

# The revitalisation of Khmer ethnic identity in Thailand

## Empowerment or confinement?

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### Introduction

In recent years, Asia has witnessed a marked expansion of heritage as a field of discourse and practice. As noted by the volume editors, the widespread concern for heritage preservation in the region is directly linked to the rapid pace of socio-economic change and the perceived 'losses' of cultural diversity and traditional lifeways to the seemingly relentless juggernaut of globalisation. One significant outcome of this increasing attention to heritage has been the revival and celebration of the cultures of historically marginalised, indigenous and minority ethnic groups. In Thailand, for example, the state-led movement to revitalise local cultural heritage (*moradok thang watthanatham thongthin*) has brought visibility and recognition to the ethnic Khmer – an ethnic minority of 1.4 million (Lewis 2009) who have lived for nearly a century in silent obscurity on the periphery of the nation-state.

Among its proponents, including advocates of multiculturalism and cultural rights, heritage revitalisation is seen as having a host of potentially positive social and economic ramifications for historically marginalised, minority populations. First, by renewing a minority group's sense of place, history and pride in their cultural difference, heritage revitalisation can play an important role in strengthening a marginalised community's sense of dignity and self-worth, thus forming the basis of a politically empowered and socially engaged citizenry (Stamatopoulou 2004). Second, by educating the broader public about cultural diversity and ethnic difference, heritage revitalisation can be a means of promoting social tolerance and mutual understanding (UNDP 2004). Finally, for advocates of the cultural or 'creative' industries such as UNESCO, cultural heritage is an invaluable economic asset and potential source of autonomy for communities, generating incomes via tourism and the sale of cultural products while simultaneously supporting the perpetuation of living practices and traditional forms of knowledge, such as performance, handicrafts and traditional medicines.

On the other hand, critics of heritage discourses have drawn attention to the contradictions, as well as the many adverse, if unintended, consequences of cultural heritage revitalisation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, Smith 2006). First, despite the emancipatory language of empowering marginalised populations through an affirmation of their culture, in many parts of the world

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including Asia, heritage revitalisation continues to be a highly selective, top-down process driven primarily by international organisations and the state apparatus (Logan 2007). Heavily influenced by what Smith (2006) has called the Western ‘authorized heritage discourse’ (AHD), heritage revitalisation in Asia largely privileges cultural heritage that is monumental, of ‘universal’ aesthetic value, exotic and vibrant, seemingly immutable and focused on the (national) past. Given the extent to which the state, along with international bodies and ‘heritage experts’, determine the selection criteria for what constitutes heritage at the local and national level, the claims of empowerment through grassroots participation in heritage revitalisation remain highly questionable.

Second, rather than fostering mutual respect, heritage revitalisation can contribute to new ‘tyrannies of identity’ (Appiah 2004) by defining rigid boundaries of group identity which reinforce a ‘self’ vs. ‘other’ mentality. Indeed, Appiah’s (ibid.) critique of the tyrannies of identity associated with group assertions of cultural difference highlights how heritage revitalisation can feed into nationalism as well as divisive ethnic identity politics at the level of the nation-state, becoming a means for specific groups to assert claims of exclusivity, entitlement or superiority over others. This is further substantiated by ethnographic case studies which illustrate that the highly contested, political nature of heritage is not the exception to the universalising ideal, but rather the rule (Littler and Naidoo 2005, Graham et al. 2000, Smith 2006, Turnbridge and Ashworth 1996).

Drawing on a fourteen-month ethnographic study of the state-led revitalisation of Khmer ethnic identity in Surin Province, Thailand, undertaken during 2002 and 2003, this chapter aims to expose the gaps between the universalising rhetoric of empowerment via cultural heritage revitalisation and its political reality. First, engaging with the critique of heritage as a state-driven enterprise, this chapter will argue that the revival of Khmer heritage in Thailand is one which promotes a politically charged, nationalist narrative of Thailand’s claims of entitlement to Khmer heritage – particularly the monumental heritage of the Angkorian empire (ninth to fourteenth centuries CE). This narrative is one which relegates the ethnic Khmer to an imagined, illustrious past, inasmuch as it represents the Khmer as bearers of Thailand’s ancient Khmer culture while simultaneously disassociating them from contemporary Cambodia. Second, drawing on Appiah’s (2004) cautionary account of the ‘tyrannies of identity’, this chapter will illustrate that the revival of Khmer cultural heritage is taking place in a regional arena of ethnic identity politics, with different minority groups vying for visibility and recognition within the nation-state. Rather than fostering mutual respect among neighbouring ethnic groups, I aim to show that the revival of Khmer heritage has reinforced local discourses of ethnic Khmer superiority over the region’s ethnic Kui and hardened the political boundary dividing Thailand and Cambodia. Finally, returning to the theme of empowerment via culture, this chapter concludes by considering how the revitalisation of Khmer heritage might bring about empowerment in the true sense of the term.

