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John Tully, *France on the Mekong: A History of the Protectorate in Cambodia, 1863-1953*. Lanham-New York-Oxford: University Press of America, 2002. xi-xxvi + 562 pp. Glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$77.00 U.S. (pb.) ISBN 0-7618-2431-6.

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A visitor to Cambodia in search of an understanding of its peoples and history is confronted with seemingly conflicting images evoked by Angkor Wat and Tuol Seng. The ancient temples of the Angkor period, most of which lie in ruins, exude a tranquil spirituality that contrasts sharply with the representations of organized violence that line the walls of what used to be the most notorious prison in Democratic Kampuchea. How could a people once considered to be peace-loving and docile erupt into the incomprehensible bloodletting of 1970s? Was the Cambodian genocide *sui generis*, or did it, as one historian has claimed, share with other genocides structural similarities connected to the categories of nation and race.[1] Although John Tully does not set out to answer these questions, his detailed history of Cambodia during the French protectorate brings them into clearer focus.

France on the Mekong is a straightforward narrative that traces the political and social developments of Cambodia under French rule. Tully's well-researched and comprehensive treatment of the subject may well contribute to retrieving narrative history from the doldrums to which it has been relegated of late. It is readable, engaging, and full of the sort of detail that will make it a valuable reference for students of French colonization in Southeast Asia.

The relationship between France and Cambodia, Tully argues, was a Faustian bargain in which Cambodia sold its soul for French protection from internecine struggles and outside incursions. The ensuing arrangement, sanctioned by the treaty of August 11, 1863, was a legal fiction as Cambodia was not so much a protectorate as a *de facto* colony. For Tully the colonial era was a "discrete" period of Cambodian history, with three well-defined stages. The first, or "heroic," phase extends from 1863 to the death of King Norodom in 1904. The second encompasses the reigns of Sisowath (1904-29) and Monivong (1927-41) and constitutes the "halcyon days" of colonial rule, while the last, from 1941 to 1953, was distinguished by the rising star of Norodom Sihanouk against a backdrop of colonial decline and eventual decolonization.

The book starts with a three-page sweep of the past, focusing on the empires that shaped Cambodia and France to the mid-nineteenth century. The ensuing twenty-five chapters are a blow-by-blow account of the establishment, evolution, and demise of the protectorate. In the early chapters Tully explores the reasons for French incursion into Cambodia, pointing to France's use of gunboat diplomacy to secure the Mekong, which the French believed was the river route to China. When they later discovered their error they were no longer inclined to withdraw. Other important factors in his estimation were religion and the campaign to abolish slavery. French Catholic missionaries hoped to establish a "Christian empire" in Asia and Napoleon III, mindful of the need for support from his Catholic constituents and encouraged by his devout wife, included in the 1863 treaty the recognition of Catholicism as an approved religion (p.18). The abolition of slavery in 1848 provided a convenient justification for French imperial designs. The French saw slavery as an inefficient form of labor and a morally undesirable institution and made its abolition a central tenet of their interpretation of the *mission civilisatrice*.

As of its inception, the protectorate met with varying degrees of resistance, from obstruction to French designs to outright rebellion. Even Norodom, who, Tully argues, was sufficiently Francophile to contribute generously to France's reparation payments to Germany after the Franco-Prussian war, obstructed French attempts at change. Although sporadic revolts started as early as 1866, the most noteworthy for its impact both in Cambodia and France was the "Great Rebellion" of 1885. It was organized by Si Votha, Norodom's half-brother, whose twin aims were to rid the country of the French and grab the crown for himself. Like the "Great Kabyle Rebellion" in Algeria, it caught the French by surprise and quickly developed into an all-out war. The Franco-Cambodian war of 1885-86, Tully surmises, is one of the little known disasters of the colonial period, leaving large areas of the countryside in ruins and thousands dead. In Cambodia it increased the level of resentment against French occupation and set the tone for

ethnic relations throughout the colonial period, whereas in France the atrocities of the war provided ammunition for the anti-colonial lobby. What became increasingly obvious, as Tully rightly points out, was that the Third Republic lacked any inclination to export democracy to its colonies.

