TIMELESS ANGKOR

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A fragile thread of continuity connects life around the ancient capital of the kingdom of Cambodia to the distant past

It is a phantasmagoric world. When European travelers discovered Angkor in the 19th century, they were astounded by the grandeur and the mystery of the temples, covered with sculptures of "airy figures stifled and crushed by the forest," in the words of the French writer Guy de Pourtalès. "I have before me," he wrote,"not only an empty capital but 700 years of unrecorded history. And death's most dreaded prodigy: silence." The silence that enveloped Angkor when it was abandoned in the 15th century seemed immutable, but appearances can be deceptive.

A fabulous archaeological site, this great stone skeleton is also a living place, at once the realm of divinities and a city of mortals, where everyday business is steeped in customs from a prestigious past.

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Angkor Wat: realm of divinities and city of mortals.

Tales of a nine-headed serpent

Between the 9th and the 14th centuries,Angkor,the capital of the kingdom of Cambodia, grew up between the Kulen hills and Tonle Sap, the Great Lake. At the height of its power, the kingdom included parts of present-day Thailand, Laos and Viet Nam. Over the centuries, kings who practiced religions that came from India, Hinduism and Buddhism, erected monumental stone temples where they honoured their gods. They also built an elaborate hydraulic system comprising huge reservoirs (*baray*) linked to a network of canals, dikes and moats.

Only one contemporary description of Angkor's former splendour has survived. It was written by a member of a Chinese diplomatic mission, Chou Ta-Kuan, who arrived in August, 1296. His vivid account includes anecdotes about the daily life and customs of Angkor's inhabitants. He wrote that every night in a golden tower, the king had to mate with a nine-headed serpent that took on the appearance of a woman. In the palace, bare-breasted women "as white as jade" wore their hair in a bun.At the other end of the spectrum, the commoners were described as "rude, black and very ugly". The nobles were carried about in gold palanquins and dressed in precious fabrics whose patterns were an indication of rank. They lived in houses with lead and tile roofs, while those of "the common people were covered only with thatch". Farmers tilled their fields on the banks of the great lake. In the dry season, when the waters receded from the flooded forest around the lake, the farmers came down from the hills and grew rice.

When the Siamese conquered and plundered Angkor in 1432, the king and his court left the devastated city. The forest overran the ruins. Wooden buildings and writings on latania leaves and scraped hides disappeared, victims of the damp climate and insects.

In the late 19th century, archaeologists ▶

1.The precise functions of these hydraulic engineering works have given rise to considerable debate.As well as providing water for irrigation they reflected the symbolic role of water within an architectural cosmogonic conception in which the temples are an earthly representation of the city of the gods surrounded by the oceans. This irrigation system has for the most part either dried up or been filled in.The only operational section is the western *baray* which has been repaired and today still provides water for some dry-season rice-fields.

French ethnologist who has been working at Angkor (Cambodia) for the last seven years.

began deciphering the inscriptions and scenes depicted in the bas-reliefs carved in the stonework of the temples, which contributed precious information to their understanding of historical timelines and myths, battles and aspects of everyday life, including hunting, fishing, marketing and habitat.

Today, life in nearby villages is much the same as when it was captured in those ancient sculptures. The wooden wheelbarrow that squeaks as it is pushed round a corner is identical to one on a bas-relief. The vendor dozing in front of her stall at the market in Siem Reap, the provincial capital (population 75,000) seven kilometres from Angkor, is resting in the same position as her distant ancestor depicted by a sculptor. On the basin of Srah Srang, located in the heart of the site and bordered by two villages, the fisherman casting his net makes the same gesture as his counterpart of seven centuries ago.

More than an outdoor museum, Angkor is home to religious and rural life revolving around the temples. Inside collapsed sanctuaries and more recently-built Buddhist pagodas, smoke from incense threads its way heavenward before statues of ancient gods and the Buddha. At the threshold of a temple or on a heap of loose stones, the eye comes to rest on cigarettes, rolled betel leaves and candles set down by an anonymous hand. They are offerings to one of the many *neakta*, land spirits who often dwell in Angkor's statues.

