

# The Nine Lives of Norodom Sihanouk

GILLES CAYATTE, DIRECTOR

ICARUS FILMS

DVD, 52 MINUTES, 2009

Reviewed by Milton Osborne

Throughout Cambodia's modern history, marked as it has been by drama and tragedy in almost equal measure, there has been one constant: the presence of Norodom Sihanouk in his multiple roles. He has been king twice; chief of state; prime minister several times; and most controversially, an associate of the Khmer Rouge, who took power under Pol Pot in 1975. Still alive today at the age of eighty-nine and enjoying the title of King Father, Sihanouk is one of international politics' great survivors. He is also a man about whom commentators have offered sharply contrasting opinions.

Against this background, the release of French filmmaker Gilles Cayatte's *The Nine Lives of Norodom Sihanouk* offers a fascinating and often-critical analysis of Sihanouk's remarkable life. Given the longevity of its subject, the fifty-two-minute documentary can only sketch in the principal events of Sihanouk's life: his unexpected accession to the Cambodian throne in 1941; his rise to domestic political power by the 1950s; his efforts to pursue a "neutral" foreign policy, which in fact depended heavily on expectations of Chinese support; and his association with Pol Pot's sanguinary Khmer Rouge after he was overthrown by former conservative allies in 1970.

The film follows this remarkable trajectory through astute use of archival footage, some of which this viewer had never seen before. One instance of this rare footage is the dramatic and disturbing sequence showing the firing squad execution of a rebel linked to right-wing anti-Sihanouk forces in 1964. This is clearly a section of the documentary for which young viewers need to be prepared. Another fascinating set of images records Sihanouk's clandestine visit to Cambodia in 1973, when he met Pol Pot, as the war between the Lon Nol forces and the Khmer Rouge was still raging.

Interspersed with the film's reportage are a series of interviews with various observers of Cambodian politics. Some, such as David Chandler, surely the most respected historian of modern Cambodia, and Father François Ponchaud, one of the earliest writers on Khmer Rouge atrocities, are well-known. But others will be known only to those who have a deep interest in Cambodia's complex modern history.

The picture that emerges from both the film's footage and the commentary that accompanies it is of Sihanouk as a man who deserved the adjective so often applied to him: "mercurial." Watching the film, it is difficult not to see in Sihanouk a man who could never find fault with his own decisions, no matter how contradictory these at times appeared. With this said, it would be unfair not to note the extraordinary challenges that faced him throughout his career and the successes that marked the earlier part of his long career, most notably achieving independence from the French in 1953.

Surprisingly, given the effort that has clearly gone into assembling the footage shown in the film, there are some worrying errors in the commentary and observations made in the film. For instance, Sihanouk was nineteen when he was named king in 1941, not eighteen. More seriously, there is no justification for the claim, made by Father Ponchaud, that Sihanouk authorized the US bombing of Cambodia that began in 1970 and lasted until 1973.

There are those who continue to admire Sihanouk and cannot countenance any criticism of his actions and policies. They will find much to reject in this film. Nevertheless, *The Nine Lives of Norodom Sihanouk* provides an account of Sihanouk's life that is both riveting and disturbing, but then so is modern Cambodian history. Presented to advanced high school and university students as part of a survey of modern Southeast Asian history, this film has much to recommend it, always providing the point is made that it represents a particular and sometimes-disputed point of view of a fascinating figure. ■

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