### Thailand’s Northern Khmer – a brief history

Thailand is home to an estimated 1.4 million ethnic Khmer (Lewis 2009), the majority of whom are concentrated in the provinces of Surin, Srisaket and Buriram (Figure 11.1). Geographically, these provinces are located along the Dongrek escarpment, which forms a rugged natural border with Cambodia to the south. This geographical location on a high plateau overlooking Cambodia is expressed in the ethnonyms of the region. The Khmer of Thailand refer to themselves as *khmer leu*, meaning upland Khmer, in contradistinction to the Khmer of Cambodia, whom they call *khmer tam*, or lowland Khmer. For the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to

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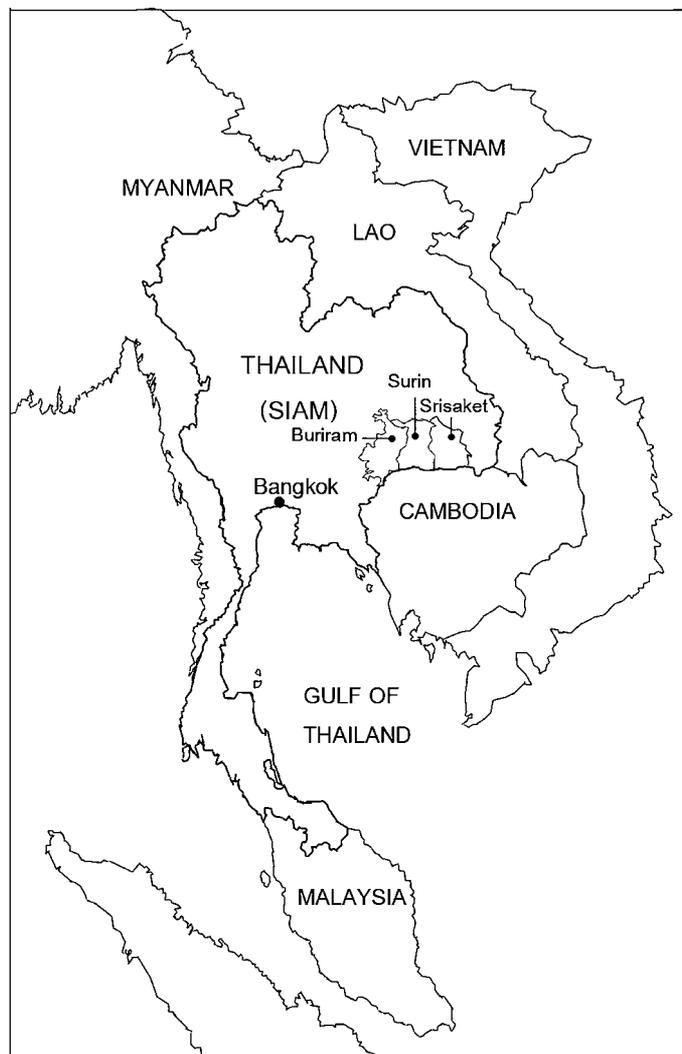


Figure 11.1 Map of Thailand showing Khmer-speaking provinces

the Khmer in Thailand using the term most widely used among scholars – Northern Khmer (Smalley 1994).

While the Khmer on both sides of this border speak a closely related language and share many cultural attributes as well as a history of cross-border migration and trade, linguists generally agree that the Northern Khmer language has diverged significantly from the Khmer in neighbouring Cambodia (Smalley 1994, Thomas 1990, Vail 2007). This view is widely shared by Northern Khmer populations, who frequently comment on the differences between Northern Khmer and the Cambodian language.

