For notice of previous publication, see chapter 7, note 1, chapter 8, note 1, and chapter 12, note 1.

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF VIRGINIA
© 1998 by the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

First published 1998


Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Domesticating the empire: race, gender, and family life in French and Dutch colonialism / edited by Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda.
  p. cm.
  Includes index.
  HQ1613.D62 1998
  305.3'0944 — dc21
  97-39064
  CIP

Frontispiece: French postcard of an Algerian Arab Muslim woman writing in ungrammatical French: “If you lift my skirt, you can see the arts of the colonies.” This card and others like it were sold at the Colonial Exposition held in Paris in 1931. The depiction of a Muslim woman writing in French is particularly ironic since the colonial state in Algeria discouraged Arab women from gaining a modern French education. (Photograph KIT, Amsterdam)
CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

2. IN PURSUIT OF GREATER FRANCE:
   Visions of Empire among Musée Social Reformers, 1894–1931
   Frances Gould and Julia Clancy-Smith

3. "SPECIAL CUSTOMS": Paternity, Suits, and Citizenship in France and the Colonies, 1870–1922
   Jean-Élisabeth Peltres

4. REDEFINING "FRENCHNESS": Citizenship, Race, Regeneration, and Imperial Motherhood in France and West Africa, 1914–40
   Alice L. Conkin

5. SECRETS AND DANGER: Interracial Sexuality in Louis Couperus's The Hidden Force and Dutch Colonial Culture around 1900
   Pamela Patryna

6. WOMANIZING INDOCHINA: Fiction, Nation, and Cohabitation in Colonial Cambodia, 1890–1930
   Perzy Edwards

7. SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR: The Ambivalence of Dutch Colonial Rhetoric on Javanese Servants in Indonesia, 1900–1942
   Elsbeth Lencer-Solten

List of Illustrations
Acknowledgments
Imagine a European man in a suit of spotless white, hunched over his writing desk in the French quarter. Dear Mother, he begins. The letterhead places him in Phnom Penh, capital of the French protectorate of Cambodia.¹ The date is harder to decipher: is it 1910, or 1920, or 1930? No matter. Barely audible above the office fan, his pen scratches a hero’s trail through warring tribes, wild beasts, and jungle fever. Later, in the post office, he fingers a Cambodian piastre to pay for the letter’s stamps. Embossed on the coin is La France, a helmet to protect her values, a lion to defend her virtue. The image unnerves him, for in her matronly demeanor, he sees an echo of his mother. It is as if she had been there in his office, spying over her little boy’s shoulder as he spun tall tales of hardship and adventure. But when the postal clerk cashes the coin and hands him a stamp, his mood lifts. Smiling, he licks the stamp, then smooths it down. Beneath his proprietary fingers, immortalized in philatelic brown and cream, a Cambodian nymphet parts her lips in mute invitation to a kiss.

On this trigonometry of gender, colonial constructions of Cambodia were built. First was the mother figure of the metropole, iconized as La France or Marianne, in colonial monuments and currency. National mythology had feminized France since the seventeenth century.² Depicted as a “beautiful, strong-willed” young woman in the first years of the Republic, France was refigured after the loss of Alsace-Lorraine in 1870 as “noble, warlike and sheltering.”³ This was the symbol of maternal authority which colonial wives were implicitly urged to imitate. Translated into the imperial context, however, the image was ambivalent. Many colonial writers equated the feminine realm of the metropole with the “sickly over-refinement . . . of an over-subtle civilization, in which the vitality of the race is being drained away.”⁴ A plethora of colonial novels portrayed French wives as monstrous incarnations of the metropole whose essential femininity was stifled by modernity.

Opposed to this image was the virile colonizer, a man of action whose energy would revitalize the nation by building a new France overseas. “A colonialist must be a man, a real man, the strongest of the strong,” wrote Georges Hardy, director of the Colonial Academy from 1926 to 1933. Hardy’s dictum encapsulated over fifty years of folklore that eulogized the virility of colonial life, constructing an exotic Wild East in opposition to the flabby degeneracy of the metropole.⁵ The colonizer’s masculinity was further underscored by imagery depicting the colonies as feminized, sexualized spaces. Unlike France whose matrarchal demeanor implicitly challenged the colonizer’s manhood, la Cambodgienne (the Cambodian woman) represented a Rousseau-like ideal whose atavistic calling to serve man was still intact. Matronly metropole, virile colonizer, and nymphetamine colony were joined in a conceptual triangle which privileged French manhood as the vital link between the raw earth of the colony and the bright hearth of the homeland.

This chapter explores how notions of race and gender were fused to produce such mythology. However, in dismantling these orientalist stereotypes, I do not mean to reinforce the stereotype of the occidental “other” which has emerged in recent scholarship in the form of an essentialized, wicked West.⁶ Rather, this essay links colonial representations of Cambodia to the contemporary intellectual climate in France. Anchoring abstract notions in the realities of colonial administration, it charts the private visions and social conventions shaping the ways in which Cambodia was imagined.

My sources are colonial novels, travelogues, guidebooks, journals, bulletins, postcards, monuments, and the archives of the French administration of Cambodia. I give special scrutiny to the works of two scholar-officials. Roland Meyer (b. 1889) experienced colonial Cambodia as a low-ranking clerk whose attempts to straddle French and native worlds ostracized him from his European colleagues. Publication of his semi-autobiographical novel Saramani allegedly cost him his job. George Groslier (1887–1945), born into the colonial establishment,
spent close to thirty years in Cambodia as a high-ranking administrator. His second novel, _Le retour à l’argile_ (Return to the clay), received the Grand Prix de Littérature Coloniale in 1929.

Writing from the edges of Greater France, Meyer and Groslier strove to prove both the importance of their colonial domain and their own indispensability as men of superior knowledge and literary prowess. Their novels conjured up an inverted dreamworld, with Cambodia at its center and France on the periphery. In this colonial utopia all the heroes were portrayed as French men, the colonized were Cambodian women hungry for male domination, and the metropole was a brooding matron.