A celestial architect

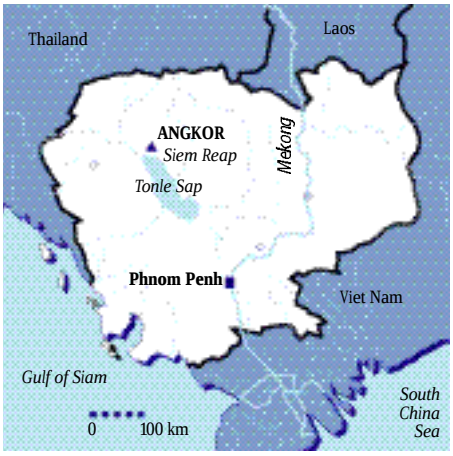
One of these spirits, Ta Pech, lives in a huge termite nest in the southern pavilion of the first wall surrounding Angkor Wat. Ta Pech has a reputation for malevolence. According to a monk, "People say that when an aircraft flies over Angkor,it must make three turns around Ta Pech; otherwise, there is a chance it may crash into the lake. If you give Ta Pech wine and cigarettes, he can also divulge winning lottery numbers."

Other signs of human activity can be read in the present landscape. The grid pattern of nearby rice paddies appears behind the screen of vegetation that cloaks many of the temples. Not always visible from the tourist routes, a score of villages can be made out through groves of sugar palms. They are home to some 22,000 people in a 300 square-kilometre area. Such a high population density on an archaeological site is due as much to the lie of the land as to the temples' economic power of attraction.

The topographical conditions provide an ideal setting for modern dwellings. In the past, people left a profound imprint on the earth by building networks of roads and dikes as part of a water management system. The plain is still shaped by vestiges of these large-scale engineering works. In search of high ground that will escape flooding during the rainy season, Cambodian farmers find the terrain highly suitable for building their homes.

How long has the current population lived in the area and what is the nature of their relationship to Angkor? Unfortunately, there is little information on the size and location of ancient villages. The few recent local writings vanished during the torment of the Khmer Rouge period.And French explorers in the late 19th century considered the temples more important than the people who lived around them—only five or six villages seem to have been recorded.They consist of groups of two to ten houses built around squares in the heart of the forest.

Do the local people consider themselves heirs of the Angkor tradition? Their history is obscure; village memory goes back no further than two or three generations. A few scraps of ancient history have come down to us orally, but it is impossible to establish with certainty whether they are real or imaginary, history or interpretation. The building of the temples is said to have taken place in a mythical period peopled by figures who were half-divine, half-human. The villagers believe that these imposing monuments can only be the work of divinities or of people who came from elsewhere and knew much more about architecture and sculpture than they do.



The legend surrounding the foundation of the temple of Angkor Wat tells the story of Preah Ket Melea, son of the king of heaven and a mortal woman.The divinities said they were disturbed by the smell of Preah Ket Melea and asked his father to send him down to Earth. The king acceded to their request, offering his son the opportunity to have an exact replica erected on Earth of any edifice in heaven with the help of Preah Visnukar, the celestial architect whom villagers still invoke whenever a building is constructed. A modest man, Preah Ket Melea chose the stable. An ox was released onto the plain of Angkor and the place where it lay down was designated as the site for Angkor Wat.

Ebbs and flows of memory

From the orally-transmitted past, villagers above all recall the wars against the Siamese and the Chams, a people from Champa, a vanished kingdom that was located in the centre of present-day Viet Nam, and the accompanying raids and forced displacement of populations. "We Cambodians are accustomed to wars. When you look at the bas-reliefs, you see many battle scenes from the days of Angkor. Since then, those images have constantly repeated themselves," says a farmer. The scenes depict distant times called *boran* ("ancient", in Khmer), or *muoy roy chnam* ("100 years"). Nobody can accurately date them, as this comment by a villager illustrates: "My father says the temples were there when he was born.They must be very old."

