics still lived in this area called "Thai Koh Kong" or "Thai two lands man". "Thai Koh Kong" key leader always plays important role in Contemporary Cambodian History such as Tea Banh (Deputy Prime Minister of Cambodia), Cha Rieng (Former Director General of the National Bank of Cambodia) but the most important Thai Koh Kong leader was Say Phouthang. He involved in many political events in Cambodia History.

## III. METHODS

The method used in this research is the qualitative research. The research instrument used historical methods by collecting information from primary and secondary sources in Thai, Khmer, French and English languages, then to analysis process.

## IV. RESULTS

Say Phouthang or well known as "Uncle Say" was a Cambodian of Thai descent or "Thai Koh Kong". He was born when Koh Kong aka "Patchan Khiri Khet" was under Thailand's domination. In 1907, after Cambodia took over Koh Kong, he and his family moved to Khlong Yai at Trat Province. Say Phouthang later returned to Cambodia and played an influential role during the most turbulent years of Cambodia's recent history.

After World War II with the wave of nationalism in French Indochina, Cambodian nationalist created Khmer Issarak

groups for fighting France for independence with the helps from Thailand and Vietnam. At that time, the Khmer Issarak group at Koh Kong was formed with objective for “liberate Cambodia from France”. This organization expanded the network to every village, there are leaders of soldiers and finance. Issarak group can control nearly all Koh Kong territories. Their cadres can speak Thai fluently for convenience to communication and trust [3], Uncle Say joined this organization as well, it was a first time for him to start career as a fighter. Cha Rieng mentioned his name as a leader of this Issarak Koh Kong [2]. According to historian Margaret Slocomb’s *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea* – which detailed the regime which ran Cambodia in the 1980s – Phouthang fought French colonial forces as a Khmer Issarak commander before gaining training and studying Marxism-Leninism in Vietnam [4].

However, Issarak group got an internal trouble. The conflict caused a stir. People were paranoid, as the war between France and the Viet Minh in Vietnam intensified and ended in the defeat of France leading to Cambodia’s independence in 1954. The 1954 Geneva Agreement stipulated that Vietnam would be divided into two countries and a demilitarized zone was established by allowing both sides to withdraw their troops back into their territories. This caused most of the party Issarak veterans take refuge in Vietnam to evade repression from the Sihanouk government because Sihanouk accused two political blocs are infiltrating Cambodian territory and trying to destroy Cambodia’s policy of neutrality: the Khmer Serei (Free Khmers, mostly former Khmer Issarak veterans) and the Khmer Rouge who militate for communism (Khmer-Vietminh).

As expected, The Thais who decided to stay in Koh Kong suffered a lot of political and cultural discrimination after the era of French colonization. In the period of Sangkum Reastr Niyum, Koh Kong people do not go to school. Around the 1950s, it was forbidden by Cambodian officials that the Thai inhabitants in Koh Kong speak Thai in public. Thai language, however, has been secretly taught by Thai monks at the temple and was spoken only at home. In addition, it was forbidden to read Thai books, and even to keep Thai books at home [3]. Thai Koh Kong who spoke Thai were fined 50 reals, the more they spoke, the more they were fined. Thai people in Koh Kong are like orphans without a father. Say Phouthang and his wife remind “Cambodian government was afraid to be Thai. They, therefore forced us not to speak Thai and also not to study Thai. They want us to be Khmer, those who refuse to abide by will be killed. In the Sihanouk era there were no more kills left. Like my birth village Nabad is a village in Sao Thong Subdistrict, only 3 families survived”. Khmer officials monitored the behavior of Thai Koh Kong so that they did not practice Thai traditions. Thai-Ko-Kong opposed to Khmer politics were called “Thai heads” by the Khmers [5]”

Life of Thai inhabitants in Koh Kong was even more difficult during the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple affair (1959-1962). The Thai-Ko-Kong were then often suspected of being spies in the pay of Thailand. Many Thai Koh Kong people have been unjustly accused and punished, sometimes even killed, after accusations by Khmer officials. For the most part, these Thai Koh Kong died after being accused of being rebels [6]. In

1965, Norodom Sihanouk announced that Communist documents were found in Koh Kong and some were in Thai language [7]. This made the situation in Koh Kong even worse.