**COLONIZING CAMBODIA: DISCOVERERS, DAMES, AND DEGENERATION**

In 1860 the French naturalist Henri Mouhot discovered the vast twelfth-century temple complex of Angkor Wat. Mouhot died in Laos the following year, but developments in print technology and the new fashion of travel literature ensured the rapid dissemination of his findings to a rapt audience. Rescued from oblivion by Mouhot’s native guides, marketed by his wife and brother, rehashed by a ghostwriter, and enhanced with elaborate engravings, Mouhot’s diary was soon serialized in the _Tour du Monde_. A major platform for French explorers, this lavish travel journal showed the French public and politicians “what they were worth, these countries which European governments seek to possess. . . . Who these peoples are . . . what we should take, and what we should leave.” Painting Cambodia as a land of cultural and material plenty, Mouhot urged France to add this “magnificent jewel” to its crown.7

Mouhot’s disclosure sealed Cambodia’s political fate. In 1863, swayed by the heady climate of imperial rivalry, the French government established the Protectorate of Cambodia (1863–1953). Until the retrocession of Siem Reap to Cambodia under the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907, Angkor Wat stood in Siamese territory. However, the French government used its new foothold in the region and its new ally, the Cambodian monarchy, to win privileged access to the temples. France had soon established a monopoly on the production of knowledge about Angkor in the Western world. Contrasting Cambodia’s “degenerate” present with the majesty of Angkor, scholars, explorers, administrators, and novelists mistakenly concluded that the Khmers, who had built Angkor, were now extinct and argued that decadence had led to the decline of an empire and demise of a race. Such analyses were less a lens on Khmer history than a mirror of contemporary French mentality. Reflecting on the ruins of Angkor Thom, Governor-General of Indochina Paul Doumer swore to do everything in his power to prevent France “from slithering down the slope of decadence.”9 Menaced by a burgeoning working class, dogged by the memory of France’s losses in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, and threatened by falling birthrates, the French establishment shared Doumer’s obsession with national entropy. From the 1880s to World War I, countless voices warned that France was on the verge of vanishing.10

These fin de siècle fears were intricately linked to notions of race, class, sex, and gender. A vulgarized Darwinism—or neo-Lamarckianism—emerged which suggested that “like families, societies and social groups were subject to degeneration.” In Paris bipolar stereotypes of decadent prostitutes and bourgeois wives were consolidated, while fears of a decline in bourgeois births saw an enhanced emphasis on the role of women as wives and mothers.10 In marriage the implication was that sexual intercourse was a “racial duty.” Against this intellectual backdrop, the invocation of women as both mothers and symbols of nation had particular significance, for “when women and nation are fused, the desire to protect the virtue of one becomes a civic duty to defend the other.” Family and race, private and public spheres, were synthesized across nineteenth-century Europe in such female icons of the nation as Germania, Britannia, La France or Marianne, Finlandia, and Polonia. These latter-day secular Virgins Marys often were armed with sword and shield to guard their chastity—and thus the purity of their race—from despoliation by foreign others.11

Fears of degeneration informed colonial policy in two key areas—cultural conservation and biological reproduction. From Fiji to Tangan- yika, administrators and scholars vowed their noble intent to salvage colonized civilizations from the demons of decline through scholarship, art education, and museums. Indeed, it was the very notion that the Khmer race had disappeared that led to the creation of the Ecole Française d’Extrême Orient (EFEO) in Hanoi in 1898. Fourteen years later
George Groslier claimed that the Cambodian royal ballet was “at the point of death.” Similar fears about the “overly rapid decadence” of Cambodian arts, “denatured and mongolized” by Western influence, led to the formation of the Friends of Angkor, whose vision of a vanishing Cambodia shaped colonial policies vis-à-vis museums and art education. Policies toward the monarchy and the monkhood further entrenched French notions of the Cambodian ethnonational essence. Colonial ritual and architecture magnified the cultural symbolism of the Cambodian crown, while French restrictions on Buddhist monks isolated Cambodian religion from Siamese and Vietnamese influences. European fears of cultural decline were thus projected onto Cambodia. Conversely, the degeneracy of the Cambodian present was used as a warning of how low the French race could sink if it succumbed to decadence.

While colonized cultures were routinely held up as emblems of degeneration, the colonies themselves ironically were seen as sites of regeneration for the French race. Harking back to the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, the writer Hugues le Roux urged his readers in 1898 “to save the race” by creating “an overseas France.” French women were vital to healthy eugenics in the colonies, crowed Indochina’s leading colonial journal, the Revue Indochinoise, because without them a mixed-blood population would emerge, “with all the vices and none of the virtues” of the French and native races. Joseph Chailly-Bert, president of the French Colonial Union, shared these views. With the exception of Catholic nuns and the chorus girls who staffed ocean liners, most fin de siècle female émigrés to Cambodia traveled as the spouses of administrators and investors. Chailly-Bert blamed the shortage of eligible French women in the colonies for pushing decent French men into the beds of native women, thereby jeopardizing the future of both the French race and French rule. In 1897 he founded the Society for Female Emigration to the Colonies to ship virtuous, marriageable women to the colonies in order to “impregnate these distant lands with the genius of our race.”

Later that year Minister of Colonies André Lebon wrote to heads of government in Indochina seconding the society’s request for jobs for French women. The negative response to this, and to later initiatives, revealed keen tension between metropolitan desires to domesticate the colony and the dreams of colonial officials to preserve their patch as the stamping ground of European males. Protectorate officials replied that the only suitable jobs for women there were teaching posts, and no more female instructors were needed. Stating that the “female element” could not usefully contribute to any department, the governor-general refused to reserve a single place for female émigrés. Undeterred, in 1903 the society’s president asked the Indochinese administration to reserve posts for women as postal and telegraph workers, dactylographers, and teachers. “Indochina has no female immigration,” replied Governor-General Beau.

