

Angkor and its Landscape in the History of Cambodia*

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Introduction: *Nagara* and Angkor

Derived from the Sanskrit *nagara* meaning “capital city” the term Angkor is itself a cultural artifact with a long history marked by both phonetic and semantic evolution [Ang *et al.* 1995]. The transformation by which this word came to designate a whole civilization, characterized indeed by astonishing urban development, is one of ordinary metonymical association. It is no more surprising that the capital, or the civilization itself, has lent its name to an entire geographic region. The land is both literally and figuratively marked by the civilization it once accommodated, with its geographic archaeological features intertwined. The holy city, *nagara*, the temples, reservoirs, irrigation canals, communication road network, settlements and other archaeological remains in the landscape testify to the existence of several cities (**Figure 1**). The specific ritual forms practiced by today’s Angkor region populations contain numerous archaic elements through which an ancestral memory is embodied [*Ibid.*]. Unlike the disappeared neighboring civilizations of Champa or Dvāravati, it is indeed being caused Angkor civilization has endured, be it in vestigial or radically modified forms that Angkor remains the name of the region itself (**Figure 2**).

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I . History of Angkor Region

Just as Angkor has not disappeared, neither was it born of thin air. While the majority of the area's archaeological remains are those of successive capital cities of the Angkorian Empire constructed between the beginning of the ninth and the fifteenth centuries A.D., the region is known to have been inhabited well before this period. Precursors to the Angkorian civilization certainly influenced its development profoundly, while subsequent social and cultural forms carried — and continue to carry — the mark of their Angkorian predecessors.

The omnipresent imagery of Brahmanism gods [Bhattacharya 1961] and Buddhism deities [Chutiwongs 2002], along with the widespread use of Sanskrit, led early scholars to explain the origins of Angkor principally in terms of an earlier 'Indianisation process' [Vickery 1998]. More recently however, greater attention has been given to the formation of a more unified polity under the rule of Jayavarman II, who, on his ascension to the throne in 802 proclaimed himself as the first "universal monarch," literally means, the king of kings. It has thus been suggested that much of the historical importance of Angkor pertains to its emergence as the first real "Empire" in Southeast Asia.

The various rulers of Angkor Empire stand tall in the history of Southeast Asia as the leaders of the region's most powerful and expansive empire. Likely, there are some written and archaeological sources and given the evidence showing unifying taxation schemes, communication road network worldwide empire [Im 2015], trade routes (**Figure 3**), laws or shared languages, has showed a degree to which outlying regions looked to the city of Angkor as their well-developed capital landscape. Naturally, the influence of the Khmer rulers shifted over time as aspirations for territorial control wavered and as battles were won and lost. The translation of inscriptions, Khmer and Sanskrit found across the region do however indicate that, at its height, the Angkorian Empire stretched from central Laos in the north to central Thailand in the south, and from the Mekong delta in the west to the borders of Pagan in the east.

After the sacking of the city by the Ayutthayan army in the mid 15 century, and with regional power shifting towards Ayutthaya, Angkor became a provincial polity which was collection of rural villages focused around Theravada Buddhist monastic communities living within the ancient city and temple complex [Ang *et al.* 1995]. For example, Angkor Vat, the largest religious monument on Earth, is truly a marvel of Khmer creativity. It's one of the most incredible structures ever built, Angkor Vat combines the finest architectural and artistic ideas with a spirituality that few sites on earth can match. It is also an enduring symbol of the Khmer people. It adorns Cambodia's flag and paper money (**Figure 4 and 5**).

Built in the first half of the 12th century by King Suryavarman, it served as the center of a royal capital city called "Angkor." The term is a corruption of the Khmer word *nokor*, meaning "capital city." As *Vat* is a Khmer word for "Buddhist pagoda or monastery," the phrase "Angkor Vat" simply means a Buddhist monastery in the capital city. Originally, Angkor Vat was a Hindu temple (**Figure 6**). According to some inscriptions in the temple, it was known as *Vreah Borom Visnulok* ("the holy highest world of [the god] Vishnu") until about the 16th century. By that time, it had become a Buddhist temple, which it still is today.