By and large, the local people have difficulty imagining that a connection may exist between them and the people who built Angkor. However, in a village north of Angkor Thom there are reports of families who claim to descend from the kings of Angkor. In the early 20th century, they still lived in small, tumbledown wooden hovels at the foot of the royal palace. After the French began restoring the temples, they had to move north. Their current living conditions are the same as their neighbours', but they enjoy a certain recognition."Like the king, they have the power of life or death over the villagers," says one local resident.

Today, Angkor's hydraulic system no longer functions and farmers use rain to water the rice paddies which are still their economic mainstay. Due to the lack of irrigation and the poor quality of the sandy, clay-filled soil, there is only one meagre harvest a year (less than one tonne per hectare). Complementary activities are necessary, such as fishing, market gardening, palm sugar production, sales of handicrafts to tourists and work

Modern times: Angkor's challenge is to strike a balance between preserving its heritage and coping with expanding tourism.

on the temple restoration projects. Technical jobs such as motorcycle, radio and television repair and battery-charging are also emerging.

Angkor, then, creates jobs for the local population. In the late 19th century, after French explorers recognized the temples' historic and artistic value, vegetation was cleared away and stones that had lain half-forgotten in the middle of the forest resurfaced. In 1907 the Angkor Conservation Authority (the French archaeologists' former headquarters and the present sculpture storage site) began restoration work. The few villagers who lived within the temple complex itself were hired as "coolies". By the late 1960s, over 1,000 people were working on the site.

The tourist revival

Before March 1970, when a coup d'état toppled Prince Norodom Sihanouk and war came to Cambodia, the local people had begun crafting small, handmade wooden items, including musical instruments (flutes and violins), toy ox-carts, knives, axes and finely-wrought canes. They started making and selling these objects anew when tourists began streaming back in the early 1990s. In 1999, the estimated number of visitors was put at 350,000, a figure expected to triple by 2005.

The people living on the site seldom enter the temples, even when they are close to home. "We're just farmers. I heard my grandfather say that during the Angkor epoch, folks like me were not allowed within the walls of the capital, Angkor Thom," says one villager. "Only nobles, civil servants and merchants could venture inside. It was the same for the temples: only priests and dignitaries could enter them."

These are something more than reminiscences of a bygone age. Today, religious rituals in the temples are celebrated mainly by masters of ceremony who come to honour the *neakta*. Local people worship these spirits, especially in the villages, by calling upon a medium incarnating the supernatural beings. Most of the tokens of devotion laid in front of the statues in the temple of Angkor Wat have been left by tourists from other parts of Cambodia and Asia on a religious pilgrimage to the site. Local religious activity is concentrated in more recently built Buddhist pagodas. Especially numerous within the walls of Angkor Thom, the pagodas were built near the temples as a way of honouring new divinities in the shadow of the old. Continuity in Angkor can still be felt in the local people's daily lives.

As peace returns and Angkor gears up for major tourism development, the people living there must meet new challenges and strike a delicate balance. Villages along the road-embankments are growing rapidly, and settlement has become dense in some formerly scattered communities. This is a direct outcome of the population growth that followed the Khmer Rouge period (1975-1979). Today, there are five children in the average family, and half of all Cambodians are under the age of sixteen.

Rice paddies are steadily encroaching on the bushy plain. Angkor is protected by royal decrees which limit the expansion of farmland and the cutting of firewood. Traditional secondary activities, such as palm sugar and charcoal production, are now seldom practiced. In Angkor, many issues remain unresolved, including preservation of the temples (especially from plunder), protection of the environment, runaway population growth and the development of tourism.

The loss of traditional values, accelerated by opening up too fast to the outside world, is another cause for concern. The chain of oral transmission broke down during the Khmer Rouge period, and it has proved impossible to revive some ancient traditions. Television, now in every village, is speeding up the loss of cultural identity. It is vital to save Angkor's architectural heritage, but equally important to protect its intangible heritage: the tales, legends and place names that only local people know. ■