

Correspondence

Response to Dr. Michael Vickery's Review of *The Khmers* (*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 27,2 [Sep. 1996]: 389–404).

Michael Vickery's review of our *The Khmers* (hereafter M.V.) consists of thirteen pages of dense discussion, thoroughly documented. Such attention from an acknowledged authority on the Khmer sources for Cambodian history is, in itself, gratifying. M.V. contributes usefully to the discussion of several problems in Cambodian history, and is able to offer needed corrections or qualifications to *The Khmers* (hereafter T.K.) in several cases. (We were unwise at certain points to refer without discussion to authorities whose conclusions have been questioned or discredited, as cited at M.V. notes 33, 37, 48; T.K. p. 69 n. 1 inadvertently misrepresents Michael Vickery's views about the capital of "Funan"; at p. 262 the name of Jayavarman's capital translates a modern name, not the ancient one.)

What provokes demur is the suggestion advanced at nearly every point that T.K. shows confusion, naïveté or ignorance. M.V.'s conclusion is, in effect, that T.K. is without serious intellectual value (M.V., p. 404).

Some criticisms are not for us to answer. M.V. questions our qualifications to write the book; this issue concerns the publishers who invited us, if anybody. A great many of M.V.'s arguments are against things we say citing the authority of Claude Jacques; this belongs to the sporadic debate between Michael Vickery and Claude Jacques.

Much remains, though. The gravamen of it is borne by the great accumulation of criticisms of details, and this accumulation must seem convincing to the casual or uninformed reader. Unfortunately, it cannot be fully rebutted without a close analysis of every claim, presenting all the evidence and keeping a tally of points scored. Such a wearisome exercise cannot be attempted in a short reply. Perhaps it is not worth attempting at all, for in the end it is largely the *amour propre* of individuals that is at stake, not weighty issues of scholarly knowledge.

Let us then take just one case for analysis — the question of slavery in ancient Cambodia. It is chosen because it bears on a fundamental element in Cambodian history and society, not on trivia, and because it appears genuinely typical of M.V.'s way of dealing with T.K.

Slavery is discussed at M.V. p. 398, beginning with the claim that we are "again confused" in our treatment of the subject. The passages criticized are chiefly concerned to identify the case for the argument, which can reasonably be made but to which we express no commitment ourselves, that the temple servants listed in inscriptions should not be called slaves. The criticisms advanced can be identified as follows:

1. "It is only in Khmer that 'records of endowments commonly include lists of the names of people'." That is, we think, in our confusion, that the names of these temple servants are listed in the Sanskrit inscriptions as well as the Khmer.

In T.K. at p.173, we refer to the temple servants figuring in inscriptions and say that in the Sanskrit inscriptions these people are called *dāsa*, slaves — not that lists of their names appear here. We were not confused, and there is no inaccuracy, though our condensed account of the subject may admittedly mislead the reader.

2. "It is not true that [these temple servants] 'are simply called men and women'. In all but a few inscriptions they have classificatory designations, which changed over time (*valku*, *siltai*)." That is, we are wrong in asserting that the people listed in the Khmer inscriptions are called just men and women.

It is true that we over-simplify; the Khmer designations do not mean "man" and "woman" *tout court*. Their ancient meanings are not obvious and have been discussed by scholars. But the point is simply that they do not mean "slave". Where there is one list of *va* or *gho* and another of *ku* or *tai*, etc., the actual information conveyed by these terms is that one list is of males, the other of females. The words convey not much more, except insofar as, in some cases, they indicate servile status (but not slavery).

3. We confusedly think that the reason why many scholars call the temple servants "slaves" is simply that the Sanskrit versions of inscriptions do so.

In fact, scholars have various reasons for treating temple servants as slaves, as we well know. Nowhere have we stated that the occurrence of the Sanskrit *dāsa* is the essential or only reason.

4. The actual reason why scholars make this identification is that the most commonly used Khmer term for these people, *khñum/kñum*, means "slave" in modern Khmer (although not necessarily in Old Khmer). That is, as is clearly implied here, we are ignorant of the problems of Old Khmer terminology, and incompetent to discuss their applications to the question of slavery.

The reasons why some scholars make the identification actually include better ones than this; they have been able to see the differences between modern and ancient meanings of *khñum/kñum*. See the references in I.W. Mabbett, "Some remarks on the present state of knowledge about slavery in ancient Cambodia" (in *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*, ed. A.J.S. Reid [St. Lucia, 1983, pp. 44–63]), where the Old Khmer terms mentioned by Michael Vickery, and others, are discussed. An important contribution to the literature is, for example, Saveros Pou's study of cognate terms linking the concepts of servile status and youth. There are no grounds for Michael Vickery to suggest that we are ignorant of the problems of Old Khmer terminology.

5. We refer to the arguments denying that temple servants were really slaves, since such people often had ritually high status, and attribute them wrongly to Claude Jacques. In fact (says M.V.) "this treatment derives from myself, not Jacques';" the latter's argument against the identification of temple servants as slaves is a bad one, using an unwarranted analogy with India.

This is strange, for the arguments attributed in *T.K.* to Claude Jacques were indeed derived from him, exactly as cited on p. 173. We knew of Claude Jacques' arguments from the analogy with India, but they seemed to us less cogent and we did not refer to them. It is not we who are confused.¹

¹Elsewhere also, M.V. claims that Michael Vickery is the real, unacknowledged, source of what we know. On p. 397, our reference to the considerable increase in the number of inscriptions during the reign of Sryavarman I is described as "another borrowed detail unacknowledged by M/C". Not so. We had access to a copy of *Inscriptions du Cambodge*, so we were able to work it out for ourselves!

So much, then, for M.V., *T.K.* and slavery. A reviewer could have remarked, with fairness, that *T.K.* over-simplifies at some points. This is indeed difficult to avoid in the condensed treatment of complex issues entailed in a work of synthesis written to a given length. M.V. appears to proceed, however, from the assumption that *T.K.* is confused, ignorant and naïve, perceives these qualities in what is written at every point, and seeks to demonstrate them by selective quotation and other means.

A good example of selective quotation is embodied in the criticism (M.V., p. 401) that we “try to make Angkorean Cambodia a country of free farmers”, quoting our isolated and doubtless injudicious references to “free” farmers and “privately owned land” (both phrases intended to make distinctions which are justified in their contexts, pp. 170, 173). The clear implication is that we imagine Khmer farmers as autonomous legal personalities wholly owning their land as if in a modern legal system. Michael Vickery argues, on the contrary, that there was no such institution of “private” ownership. So do we. M.V. ignores our statement, p. 170, that the ruler “did not ‘own’ [the land] in the modern legal sense, which did not accord with the Khmer world view, but he was, in a moral sense, master over it and could make claims upon its produce and the labour of the people who worked upon its surface”. Right or wrong, this is not a naïve projection of modern concepts upon ancient Cambodian society.

Any extended analysis of M.V.’s criticisms would be tedious and risk becoming bogged down in trivialities. What matters is that M.V. contrives, by sheer accumulation of such details, to present a picture of *T.K.* as incompetently written.

There is no space for a proof that these examples of M.V.’s treatment of *T.K.* are typical. If they are not typical, at least these examples are less than fair. If they are indeed typical, then M.V. as a whole is less than fair. To any fair-minded reader, we offer the following earnest advice. Do not take M.V.’s assessment on trust. Do not take our defence on trust. Instead, buy a copy of the book (available in a convenient paperback edition) and read it carefully.

I.W. Mabbett & D.P. Chandler