Little is known of the history of the Northern Khmer populations prior to the late-eighteenth century. Nonetheless, based on the archaeological record, we can surmise that the Khmer of this region are the descendants of the populations who established the early Khmer states of mainland Southeast Asia beginning around the sixth century, including the civilisations of

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Chenla and Angkor (Srisaksa 1989). Today, the remains of Hindu-Buddhist sanctuaries dating to the Chenla (610–802 CE) and Angkorian periods (802–1431 CE) found scattered throughout Thailand's northeastern provinces are a tangible reminder of the former breadth of the ancient Khmer empire – an empire which encompassed much of present-day Thailand and pre-dated the Thai kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, which were established in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Following the collapse of Angkor in 1431 and the contraction of the Khmer empire, the Khmer of this region fell into obscurity, reappearing again in the Thai historical record some 350 years later. According to the royal chronicles of Siam (as Thailand was known before its name change in 1939), the Northern Khmer constituted a tributary chiefdom called the 'domain of the forest' Khmer (*huameuang khamen paadong*), known to the central court through ritualised tributary relations (i.e., offering of forest products and slaves) and periodic military conscription (Paitoon 1984). In the wake of the colonial encounter in the nineteenth century, the central Siamese court in Bangkok initiated a series of sweeping administrative reforms intended to rationalise the bureaucracy, generate revenue and incorporate the ethnically diverse frontier dependencies into the incipient nation-state. Towards these ends, the central administration deployed commissioners to its dependencies, instituted a cash head tax, subsumed the powers of local lords to central administrative authorities and renamed all the outer domains and dependencies so as to eliminate place names which denoted autonomous ethnic identity (Thongchai 1994). Thus in 1899, the 'domain of the forest Khmer' was subsumed within the administrative unit called *Monthon Isaan* (the Northeastern Circle) and was further subdivided into provincial and district units (Paitoon 1984).

As in other regions of the empire, the reforms spurred a series of millenarian rebellions, whose leaders prophesied the death of central Siamese officials and the coming of a Buddha Maitreya who would restore social justice and peace to the meritorious (Keyes 1977, Paitoon 1984). In Surin in particular, lyrics belonging to the Khmer folk music genre called *kantruem* captured the upheavals of this era of modernising reforms, as well the hopes for millenarian redemption which came in their wake. The rebellions were suppressed and their memory largely erased and in subsequent decades, the Northern Khmer were gradually integrated into the Thai nation-state via education, religion and economic expansion into the Northeast. This assimilation into the Thai state had apparently been so total that when visiting the Khmer provinces in 1985, the linguist William Smalley described the Khmer as being essentially invisible.

Given the size and importance of the Northern Khmer in its own area, the population which speaks this language is surprisingly invisible to the nation at large. Northern Khmer people fit so perfectly into the language hierarchy that they are not generally noticed even though theirs is not a Thai language. Their immediate Thai neighbors know about them, of course, but Northern Khmer exhibit no linguistic competition, no Khmer nationalism, no secessionism. They live on the margin of the country and cause no problems, so they are largely ignored as being a separate people

(Smalley 1994: 140)

### From invisible others to bearers of Thailand's Khmer heritage

There are many reasons why the Northern Khmer conceded to invisibility during the Cold War era. One reason was the negative stereotypes found in standard national Thai histories representing the Khmer of Cambodia as traitors and one of Thailand's historical enemies (Charvut 2003). Another important reason was that Northern Khmer sought to disassociate themselves

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from their Cambodian neighbours following the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge (1975–79). In total, during the nation-building and Cold War eras, the stigma associated with Cambodia created a powerful disincentive to identify openly as ethnic Khmer. This stigma has persisted up to the present, with many Northern Khmer expressing embarrassment about being Khmer, preferring to assert their identity as Thai.

However, beginning in the 1990s, the Northern Khmer began to emerge from obscurity as a result of the state-led revival of Thailand's Khmer heritage. Several forces precipitated a renewed interest in Khmer cultural heritage in Thailand's Northeastern provinces. In terms of geopolitics, the most important sea change was the end of the Cold War and the Thai state's re-establishment of diplomatic and economic ties with Cambodia. Thai Prime Minister Chatchai's plea in 1989 to turn 'battlefields into marketplaces' exemplified the triumphant mood of optimism in post-Cold War Southeast Asia about a future of regional economic cooperation, much of which was focused on the lucrative market of heritage tourism.