Despite such resistance, French women soon were arriving in Indochina, ending “the reign of the native woman, the regime of the concubines.” As Phnom Penh’s colonial community expanded, so did the demand for female teachers and nurses to staff girls’ schools and maternity hospitals. Male critics later blamed white women for erecting “a field of barbed wire” between Europeans and natives. In fact, the policy and mentality of male administrators helped to anchor colonial women in their much-resented role as housekeepers of the empire by closing off other avenues. Civil service positions were consistently categorized as masculine and unsuitable for women. In the late 1920s women were the principal targets of a propaganda campaign to stem a flood of French émigrés arriving in Indochina in search of work. French women in Cambodia as in the metropole were denied the right to vote. Marginalized professionally and politically, they were encouraged to channel their energies into such maternal endeavors as the Society for the Protection of Cambodian Children and Mothers, founded in 1926. An arbiter of hygiene and watchdog of racial purity, the French woman was “destined to civilize and police, to inspire and purify, to ennoble and augment all that confronts her.” However, this gender role was class-bound. The spectacle of poor-whitism was feared and condemned across the global colonial map as a serious detriment to imperial prestige. White women who violated bourgeois ideals were considered dangerous threats to the racial and moral hierarchy of colonial rule.

“A Mme Français going to market!” scoffed journalist Jean Ajalbert in an attack on poor white wives who frequented native spaces and assumed native roles. “The Asians cannot understand such a fall!” The image of the debauched white whore, anathema to the cult of the chaste
conserve all the qualities of [their] race so as to prevent their absorption by the native milieu. 20

Urban planning provided one defense against such absorption. The expansion of Phnom Penh’s European population from 150 in 1900 to approximately 530 in 1904 led to the first freestanding villas for whites and the consolidation of a French quarter, cordoned off from the Cambodian quarter by a moat. White wives and mothers had a key role to play in keeping their families French by maintaining such cultural rapprochements of the milieu as furnishings, cuisine, their “French manners . . . grace and spirit,” and clothing. While oriental costume parties were a fashionable pursuit in fin de siècle Paris, dressing native was considered a dangerous gateway to assimilation in countries where Europeans formed the minority. European women in Indochina were protected from the sun, and the native gaze, by “caps, dark glasses, veils, parasols, gloves.” 21 As fashions changed, they were advised that pith helmets were compulsory, as was “dress[ing] appropriately and keep[ing] a distance from the natives.” Color as well as style of dress sustained the emphasis on difference. In Cambodian tradition white symbolized the invisible, immaculate, and divine. An insignia of race and rank, the white uniforms of colonial officials contrasted strikingly with the dark attire of Cambodia’s majority peasant population. “With the assumption of this uniform,” observed novelist Marguerite Duras, “the first step had been taken. From then on, the distance augmented.” 22 The white suit became a shield against European assimilation to native culture, a social skin which won instant acceptance and respect no matter what vices of the Frenchman it veiled. But maintaining the European milieu was only half of the battle. Equally important was preserving a quintessential Cambodia as a bulwark against Europeans’ cultural slippage.

Just as white women should not fall from their place, so Cambodian women must not be allowed to rise from theirs. Natives who spoke the wrong tongue or dressed the wrong way threatened to unravel a status quo predicated on the entrenchment of social distance and ethnic difference. Cross-cultural exploration and experimentation were the privilege of whites. While the Parisian diva Cléo de Mérode was applauded for posing as a Cambodian dancer at the 1900 Exposition, Cambodian aristocrats and artisans at the international and colonial exhibitions in Paris (1900) and Marseilles (1906) were ridiculed and reprimanded for

French Cambodia as represented on a five-piastre bank note issued by the Bank of Indochina.
wearing Western dress. Many provincial chiefs in Indochina reportedly forbade their native subordinates from wearing European clothes. To preserve both French power and a pristine Cambodia, male colonialists fulminated against the pernicious effects that learning the French language had on native women, maintaining that it would corrode their quintessential femininity and create déclassées and prostitutes. Such concerns reflected deeper fears of miscegenation. Buttressed through cultural, educational, religious, and political policies, French visions of Cambodia’s ethnonational essence were embodied in a racially pure native woman.

The official art of empire cloaked these conceptions in the legitimizing veneer of France’s cultural mission. In museums and international expositions, Cambodia featured as an apsara, the celestial dancer who embodies “purity of spirit and eternal beauty.” In royal court dancing the apsaras were traditionally used to mediate between the king and heaven. Colonial representations divorced the apsara from this cultural context, using the fabled dancer as an intermediary between the French pantheon and the Cambodian people. Emblems of an antiquity that France was sworn to protect, flesh and blood apsaras—the royal dance corps—were repeatedly deployed to represent Cambodia at colonial exhibitions (1906, 1922, 1931). On their knees, bearing gifts, or puzzling over French books, paper and stone apsaras cast Cambodia as the grateful but needy beneficiary of France in numerous monuments and propaganda posters. Sporting a helmet, and sometimes a sword, the powerful protectress France often towered over these supple syphils. A similar matrix shaped Théodore Rivière’s massive monument, La France, built in Hanoi in 1908, and his Sisowath Monument, sculpted in Paris and transplanted to Phnom Penh. Designed to reflect an ideal, these depictions bore little resemblance to contemporary Cambodian women, who covered their breasts and whose hair was cropped short at puberty in a style considered androgynous by numerous Western writers. Instead, imperial iconography constructed a mythic Orient imbued with a fantasy femininity that was at once inviting and rewarding.

