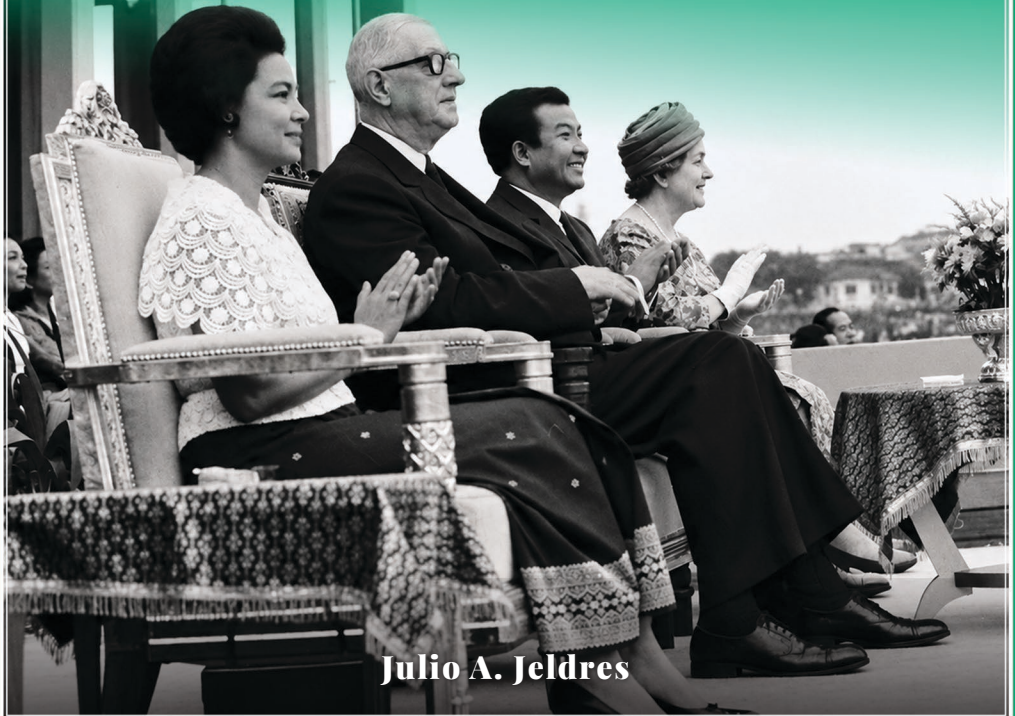




The King-Father Norodom Sihanouk and the Francophonie



Julio A. Jeldres



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Foreword

Allow me to begin this study with an anecdote dating back to November 1967, set in my home country of Chile. Intrigued by Jacqueline Kennedy's visit to Cambodia that year, I became interested in the country, its ancient culture, and—above all—its Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. I began researching Cambodia to satisfy my curiosity.

I wrote to the Cambodian Mission to the United Nations requesting information, as Cambodia was virtually unknown in Chile at the time. My letter was in Castilian the only language I spoke at the time.

A few months later, I received a letter in French in which His Majesty expressed his delight that a Chilean student was taking an interest in Cambodia. I did not speak French, so I had to ask a teacher at my high school to help me translate the letter. Shortly thereafter, I managed to convince my father to let me take French lessons at the Alliance Française in Santiago; I studied there for two years so that I could correspond with His Majesty.

This anecdote illustrates how His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk never ceased to champion the Francophonie. His Majesty could have written to me in English; instead, he chose the language of Molière—a language he had mastered perfectly, and indeed better, if I may say so, than some French people themselves.

That was the essence of the King-Father and the Francophonie! His Majesty used to say: “I, Sihanouk, have always accorded pride of place not only to the Francophonie but also to France within Cambodia.”

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Mesdames Fanny del Volta, Marina Pok and Laetitia Tran Ngoc of the Francophonie organization, for their assistance with the research for this study. Also, to H. E. Mme Srey Nory of the Cabinet of His Majesty the King and H.E. Mme Tan Meng Huoy of the Cabinet of Her Majesty the Queen Mother and to Ambassador Youk Chhang and the Queen Mother Library for funding this publication.

