

# Fate of National Library depends on donors, government funds

*Reopening after repairs, library seeks to reclaim status as center of learning*

**By Jon Bugge**

The books' pages have faded to a brown hue. Insects scurry into dark corners and gnaw on moldering volumes of books. Flipping through obsolete textbooks and French treatises, clouds of dust rise into the humid air.

This is the fate of what was once Cambodia's most extensive and treasured collection of knowledge in the National Library. Desecrated by the Khmer Rouge, and neglected during two decades of political turmoil and poverty, a new preservation effort launched by The Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MCFA) has begun its renewal. The tumultuous chapters in the life of the National Library have mirrored the nation's own turbulent past.

The National Library was opened to the public on October 24, 1924, with a collection of 2,879 volumes, almost exclusively in French. It was known as the Bibliotheque Centrale and managed by the regional French bibliographic authority of the time, the Directorate of Archives and Libraries of Indochina. Its legacy endures: "Bibliotheque" is inscribed above the towering entrance to the colonial yellow building just west of Wat Phnom.

At the library's height in 1928, there were more than 10,000 books on its shelves that drew hundreds of people to its quiet sanctuary every day. The institution primarily served as an intellectual haven for Francophone visitors, officials and scholars. Yet it was more than two decades, in 1950, before Cambodians could find books written in their own language. Although the library kept its doors open following independence under the rule of King Norodom Sihanouk, it barely survived the ravages of the Khmer Rouge.

The government of Democratic Kampuchea ignored the library as a repository of knowledge, but soldiers quickly found a more utilitarian use for the building. Pigs were kept in what was once a beautiful walled flower garden. The National Archives building, located just behind the library, doubled as a slaughterhouse. The library grounds themselves were used to house the cooks, the kitchen and store food for Chinese political advisers staying in the adjacent Hotel Le Royal. Precious books were destroyed as kindling, thrown onto the streets to rot or piled in the corners to disintegrate.

The indignity and destruction inflicted on the library was not limited to its contents. Of the 40 library staff who worked in the building in 1975, only six survived the Khmer Rouge years. Three would eventually return.

Mao Kin, who was forced to labor in Battambang province under Pol Pot, returned to work in the library in 1979 with his daughter, Mao Thach. He continued until retiring in 1991. His daughter, Thach, 54, is still there today. She continues to care for the collection and add to the inventory. She manages the French Collection including more than 25,000 volumes about laws and administration during the colonial period and works on travel, culture and art in Cambodia.

She remembers her first sight of the library after the Khmer Rouge abandoned the city.

"The shelves were thrown over and the library was almost empty," she says. "There were some books piled into the corners or just lying around."

She says the collection was in complete disarray. Locals who picked up some of the volumes from the surrounding streets returned them to the library. Some volumes found their way into private collections before they could be recovered. Others were just sold on the streets for a fraction of their true value.

The library finally reopened in January 1980 under the auspices of the reconstituted Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. The slow process of rebuilding the library's collection began with donations of books from all over the world. Cambodia's allies were keen to help. Vietnam and the USSR assisted in publishing Khmer language books and training new staff. The Buddhist Institute donated many copies of their book collection written in Khmer. Slowly the shelves of the library began to fill again.

In the following years, several NGOs provided small amounts of assistance. During the 1980s, books came in from all over the world as news of Cambodia reached the developed world. Since 1988, four different expatriate volunteers have worked in the library. A French expert is scheduled to arrive next year; most have left. The challenge now is to ensure that progress continues.

"People expect the authority to come from above," says Margaret Bywater, a librarian who first advised the National Library in July 1986. "The ministry is really not that interested."

She says without compensation or encouragement from the government, library staff only perform the bare minimum of tasks and little else. That jeopardizes the advances that have already been made.

Last July, the central raised section of the ceiling collapsed. The accident prompted the most recent series of improvements to the buildings. A badly needed donation of some \$10,000 came from the MCFA to complete the repairs, which have lasted three months.

Now, with a new ceiling and paint job, the library is due to open next month. The entire building will be open and access granted to the general public.

The library's collection includes several sections including Cambodian documentary heritage, the French Colonial Collection, the Reference Collection, the General Collection and the Lending Collection. In total the library has 10,000 new works, 30,000 "old books" and over one hundred palm leaf manuscripts-ancient religious writings inscribed on fragile palm leaves.