By 1887, when Cambodia was integrated into the Union Indochinoise, French control over the protectorate was complete and Norodom, for all his passive resistance to the reforms the French considered necessary, was little more than a puppet. In spite of the continued erosions by the French of the political power of the monarchy, Tully claims that for the first forty years of the protectorate Khmer society remained essentially intact.

With the death of Norodom in 1904 and the advent of Sisowath, who, Tully states, “might almost [have been] a Frenchman,” the French started to apply their newly formulated doctrine of *mise en valeur* to the protectorate. With Sisowath’s cooperation a series of reforms were undertaken geared to put more land into the hands of the French and impose stricter control over the government. It was these reforms that disrupted the economic and political structures of Khmer society with such benefits as there were accruing to the French and, to a lesser degree, the Cambodian elites.

The alliance between the French and the elites was, of course, to the detriment of the workers and peasants, and Tully describes the development of rural resistance and its sporadic eruptions into violence. Whether large-scale revolts or minor agitations, these outbursts were nearly always repressed with incommensurate harshness, as indeed was the case in most other French territories when trouble occurred. Rural discontent was largely due to the taxes and *corvées* imposed to finance colonial activities. During the “1916 Affair,” one of the high points of this type of agitation, the peasants drew up an eight-point charter in which they claimed redress for their grievances. Tully points to the uniformity of the peasants’ demands throughout the country and suggests the involvement of Buddhist monks in creating the necessary information networks that led to such unity of purpose.

In an otherwise socio-political analysis, Tully devotes one chapter to the socio-cultural activities of the French, bracketing together health, education, and the restoration of Angkor as the essential elements of the *mission civilisatrice*. He stresses the neglect of education and health in Cambodia compared both to other parts of French Indochina and to other colonial powers. He suggests that the failings, and possibly even the tragedies, of the post-independence era could in some measure be attributed to France’s failure to develop an educated middle class and a skilled proletariat (p. 228). As for the preservation of Angkor, Tully argues that it was “a labor of love that transcended economic interests or imperial power politics” (p. 217). It was French pressure on Siam that led to the transfer of sovereignty over Angkor and its surrounds to Cambodia in 1907. In accounting for French attachment to Angkor, Tully eschews the tourism theory as the primary motive, pointing out that although it initially did generate such interest, and hence revenue, by 1939 tourism had dried up. Ironically, the French preservation of Angkor was ultimately to serve the Khmer nationalists, who used it as their national symbol.

Tully also points to French encouragement of Khmer arts, crafts, and other cultural activities as a factor in undermining their power by providing the Cambodians with a strong sense of their identity. Although he endorses Penny Edwards’ thesis that Cambodian nationalism had its roots in the cultural context, Tully does not neglect its political dimension.[2] His discussion of what he calls the “politics of envy” emphasizes the antipathy between the Khmers and the Vietnamese and the envy of the former for the latter. He disagrees with Wilfred Burchett’s claim that such feelings did not exist between the two ethnicities prior to French arrival, pointing out that “divide and rule” was never a formal policy even if it was an informal practice.[3] Burchett, he adds, distorted the facts to score political points against French imperialism (p.242).

The interwar years are generally considered to be the “halcyon days” of French imperialism and, in Southeast Asia, the period when rubber became the mainstay of the colonial economy. Tully generally adheres to this line although he does point out that the “boom” of the Twenties was followed by a severe slump as the colonies succumbed to the prevailing trends of the Great Depression. If the colonialists and Cambodian elites suffered, the Cambodian people were even harder hit, for the plantation economy pushed them off their lands and created a highly exploited rural proletariat. This was also the time when the tentacles of French power gripped the hardest. It was, Tully states, “a dictatorship of [the] police and civil servants” with the authorities passing laws that were inconceivable in France or any other democracy (p. 292).