Julio A. Jeldres
September 2026

The Founders of the Francophonie



President Léopold Senghor

of the Republic of Senegal

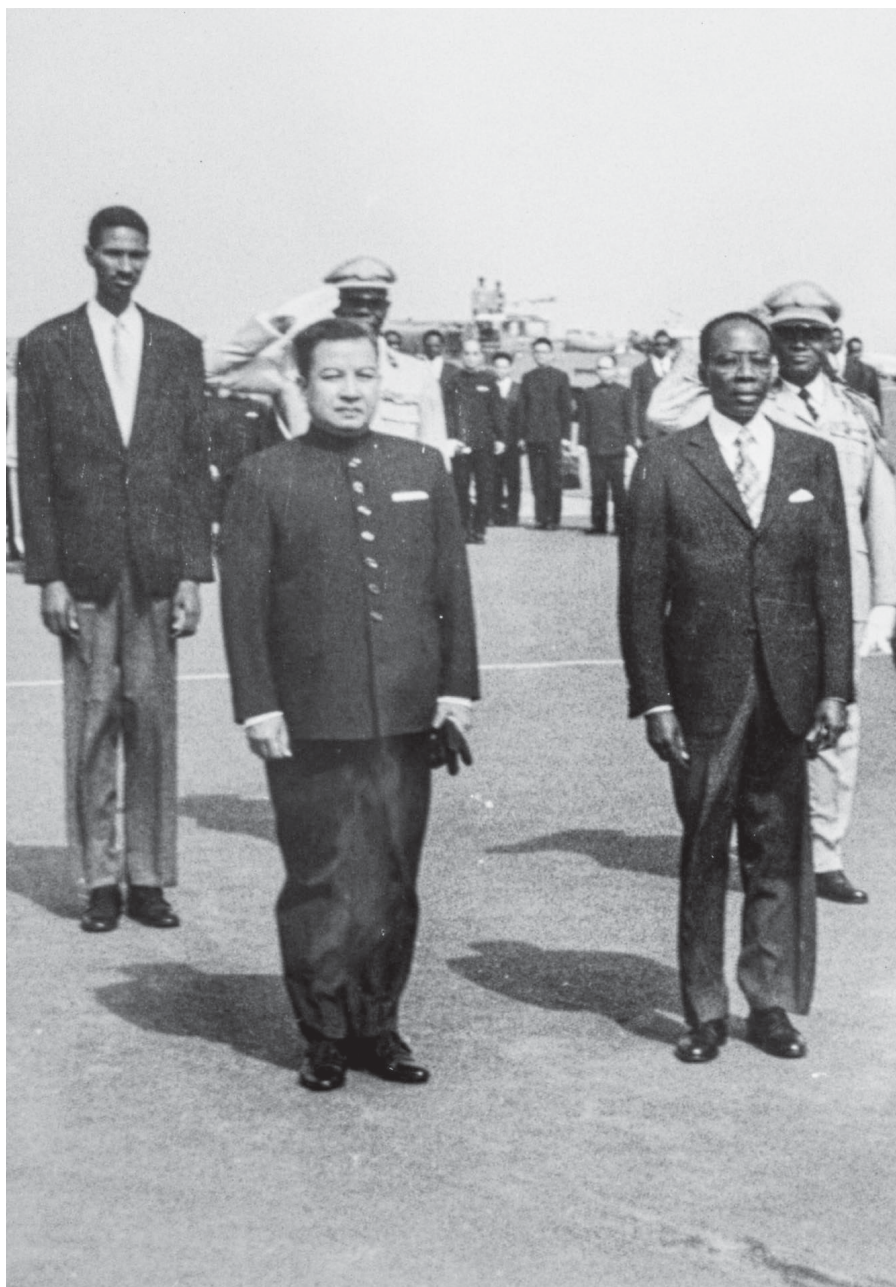
Born on October 9, 1906, in Joal, Senegal, and passed away on December 20, 2001, in Verson, France. Léopold Sédar Senghor was a Senegalese poet, writer, and statesman, as well as the first President of the Republic of Senegal (1960–1980). He was the first African to be elected to the Académie française.

Léopold Sédar Senghor began his education in Senegal before arriving in France at the age of 22—the start of “sixteen years of wandering,” in his own words. Initially a student at the Sorbonne and later at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, he prepared for the entrance examination to the École Normale Supérieure.