When General Lon Nol made coup d’état in 1970 supported by United States, although the suppression was reduced due to the good relations with the United States linked to Thailand, but the struggle of the Thai Koh Kong people continues because Lon Nol seemed to apply Thai discrimination policy in the future. They call themselves as “Thai Koh Kong groups”, They were not communists, but they focused for fight from oppression. At that time Say returned to Koh Kong in 1970, He was member of Thai Koh Kong groups with partner the Khmer Rouge military, which would soon overthrow the Marshal Lon Nol government [8].

However, the distrust of the Khmer Rouge army grew more and more troops deployed to Koh Kong in 1974. In the end, the Khmer Rouge had seized all power from the Thai Koh Kong, controlling the use of consumer goods that Thai Koh Kong has accumulated by deceitfully summoning the leaders of Thai Koh Kong to meet and kill them [3]. Say was the military leader at Koh Kong in this event. From being a group with link of Khmer Rouge fighters, it has changed to the opposite side, he refuges in Thai territory and stayed at Cardamon mountains near Thai border along with building strongholds and organizing troops.

He spent most of the Khmer Rouge period in Thailand or along the border. Say was introduced to Thai military officers, including General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and General Vichit Yathip. At the time, the Thai military was helping supply the Khmer faction in Koh Kong fighting to undermine Pol Pot but was among the first to rebel against Pol Pot. In 1975 – 1976, Khmer Rouge attacked Trat border with cooperation Thai communist party, Uncle Say stayed at Koh Kong for defend Klong Yai. In the Pol Pot period, many people of Koh Kong fled to Thailand and got some help from Thai people. The Trat provincial government allowed them to live at Khlong Yai or with siblings in Trat, anyone who knows someone, let them stay. Therefore, the people of Koh Kong and Khlong Yai are like people from the same village all along.

When conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia was happened, Vietnam sent message to “Thai Koh Kong” group and promise to discuss with Thai Koh Kong, which migrated along the Thai - Cambodian border. Thai Koh Kong resolved to secretly send Say to Vietnam as he had fought closely with Vietnam since the Khmer Issarak and the Indochina Communist Party used to live in Vietnam for a while. Thai Koh Kong group (Anti-Khmer Rouge group in Thailand) was one of the five partners of National United Front for National Salvation, Solidarity and Liberation of Cambodia. [9] After the anti-Khmer Rouge group received aid from Vietnam until they overthrew the Khmer Rouge on January 7, 1979. People in Koh Kong do not forget to thank Vietnam. If there is no Vietnamese, they can’t liberate. Uncle Say said “Our army is only 3 small battalions, the Khmer Rouge has 27 battalions, so Vietnam’s arrival is truly a liberation” [5].

Before the Pol Pot era, there were 70,000 people. After the liberation in 1979, 15,000 people returned. Koh Kong Province after the liberation, there were 21 houses left. It was released for more than a month and still couldn’t find any

people. At that time, there were 3 houses around Plak Klong, with no lids. Koh Kapi originally had 500 houses on the island, and only one left on the island [5]. After the liberation, among the Khmer faction's war, the island was not closed because this relationship has been around since ancient times. Koh Kong will be Cambodia, but we are the blood of Thai people. On the other hand, Thai and Khmer people have the same traditions and culture.

Uncle Say has played an important role in Cambodian politics after the fall of Khmer Rouge. At that time, Say is regarded as one of the five-highest most influential figures in the politburo of the Cambodian People's Revolutionary Party. He was influential member of the country's government in the 1980s. He was both the political politburo and the party's central committee responsible for all personnel as a person who manages the division of duties in the Cambodian government at that time. Gottesman wrote, "Brought back to Phnom Penh by Vietnamese agents in the spring of 1979, Say Phouthang served as a member of the Politburo and as chair of the Central Organization Committee of the Party. Following the arrest of Pen Sovan in December 1981, Say Phouthang was perhaps the most powerful Cambodian leader."

