Suzanne Karpelès and the Buddhist Institute

Dr. Khing Hoc Dy
Researcher, CNRS, Paris and Chargé de cours, INALCO, Paris

Biography (b. Paris 1890 - d. Pondicherry 1968)

Suzanne Karpelès was born in France in 1890. Upon graduation from secondary school, she continued her studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, where she took courses on India with Professor Sylvain Lévi, Alfred Foucher and Louis Finot during the First World War (1914-1918) and graduated in 1919. She published a research article, “Lokeçvaraçataka ou cent strophes en l’honneur du Seigneur du Monde par Vajradatta” in the Journal Asiatique. In 1921, she received her diploma in Siamese (Thai) language.

On 1 January 1922, Karpelès journeyed to Hanoi as an employee of the EFEO. She began studying Pali texts published in Sri Lanka, and compared them with other texts from Cambodia. From May 1923, she completed an assignment in Bangkok to research similar texts, and also worked on improving her proficiency in Thai. After returning from Siam in the same year, she visited Angkor. In 1924, the prominent archaeologist Henri Marchal invited her to visit the temples, and she returned to Angkor. At around this time, she translated Six Pāli Stories from the Dhammapada Commentary into French for publication in the Revue Indochinoise.

In December 1936, Karpelès held two positions: she became a permanent member of the EFEO again, and she was appointed Secretary of the Cambodian Buddhist Institute. In 1941, during the Second World War, the French authorities of the Vichy regime suspended her from her duties because she was Jewish, and also because through her work at the Buddhist Institute — a centre for resistance to French colonization — she worked more for Khmer benefits than for the French government. The French administration appointed Pierre Dupont to take her place. However, Karpelès returned to work at the end of World War II.

Karpelès made a strong impact on Ven. Chuon Nath and on Ven. Huot Tath, particularly in the general knowledge of Buddhist education and Dharma. These two monks consecutively held the office of the “Samdech Preah Sangharac Kana Mahānikāy” (Supreme Patriarch, or the chief representative of the Mahānikāy Sect), from 1950 to 1975. Upon retirement, Karpelès moved to Pondicherry to pursue her Dhamma studies in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where she lived until her death in 1968.