It was there that he met Paul Guth, Henri Queffélec, Robert Verdier, Georges Pompidou, and Aimé Césaire. On September 12, 1946, Léopold Sédar Senghor married Ginette Éboué (1923–1992)—a parliamentary aide in the office of the Minister of Overseas France and daughter of Félix Éboué, former Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa—with whom he had two sons. Re-elected as an independent deputy representing the overseas territories in 1951, he served as Secretary of State to the Presidency of the Council in Edgar Faure’s government from March 1, 1955, to February 1, 1956; became mayor of Thiès (Senegal) in November 1956; and subsequently served as Minister-Counsellor in Michel Debré’s government from July 23, 1959, to May 19, 1961.

Elected on September 5, 1960, Léopold Sédar Senghor became the leader of the newly formed Republic of Senegal. He authored the Senegalese national anthem, **Le Lion rouge**. He resigned from the presidency before the end of his fifth term, in December 1980. Abdou Diouf, then Prime Minister, succeeded him as head of state in accordance with Article 35 of the Constitution.

Under Léopold Sédar Senghor’s presidency, Senegal introduced a multi-party system and established a highly effective education system.



Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor welcomes
Prince Norodom Sihanouk to Dakar in May 1973.
Photo: courtesy of the OIF.

President Habib Bourguiba

of the Republic of Tunisia

Habib Bourguiba was a major Tunisian political figure and the country's first president, serving from 1957 to 1987.

Born into a modest family in Monastir in 1903, he received a broad education and later studied law in Paris. His exposure to Western ideas shaped his political outlook and inspired him to be one of the founders of the Neo-Destour Party, which became central to Tunisia's nationalist movement against French colonial rule.

Bourguiba played a pivotal role in Tunisia's achievement of independence in 1956, advocating a moderate approach to governance that combined modernity with Arab-Islamic values.

His presidency was marked by significant progress in education and women's rights, as well as the establishment of a one-party state. However, his tenure also faced challenges, notably economic difficulties and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

Despite his declining health and his ousting from power in a bloodless coup in 1987, his legacy remains significant; he is credited with shaping a stable and independent Tunisia.

Regarded as a major statesman in North Africa and the Arab world, Bourguiba left a lasting mark on the region through his vision and leadership. He passed away in 2000, remembered as a leader who worked to modernize Tunisia and strengthen its national identity.



President Habib Bourguiba received in France by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac - December 1986

Photo: courtesy of the Hôtel de Matignon.

President Hamani Diori

of the Republic of Niger

President Hamani Diori was born on June 6, 1916, of the Djerma ethnicity in Soudouré—a village 12 km from the capital, Niamey—to a father who was a public health official in the French colonial administration.

After completing his studies at the William Ponty Normal School in Dakar, Senegal, Hamani Diori worked as a schoolteacher in his country's regional schools from 1936 to 1938, before becoming an instructor of the Zarma and Hausa languages at the National School of Overseas France in Paris. On May 9, 1945, he married Aïssa Amadou—known by the nickname Aïchatou—with whom he had six children.

In 1946, he was a founding member of the Nigerien Progressive Party (PPN), the local branch of the African Democratic Rally (RDA). That same year, he was elected as a deputy representing Niger in the French National Assembly.

On November 8, 1960, the Nigerian National Assembly—presided over by Boubou Hama and composed solely of the single party PPN-RDA—elected Hamani Diori as President of the Republic. During his administration, Diori promoted the *Samaria* (traditional structures for cultural exchange) to benefit the party and maintained close economic ties with France. Running unopposed, he was re-elected in 1965 and 1970.

On the night of April 14–15, 1974, a coup d'état against President Diori broke out, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Seyni Kountché—the new Chief of Staff who had replaced Balla-Arabé (the latter having been promoted to Grand Chancellor of the National Orders of Niger). Soldiers commanded by Lieutenant Gabriel Cyrille stormed the presidential palace in Niamey, seized Diori, and assassinated his wife.

Released in 1987 by Kountché's successor, Ali Saïbou, shortly after the latter took power, Diori left the country for Morocco, where he died in Rabat on April 23, 1989.