More importantly, he played a vital role in choosing Hun Sen as prime minister. Hun Sen came into the picture after prime minister Chan Sy died in late 1984. The central committee had to elect a new prime minister. Heng Samrin asked Say for advice. Say Phouthang pointed to Hun Sen, who was foreign minister at that time. The rest of the central committee members agreed. "Say Phouthang viewed that Hun Sen was more qualified due to his youth and leadership. Hun Sen was only 32 years old," he said. "Hun Sen seems to be grateful to Say Phouthang for believing in him to this day. [8]" This party changes name as Cambodian People's Party ruled by Hun Sen.

## V. DISCUSSION

In the point of view of Uncle Say "Thai people in Koh Kong have never been happy. They were slave in the eyes of Cambodia. These circumstances forced them to stand up and fight for independence because in the past Thai Koh Kong people were like orphans. When they go to Thailand, they call them Khmer, when they return to Cambodia, they called us "Siem" or Thai. Thai people in Koh Kong have been a part of Cambodian history for a long time. After the liberation from the Khmer Rouge, the Koh Kong Thai people became more independent" [9]. Such memories reflected the painful wounds of being "Thai two lands man", it was causing them to rise to fight and get involved in national politics at a later time which is a major change in perception of Cambodian's government to Koh Kong.

After successfully overthrew the Khmer Rouge, the new government at Phnom Penh officially announced the endorsement of Thai people in Koh Kong province as minority in Cambodia. Thai was granted legitimate Cambodian people de jure equal rights with Cambodian people. All Thai people play an important role in salvaging Independence around the Koh Kong area since the beginning. Thai had been praised, and appointed to be high official in the government, both in Phnom Penh and local government.

Thus, Thai people in Koh Kong were proud as their Thai ancestors in Koh Kong had struggled through many fights, sacrificed their blood and lives since the Prachanta khirikhet province was taken over by France and Cambodia in 1904, including the French colonial era, the Sihanouk government, the Republic government, or the Khmer Rouge government Pol Pot. Thus, 7th of January 1988 was considered as the day that Thai people in Koh Kong stopped all fighting [5].

In the eyes of Say, He thought that Thai people of Koh Kong deserve this because Koh Kong has always been an oppressed area especially with the Thai people of Koh Kong who are insisted to fight which is different from the past. The attitude of Say, representing the Thai Koh Kong people to the government backed by Vietnam, is therefore positive, especially about giving opportunities for Thai people to work according to their abilities which is not limited to just the Ministry of Defense Bank President or Deputy Interior Minister. Cha Rieng reminisced that Uncle Say was the one who asked him for help in Phnom Penh's government. When Cambodia lacks human resources after the Khmer Rouge regime, it has to mobilize people to help restore strongly the country. From the role of Uncle Say put leading to the promotion of rights and freedoms of minorities in Cambodia, the total number of central committees of the party is 50, of which 26 are ethnic minorities, the most active minority and the largest number at the leading level are Thai [10].

His influence began to recede in 1985, when he moved to the Party Inspection committee, With the ascendance of Hun Sen and Chea Sim, Say became less important and faced with declining health and spent more time in Thailand. He currently holds no official position, other than his seat on the politburo. For the past decade he had lived with a low-profile existence in Thailand. "Local people called him Uncle Say," said Jakkrit Waewkrai hong, a Trat-based reporter. "People in Khlong Yai know who he was. We treated him like any other senior local." He added that it was normal to see this senior Cambodian politician walking around Khlong Yai because of the ancestral connections, adding they can speak Thai.

Prime Minister Hun Sen confirmed the 96-year-old's death in a Facebook post calling Phouthang one of the CPP's "main heroes who sacrificed everything to liberate the country from the Khmer Rouge regime" [11]. Following the Khmer Rouge's toppling, Phouthang was "unarguably the most influential leader of the PRK" though the party elder's influence began to wane as the decade continued and powerbases surrounding Hun Sen and late party president Chea Sim grew stronger.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Say was the best-known Thai leader in Cambodia. He died on June 13 at the age of 96. The large number of dignitaries at his crowded funeral reflected his influence over Cambodian politics. His memories and experiences in battle that illustrate a Thai minority in Cambodia, leading to a good relationship between Thailand and Cambodia beyond the context of the conflict. This case of Say also leads to awareness of the promotion of equality among the Thai Koh Kong people in Cambodia as well.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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