It was during the reign of King Ang Chan in the 16th century that restoration work at the site was begun [Ang *et al.* 1995]. Today, evidence of this work can best be seen at Bakan, the temple's central sanctuary, and along the panels on the northern wings of the galleries at the second enclosure. The workers in the 16th century used old temple stones that they found lying on the grounds of the complex. In general, restoration at Angkor was considered a traditional duty of the Khmer king and continued from one king's reign to another's [Thompson 2004]. A good example of how the royals felt about this duty is a 1577 inscription (**Figure 7**) the Queen Mother had inscribed on the wall of the central tower of Angkor Wat:

Having seen my royal and august son [Ang Chan's grandson], brimming with faith, restore this Preah Pissulok of ancient Cambodia to its ancient plenitude, I was seized with joy and an overwhelming satisfaction in him!

II. Angkor's Modern 'Revival'

With Cambodia under the protection of the French the establishment of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) in 1901 has been provided the foundations for decades of scholarly activity, temple conservation and site presentation. The efforts of EFEO ensured many of Angkor's largest temples, including the vast walled enclosures of Angkor Vat and Angkor Thom, were restored as the monumental heritage of a once great civilization; a shared legacy of sublime beauty and magisterial power (**Figure 8 and 9**).

Physical conservation and restoration have been starting the form one part of the story of Angkor's modern "revival." Beyond the site itself, the temples became popular and vital motifs for an emergent nation. As the boundaries, institutions and unifying history of Cambodia gradually took shape, images of the temples played a highly symbolic role, appearing on colonial banknotes, on stamps, legal documents. Ornamentation and architectural designs were also reproduced in civic architecture and monuments in Phnom Penh and other urban spaces (**Figure 10**).

Under the supervision of EFEO, a School of Cambodian Arts was established in an attempt to mesh together arts training with the newly opened Musée Khmer, a steadily growing tourism industry and the country's ancient temple heritage (**Figure 11**). Rather than adopting modern techniques and designs, teams of craftsmen were trained to work in the ancient traditions, reproducing the intricate carvings and sculptures found in the temples. Working in harmony, these various processes meant Angkor emerged as the pivotal reference. More specifically, ideas of a noble Khmer citizen, a Khmer cultural heritage and a Cambodian national history all converged and fused around a totemic Angkor.

III. Angkor Symbolized for a Nation

In about the early 1950's, a national newspaper, the title of which, *Nokor Vat*, was a

translation of Angkor Vat has been formed (**Figure 12**). As part of the newspaper's anti-Chinese, anti-Vietnamese, and increasingly anti-colonial agenda, Angkor was frequently cited as evidence of a Khmer racial and cultural supremacy, and a testament to a Khmer strength which should not be forgotten [Edwards 2007: 15]. It would not be until 1953 however, nearly a decade after the end of World War II, before these dreams of national independence could be realized.

The opening verses of Cambodia's first national anthem after independence indicate how the challenges and reminding of this new era were approached through the reassurance of a resplendent heritage of architectural glories and territorial power.

*May Heaven protect our
King And give him
happiness and glory;
May he reign over our hearts and our
destinies. He who – heir to the builder
Monarchs – Governs the proud and
old Kingdom.*

*The temples sleep in the forest
Recalling the grandeur of Moha
Nokor. The Khmer race is as
eternal as the rocks.
Let us have confidence in the faith of
Kampuchea The empire which defies
the years.*

As part of an effort to construct a distinct identity for the country, the Queen mother of H.M *Preah Borom Rothanakod*, Royal Palace in Phnom Penh formulated a classical dance using young costumed *APSARAS* as a way to promote the temples as a unifying and populist symbol [Turnbull 2006]. In the world of 1960s Cambodian commerce, Angkor Vat in particular would become a definitive icon of modernity and national progress. Customers purchasing the Angkor brand of trucks, tractors or motorcycles were assured of 'guaranteed quality, perfect servicing and cheap running costs' [Edwards 2007]. Angkor also signified leisure, taste and refinement in Cambodian advertising (**Figure 13**). The Khmer Distilleries Corporation slogan "Angkor beer, My happiness" (1969) unusually juxtaposed the image of a modern young woman, rather than the stereotypical *APSARA*, with Angkor (**Figure 14**).