President Diori Hamani with General Charles De Gaulle in Paris - September 1961
Photo: courtesy of the Élysée Palace.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk,

Head of State of Cambodia



His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk on the day of his Coronation in 1941.

Photo: Author's collection.

His Royal Highness Prince Norodom Sihanouk—born on October 31, 1922, in Phnom Penh and died on October 15, 2012, in Beijing—was a Cambodian statesman and a dominant figure in his country's political life during the second half of the 20th century.

He served—at times successively and at others simultaneously—as King, Prime Minister, Head of State of the Kingdom, Head of State in exile, and finally King once more.

Appointed King of Cambodia on April 24, 1941, at the age of 18—while the country was under a French protectorate—he led his nation to independence on November 9, 1953. He subsequently abdicated on March 3, 1955, in favour of his father, in order to assume a political role that the constitution did not permit his royal office to hold.

Having founded his own political party, the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (People's Socialist Community), Sihanouk led the Kingdom of Cambodia, first as Prime Minister and later—following his father's death—as Head of State. During the Cold War, he adopted a policy of neutralism; however, his hostility toward American interference in Southeast Asia drove him to align more closely with the Socialist camp of politics, particularly China, even while he simultaneously suppressed domestic Cambodian communists.

Prince Sihanouk was ousted as Head of State of Cambodia on March 18, 1970, by General Lon Nol and subsequently formed a resistance front in exile in China, bringing together royalists, non-political citizens, and his former communist adversaries, the Khmer Rouge. The latter seized power on April 17, 1975; Sihanouk, while officially Head of State, was relegated to a purely ceremonial role. He resigned on April 2, 1976, and was placed under house arrest while the Khmer Rouge massacred a portion of the country's population, as well as several members of his immediate family and the Cambodian royal family.



His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk on the day of his coronation in 1941 accompanied by the French Governor General, Admiral Decoux. Photo: Author's collection.



Article in the French newspaper "Le Figaro", June 1948, commenting on King Norodom Sihanouk's second stage at the Saumur Cavalry School, when he was given the rank of Reserve Captain and highly commended by his teachers and classmates. He had completed an initial stage in 1946. Author's collection.

Between March 1970 and September 1991, Cambodia suffered greatly due to foreign invasions and the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, who had seized power in April 1975. During this tragic period of Cambodian history, Prince Norodom Sihanouk was in exile in China (1970–1975), a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge (1976–1979), and in exile a second time (1979–1991) in China; from there, he led the Cambodian resistance and worked to promote the return of peace to Cambodia.

Following the Paris Peace Agreements in October 1991, he returned to Cambodia and resumed his role as constitutional monarch on September 24, 1993; he abdicated on October 7, 2004.

Norodom Sihanouk is considered one of the founding fathers of the Francophonie, alongside President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, President Hamani Diori of Niger, and President Habib Bourghiba of Tunisia.



These photos were taken during the State Visit to Cambodia, in September 1966, of General Charles de Gaulle, President of France and Madame Yvonne de Gaulle.

Photo left: Queen Sisowath Kossamak, General de Gaulle, Madame de Gaulle and Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

General de Gaulle, Madame de Gaulle, Princess Norodom Monique Sihanouk and Prince Norodom Sihanouk.

Photos: Collection of H.R.H. Prince Norodom Chakravuth.

Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam)



Lingua Franca



The concept of the French language as a political and commercial tool dates back to medieval France, but the term entered common usage thanks to non-French heads of state. This led to the creation of the *Organisation de la Francophonie*, which became a diplomatic framework for dialogue on human rights, development, the economy, and education.

French was once the language of the upper classes in England and served as a *lingua franca* at the Champagne fairs in northeastern France during the 12th and 13th centuries, linking northern trade routes with those of the Mediterranean. However, it was not until the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts, promulgated by Francis I in 1539, that French became the official language of the legal system and administration, displacing Latin.

The French geographer Onésime Reclus coined the word “Francophone” in 1880 to refer to anyone who spoke French. However, the term fell into disuse until the 1960s.

“Francophonization” had not been the primary objective of French colonization. Canada, along with various African and Arab nations, brought the concept back to the forefront, linking it to the desire to assert a cultural identity—as in Quebec—or to the process of decolonization, which saw several nations adopt French as an official language, thereby facilitating exchange among geographically dispersed Francophones.