Outside of public spaces, between the covers of colonial novels and postcard albums, Cambodian women were stripped of the apsara’s angelic veneer and cast as sexual playthings. Such depictions emphasized the degenerate status of Cambodia’s present, again underscoring France’s restorative mission. These images depicted la Cambodgiennne as a voluptuous congai, a Vietnamese term coined by the French to refer to Asian concubines in Indochina. Her role in the gender matrix was to transmit the secrets of her culture through amorous encounters with her French protectors. She was a “skin dictionary” (le dictionnaire en peau), through whom the French could master the language and culture of the conquered. Like the British and Dutch colonial euphemisms “sleeping-dictionary” and “walking dictionary,” the metaphor equated carnal knowledge of the colonized with knowledge about the colony. Male infallibility was maintained by the myth that Europeans had taught Asian women passion. Such stereotypes bolstered notions of the sexual prowess of the white man, emasculated the Orient, and cast the congai as a purely physical object incapable of the tender emotions and maternal instincts of la Française (the French woman). Before 1900 relationships between French men and native women were an accepted feature of life in Cambodia. Gaspard Faraut, a pillar of the French community, moved to a Khmer temple to study the culture and language and married a Laotian who bore him two sons. Faraut’s prominence in late nineteenth-century colonial life indicates that no censure surrounded his partial “indigenization.” Several other leading colonial figures also settled in Cambodia with native wives. Religious missions in fin de siècle Indochina helped to institutionalize concubinage by hosting the congais of French officials during their masters’ home leave. Yet by the 1920s few colonial residents enjoyed public relationships with native women. Those who did were considered traitors to the European camp.

These changes in attitude may be traced to Governor-General Doumer’s term in office (1897–1902). From the 1860s to the 1890s, Cambodia had been dominated by a loose-knit group of gunslingers, missionaries, adventurers, and carpetbaggers interested in furthering their own military, religious, or commercial gain under a figurehead French government representative. Disgusted by this, Doumer overhauled Cambodia’s inert administration, centralized the Indochinese Union, unified bureaucratic procedures, and institutionalized colonial scholarship. Coinciding with the inauguration of the Ecole Coloniale in Paris to train
France's new colonial civil service, Doumer's policies tightened links to the metropole, homogenized French rule throughout Indochina, and ultimately changed the complexion of colonial society in Cambodia. In a radical departure from earlier laissez-faire policies, Doumer took immediate steps to police the private lives of French administrators; he acted swiftly to end the relationship between Resident Superior of Cambodia Huyn de Vernèville and a high-society Cambodian concubine, Dame Ruong, who was subsequently jailed. Interracial liaisons came under new scrutiny throughout Indochina. In 1898 the prosecutor-general for Cambodia and Cochin China warned subordinates not to take native concubines on pain of dismissal. Soon thereafter, Doumer instructed all French officials to avoid relationships with native concubines, whose influence "is nearly always disastrous." In a 1908 circular the chief prosecutor warned French legal officers throughout Indochina to guard against the corrupting influence of native women or face strict penalties. By contrast, the law was lenient on nonofficial colonial men who maltreated their concubines, even when it ended in murder.

Despite such measures, cross-cultural liaisons continued, leading to the establishment of the Society for the Protection of Children in Cambodia in 1913 to care for the abandoned offspring of native mothers and European fathers. The continued prominence of the congai in colonial novels and memoirs of the 1910s and 1920s suggests that French-native sexual liaisons did not diminish but were simply pushed from the public to the private sphere. In life as in literature, the presence of the congai exercised sexuality from the image of the "irreproachable Frenchwomen of Indochina, our wives." At the same time, the banishment of the congai to back rooms and back streets prevented her racially tainted love from tarnishing the facade of the French administration. The popular literary stereotype of Cambodian women as creatures of the boudoir is testimony to the thinking that informed such constructions. Nevertheless, Cambodian women were far more active in the urban and agricultural economy than their French counterparts. At home they enjoyed financial clout and property rights in a matrilineal society which challenged French colonial and metropole gender ideology. Yet colonial educators and administrators urged la Française to domesticate and elevate native woman. As the century wore on, such role playing became increasingly out of step with socioeconomic changes in France.

World War I had mobilized women to enter the European labor force in unprecedented numbers. Nevertheless, colonial society creaked on as a last frontier of male dominance. In this context, male writers had a vested interest in depicting Cambodian women as weak vessels and helpless children.

Maintenance of the status quo thus hinged on manufacturing and preserving racial, cultural, and sexual identities through the strict application of a trifocal vision of gender. At home the colonial wife and mother upheld the sanctity of the French race and nation. Hidden from public view, the Cambodian concubine yielded intimate knowledge of her body and culture to her French masters. And in the offices of the French administration, men such as Meyer and Groslier articulated and preserved native tradition.

ROLAND MEYER: THE PERILS OF CROSSING CULTURAL BARRIERS

Born in Moscow and educated in Paris, Roland Meyer entered the Indochinese colonial service in 1908. After three months in the cabinet of Governor-General Paul Beau in Saigon, Meyer completed ten years of service in Cambodia, then moved to Laos where he became chief of security and political affairs and permanent secretary of the Franco-Siamese Mekong High Commission. Awarded the Legion of Honor and appointed to the cabinet of the minister of colonies in Paris in 1933, Meyer later became chief administrator of Overseas France. In tandem with his bureaucratic career, Meyer wrote a number of fictional and scholarly works. His Cours de Cambodge (Lessons in the Cambodian language; 1912) was followed by a series of books consisting of a semi-autobiographical novel, Saramani: Danseuse cambodgienne (1922); Cours de Laos (Lessons in Lao; 1924); a volume of fiction and essays, Komlah: Visions d'Asie (Komlah: Visions of Asia; 1929); and Indochine française: Le Laos (French Indochina: Laos; 1931). In 1952 Meyer published his memoirs, Le propos du vieux colonial (Proposal of an old colonial), a staunch defense of colonialism, which reinforced the image of a man utterly dedicated to the French colonial project.

A careful reading of Meyer's work, however, reveals a more complex picture. As a boy, he succumbed to the bourgeois fad for armchair
travel, reading Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and the works of Jules Verne and James Fenimore Cooper. At age eighteen, with only six hundred francs in his pocket and carrying a trunk and a pith helmet, Meyer embarked on his own adventure. His youthful ambition was to become not minister of the colonies but “the most Asiatic Frenchman in Asia” and to “write the book of Angkor.” In Phnom Penh, Meyer found a country, people, languages, history, religion, traditions, literature, and arts waiting to be “conquered” (*Le propos*, 34–35).