In the early 1970's, such societal divides have been contributed to the former *King Preah Borom Rothanakod*'s downfall at the hands of his pro-American military chief Lon Nol in 1970. To help justify his overthrow of *Preah Borom Rothanakod*, Lon Nol drew parallels between the decadence of the previous administration and the extravagances of a crumbling Angkorian Empire. Interestingly, for Lon Nol Angkor would become a totem of "Khmer warrior" heritage.

By 1975 however, with the country suffering devastating destruction from the

Vietnam- America war, Pol Pot took the country in yet another political direction. Although recognizing no historical precedents for his revolution, Pol Pot once again situated himself within an illustrious Khmer past by citing Angkor's social and economic structures as the ideal foundations for his agrarian utopia (**Figure 15**). Inspired by the hydraulic theories of scholars and engineers over the course of the 20th century, Pol Pot brutally implemented a form of collectivist agriculture that utilized, and attempted to expand upon, Angkor's irrigation technology.

In essence then, it could be seen that, whilst the aims and beliefs of Cambodia's politicians varied greatly in the crucial decades after Independence, Angkor endured as a symbolic resource of cultural, ethnic and national power. The towers of Angkor Wat were featured on the flags of every major political party throughout the period (**Figure 16, 17, and 18**). Angkor, as concept and ideal, represented a common thread running through a political landscape defined by a combination of realpolitik and intense ideological fissures. By claiming guardianship over an irreplaceable national heritage, each leader used Angkor as the reference point for a national and cultural revival.

IV. The Present Day of Angkor

Fast forward to today. In 1991, Cambodia's former King *Preah Borom Rathanakod* launched an appeal to UNESCO to safeguard the Angkor monuments. In response to his request, the head of UNESCO officially launched an international campaign known as "Save Angkor." In 1992, the Angkor complex was classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site, both tangible and intangible heritages (**Figure 19**). The listing brought international assistance to safeguard and develop the historic site of Angkor. The revival of the *APSARA* dance – performed for tourists as the "authentic Angkorian" or "classical Cambodian" dance (**Figure 20**), listed to the world heritage properties – has become the iconic image for a wider recovery of the country's shattered cultural infrastructures. The constant reproduction of the temples in civic architecture, in paintings, and by artisans working in stone and wood means Angkor once again provides a common thread running through contemporary imaginings of the nation. Indeed, Cambodians are continually reminded about their national heritage through a seemingly endless source of Angkorian references.

While such examples might at first seem somewhat trivial, they reflect an unparalleled history whereby an unshakeable bond has emerged between a cultural heritage of the ancient past and a modern society. One of the ways in which these values are expressed most clearly is the annual Khmer New Year Festival, named presently as *ANGKOR SANGKRAN* (**Figure 21**). In recent years, in excess of several million Cambodians have travelled to the Angkor-Siem Reap region for the four days of festivities. At once both an event of pilgrimage and tourism, Khmer New Year provides a powerful example of how the site has become accessible to the people of Cambodia as never before.

In addition to the re-emergence of Angkor as an immensely symbolic site within 21st century, the site has also re-established itself as one of Asia's most popular cultural landscapes. In excess of 3 million tourists now visit Angkor each year (**Figure 22**). Visually

spectacular, the temples have also become one of UNESCO's the highest profile World Heritage sites. Interestingly, international tourism and World Heritage, two of the defining industries of the modern globalized era, are together helping to re-establish a series of cultural connections and processes at Angkor which date back several centuries.