Cambodia did not come into contact with the French language until relatively late; sustained relations with France were not established until the mid-19th century. And it was only with the Protectorate that the French language truly penetrated the country.

The Khmer language had possessed its own alphabet for a very long time. Khmer literature was rich, even if limited to areas corresponding to its needs: sacred texts, epic tales, literature, and poetry. Through the French language, Cambodians were able to gain immediate access to vast fields of literary studies as well as scientific and technical fields. The teaching of French was introduced in primary schools and French became the language of all secondary education. The doors to modern knowledge suddenly opened to a vast bilingual elite.



The Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon. Photo: Author's collection.

The young Prince Norodom Sihanouk completed his secondary education at the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon (currently Lycée Le Quy Don in Ho Chi Minh City), because his mother, Queen Sisowath Kossamak, was convinced that only Cambodians who were very strong in French could make a place for themselves in the colonial administration.

The Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat was one of the finest establishments built by France. Since 1874, it had welcomed more than 2000 male and female students in a harmonious and verdant setting. Its teaching staff was remarkable. It provided lectures of the highest quality, comparable to those of the great Parisian schools. Norodom Sihanouk was part of the class of 1941, the year in which he ascended the throne.

In 1962, Norodom Sihanouk wrote about his experience at the Chasseloup-Laubat: "It is more delicate for me to speak of the role of the French language in my education. Shall I admit it? I am not an intellectual. I was about to take my first baccalaureate when the death of H.M. Sisowath Monivong, my late grandfather, tore me from the benches of the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat in Saigon to place me on the Throne. I had been a fairly good Latin and Greek scholar, and I was better than passable in French. I had to make do with this modest baggage. Since then, I have improved on my own, by reading, listening, speaking, and writing".

He added: "For I have written in French. Oh! not great books, I would have had neither the time nor, no doubt, what settles everything, the talent. But articles, which I published in the press of my country and, on occasion, in newspapers or journals abroad. I was thus able to explain the role of our Khmer Monarchy, often misunderstood, and address major national issues with a freedom that often brought

me trouble, but also earned me some precious sympathies. Besides, as my readers can see, it is in a style more journalistic than diplomatic that I offer my testimony as a faithful friend of the French language, and of France itself”.

After Independence was achieved in November 1953, Norodom Sihanouk created secondary schools and universities where the French language played a primordial role. Likewise, in the field of information, the Head of State launched several magazines and newspapers, such as *Cambodge*, *Réalités Cambodgiennes*, *le Sangkum* and *Kambuja*, all published in French.

Norodom Sihanouk was among the first to become aware of the interest that the creation of an organization of French-speaking states would present. A Francophile as much as a Francophone, Norodom Sihanouk helped give the Francophone community this Asian component without which it could not have claimed universality.

In 1960, several French-speaking countries created the Conference of Ministers of Education of French-speaking States and Governments (CONFEMEN) and then, in 1961, the Association of Partially or Entirely French-Language Universities (AUPELF).

In November 1962, the French journal “*ESPRIT*” published a special issue devoted to the French language and culture entitled “French, a living language”.



Prince Norodom Sihanouk and General Charles de Gaulle during the French President's visit to Cambodia in September 1966. Photo: author's collection.

In this special issue of ESPRIT, there were articles written by some of the architects of the Francophonie such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Norodom Sihanouk, as well as other French, Canadian, African, writers and diplomats, etc...

According to President Senghor, the Francophonie is, “this integral humanism, which is woven around the earth; this symbiosis of the dormant energies of all continents, of all races, which awaken in their complementary warmth”.

Prince Sihanouk, affirmed that “It is not unknown, moreover, in the intellectual circles where Esprit circulates, that Cambodia occupies an honourable place among Francophone countries, and that it could be, if France wanted it and consented to the few sacrifices necessary for this, the ‘sanctuary’ of French culture in Asia”.

The Prince added that: “The influence of a country, nowadays, is closely linked to its cultural influence. From this point of view, France remains very present in Cambodia where the entire elite practices, and often quite well, in any case with affection and pride, the language of Pascal— where our schoolchildren, our middle school students, our high school students are ten times more numerous than in the time of the Protectorate to know French”.