The ambition of Thailand's tourist industry was by no means the sole force behind the state-led revival, however. The post-Cold War era in Thailand also witnessed the expansion of the localism movement (*phumpanya thongthin*) – a trend which called for the recovery and celebration of the nation's local knowledge and regional cultural diversity as an antidote to the many threats of globalisation. In the Northeast in particular, the localism movement stimulated an academic reassessment of the significance of the region's Khmer heritage, exemplified by the work of a prominent Thai historian, Thida Saraya (1992). Based on her study of the archaeological record of the pre-Angkorian Chenla period (sixth and ninth centuries CE), including epigraphs, moated settlements and artifacts found in the Mun-Chi river basin, Thida concluded that the Northeast was not merely an outpost of Khmer civilisation, but rather the birthplace of the royal lineages that would later move south to establish the civilisation of Angkor.

Concurrent with these developments in revisionist local historiography, the post-Cold War period witnessed the growth of Khmer temple restoration by the central Thai Ministry of Fine Arts. In Surin in particular, the sites under renovation in the 1990s included Prasaat Taa Muan Thom, Prasaat Taa Muan Tot and Prasaat Sikhorphum (Peleggi 2002). This boom in temple restoration was accompanied by a series of visits to the province by Crown Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who has played a prominent role in studying the sites and promoting their historical value to the Thai public-at-large.

Prompted by the localism movement and the restoration of the sanctuaries, a number of local historians at the Provincial Teacher's College – many of them ethnic Khmer – began drawing on Thida's revisionist narrative to produce texts about Surin's Khmer cultural heritage, in which they proposed that Surin's ethnic Khmer were the forgotten descendants of the ancient Khmer who once ruled in the region (Siri 1993). Another aspect of the revivalism of Khmer heritage during this period was the Provincial Teacher College's support for folklore studies about the local myths and ritual practices surrounding the sanctuaries, which constituted a subjective basis for the state's construction of narrative continuity between the living Khmer and these ancient sites.

One of the most significant ramifications of this post-Cold War revival movement is that after almost a century of living as marginal and invisible ethnic others, the Northern Khmer were now being rendered visible as the bearers of the illustrious and monumental Khmer past. In the imagery of the revival found in provincial history texts and state-sponsored official events and festivals, ethnic Khmer are posed against both real and simulated backdrops of the sanctuaries, dressed in lavish traditional silk costumes and ornate jewellery which evoke a bygone era of grandeur (Figure 11.2). Moreover, descriptions of ethnic Khmer culture portray their beliefs and ritual practices as the vestiges of a primordial era (*phithii praphenii dang doem*). In a nutshell, the

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Figure 11.2 Ethnic Khmer posed in front of an ancient Khmer sanctuary float at Phnom Khaw Saway Festival, Surin Province (Photo A. Denes)

revival's representation of the ethnic Khmer is one which connotes unbroken historical and cultural continuity between the Northern Khmer and their ancient Khmer forebears.

Concomitantly, the image of the Northern Khmer as custodians of Khmer antiquity began to feature widely in popular media, such as in Khmer-language *kantreum* music videos. In one such video, the regionally popular ethnic Khmer folk singer named Nam Phueng Mueang Surin is posed in traditional attire in front of a Khmer sanctuary in Buriram Province called Prasaat Muang Tam (Figure 11.3). Surrounded by dancers wearing costumes derived from the bas-reliefs of celestial consorts, or *apsara*, Nam Pheung walks around the ruin, gesturing to the intricate carvings in stone, while her lyrics beckon her ethnically Khmer listeners to remember their birthright, passed down to them by their ancestors. Around the same time, the figure of the ancient Khmer also began to feature prominently in spirit mediumship rites invoking the spirits of place (Figure 11.4).

While the state-led cultural revitalisation can be credited with fostering visibility of the Northern Khmer, the revival nevertheless circumscribes a very narrow definition of Khmer identity that essentially relegates the ethnic Khmer to an idealised, imagined past. In order to fully understand this representation of the Khmer as the custodians of Khmer high culture and monumental antiquity, it is necessary to frame the revival in the context of Thailand's extant claims of entitlement to Khmer heritage.