The death of King Monivong in 1941 and the accession to the throne of Norodom Sihanouk mark the beginning of French decline in the area. A year earlier Monivong had been caught off guard by France's rapid collapse, but Japan and Thailand had been enlightened as to the potential created by France's vulnerability. Although France retained its nominal hold on Indochina, Japan emerged as the real power in the area. The head of the French administration at the time, Admiral Decoux, who was fearful of the Japanese, was an ardent supporter of Vichy. He transformed an already authoritarian state into a quasi-Fascist regime, instigating anti-Jewish laws, requiring the Fascist salute at public events, launching the Khmer youth movement Yuvan, and filling the jails with dissidents of all kinds (pp. 365-7). Such initiatives fuelled resentment against the French and, in the case of Yuvan, provided the Khmers with their first real experience of mass politics and a sense of their own identity, a development that would eventually work against the French. When Decoux tried to introduce a Khmer *quoc ngu*[4], he was opposed by the monks and Sihanouk, who had hitherto accommodated most of France's demands. Sihanouk would eventually abolish Khmer *quoc ngu* following the Japanese *coup de force* of March 1945.

In the closing months of the war the Japanese overran Phnom Penh and asked Sihanouk to declare independence, which he did, changing the name of the country to Kampuchea. Paris had been liberated by this time, and the French government declared that it would grant "home rule" to Indochina once the war was over. As was so often the case, it was too little too late. Although the French regained control in their Indochinese territories, the ensuing eight years, until independence was finally wrested from France, were difficult ones. The war had destabilized the region and the period was marked by uprisings and anxiety as the war between the Vietminh and the French threatened to spill over into Cambodia. Tully traces the political and diplomatic events that would eventually suck the United States into the area once the French withdrew, pointing out that the one French achievement of the period was the return to Cambodia of Battambang and Siem Reap, the two provinces that had been taken over by Thailand during the war. By 1953 the war weary French had realized that withdrawal was almost inevitable and this, Tully tells us, in spite of certain U.S. cold warriors, such as Richard Nixon, suggesting the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons (p. 476).

The concluding chapter of the book, entitled "In the image of France?" examines the achievements and failures of the Protectorate period and contemplates the long-term impact on Cambodia of the French presence. We return, therefore, to the questions raised at the outset of this review. Tully's work demonstrates that the Cambodians were not the peace-loving people that they were so often made out to be. He argues that with the exception of a very brief period after 1945 the Cambodians had always had authoritarian governments. When the French withdrew Cambodia was still economically backward. They had made no effort to industrialize the country nor had they encouraged the emergence of a large indigenous middle class that would have been able to safeguard its future. The Khmers Rouges, Tully argues, inherited their autocratic methods from former regimes, be they French or Cambodian. They coupled authoritarianism with their own brand of communism, which was in no way internationalist but was shaped by the politics of envy that had been a feature of Khmer nationalism and which Tully compares to the anti-Semitism of fin-de-siècle Europe (p. 502, n.22). The French, Tully concludes, were not responsible for the emergence of Pol Pot, but, he adds, they did contribute to the social, political, and economic underdevelopment that helped to create him (p. 495). As for the Khmer Rouges, Tully points to the conspicuous consumption of the Cambodian elites and the horrors of the U.S. carpet bombing in the countryside, as possible explanations for the ferocity of their ideals (p. 492).

Readers looking for history from the bottom up, or an in-depth analysis of the cultural dimensions of the French presence in Cambodia, will be disappointed. Drawing on sources in Cambodia, France, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, Tully has produced a thorough examination of the socio-political developments of Cambodia under French rule. To be sure, he devotes a chapter to the *mission civilisatrice* and provides useful data on health and education, but they are asides in an otherwise political narrative. The book has a glossary and a bibliography that researchers new to the area will find useful. Surprisingly for such a work, there are no maps. That said, this is a much-needed contribution to the literature on the subject. Its exorbitant paperback price and its length will exclude it from the average classroom, but it will nonetheless serve as an essential reference for all students of French colonialism in Southeast Asia.

[1] Eric Weiz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003).

[2] Penny Edwards, "Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-45" (PhD diss., Monash University, Australia, 1999).

[3] Wilfred Burchett, *Mekong Upstream* (Hanoi: Red River Publishing, 1957).

[4] *Quoc ngu* was the Romanization of Vietnamese script, which had been imposed and adopted in Cochin-China, Annam, and Tonkin; Decoux wanted to do the same with Cambodian script.

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