The Cambodian Head of State set his country on the path of the Francophonie in 1962, when he co-signed an appeal for the gathering of what were then called “French-speaking countries”. Leading Francophone figures, such as President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, President Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia and President Hamani Diori of Niger, joined Cambodia.

Cambodia and Senegal had established diplomatic relations since 1969 and Cambodia had opened an Embassy in Dakar and appointed Chan Youran, former Head of Sihanouk’s Secretariat, as its first Ambassador to Senegal. The latter would lead an essential diplomatic mission for Cambodia in Francophone Africa. Ambassador Chan Youran was also accredited as Ambassador to Niger, Congo, Mauritania and Mali.



Prince Norodom Sihanouk and French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing at the Elysee Palace on 13 December 1979.
Photo: Author's collection.

Sihanouk and President Senghor had fairly close relations, to the point that after the March 1970 coup d'état in Cambodia, Senegal continued to recognize Sihanouk as the legitimate Head of State of Cambodia.

In November 1969, the President of Niger, Hamani Diori, made a state visit to Cambodia, it marked the last high-level state visit and the last official reception organized in Cambodia before the March 1970 coup d'état led by Lon Nol.

Hamani Diori and Prince Norodom Sihanouk maintained close diplomatic ties, particularly regarding the promotion of the French language and the foundations of the Francophonie movement.

In his speech at the official dinner, President Diori clearly expressed the purpose of his visit to Cambodia: "Your Royal Highness, the Republic of Niger bows with profound respect before Cambodia's unwavering courage. Our presence here bears witness to a broader ambition: the creation of a linguistic family that transcends continents — not to turn toward the colonial past, but to build an unbreakable alliance founded on mutual progress, both technical and cultural and political. We salute Cambodia's courageous commitment to non-alignment. You have proven that a nation can preserve its peace and modernize its society without selling its soul to ideological blocs. Niger stands alongside you as we build this new global community of the Francophonie".

It was in this spirit that the Treaty of Niamey (Niger) on the creation of the Agency for Cultural and Technical Cooperation was signed, in March 1970.

Unfortunately, Cambodia did not formally sign the Treaty of Niamey on 20 March 1970. Although Prince Norodom Sihanouk is unanimously recognized by the International Organisation of Francophonie (OIF) as one of the four "founding fathers" (thanks to his activist efforts throughout the 1960s and his agreement given to Hamani Diori in November 1969), the Kingdom of Cambodia did not join the organization as a founding member in March 1970 because of the coup d'état. The country did not officially join the Francophonie until much later, in 1991 (as an observer) and then in 1993 (as a full member), after the Peace Agreements have been signed and the return of the Prince Sihanouk as President of the Supreme National Council.

In 1997, the Agency became the Intergovernmental Agency of the Francophonie. At the same time, university cooperation developed to form the Francophone University Agency, which today brings together 526 universities and research institutes across all continents.

With decolonization, the Heads of State of the newly independent countries developed this very clear and very modern vision of the need to renew relations among themselves through this common language, with the creation of a common market already as a project.



King Norodom Sihanouk and Queen Norodom Monineath Sihanouk with President and Mme. Jacques Chirac at the start of their State Visit to France on 22 April 1996.

Photo: Courtesy Cabinet of Her Majesty the Queen Mother.

The overthrow of Norodom Sihanouk in March 1970 plunged the country into a tragedy from which it is only recovering today. The 1970-1975 war brought a strong Anglo-Saxon presence to Phnom Penh (Americans, Australians, New Zealanders...). This presence led to widespread use of the English language in the administration as well as in the military, economic and educational sectors, to the detriment of French, which declined.

When he announced in 1976 that he was resigning from his functions as Head of State of the newly established Democratic Kampuchea, the Prince read his statement in French on Radio Phnom Penh.

After the signing of the Peace Agreements in 1991, the Francophonie regained some of its lost influence in Cambodia, particularly in the field of education. In February 1993, His Majesty welcomed French President François Mitterrand, the first French Head of State to visit Cambodia since the historic visit of General Charles de Gaulle in 1966.

For King Sihanouk, French was not simply the language of the colonial masters. It was also, at the time, a widely used language in diplomacy, commerce, international trade and culture. Therefore, his relationship with France and the French reflected a clear understanding that while he wanted independence from France, he also appreciated the important role the French language and culture could play in an independent Cambodia.