During the next decade Meyer defied the prescribed boundaries of colonial life, living a hybrid existence between the offices of the administration where he worked and the Cambodian quarter where he lived. His French peers treated him as “a pariah, a degenerate” for his “wild retreat” into this native space. In turn, Meyer mocked the “rootless whites” who “curse[d] and ignore[d]” Cambodia from the confines of the European quarter, where they “preserve[d] the puerile manias of their civilized life” (*Komlah*, 99). Framing his mission in terms of humanity and knowledge, Meyer saw his self-imposed exile from the material trappings of colonial life as a sacrifice necessary for the completion of his book. By 1918 Meyer had risen several times through the colonial ranks; he had also mastered the Khmer language. His novel was nearing completion, but deteriorating health forced him to leave his “primitive hut” and to descend to the “sterile mediocrity” of his colleagues by opting for the creature comforts of a brick house. It was here that Meyer finished *Saramani*.

Based on Meyer's own life, *Saramani* tells the story of a Frenchman, Komlah (Khmer for “bachelor”), who in many respects epitomizes then prevalent notions of France’s mission in Cambodia. Komlah falls in love with what he sees as Cambodia, and he devotes himself to the study of Khmer language and history in order to rescue them for posterity. Like Meyer, the protagonist Komlah, whose name hangs like a question mark over his Frenchness throughout the text, is so charmed by Cambodia that he settles there. He gradually forgets his origins, race, even his language, and becomes the Khmer’s adoptive son.

Komlah marries Saramani, a Cambodian dancer who represents “the falling race in all its ancient nobility, the last flicker of a sacred fire whose trembling flame, he, Komlah, would save” (*Saramani*, 23–25). Saramani’s white, powdered performer’s mask veils the secrets of an ancient race on the verge of extinction. It is this allure which seduces Komlah and compels him to marry her, renouncing his past in the process. Yet his hopes are dashed. Komlah’s attempts to adopt Cambodian culture end in failure. Overpowered by the native milieu, he falls sick and returns to France to stop the erosion of his Western personality by “the morbid elements of the Khmer and Buddhist soul” (*Saramani*, 41). Saramani dies alone, shunned by friends and family for having betrayed her race and culture. In this respect Meyer’s message is deeply conservative: any attempt to subvert the status quo is an open invitation to disaster.

The story also serves as a parable regarding the dangers of Western decadence. At one point in the book, a Cambodian prince in Paris buys photos of French women in positions that “the prostitutes of Cambodia could never have imagined.” Meyer served as Khmer language instructor to French civil servants. Yet when Saramani asks Komlah to teach her French, he refuses because it is a “fatal poison for Khmer girls” and will kindle “thoughts and vices for which your mother tongue has no words” (*Saramani*, 152, 59). Both the French language and modernity serve as metonyms for the destructive effects of women’s liberation in the Western world, a prominent theme in Meyer’s later work. In 1952 Meyer argued that the emancipated women of the West had invaded the world of men, bringing nothing but disorder and passion: “Love is women’s function and vocation. Open the doors of her cage, and what does she do with her liberty? She invents love and its complications. . . . Women are men’s physical and intellectual inferiors, and are often irresponsible, a victim of their own weaknesses. The Orientals understood them well, in sheltering this weakness behind walls. For them, and for us also, to let woman free is to lose her” (*Le propos*, 33).

By the same token, *Saramani* implies that to free Cambodians from French rule would be to lose them. Only Komlah stands between the Cambodian race and its erasure from history, personifying France’s mission as savior and curator of Cambodia’s past. Meyer’s Cambodia is indelibly feminine. The land seduces him with “magical charms,” luring him deep into its riverine interior, where he is “conquered body and soul” (*Saramani*, 10–11). The native protagonists of his novel are women, guided by instinct and atavistic tendencies. By embodying Cambodia in Saramani, a nubile dancer who dies when abandoned by
her French husband, Meyer underscores the vulnerability and dependence of the colonized.

Meyer’s novel also offers important testimony to the price of transgressing colonial boundaries. Publication of *Saramani* provoked such outrage among the colonial community that Meyer allegedly was condemned to exile. “Within days, everything was destroyed: his work, his reputation, his modest fortune . . . his career and his future.” Meyer accused “a coalition of ignoramuses and jealous people” of conspiring to destroy him and of doctoring *Saramani* to make it more palatable for colonial readers (*Komlah*, 25, 24). Meyer’s claims are hard to verify. But it is easy to see why *Saramani* might have offended colonial sensibilities. The novel’s detailed coverage of Cambodian customs may well have threatened the prestige of such mainstream scholar-officials as Groslier. Its depictions of colonial society further challenged the legitimacy of French civil servants who claimed to represent the interests of the Cambodian people yet lived isolated in the sanitized cocoon of the European quarter. While writers such as Pierre Loti, Pierre Mille, and Emile Pischari were renowned for attacking the superficiality of colonial lifestyles, Meyer breached convention by attacking those standards from within.

Meyer also broke with colonial tradition by depicting a native woman as a moral and principled individual. Passionate yet forthright, Saramani challenges the hackneyed formula of the cold-blooded Asiatic Eve. Her devotion to her husband is beyond question and resembles any white wife’s dedication. Meyer’s description of Saramani’s lesbian love affair with a younger palace dancer also stresses her capacity for tender sentiment. Sensitively handled and nonjudgmental, this account might have fueled the hostility of his readers by painting a world of female passion beyond the reach of white men.

In a further challenge to his peers, Meyer depicted colonial officials as racists and buffoons. Walking near the French quarter with Saramani one evening, Komlah hears cruel remarks and sees “a group of Europeans . . . still laughing from their hateful jibe . . . hideous and deformed in their white cloth suits, bearded, sweat stained their brows and armpits, enveloped in a fetid smell suited to their insipid flesh. A woman was among them, strapped into her ugly corset, her hair coiffed in an incredible style; under the coarse growth of her faded hair, she fixed her panther’s eyes on Komlah and Saramani, innocent victims of her haughty disdain” (*Saramani*, 190). Just as Saramani represents the quintessential beauty and innocence of the golden era of her race, the colonial madam personifies the evils of modernity. By juxtaposing Saramani’s natural simplicity with the horrific emblem of a French emancipated woman, Meyer held up a mirror of what Saramani—and thus Cambodia—could become if France failed to respect and preserve native traditions.