### Tracing the roots of Thailand's contested claims to Khmer heritage

First, it must be understood that the state-led revival of Khmer heritage in the post-Cold War period emerges out of a complex and politically fraught history of contestation over entitlement to Khmer heritage which dates back some six hundred years. Indeed, much of what constitutes

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Figure 11.3 Nam Pheung Muang Surin filming a *kantreum* music video at Prasaat Muang Tam (Photo A. Denes)

Thailand's cultural heritage – including court literature, dance, religion and material culture – can be traced back to the Angkorian empire, which flourished in present-day Cambodia during the ninth to thirteenth centuries CE. This is because the Tai peoples who migrated into the region from southern China to eventually establish the Siamese kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, encountered a region dominated by the Khmer and their sophisticated Hindu-Brahmin culture. Even as they fought to assert their autonomy against their Khmer suzerains, the early Tai polities emulated Angkor as an exemplary centre (Wyatt 1984). A few examples of this borrowing include the Thai alphabet, which was created in the thirteenth century and based on the old Khmer script, court performance, Hindu-Brahmin ritual practices and architectural motifs, particularly the bud-shaped temple tower called a *prang*, found widely in Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Bangkok (Aasen 1998).

One of the major ways that early Tai courts absorbed Khmer culture was through warfare and 'the rhetoric of appropriation' (Davis 1997). Writing about 'the rhetoric of appropriation' in medieval India, Davis showed how the 'capture and display' of sacred images was a means of visually substantiating the regional supremacy of a victorious king. Similarly, in their competition for regional supremacy, pre-colonial Southeast Asian polities proclaimed their paramount status in part by encompassing the symbolic and material potency of their rival states. So when

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Figure 11.4 A spirit medium dressed as a female Khmer celestial deity, or *apsara* (Photo A. Denes)

the Siamese conquered Angkor in 1431, they asserted their ascendancy by transporting people, religious objects and regalia to Ayutthaya (Chandler 2000).

This victory was not celebrated as a racial triumph of the Tai over the Khmer. Quite to the contrary, as Vickery (1973, 1976), Wilaiwan (2001), Wolters (1966) and Wyatt (1984) have all noted, given the prevalence of Khmer language and cultural practices in the court of Ayutthaya and the claims of succession to Angkor made by its monarchs, the early Ayutthaya period is more accurately characterised as ‘Khmerised’ than Tai. Through a symbolic assimilation of Angkor’s once unrivalled potency, the Siamese monarchs of Ayutthaya fortified their regional suzerainty and legitimated their status as overlords of the weakened, post-Angkorian polities of Cambodia.

This pre-colonial logic of the ‘rhetoric of appropriation’ and the forms of cultural hybridity it generated lost legitimacy during the colonial era, as colonial regimes in Southeast Asia endeavoured to delineate the boundaries of culture groups and author the histories of national races. From this standpoint of the new episteme of racial purity, Siam’s claims of entitlement to Khmer cultural and material capital were not only a violation of the ostensibly universal principle that rights to heritage were determined by race, but also regarded as indicative of Siam’s inferior and derivative status. On the grounds of securing Cambodia’s sovereignty, the

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French established the Protectorate of Cambodia in 1863 and in 1907, they reclaimed the rest of Khmer territories still under Siamese control, including the northwestern provinces of Siem Riep, Sisophon and Battambang.

In response to this new discursive and political apparatus of race and territoriality, the Siamese ruling elite delimited the boundaries of the nation and constructed an official narrative according to principles of purity. In this new purified narrative, the first historians of Siam shifted attention away from Ayutthaya and its 'Khmerised' culture to focus on constructing a narrative of the Thai race, wherein the Khmer were represented one-dimensionally as one of Siam's historical enemies (Charnvit 2003). During the era of nation-building, standard nationalist historiography produced negative stereotypes rendering the Khmer of neighbouring Cambodia as backward and treacherous (*ibid.*).

The Cold War ushered in a period of heightened tensions between Thailand and Cambodia and strong anti-Khmer sentiments propagated by Thailand's nationalistic military dictators, Field Marshal Phibulsongkram (1938–44, 1948–57) and Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1959–63). Tensions during this period manifested most visibly in the bitter dispute over Phreah Vihear, an eleventh century Khmer sanctuary located in Srisaket Province. In 1962, the International Tribunal at The Hague deemed that the temple belonged to the Cambodians, in spite of its geographic location within Thailand. As Keyes (1991) has shown, the loss of Phreah Vihear sparked a public outcry in Thailand and mass demonstrations in protest of the ruling, and shortly thereafter, the Thai government launched a series of anti-Cambodia propaganda campaigns in the Northern Khmer provinces, ordering Northern Khmer villagers to destroy Khmer language materials and forbidding Buddhist sermons in the Khmer language (Vail 2007: 121).