Although the Cambodian heritage section is closed to the general public, it is accessible to scholars and researchers. Some other works, due to their age and delicate condition, are not possible to view.

Khlot Vibolla, director of the National Library, says the library is critical to preserving the cultural heritage of the Khmer people. It is the only storehouse in the country for such works. It must be preserved for the future generations, she says.

"Cambodia does not have a public library system, which makes the National Library even more important," she says. "It is important for researchers and students alike to have the library."

Bywater says the state of the collection reflected priorities of the country itself.

"When I first arrived [in 1986], compared to everything else, the library looked all right," she says. "Since then, everything else has moved ahead but the library has stood still."

The reasons are clear. In an impoverished country that lost much of its educated elite during purges of the Khmer Rouge, the nation's libraries have received scant attention or resources.

"The two biggest problems are a lack of funds and specialist personnel," says Professor Hun Sarin, director of the Department of Books and Reading at the MCFA. "We must have trained personnel and long term foreign funding. I hope then that the library will [again] be busy with people learning."

But Pierre Andricq, a book specialist in the French Cultural Center, says the low salaries make it impossible for the staff to dedicate all their time to the library.

"They are paid about ten dollars per month," Andricq says. "This is why they must rent the garden for the moto park to make some income."

The once immaculate gardens are now stacked with rows of motorbikes of students attending the Institute of Management across the road. Behind the library, a plant nursery has also set up shop. The library generates a tiny income through lender fees from its collection of books. It received just 10 million riel (\$2,500) from MCFA for its operating budget in 2002. It has not yet received its budget for 2003.

Without more funding, some are concerned that the library will miss its best chance to save its collection and train committed staff to preserve it.

"No one could stay [at the library] without family support or another job," says Bywater. "As a result, many good people have left."

She points to the generous funding provided to the Hun Sen Library in the Royal University of Phnom Penh over the last seven years. As a result, she says, the staff take pride in their work. She thinks the model could benefit the National Library, which has artifacts and manuscripts of great value to the nation.

Bywater outlined many of her suggestions in a paper presented at a librarian conference in 1997. "Not a lot has changed since then," she says.

But several countries have already begun helping resurrect the library. Malaysia and Poland pay for staff to study book conservation and library science. Australia sponsors courses for Cambodians at the University of New South Wales and donates badly needed books and funds. Support is also received from libraries in Brunei and Singapore.

The Asia Foundation, with funding from US government, donates a large number of new publications to the library. Sarin says that equipment such as computers, scanners and cabinets have also been provided by the US.

The French have taken an active role in restoring the old West wing of the library to accommodate some 25,000 volumes of the French colonial collection acquired before Cambodia gained its independence in 1954. The collection includes historical guides to Cambodia, 19th century French literature and a valuable collection of unique colonial prints.

But the French Protectorate collection, as it is known, is threatened by a particularly small and voracious enemy: insects. Silverfish and other paper-eating bugs devour their way through old documents. Fumigation, normally used to exterminate them, is impractical due to the high ceilings in the library. The staff is left to try and kill the insects by hand when they clean the volumes.

Besides the insects, high humidity and a lack of air conditioning or dehumidifiers threatens the future of the manuscripts. Some improvements have been made. Air conditioning is now installed in the West Wing housing the French Collection and there are plans for additional cooling units in the reading room.

But the library has a reactionary preservation policy, says long-time adviser Bywater. It's not until disaster strikes, such as the roof collapsing, that efforts are taken to safeguard the collection.

"We tried to get a support group going [in 1999]," she says. "We wrote to the minister outlining the problems faced but there was no reply. Maybe it never reached the minister."

But Bywater, who follows the library's progress, says the future holds promise.

"I hope that within ten years it will attain the status as an important cultural center," she says. She worries that commitment to preserve it will falter.

The motto of the institution, inscribed above the entrance to east wing of the library, may offer a hint at how the library has survived for so long despite its dramatic past. It may also hold the key to its future.

"La Force Lie Un Temps Lidee Enchaine Pour Toujours."

It means, "Force binds for a moment, ideas link forever".

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