For some this was either a paradox or a contradiction but in fact the Cambodian leader had carefully reflected on this as explained to Jean Lacouture in “Le Monde” of 24 June 1964: “If I am going to Paris, it is above all to thank the French for what they have done for Cambodia, particularly in recent years. Without France—and its intelligent policy—the disappointments inflicted upon us by the Americans, and even the British (whose traditions of realism seem to be fading), would have deeply alienated us from the West. It is France that has built and maintained a bridge between the free world and us. It is thanks to France that Cambodia has not tipped into the socialist camp and can still call itself neutral.”

Even after retiring in 2004, His Majesty continued to promote the Francophonie by publishing his memoirs written in French daily on his website.



Prince Norodom Sihanouk and French President Francois Mitterrand in July 1986 at the Elysée Palace. President Mitterrand hosted the Paris International Conference on Cambodia in July-August 1989 and again in October 1991 when the Peace Agreements were signed.

Photo: Courtesy National Archives of France.

King Norodom Sihamoni, a worthy Francophone heir



King Norodom Sihamoni of Cambodia is a fervent ambassador of the French language and an engaged actor of the Francophonie, a worthy direct heir of his father, King-Father Norodom Sihanouk, who was one of the founding fathers of the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF).

Before ascending the throne in 2004, Norodom Sihamoni lived for many years in Prague. There he studied classical dance, theatre and cinema, and taught dance in Paris. He also served as Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Cambodia to UNESCO.



King Norodom Sihamoni with French President Emmanuel Macron, during the XIX Francophonie Summit in October 2024.
Photo: Cabinet of His Majesty the King

In 2004, in the journal *Hermès*, King Sihamoni wrote an article on the Francophonie in which he emphasized the following: “Cambodia encountered the French language relatively late. It was not until the middle of the 19th century that sustained relations were established with France. It was only with the protectorate that French truly took root there”.

He added: “The national language had long possessed its own writing system and alphabet. Khmer literature was rich, although limited to fields that corresponded to its needs: sacred texts, literary and epic texts, poetry, para scientific treatises. Through the French language, Cambodians gained immediate access to the vast literary, but

also scientific and technical, body of works in French. The study of French was introduced as early as primary school and it became the language of all secondary education. The broad bilingual elite of baccalaureate graduates suddenly saw the doors of modern knowledge open before them”.

King Sihamoni represented Cambodia on the High Council of the Francophonie when he was his country’s ambassador to UNESCO, before becoming sovereign of Cambodia.

Furthermore, the King was appointed a foreign associate of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of France in June 2008 and, in December 2025, an associate member of the Académie des Sciences d’Outre-mer.

Sihamoni speaks perfect and refined French, which he regularly uses during his official addresses and diplomatic visits. The sovereign actively supports the promotion of Francophone values and the teaching of French in Cambodia, a country that plays a major cultural bridge role for the Francophonie in Southeast Asia

The monarch embodies Cambodia’s active presence within the institutions of the Francophonie, participating in major international gatherings such as the XIX Francophonie Summit held at Villers-Cotterêts (Villers-Cotterêts Palace) and Paris (Grand Palais) in October 2024.



King Norodom Sihamoni during his first State visit to France is welcomed by French President Jacques Chirac on 20 November 2006. Photo: Author’s collection.



King Norodom Sihamoni during his installation as a Foreign Associate Member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of France in June 2008. Photo: Author's Collection.

In his closing remarks at the XIX Summit of the Francophonie, the King stated that: “So yes, my country reaffirms more than ever its firm commitment to La Francophonie. And in a world shaken by violence we thought belonged to a bygone era, Cambodia wishes to reiterate its adherence to the values and principles of La Francophonie, as well as its deep commitment to cultural and linguistic diversity—a driver of human development—and to a rules-based multilateralism that serves as a spearhead for growth”.



King Sihamoni with the Secretary General of the Francophonie, Madame Louise Mushikiwabo and President Macron of France, on the occasion of the XIX Summit of the Francophonie in October 2024 in France. Photo: Cabinet of His Majesty the King.



Cover: Collection of H.R.H. Prince Norodom Chakravuth.

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