Karpelès and the Buddhist Institute

On August 13, 1925, King Sisowath of Cambodia inaugurated the Royal Library of Phnom Penh, with Mlle. Karpelès, its founder, as first curator. The royal library conserved Buddhist literature in Pāli and Khmer, including commentaries, subcommentaries, Yojana, Gandhāra, and so forth. Her appointment was by a Royal Edict of 1 February 1926, which placed Karpelès under the Presidency of the Samdech Chaufea Veang (Palace Minister) of Cambodia. From that time on, she was no longer a direct employee of the EFEO, but was a correspondent member. She began publishing and disseminating articles on Buddhism and on works of general literature at the Royal Library, and in 1926 established the Khmer journal Kambujasuriy which came under her supervision as chief curator of the Royal Library. In 1929, Karpelès travelled on mission to Cochinchina, where she visited a number of Khmer communities and temples. After making additional visits to temples and Buddhist monks and laity in Laos, she proposed that the authorities establish a Buddhist Institute. On the 25 January 1930, the Buddhist Institute was created in Cambodia and Laos, with Mlle. Suzanne Karpelès as secretary general of both institutions.
main role of the Buddhist Institute was to conduct research on Buddhism, and in particular, various texts related to Buddhism and to this end, the institution published various articles related to Buddhism. The institute would also conserve manuscripts and Buddhist scriptures and commentaries and preserve them as the cultural heritage of Cambodia. The Tripiṭaka Commission was created in 1929, and the first volume of the *Tripiṭaka* was published by the Buddhist Institute under the direction of Mlle. Karpelès in 1931. In 1934, the Mores and Customs Commission of Cambodia was established. Its most important publications were its three volume work “Prerāh reach Pithi Tteatosameas” (Braḥ Rājajīḍhī Dvādasanīs – Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months), its nine volume “Collected Khmer Folktales” (Prajāp ṛjēн Breṅ Khmaer), and the following titles: “Folk dance” (Rāpāṃ Prājāpriy), “Folk pastimes” (Luyeṛ Prājāpriy), and “A Concise Introduction to Khmer music” (Laṃnāṃ Sankhēp nai Bhrēṅ Khmaer). Under the Presidency of Mlle. Karpelès, the Buddhist Institute also published the first ever edition of the “Cambodian Dictionary” (Vacanūnukram Khmaer) with volume one appearing in 1938, and volume two in 1943. In addition to Buddhist works, the Buddhist Institute also published a number of Khmer literary texts including such famous stories as “The Story of Maraṭamūt” (Rājī Maraṇānīthā), “The Story of Kūkṣi” (Rājī Kūkṣi), “The Story of Dibvasaṅravāra” (Rājī Dibvāsaṅravāra), “The Story of Sabvasaṅdhiḥ” (Rājī Sabvasaṅdhiḥ), “The Story of Bhrāh Jīnavāriṇī” (Rājī Bhrāh Jīnavāriṇī), “The Story of Bhrāh Sūdhānta”, “The Story of Hāṅsa yantu” (Rājī Bhrāh Hāṅsa Yantu), “The Story of Buddhisaṃ” (Rājī Buddhisaṃ), “The Story of Sāñkhāśaṅriṇjā” (Rājī Sāñkhāśaṅriṇjā), “The Story of Khyān Sāṅkhī” (Rājī Khyān Sāṅkhī), “The Story of Supinakumāra” (Rājī Supinakumāra), “The Story of Sradap Cēk” (Rājī Sradap Cēk), and so forth. Most importantly, as a result of her own research efforts, Karpelès organized the publication of the *Reamker* (Rūmakerti) by the Buddhist Institute in an edition appearing in 1937 that featured the first to tenth episodes, and the seventy-fifth to the eightieth episodes. Karpelès wrote an introduction to each episode and a summary in French. Her interests, however, were not restricted to Buddhist scriptures and traditional literature: it was due to Karpelès’ interest in modern literature, that Kambujasuriyā began publishing contemporary works, a trend begun with Kim Hak’s novel Dīk Danle Sāp (Waters of the Tonle Sap) in 1939. Modern works published after her departure from the Buddhist Institute included *Pisāc Snaēhū* (Love Demon) by Nhok Thaem in 1942, *Kambūl Kāṃṣat* (Very Poor) by Han Yeng in 1944, and *Kambūl Snaēhū* (Great Love) by Heng Yan in 1946. She researched oral literature as well as written literature. Having heard of the reputation of the folk singer Grandfather Phirum Ngoy, Mlle. Karpelès invited the famed bard to perform and play the *saḷeav* (a Cambodian string instrument) at the Buddhist institute, and in the 1930s asked her colleagues Mr. Chap Pin, Bou Po, and Chea You to write down all his songs for publication in small books so as to conserve his works for future generations. She gave Grandfather Phirum Ngoy a donation of one piastre as a gift. Her story shows that not all French people were colonizers, but that some loved Khmer culture and civilization and wanted to preserve it as the heritage of humankind for as long as possible. Because George Cœdès, the director of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient, researched Cambodian inscriptions, Karpelès asked the Buddhist Institute to publish the *Nagaravatta Inscriptions* in 1941. The Buddhist Institute published 281 titles in Pāli, Khmer and French, including the 110 volumes of the *Tripiṭaka*.
NOTES


8. A victim of anti-semitic laws, Suzanne Karpelès was retired from her post in 1941. This measure was annulled on France’s Liberation from the Vichy regime in 1945. Chercheurs d’Asie, op. cit., p. 129.