Through the reflected gaze of these Europeans, Komlah first becomes conscious of Saramani’s outward markers of difference. It suddenly dawns upon him just how petite and dark she is. Realizing that their children would be branded with the color of their origins and condemned to a lifetime of European contempt, Komlah faces up to the failure of his mission. Between his aversion to the whites and the “hopelessness of all conversion” yawns a “chill void,” the gaping abyss between French and native milieus (*Saramani*, 195).

GEORGE GROSPLIER: THE PERILS OF MODERNITY

The son of a colonial administrator and his French wife, George Groslier was born in Phnom Penh in 1887. In 1891 his parents sent him to France for schooling. He returned to Cambodia in 1909; for the next five years the ministry of public education gave him various assignments. Ever mindful of his cultural heritage, Groslier “kept his extremely civilized habits in the thick of the jungle, and put on his evening dress before sitting down—alone—in front of a collapsible camping table.” In 1913 he published the first European study of the Cambodian ballet; his second work was a romantic travelogue entitled *A l’ombre d’Angkor* (In the shadow of Angkor). Upon Groslier’s return in 1917 from service in World War I in Europe, the governor-general of Indochina, Albert Sarraut, entrusted him with the portfolio of arts education in Cambodia. Sarraut, a leading advocate of associationist policies, believed that the future of colonial rule lay not in assimilating cultures but in allowing them to evolve “under our tutelage, in the framework of their civilization.” These principles guided Groslier’s plans for a Phnom Penh School of Fine Arts, opened in 1919, and his expansion of the National Museum into the Albert Sarraut Museum,
opened in 1920. Through these institutions the French obtained substantial control over the Cambodian plastic and figurative arts. From 1919 until his death in Phnom Penh in 1945, Groslier continued to direct museum and arts education policy in Cambodia. A prolific writer, he produced scholarly articles on Cambodian dance, arts, traditions, and colonial architecture that regularly appeared in the *Revue Indochinoise*. He restricted his fictional output to novels.

Groslier’s artistic vision centered upon replacing the historic patrons of indigenous art—the Cambodian ruling elite who by then invested their wealth in Western imports—with a new clientele: tourists and colonial residents. But to supply the demand Groslier correctly predicted for Angkorean statuary and trinkets, he needed to create a new cohort of artisans whose “pure blood” could save Cambodian art from “decadence” and “bastardization.”\(^42\) In addition to recruiting Cambodia’s few surviving craftsmen as instructors, Groslier sent students to Angkor to copy and perfect motifs for reproduction.

Praised by some as disinterested and benevolent, condemned by others as a cynical ploy to deprive the colonized of Western progress by shackling them to their own traditions, Sarraut’s and Groslier’s rescue mission of Cambodian art was guided by a deep-seated horror of modernity.\(^43\) The carnage of World I exacerbated such feelings. Increasingly, Groslier and other French intellectuals looked East for models of civilization that could benefit the metropole. A deeply romantic view of Cambodia emerged, often with highly conservative ramifications. Like Meyer, Groslier saw the emancipation of women as a catalyst of Western decline. A vision of Angkor as the quintessence of Cambodia informed Groslier’s lifework; his novels incarnated this ethnonational essence in the female form. Groslier’s fiction thus provides important insights into how he conceptualized the Cambodia he helped to authenticate through his cultural policies.

Both of Groslier’s novels—*La route du plus fort* (The road of the strongest; 1925) and *Le retour à l’argile* (Return to the clay; 1929)—mirror the trigonometry of gender. *La route du plus fort* begins not in Cambodia but in Paris, where Hélène falls in love with Ternier, a colonial administrator on home leave. Ternier represents the colonizer, a “powerful machine,” driven by “the egoism of the strong, the weight of logical thinking” (*La route*, 235). Hélène, personifying France, is eager to transcend the mediocrity of the metropole and journeys to Cambodia for the exoticism and vitality of colonial life. She finds the Cambodian landscape replete with trophies of male colonial endeavors, such as the newly completed road from Sangke to Sisophon, Ternier’s pride and joy. In a letter Hélène compares herself to the colony: “I am one of the provinces he has penetrated. . . . Like the province, I am peaceful and happy, limited in my habits . . . and he has advanced upon me. He has thrown me upside down with his world of ideas and new passions, [making me] thirst for riches I’d never seen. Like the villages that his road pushes back and sucks up, all my poor thoughts, my projects, and even my memories are unrecognizable. And in spite of all that suffers in me, the hard and deep groove which tears me, I feel enlarged.” Lean, hard, young, and strong, the masculine motif of the road bisects the feminized, fertile terrain of Cambodia, “germinating tirelessly for centuries” (*La route*, 232).

Changeless as the landscape are Cambodian women, represented by Vetônéa, Ternier’s concubine. Vetônéa is Khmer for “misery,” a name apparently chosen to underscore her manipulative characteristics and to evoke sympathy for the hapless French men doomed to sorrow by Cambodian female wiles. Vetônéa is a marginal figure, a literary foil to enhance the exotic atmosphere and to signal Ternier’s closeness to the people he rules. The archetypal congai or prâpôn (Khmer for wife), she encompasses both the white man’s hope and his burden.

Moreover, Vetônéa is a Siam-Khmer métis abandoned by her father. Embodying France’s colonizing mission, Ternier is portrayed as a valiant knight who has rescued Vetônéa and “set her on his throne as well as in his bed.” The segregation of space and its role in constructing the colony is stressed as Ternier dictates to his new Cambodian “wife” her code of conduct in his home: she must stick to her three rooms at the rear; she may not appear in any of the windows in the housefront; she may not chew betel indoors or have Cambodian visitors. Penalties for transgression range from economic sanctions to “divorce,” a further indication of the colonial obsession with racial and spatial hierarchy (*La route*, 76, 79).