In spite of the turn to a purified national narrative of 'Thainess' and the rise of anti-Khmer sentiment following the loss of Phreah Vihear, the Thai elite have never fully relinquished their claims to Khmer heritage. Indeed, as Keyes (1991) has pointed out, following the Phreah Vihear settlement, the Thai government responded by shifting its attention to Khmer heritage within the nation's boundaries, funnelling funds and French expertise into the Fine Art's Department's restoration of Angkorian heritage sites in the Northeast, most prominently Phimai and Phanom Rung. In other words, this shift of attention from Angkor and Phreah Vihear to the Khmer heritage within the nation was a form of displacement, wherein the Khmer heritage in Thailand's Northeast became a metonymic substitute for the 'loss' of Angkor, which once represented a symbol of power and origins within the pre-colonial Siamese empire.

Returning to the topic of the post-Cold War revival of Khmer heritage in Surin in light of this history, I maintain that the revival constitutes yet another iteration of Thailand's extant claims to Khmer heritage. As we saw in the previous section, the state-led revival has constructed a representation of Khmer identity based on the Angkorian-era sanctuaries, as well as the elements of intangible heritage that are regarded as 'vestiges' of ancient Khmer civilisation, such as silver and silk handicrafts, folk music and Hindu-Brahmin rituals. Rather than creating a space for the ethnic Khmer to determine for themselves what aspects of their culture and history they value and hope to safeguard for future generations, the revival has pre-selected those aspects of ethnic Khmer culture which fit within the broader nationalist narrative of the imagined place of Khmer heritage within the Thai national past.

### **The strategic appropriation of Khmer antiquity and the tyranny of northern Khmer identity**

For many of Thailand's ethnic Khmer, the revival movement offered an unprecedented opportunity to openly express their ethnic identity by embracing the revisionist historiography of the

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Northeast and the highly valorised imagery of Khmer antiquity. Inasmuch as the revival encouraged the Khmer to assert their rights as heirs to a rich cultural legacy dating back to as early as the seventh century, one might be inclined to regard it as a vehicle of empowerment. Yet, as I learned through my field research, the revival was also giving rise to new 'tyrannies of identity' (Appiah 2004). According to Appiah (ibid.), the danger of collective identities in the contemporary era – whether based on ethnicity, religion, or gender – is that they frequently demand adherence to a fixed typology of culture and essentialised representations of identity. Apart from precluding the possibility of multiple identities, collective identities today are fundamentally constituted through the exclusion of other groups. Indeed, as I discovered in Surin, the revival was being appropriated by some Northern Khmer to promote a narrative of ethnic Khmer cultural superiority vis-à-vis another minority ethnic group in the region called the Kui, of whom there are approximately 400,000 in Thailand's northeast (Lewis 2009).

One illustration of this narrative of Khmer ethnic superiority came from a monk and former army colonel named Phra Phantri Amporn, who authored a short history of Surin entitled *History of Isaanpura (Muang Surin)* (2002). Phra Phantri explained that his primary motivation for writing this booklet was to challenge Surin's official historiography. Briefly, according to the official provincial narrative, Surin was founded by an ethnic Kui elephant keeper named Chiang Pum, who is credited with recapturing an escaped white elephant belonging to last reigning monarch of Ayutthaya, King Ekathat, in 1757. In recognition of this loyal deed, Chiang Pum was bestowed a royal title and granted the authority to govern Surin as a tributary principality of the Siamese court. Phra Phantri insisted that the biggest error of this official history was the notion that Surin had been founded by an ethnic Kui.

Disputing this narrative, Phra Phantri told me that the real founders of Surin were Khmer, not Kui. He argued that the ancient edifices and artefacts found throughout the region were unmistakable proof that Surin was originally settled and dominated by Khmer. First, there was the ancient wall around the capital city, which was known by the Khmer name *Banteay Chmar* before the capital was renamed Muang Surin in 1786. The second clue was the Khmer sanctuaries, which were a testament to the Khmer's cultural superiority and longstanding presence in the region. Phra Phantri offered several additional pieces of evidence to substantiate Khmer cultural dominance in the region, including the fact that the Khmer had an alphabet and elaborate marriage rituals, unlike the Kui who were illiterate and uncultured. For all of these reasons, Phra Phantri maintained that it was impossible that a Kui would have been a former chieftain of Surin.