9. From August 1941, Pierre Dupont moved to Phnom Penh where he had just been appointed to the vacant post of Secretary Generaly of the Buddhist Institute. Two years later, he also became the curator of monuments in Cambodia (except for the monuments of Angkor) and from February 1944, he became curator of the Musée Albert Sarraut. George Ceirès, “Nécrologie : Pierre Dupont (1908-1955),” BEFEO, XLIX, Vol. 2, 1959, p. 639.

10. Brañ Buddhaghosastorya Chuon Nath was a respondent member of the EFEO in 1943 and an honorary member of the EFEO in 1948. See Chercheurs d’Asie, op. cit., p. 306.

11. Brañ Sakyavantis Huot Tath was a respondent member of the EFEO in 1943, 1948, 1951, 1954. Ibid., p. 308.

12. Ibid., p. 129.


14. Royaume du Cambodge, Ordonnance Royale

Nous
Préa bat Samdach Préa Sisowath Chamchakrapong Hariréach Barminthor Pouvanay Kraykéófa Soulalay
Préa Chau Crung Campuchea Thippeday

Vu l’Ordonnance royale du 11 juillet 1897, sur l’Administration Générale du Royaume ;
Vu l’Ordonnance royale du 3 juillet 1905, fixant les attributions du Conseil des Ministres ;
Vu l’Ordonnance royale du 15 juillet 1921, portant fondation d’une Bibliothèque Nationale à Phnom Penh ;
Vu l’Ordonnance royale No. 23 du 18 mars 1926, portant réorganisation de la Bibliothèque royale notamment en son article 4 ;
Vu le contrat d’engagement de Mademoiselle Karpeles en date du 1er février 1926 ;
Vu l’entente intervenue entre Monsieur le Résident Supérieur et Nous ;
Sur la proposition de Monsieur le Résident Supérieur de la République Française au Cambodge ;

ORDONNONS :

Article premier – Mademoiselle Suzanne Karpeles Membre temporaire de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient pendant les années 1923 et 1924 diplômée de l’École des Hautes Études Pratiques (Sorbonne) et diplômée de l’École des Langues Orientales vivantes, est nommée Conservateur de la Bibliothèque Royale.

Article 2 – Nous autorisons Notre Ministre du Palais a passer en Notre nom, un contrat fixant les conditions d’engagement de Mademoiselle Suzanne Karpelès.

Fait en notre palais royal à Phnom-penh, le 18 mars 1926.

Sisowath

Vu et rendu exécutoire
Par l’arrêté No. 936 du 20 avril 1926
Le Résident supérieur
Baudoin.

Siksäcakr 57 គិត្តិយ្យ ស្រុក
15. See Document No. 421, Karpélès to the Head of the EFEO, 12 August 1927:


“Monsieur,

“Je viens de recevoir votre note du 6 août 1927 m’apprenant que j’étais membre correspondant de votre Institution depuis près d’un an, ce que j’ignorais totalement.

“Je vous serais donc reconnaissante de me faire savoir ce que l’École réclame de ses membres correspondants.

“En qualité d’ancien membre de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient et de correspondant, est-il besoin de vous assurer que vous pourrez toujours compter sur mon entière collaboration.

“Trouvez ici, Monsieur, l’expression de mes sentiments les meilleurs.”

Signé : Suzanne Karpélès.


17. See 2 sub-decrees signed by GGI Pierre Pasquier:

1. “Le Gouverneur Général de l’Indochine
Grand Officier de la Légion d’Honneur

“Vu les décrets du 20 octobre 1911, portant fixation des pouvoirs du Gouverneur Général et organisation financière et administrative de l’Indochine,

“Vu l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930 créant un Institut indigène d’étude du bouddhisme du Petit Véhicule à Phnom Penh,

“Vu l’arrêté du 12 mai 1930 portant nomination de Mlle KARPELÈS aux fonctions de Secrétaire de l’Institut indigène d’études du bouddhisme du Petit Véhicule,

“Vu l’arrêté du 13 mai 1933 modifiant l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930,

ARRÊTE :

Article 1er : L’Article premier de l’arrêté du 13 mai 1930 survécu est modifié ainsi qu’il suit :

Article 1er : Mlle KARPELÈS, Conservateur de la Bibliothèque Royale du Cambodge, est appelée à remplir les fonctions de Secrétaire Général de l’Institut indigène d’études du bouddhisme du Petit Véhicule.