V. New Aspect of Angkor through Current Studies

Recent research on the scribbles and graffiti found across the temples indicates long and complex histories of visitation. Scribbled poetry provides the evidence of Chinese travellers visiting Angkor during the early Qing dynasty [Edwards 2006]. Calligraphic marks in ink also testify to the presence of Japanese travelers in the early decades of the 17th century [Harris 2005; Ishizawa 2015]. Whilst the exact significance of these texts remains open to interpretation, their accounts of offerings made to Buddha images point towards Angkor's significance as a spiritual crossroads and a hub for pilgrims travelling to and around Southeast Asia. Indeed, Arabic inscriptions citing the Koran found at Phnom Bakheng suggest the temples (**Figure 23**), with their Buddhist and Hindu iconography, operated as multi-denominational pilgrimage sites [Thompson 2004].

The recent conservation assistance programs established by about 20 countries under an umbrella of World Heritage thus reflect the long standing, pre-nation-state ties forged between Angkor and the wider Asian region and the rest of the world.

Far from merely lying its decline in the 15th century, Angkor has endured as a highly symbolic place for religious pilgrims and travelers located across Asia and beyond. The eventual formation of Cambodia as a modern nation-state in the late 19th century saw Angkor emerge as the pivotal reference point around which Khmer cultural, racial and national identities unified. Appropriated as the legacy of erstwhile glories by politicians and businesses, and by artists and architects, Angkor's symbolic value endures and continues to cross geographical, economic and aesthetic boundaries. For Cambodia itself, the multi significances of the site for the population today is perhaps unparalleled in any other country. In a post-conflict era, Angkor has become a beacon of strength, an icon of sublime aesthetic grandeur and as such an engine of societal restitution. For about 25 years now, the work continues with a view to ensuring the preservation and management of Angkor Park (**Figure 24**).

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Figure 1. Map of Angkor (Courtesy to APSARA-Sydney University-EFEO)



Figure 2. Ritual at Angkor Vat (Courtesy to APSARA)



Figure 3. Road network (Courtesy to Living Angkor Road Project, LARP)



Figure 4. Cambodia flag (Courtesy to worldatlas.com: <https://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/flags/country/asia/cambodia.htm>) (Accessed February 3, 2020)



Figure 5. Cambodian paper money



Figure 6. Angkor Wat



Figure 7. Inscription 16th century at Angkor Wat central tower



Figure 8. Banteay Srei: restoration works
(Courtesy to EFEO)



Figure 9. Preah Balilay: restoration works
(Courtesy to EFEO)



Figure 10. Independent Monument (Courtesy to Reyum)



Figure 11. Opening Ceremony Art school
(Courtesy to Mr. Preap Chanmara)



Figure 12. *Nokor Vatta* Newspaper front page
(Courtesy to Cambodia National Archive)



Figure 13. Destilleries advertising (Courtesy to SM le Roi-Père Norodom Sihanouk du Cambodge, Royal Cabinet, Cambodia)



Figure 15. Khmer Rouge's Hydraulic Work (Courtesy to Cambodia Archive)



Figure 17. National flag in a scene of 1980's (Courtesy to Cambodia Archive)



Figure 14. Khmer Lady during the independent period (Courtesy to Reyum)



Figure 16. 1950's Indochina Communist Party Meeting (Courtesy to Cambodia Archive)



Figure 18. Stamps of Angkor Vat flag (Courtesy to Cambodia Archive)



Figure 19. Angkor World Heritage List Certificate



Figure 20. Apsara dance at Angkor Vat on August 9, 2018 in the event for Angkor “Best Landmark in the world, 2018 by Trip advisor” (Courtesy to Miwa, Satoru)



Figure 21. Angkor *Sangrant*, new year celebration



Figure 22. Crowded morning at Angkor Vat pond



Figure 23. Arabic inscription
(Courtesy to Angkor Conservation office)



Figure 24. Youth gathering at New Year (Courtesy to APSARA)