Another ethnic Khmer who shared Phra Phantri's views about the superiority of the Khmer vis-à-vis the ethnic Kui was Isara Caranyanon, a local historian and resident expert at the Centre for Local Wisdom at the Provincial Teacher's College. Isara noted that one of the regrettable consequences of the state's suppression of local Khmer language and culture, especially during the Sarit era (1959–63), was that the ethnic Khmer no longer knew who they were anymore. For instance, they didn't know that they were the rightful heirs of the ancient Khmer civilisation, or that this civilisation was the basis of much Thai language and culture. He asserted that not only the Northern Khmer but also Thais tended to forget that the fact that they took a great deal of their own court culture from the Khmer, including language, dance and Brahmin rituals, and that the Thais had historically fought the Khmer to possess this sacred knowledge. He added that had it not been for the French, Cambodia would still be a part of Thailand. Although much of this historical awareness had been suppressed, he believed that because of the current support for localism, the new generation would experience a renaissance of their history and culture.

Isara also held that the ruling lineage of Surin could not have been Kui and claimed to know this because he himself was a descendant of the founder. Isara went on to ground his assertion

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in the ostensibly anthropological observations that since time immemorial, the Kui had been the servants or ‘slaves’ (*khi kha*) of the Khmer and moreover, unlike the Khmer, the Kui did not have a written script. Asking whether it was possible that the Kui might have acquired Khmer culture and language through intermarriage or assimilation, he conceded that the Kui had adopted much of the Khmer culture because their own culture was weak (*aun*) in comparison to that of the Khmer.

A third informant who shared this view of the superiority of the ethnic Khmer was Chaloy Rattanasun, an attorney who had authored a number of texts on the genealogy of Surin’s ruling lineages. He asserted that the Kui (whom he referred to using the pejorative term ‘Suay’) could never have been founders of Surin, because they didn’t have any written language and they were incapable of being ‘leaders’. Moreover, Chaloy insisted that while the elephant mahouts in Surin were ethnically Kui, the chieftains of Surin were ethnically Khmer. This made sense, he added, because while possessing elephants was a great source of prestige (*barami*) and power (*ammaat*) for the chieftain, the day-to-day care of elephants was a dirty job reserved for slaves of the chieftain, who would have been Suay.

As these anecdotes clearly illustrate, the revival of ethnic Khmer identity is taking place within an arena of regional ethnic identity politics, with different groups vying for recognition, visibility and status within the nation-state. Herein, I propose that one of the motivating factors behind some Northern Khmer’s self-identification as heirs of Khmer antiquity in the post-Cold war era was a desire to upstage the Kui as protagonists in Surin’s official provincial history. As a result, existing prejudices against the region’s ethnic Kui have been amplified and reinforced through the revival’s narrative of Khmer civility. Moreover, through the construction of rigid ethnic typologies which presuppose ethnic purity, the revival is precluding the recognition of a history of ethnic assimilation and intermarriage between the Khmer and Kui – dynamics which have been observed and documented by numerous scholars of the region (Aymonier 1901, Seidenfaden 1952).

In addition to reifying the boundaries separating the Khmer and Kui, the revival has also reinforced the political boundary between Northern Khmer and Khmer of Cambodia. As mentioned above, during the Cold War, the Khmer of neighbouring Cambodia were highly stigmatised due to representations of Khmer as ‘traitors’ and as a result of the Pol Pot genocide. This stigma is widely reflected in the narratives told by Northern Khmer about their ‘untrustworthy’ Cambodian neighbours. Reflecting on my many discussions with ethnic Khmer in Surin who wilfully affirmed their identity as custodians of Khmer heritage while simultaneously asserting their difference from the neighbouring Khmer of Cambodia, I came to understand that the image of the Khmer as relic was a means of creating a temporal distance between the Khmer of Surin and the contemporary Khmer of Cambodia, who in the eyes of many Thais and Northern Khmers, were still seen as historical enemies who bore the heavy stigma of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. Seen in this light, what the state-led revival of Khmer heritage offered was a redemptive narrative which allowed the ethnic Khmer of Thailand to identify with the prestige of the ancient Khmer past while simultaneously bypassing the stigmatised modern history of neighbouring Cambodia. One text which illustrates this point vividly is called *Surin: World Heritage in Thailand, Birthplace of the Ancient Khom Empire and Origin of Thai Culture* (Siri 1993).