Arrêté du 13 mai 1933 modifiant l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930,

Hanoi, le 6 octobre 1933.

Signé : P. PASQUIER.

2. “Le Gouverneur Général de l’Indochine
Grand Officier de la Légion d’Honneur

Vu les décrets du 20 octobre 1911, portant fixation des pouvoirs du Gouverneur Général et organisation financière et administrative de l’Indochine,

Vu l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930 créant un Institut indigène d’études du Bouddhisme du Petit Véhicule,

“Vu l’arrêté du 13 mai 1933 modifiant l’arrêté du 25 janvier 1930,

ARRÊTE :

“Article 1er. – M. Silvestre, Résident Supérieur au Cambodge est nommé Président d’honneur de l’Institut Indigène d’Études Bouddhiques.


Saigon, le 31 juillet 1933.

Signé : P. PASQUIER.

18. The Buddhist Institute conserved sūtra (traditional manuscripts, usually on palm leaf) and gambhir (Buddhist scriptures) until 1972, according to the BI catalogue at the time, from numbers 1 to 1647, including 13,471 gambhir.

19. The Tripitaka Commission commenced their translation from the Pāli text into Khmer from 1929, and finished the translation in 1968, totalling 39 years work. The Buddhist Institute published 110 volumes altogether, and the 110th volume appeared in 1968. Each volume comprised on average 500 to 600 pages of bilingual text, with Pāli on one side and Khmer on the other.

20. In this period, the Mores and Customs Commission included: Mr. Jean Cambefort, Pierre Dupont, Nhok...
The Dictionary Commission was established in 1915:
"President and Commission

21. The Dictionary Commission was established in 1915:

22. Please see the Reamker published by the Buddhist Institute.


25. Published in Kambujasuriyā 1944, 1-12.

26. Published in Kambujasuriyā 1946, No. 1-11.


28. See the Normative Poems of Kram Ngoy, Cpüp’ Lpock Thmî (New Poems and Codes), Cpüp’ Ker Kîl (Codes from former times), Sec Kîl Rańlîk Tîn (Pressure to Remember), Bîky Kâby Praťau Jan Prus Srî (Poems to Exhort Men and Women), Phnom Penh, Buddhist Institute, 1973 (Seventh Edition).

29. “All his songs were included in an anthology. They resonated with Mlle. Suzanne Karpelès, then Director of the Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. She agreed to have them published and, to reward our poet, gave him a piastre. It was not much, but this gesture was of almost historic significance in demonstrating that the French were not all colonialists, but also included some knowledgeable defenders of the Khmer national culture.” KENG VANNSAK, “Réflexions sur la littérature kmère,” La revue française présente Le Cambodge, no. 206, janvier 1968, p. 34.


31. See the letter written by George Cœdès to Mlle. Suzanne Karpelès on 11 November 1940:

32. See Liste des ouvrages édités par l’Institut Bouddhique, Phnom Penh, Buddhist Institute, 1969.
Suzanne Karpeles (1890-1969) was a gifted French scholar who played an important role in the revitalization of Buddhism in Cambodia. After graduating in oriental studies from the University of Paris she was posted to the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme-Orient in Hanoi in 1923 where she collated Sri Lankan Pāḷi manuscripts with Khmer ones. Two years later she moved to Cambodia, soon befriended many monks, scholars and intellectuals and went on to develop a deep love of Cambodian religion and culture. Her