All congais, Groslier explains, are governed by the same proclivity to engage in manipulation and deceit. There is thus no scope for emotional depth in Vetônéa. Within months, Vetônéa’s transformation to
The novel relates Claude’s violation of the racial barriers of colonial society and his subsequent transition from an aggressive shaper of colonial Cambodia to the passive plaything of his concubines. A major departure from Groslier’s previous glorification of France’s role in Indochina, Le retour à l’argile surprised readers and reviewers. “After two years in Cambodia, the once happily married and hardworking Claude abandons his wife, friends, career, colonial costume, and European luxuries for life in the Cambodian quarter. A tale of social decline and descent into decadence, the novel may be interpreted as a warning against the dangers of dabbling with the native milieu. But Claude suffers no moral dilemma at the story’s end. On the contrary: “What peace!” Claude sighs in the closing chapter. “What pride to no longer be a civilized man who thinks himself the number one man in the world” (Le retour, 69).

Parodying colonial society as shallow nonsense, Groslier applauds Cambodian culture for its simplicity and closeness to nature. Moreover, France has much to learn from Cambodia, Groslier argues in his narrative intrusions, particularly concerning the role of women. An attack on Western civilization and bourgeois convention, Le retour à l’argile bitterly condemns the “defeminization” of women in the West. In France progress has turned natural-born mothers into individualistic monsters whose demands for equality have splintered society and the family. Just as progress has erased femininity in France, Groslier contends, it also threatens to destroy the essence of Cambodia. Admiring the “powerful body” of his nearly completed bridge, Claude is suddenly filled with regret that “he will have dealt one more blow to this ancient country ravaged by the West” (Le retour, 69).

Claude compensates for his guilt at defacing the Cambodian landscape by protecting his congai from modernity. He builds her a traditional Cambodian wooden house, furnished with rattan mats and a hard wooden bed, and insists that Kamlang wear authentic Cambodian clothing and jewelry. For Claude she has no existence outside the trappings of his imagined Orient. Yet Kamlang longs for Parisian chic and a Chinese-style brick house on a fashionable street. While Claude indulges his taste for the exotic, Kamlang must suppress her desire for diversity. Claude’s aesthetic hegemony mirrors Groslier’s sculpting of Khmer artistic identity through the School of Fine Arts. Kamlang’s tra-
ditional raiment become the defining features of her persona and totems of Claude’s desire. Just as Groslier condemned Western imports as contaminants of Cambodian culture, so his novel parades la Française as the ominous fate awaiting Kamlang should she acquire the ways of the West. Variously sulking, aggressive, tyrannical toward the servants and disinterested in her husband’s work, Raymonde incarnates the nagging metropole. Had she shrugged off her bourgeois soul, shared her husband’s love of the colony, and wallowed in the raw beauty of Cambodia, their marriage might have survived. Instead, her failure to play the supportive spouse creates “a denuded terrain upon which the congâi advances” (Le retour, 126–27, 142, 38, 97).

Once Claude has returned to the clay of a fictive Cambodia where women are docile creatures living to serve man, he breaks free of the fetters of Western civilization. Despite his renunciation of colonial apparel for Cambodian costume, Claude remains a voyeur, while Cambodian women and the landscape are leveled and unified into a sensuous terrain of warmth and light. Just as his engineer’s hands had tamed nature while building bridges, so Claude now transforms the raw material of Cambodian women: “She is the flesh, while I am the soul; she is weakness, and I, strength. . . . I see no room for foggy theories between her and me. I see a man and a woman; a hand and clay” (Le retour, 193, 137). Claude, Groslier implies, by being open-minded enough to live with Cambodian concubines, who offer themselves to him four or five times daily, has attained a noble ideal and rejected Western artifice. For this he is to be admired, not derided. Instead, the target of Groslier’s derision is Raymonde. By failing to anchor her husband in a domestic environment, she has pushed Claude into the arms of native concubines and thereby Cambodian culture.

CONCLUSIONS

Groslier’s and Meyer’s novels resonate with the tensions between the metropole, French colonial society, and the native milieu. Reflecting obsessions with the demarcation and preservation of Cambodian culture, both authors delineate these separate spheres with notions of race and gender. But why was Cambodia represented in the feminine? A possible explanation is that congâis were the only point of contact between French administrators and the Cambodian population. While urban planning ensured the segregation of French and native living spaces, employment policies favoring Vietnamese over Cambodian personnel meant that colonial officials rarely encountered Cambodians during office hours. Yet this argument cannot hold true for either Groslier or Meyer. By 1931 Groslier’s art school had several hundred male pupils. Meyer’s memoirs indicate he met with monks and other Cambodian males. Feminine representation might equally have been a reward for Cambodia’s good conduct as a pliable, submissive colony.55 Reflecting an asymmetry established at the colonial and international exhibitions from 1889 to 1937, Cambodia dominates Louis Botinelly’s 1927 monument Our Possessions in Asia in Marseilles. Sporting an Angkorean headpiece and a decidedly Parisian hemline, Cambodia reclines as she is waited on by younger, scantily clad Laos and Vietnam. While all three colonies are feminized, Cambodia’s beauty, emblematizing its goodness and purity, is exaggerated. David Chandler has analyzed this bias as France’s way of rewarding Cambodia for being the easiest and oldest protectorate.46

Yet these hypotheses do not mesh with real historical conditions within Cambodia. The gentle, serene, and feminine facade of colonial literature and iconography belied decades of banditry in the vast Cambodian hinterland beyond the narrow frontiers of European enclaves.47 The decision to represent a colony or nation in the feminine is thus not necessarily a reward for its submissive behavior. Nor can such gender imagery be explained simply in terms of a colonial will to dominate and penetrate. Such an analysis ignores how the colonizer’s own nation was framed in feminine terms: Britannia fair or Marianne.