Besides the ancient wall and the sophisticated arts and crafts such as silk and silversmithing, Surin is also a center of culture and traditions. The practices found in Surin which are different from other provinces in Thailand include the following: *prapeni roam trot* (the Tros festival), *kantruem* (kantruem folk music), *luad anre* (the Luad Anre folk dance), *col maemot*

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(spirit mediumship) and *kaan hae naak* (the ordination procession), among others. These traditions are entirely unique to Surin, largely *owing to the fact that Surin province did not experience any foreign penetration or invasions by other countries. For this reason, the culture in Surin has not been destroyed as in the neighboring nation of Cambodia, and as such, this cultural reservoir is still in existence for new generations to study.* If we analyze these practices closely, we can see that they are all deeply linked to the Brahmin religion.

*(ibid.: 8; translation and emphasis mine)*

...

Today, the arts, crafts and cultural practices of the ancient Khmer (*Khmer boraan*) are almost impossible to find in Cambodia anymore, with the singular exception of the cultural heritage that is still in existence among the Thais of Khmer and Kui ethnicity in Surin.

*(ibid.: 12)*

Here we can see clearly that Surin is being represented as one of the last remaining reservoirs of authentic ancient Khmer culture and that this reservoir of Khmer heritage can only be found in Thailand. In addition, by emphasising the theme of cultural destruction in neighbouring Cambodia, this text reinforces negative Cold War stereotypes about Cambodia as a nation beset by violence. Thus, in spite of the pluralistic rhetoric of Thailand's localism movement and diplomatic gestures towards fostering improved cross-border relations, this citation illustrates that the revival of Khmer ethnic identity has done little to erode Cold War boundaries or tensions between Thailand and Cambodia.

Yet another factor that reinforces this disavowal of the Northern Khmers' relationship to neighbouring Cambodia is the state's unwillingness to support Khmer language instruction in schools. This policy tacitly seeks to distance the Northern Khmer from contemporary Cambodia by limiting exposure to Khmer-language media. Stated otherwise, the state-led revival encourages Northern Khmer to embrace their Khmer heritage, only insofar as it is securely contained within the boundaries of the Thai nation-state. Ultimately, this revitalisation relegates the Northern Khmer to an idealised past while reproducing boundaries, biases and stereotypes born of nationalism and the Cold War.

## Conclusion

As the above vignettes have shown, while the revival movement has provided an opportunity for the ethnic Khmer to reclaim a place in the national past after a century of invisibility, it has done so at a heavy price. Rather than empowering the ethnic Khmer to determine for themselves what aspects of their heritage they regard as significant or valuable, the state-led revival is one which circumscribes Khmer identity as a means of reasserting Thailand's extant claims of entitlement to the Khmer past – particularly the legacy of Angkor. Moreover, with its narrative of Northern Khmer cultural superiority, the revival reinforces and reifies ethnic and political boundaries, thus producing new 'tyrannies of identity' (Appiah 2004).

In light of these issues, what might a different kind of cultural revitalisation of Khmer heritage in Thailand look like? I propose that a revitalisation movement genuinely geared towards empowerment and mutual understanding would have to start by challenging the notions of ethnic and cultural purity, by focusing instead on the history of ethnic change and cultural hybridity. For instance, instead of reifying Kui and Khmer ethnic identity, priority should be placed on researching the dynamic and fluid historical relations between these groups. Second, the revitalisation would have to create a space for open dialogue about the mutual transmission

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and appropriation of tangible and intangible culture between the Cambodian and Thai empires and how nationalism led to the concealment of this cultural hybridity. Rather than focusing on the Khmer heritage within the borders of the nation, which reinforces competition and fuels tension between Thailand and Cambodia over entitlement to Khmer heritage, the revitalisation would have to do more to explore and affirm the regional, historical and cultural ties that transcend geographical and political boundaries. Third, revitalisation should include the study of Khmer language, not only because language is a reservoir of cultural knowledge, but also because it would validate Northern Khmer identity as contemporaneous rather than trapped in an idealised past. Finally, to foster understanding, the revitalisation would have to endeavour to create a space to discuss the many silences and stigmas of Khmerness created during the Cold War and nation-building eras and which continue to shape both Khmer self-perceptions as well as views of the Khmer by the dominant Thai. Although by no means easy, such an approach might eventually open up possibilities for these neighbouring nations to recognise Khmer heritage as a shared past, which would go a long way towards improving the current relationship characterised by deep mutual distrust and suspicion.

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