Many factors conspired to produce the stereotype of Cambodian femininity, but chief among them were the anxieties of male administrators about the future of their own sex. Afraid of the emancipation of Western women, colonizers like Meyer and Groslier retreated into a fictive world where woman’s place was to serve and obey. Despite their efforts to divorce themselves from the metropole, both writers were deeply influenced by the intellectual climate in Europe. Reflected in a constellation of monuments, exhibitions, and museums, their female typecasting of Cambodia was rooted in generic occidental conceptions of a quintessential feminine East. Such gender imagery was by no means
exclusive to the colonial era, as witness the lasting appeal of Puccini’s Madame Butterfly and the recent popularity of Andrew Lloyd Weber’s Miss Saigon. However, the stereotype of oriental femininity was greatly exaggerated in colonial society, which gave an increasingly anachronistic male hierarchy the power and privilege to plot the place and space of native women’s (and men’s) lives. The arrival of white wives in Cambodia curbed this freedom and exposed the fallacy of colonial virility, showing that white women could survive in the colonies as well as men. Reluctant to concede this, writers such as Meyer and Groslier sculpted their fictional French women in the image of a decadent metropole and deranged suffragette.

Whether through deliberate ploy or subconscious whim, depicting Cambodia in the feminine fulfilled the fantasies of male scholars, artists, and administrators. The gangland of Cambodia was remade in their hands as a docile, female creature. Meyer’s and Groslier’s notions of an essentialized femininity fused with a horror of modernity in the image of la Cambodienne, whom valiant Frenchmen must protect from the onslaught of the modern world. But there was a flip side to these imaginings. Meyer warned of Cambodia’s potential to “paralyze” and “suffocate” France, personified by Komlah (Saramani, 41). Groslier stressed the destructive appetites of Cambodian women, who “devour their master” (Le retour, 85). While emphasizing the femininity of the colony, both writers stressed its potential for insubordination if not properly contained and firmly ruled.

7. SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR: The Ambivalence of Dutch Colonial Rhetoric on Javanese Servants in Indonesia, 1900–1942

Elsbeth Locher-Scholten

During the past decade historians and anthropologists have become increasingly aware of the lingering importance of colonial discourses in a postcolonial world. As a result, historians in Europe and North America as well as in formerly colonized societies have focused their attention on the subject of colonial mentalities again. In an exploration of this topic, women have also emerged on the scene: even if Dutch colonialism in Indonesia before 1900 had been largely a male affair, the twentieth-century colonial mind-set was no longer a male prerogative. As newly arrived partners of the men who ran the colonial enterprise, white women expressed this colonial mentality in their own right and in their proper female domain, whether within the household or within various women’s organizations. Their mind-set was most sharply delineated when it touched upon the Indonesian, or native, population, whom white women met mainly through their Indonesian servants. By examining these white women’s voices as they expressed views on their servants, we can refine our analyses of the colonial mentality and provide new insights in the paradoxes and complexities of colonial cultures in the past.

In this essay I explore the attitudes of European women toward Javanese domestic servants by examining their views as articulated in two different genres: first, household manuals for new colonial residents who were not yet familiar with tropical surroundings and, second, novels for children and teenage girls. Both genres offer a rich fund of information since they were highly prescriptive and were meant to be so.


8. The impact of Couperus's imagination is greatly due to his brilliant, unorthodox use of the Dutch language. For an analysis of his fin de siècle style, see P. H. Ritter Jr., "Over de stijl van Louis Couperus," in Ritter Jr., Louis Couperus (Amsterdam, 1952), 54–73; also E. M. Beeckman, introduction to The Hidden Force (Amherst, Mass., 1990), 17–19.


10. In The Hidden Force Louis Couperus demonstrates a remarkable awareness of Dutch imperialism and colonial culture. Yet, written in 1900, the novel incorporates an essentialist distinction between East and West. It therefore inevitably privileges Europe as the center, emphasizing the homeland over the native and the metropole over the colonial periphery.


14. Revulsion is a psychic mixture of fear of losing one's identity and a fascination with this loss. This ambiguous response was first invoked when, in its early development, the child detached itself from the mother in a necessary move. At that moment, which establishes sexual difference, the child experienced its first loss, a traumatic and fundamental one. Prior to this, the child was fused with its mother and inhabited a void, an emptiness in which neither subject nor object, neither masculinity nor femininity existed. Lurking in the unconscious, the memory of this lost bliss will always ambiguously disrupt the oppositional, rational, gendered, and racialized order, in which the subject finds himself or herself. The literary image of an interregnum union as constructed in The Hidden Force transgresses the boundaries between masculinity and femininity and fuses different "races." It thus works by inciting in the reader an archaic mixture of pleasure and danger which is called revulsion. See Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982).


6. WOMANIZING INDOCHINA: Fiction, Nation, and Cohabitation in Colonial Cambodia, 1890–1930

1. Throughout French rule (1863–1953), the term Cambodgien (Cambodian) was commonly used to denote the majority ethnic group in Cambodia, today known as Khmer. I have adopted this usage throughout this chapter.

10. Ibid., 13; Alain Corbin, Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850 (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 331; Catherine Fouquet, L’histoire des mères de moyen-âge à nos jours (Paris, 1980), 138–78.


34. See, for example, Edouard Heckel and Cyprien Mandine, *L'enseignement colonial en France et à l'étranger* (Marseille, 1907), 44–45.


36. Meyer's work displays a much greater attempt to engage colonial society than that of Groslier, whose *Danseuses cambodgiennes, anciennes et modernes* (1913) lacked the depth and detail of Saramani. See Cravath, "Earth in Flower," 73–74.


38. Groslier to secretary-general, Hanoi, June 25, 1906, AOM INDO GGI 2397.


44. Forestier, "George Groslier," 604.

45. For a discussion of portrayals of "good" colonial subjects as feminine, see David Henry Hwang, *M. Butterfly* (London, 1988), 99.


7. SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR: The Ambivalence of Dutch Colonial Rhetoric on Javanese Servants in Indonesia, 1900–1942

An earlier version of this essay appeared as "Orientalism and the Rhetoric of the Family: Javanese Servants in European Household Manuals and